

One time while conversing with a person who had been impacted by alcoholism, they shared with me how one of the things they came to learn over the course of their lives was how to go from saying what people wanted to hear, namely to keep an uneasy peace, to learning how to speak their mind and speak the truth. And while their situation was one of being in a dysfunctional family impacted by alcohol the reality is for so many of us, we can become blinded to the impact of sin and that of others that we may not want to own up to it, or call people out on it, less doing so make ourselves or others feel uncomfortable.

However, our decisions do impact others and ourselves, and will always catch up to us.

A man by the name of “Bob L” who is an alcoholic who has been sober now for many years, talks about this journey out of his addiction and of finally having to own up to the decisions he made.

Two years ago he was diagnosed with terminal kidney cancer. He felt all the emotions you’d expect. Shock. Dread. Grief. Self-pity. One emotion surprised him though. Even more surprising, it turned out to be the emotion

that outlasted all the others, growing stronger as the reality of the diagnosis took hold.

That emotion was gratitude.

He says he's not grateful that the cancer might take his life before he even reaches his sixty-fifth birthday. The gratitude he's talking about is his astonished thanks for the happy, stable and emotionally abundant life he will leave behind. A life he says he certainly did not deserve and never could have expected during the decade he squandered as an active alcoholic.

Back then, he burned through two marriages and came close to wrecking a promising law career. He manipulated people, abandoned friendships, treated women like emotional props and scorned help. It was another form of terminal illness he says.

Today he is married to a woman, Alice, who is more sensible, generous and spiritually mature than he could ever hope to be. They celebrated their

twenty-seventh wedding anniversary this year. They have three children. He recently retired as partner of a New York City law firm.

None of this was foreordained. Especially not his marriage to Alice, which he considers foundational—after my relationship with God—to so much of his unexpected good fortune.

He's for Alice and also for what he learned in Alcoholics Anonymous that enabled him to have his relationship with Alice. AA taught him how to find and rely on God, live with integrity and think of others before myself. It taught him how to love unselfishly.

Those gifts helped keep him sober. They also made him a better husband and father. Now that he is dying, Bob says he can approach the end of his life in peace because of who he has become in sobriety.

He shares his story in hopes that others struggling with addiction can find the connection and purpose that saved his life and filled him with such gratitude.

He started drinking heavily in high school. He can't pinpoint why. There was nothing traumatic in his childhood. Bob had grown up in a small town in north central Pennsylvania. Alcohol provided a respite from an undercurrent of insecurity he'd felt from the time he was little. He sought that respite often enough to get arrested for drinking at school in tenth grade. By the time he graduated high school, he couldn't have fun—couldn't get by, really—without alcohol.

Bob managed to graduate college and did well enough on an entrance exam to start law school. He paced his drinking, staying more or less sober during the semester, then cutting loose the minute school ended.

He got a job as an attorney representing a motorcycle company facing multiple safety lawsuits. The best part of the job? Some of the clients were heavy drinkers, and his expense accounts paid for the booze. Eventually he could no longer pace the drinking. His life spiraled into alcoholism's inevitable chaos and self-destruction. He drank to overcome insecurity, but of course, Bob says alcohol doesn't solve problems. It just distracts from them while making them worse. He got so anxious and stressed at work,

he seriously contemplated quitting the firm and moving back home. There was no legal work there. It would have been professional suicide.

Bob's insecurities showed even more in his romantic relationships. He was terrified of rejection and gravitated to emotionally needy women, many of them fellow drinkers. He'd get infatuated, then recoil and move on—or she would.

His first wife, fed up with his drinking, walked out on him, leaving her wedding ring on the bathroom sink. His second wife, a fellow alcoholic, lost interest in him before the wedding.

The events that led him to Alcoholics Anonymous—the collapse of that second marriage, his denial that he had a problem, the night he gave in, got on his knees and begged a God he did not yet believe in to free him from the desire to drink—are variations on a theme known to many who have struggled with addiction.

The hopeful part is what happened after he entered recovery. Alcoholism, he learned, is a disease of isolation. He thought alcohol made him more sociable by compensating for his debilitating insecurity.

What it really did was interpose a veil between Bob and other people. Alcohol numbed his fears and insulated him from the hard work of building real relationships.

As Bob began to work the 12 steps of AA, he was surprised to discover how many of them directed him toward relationships with a higher power and with other people.

Steps two and three required him to surrender to a relationship with God. Steps four and five required a searching moral inventory and then admitting his character defects to God and to another person. The following steps went deeper. He had to make amends to people he had hurt, ask God to remove his shortcomings, pray often and share with other alcoholics what he had learned in recovery.

On top of that, Bob had to attend meetings and be honest with the people he met there. It felt so daunting after years of avoiding exactly this kind of connection and transparency.

Bob had no idea whether he could do it, much less progress from sobriety to forging authentic relationships with friends and coworkers—or maybe, one day, a spouse.

Here's what happened. AA doesn't just teach people how to forge relationships. In AA, you become a person who connects with others by doing it. The steps aren't just suggestions. Following them forces you to act. The meetings throw you together with people from all walks of life with one thing in common—addiction. What's left to hide?

Day by day, step by step, Bob opened himself to other people, admitted his most shameful acts and offered support to other alcoholics. After all those years of posturing and deflecting, he discovered a world he hadn't known existed. A world in which people didn't reject him when they learned the truth about him. A world in which love meant more than his need for affirmation.

He met Alice two years after his first AA meeting. They were both on vacation in the Caribbean. Alice was pretty, like other women he had been attracted to. But Alice was also strong, independent, smart and practical—and a woman of deep Christian faith. Even as they began dating back in New York, where she also lived, Bob found himself assuming she'd quickly see through him and dump him.

That's where his AA experience kicked in. In his drinking days, he would have avoided someone like Alice or tried to manipulate her into falling for him. Now he simply acted like himself and hoped for the best. His foundation in recovery kept supporting me as things with Alice got more serious; he trusted her and worried less, and eventually it led to marriage.

Early in recovery, a speaker told Bob that if he truly wanted a happy marriage, he should focus not on finding the perfect mate but on becoming the sort of person who would be attractive to a good partner.

Bob has since learned the underlying lesson: Make room for God to act.

In addiction—and maybe this is true for all unhealthy lifestyles—Bob assumed he was the center of his own universe. Recovery requires a different assumption: that we are not alone and that we are not in charge. Bob at what point was a self-destructive drunk, driving my life into a ditch. He says: “I let go of the wheel, reached out to God and gave in to recovery. I did the hard, halting work of learning to live in a new way.

As he puts it, he made room for God to act. He’s not done with him. He’s grateful. And together with Alice, he is ready for what comes next.

Like Bob, we all have different addictions. And like Bob, and like the rich man in the Gospel, we sometimes do not want to open our eyes to the reality around us. But as Bob learned, actions have consequences. But unlike the rich man, Bob learned how to reform his life and become a better man.

The Gospel this week has Lazarus and a rich man who ignores Lazarus throughout his life. The sin is not that the