

THE LOSS OF SUBSTANCE: STORIES AND NOTES ON ADDICTION

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This blog was first published on my Facebook Wall in November of 2010. It addresses one of the more common substance addictions that I have experienced, hopefully in a candid and helpful manner. In my own life, many of these topics only became problems as I grew older. What I could easily shake off at twenty-five years of age is not so easily dismissed later on, like in my fifties, sixties, and now my seventies.

I don't have all the answers, but I do seem to have most of the questions and problems, so I thought it might be better to share my thoughts with you than to not talk about them. I hope you agree.

That being said, please accept these notes, comments, and stories in the spirit in which they are offered, one of friendship and shared concerns.

The Loss of Substance: Cigarettes

I am a slow learner when it comes to giving up what is bad for me, slow beyond reason, probably the last of the last when forced to give up a bad habit. I don't do it voluntarily and I don't do it rationally. I give up what is bad for me only when faced with a worse alternative, like knocking on death's door. And I am not exaggerating here as I am sometimes prone to.

When I look back at the trail of bad habits I have left behind me as I have aged, it does not speak well of me. It is clear that I don't learn by reason, by reading, or being told (even by a doctor) that this or that is bad for me. When it comes to my bad habits, only at the last possible moment do I change, and even then I insist on being rational, scientific, using trial and error, and god knows what else. I try each habit until the last dog dies. I want to be certain it is bad for me and I leave no stone unturned.

For those who want to paint me a teetotaler, please note my bona fides in this realm of substances. All of the vices I write about are my own, tried by me (and for a long time too), found wanting, and then perhaps discarded. And I give my reasons. Where shall I begin? Let's start with my smoking cigarettes.

Cigarettes

I started smoking along about the seventh or the eighth grade. Why? Because everyone in the very small class at my Catholic school (at least the guys I liked) smoked. I think all of us smoked and some of the girls did too. How I chose Chesterfield cigarettes, I can't remember, maybe simply because they were longer than most others and you got more for your money. I really don't know, but they are a harsh cigarette, real chokers, and I was married to them. I can still hear the clunk of the pack coming out of the vending machine when I inserted twenty-five or thirty cents. The machines were the only place we could buy them. We were just kids.

My dad and mom smoked Lucky Strikes and they were even harsher than Chesterfields, but somehow better, if that makes sense. But I was not about to smoke what my parents were smoking. I would decide for myself what to smoke. Actually, I tried all kinds of cigarettes over

the years, including filters like Marlboros and Parliaments, straights like English Ovals, Benson & Hedges, and those nasty French Gauloises that almost took your breath away when you inhaled. When I was a “beatnik” I even picked up butts on the street and smoked them. I never liked cigars or pipes.

Eventually I settled down to Camel straights. Now that was a really good cigarette to my taste, and I smoked a lot of them, sometimes up to three packs a day. They were just too good (and too cool) to give up. I was proud I smoked Camels and I loved the package and camel logo.

In the beginning, back in Catholic school, somewhere around the eighth grade (as I mentioned), we smoked in the thickets and swamps next to St. Francis of Assisi Church and School in Ann Arbor. And the nuns knew we were smoking, but could never catch us at it. We could see their black and white habits bustling through the thorn bushes from far away and we watched them trying not to get dirty as they fought their way through the thickets. We would simply outrun them every time, disappearing like vapor in the swamps. I don’t think we ever got caught smoking there. But the nuns knew who we were, and there were only a few of us in our class of twelve girls and boys. This was in 1955, the year I graduated from the eighth grade.

I have distinct memories of feeling that full pack of cigarettes in my upper left shirt pocket while walking along the sidewalks and winter streets of Ann Arbor on crisp cold nights. My jacket was usually a bit too thin and the cold penetrated. Often I was all alone. And there was the sharp smell of tobacco.

Back then I liked to see my breath in the cold winter air as I walked, and cigarette smoke made it all the more visible. There I was, just silent, walking and smoking, always going somewhere. Usually I had hitchhiked into town from where I lived out at 2815 Washtenaw Avenue and still had many blocks of sidewalk to cover to get to a friend’s house. The streets in winter late at night were so empty, silent, and cold – beautiful in their own way. I was always longing for something or someone. This was when I was in junior high and high school, and not later on when no one would care what I did.

And all of the guys in my eighth-grade class had the same deal. Maybe a couple of them had parents who knew their kids smoked, and didn’t care. This made them so much more macho in our eyes than the rest of us. Their parents didn’t care. Wow! Mine cared, but they both smoked, so why shouldn’t I smoke. Adults did it. In those days everyone smoked -- at home, and in all public places, in cars, buses, planes, etc. Ashtrays, smoke, and ash were ubiquitous. No one complained. We were breathing smoke in every public place.

Back then we became expert at finding places to have a cigarette. Those old standalone garages next to a friend’s house were a favorite, where the smoke mixed with the somewhat faint and delicate smell of oil and gas fumes from years housing a car. I miss those old garages and their smell.

Or perhaps it was in the corner of a friend’s basement, back behind the furnace, or blowing smoke out of a cracked window from a bedroom. We dared them all and seldom got caught. Back then it was exciting and so grown up to be packing cigarettes, to have matches, and lighters. Lighters were just too cool, and your girlfriend might give you a special lighter on your birthday or at Christmas, gold or chrome-plated lighters that were heavy, yet compact. My initials were engraved in them, “JME.” They were special. I wonder what ever happened to mine? But I am waxing too nostalgic here. What about giving these coffin nails up? How did that happen?

I can tell you it happened slowly. I would guess that I smoked for something like ten or twelve years. And the smoking got heavier when I started to play music professionally in 1965. And of course we smoked more than just cigarettes, but I will get to that in another blog. And smoking was a real habit, something I depended on, especially when I got nervous, and I am nervous by nature, so that tells you the whole story. And like so many of us back then, the first thing I would do when I woke up in the morning was (of course) smoke a cigarette, and on and on.

I tried to quit, many times. I would get maybe a day into the quit, perhaps two, and then something would happen that just flipped me out. Whatever it was, it called for a cigarette, and overran my resolution to not smoke. And all of this happened in an instant. I just reversed myself, thinking that certainly I have to smoke and of course I will have to quit some other time because whatever just happened was way too important to be trying to quit and deal with it at the same time. It needed my full attention, and that meant smoking again. I don't know how many times I quit and started again, but it was always the same scenario.

I would be quitting (and doing sort of OK with it) when some life event would interrupt that demanded all of me, and all-of-me back then included the smoking part of me, so there you have it. I was soon back smoking again, just like that, with no regrets and only a little guilt, knowing that I was in fact killing myself in a slow suicide.

And when I did manage to quit, I would work it for all it was worth, announcing it to my friends, pointing out their bad smoking habits and my moral superiority and fierce determination by not smoking. Then two days later, there I would be smoking again, with them seeing me smoke. Humiliating, but by that point I never really cared. I was at least feeling normal and myself once again. Doctors tell me that my lungs still have scars from smoking or pneumonia, perhaps both.

How did I finally quit back on May 12, 1967? As corny as this sounds, I just quit quitting and quit, all in a moment, in a day, in this lifetime. I wish I had some sort of 12-step program to tell you how I did it, but I don't. I can say this:

My quitting was the result of an intense spiritual-like experience that changed me in some very real ways, and distracted me from whatever it was that made me smoke in the first place. Suddenly I had a lot more going for me, was much more engaged in life, and had something more to live for than before. Just like that, I popped out of the smoking rut and was free of it. It would be correct to say I was instantly distracted from distractions like smoking, and I never went back. It was like waking up. There was no need to smoke. I had something more real to focus on, like: my life. I finally had something like one.

I doubt that the above explanation is all that helpful, but the idea as I look back on it was that I was busy smoking until something better came along. When something better did come along, I stopped smoking. In other words, the best time to quit a habit like smoking for me was when some powerful event intervened in my life and created a natural gap in time, a separation of past from future, an imprint that I could use (and measure from), a reason to step away from the past. These kinds of events happen, so for some of you that still smoke, that may be a clue.

Of course, soon after I quit, the sheer hideousness of smoking became all too apparent in the habits of others. Their stained fingers and teeth, the overflowing ashtrays and waves of ash particles that settled everywhere around, the nervous habit of endlessly lighting a cigarette at the least event, the coughing, veils of smoke, the expense, the sheer habit of it all. It was an addiction and I was cured. I consider my giving up smoking (however it came about) as a major

personal victory, and though I may sound nostalgic about the time back then, I have never missed the cigarettes. I just had trouble quitting.

Having given up smoking, I am glad to see more and more of the nation go 'smoke free'. Smoking is something everyone has a right to do in their own private space, but second-hand smoke is something we should not be forced to experience. When I grew up, we had no choice whatsoever. Everyone smoked everywhere and all the time. No one questioned it any more than they questioned separate bathrooms for whites and colored. Change did come, but very slowly.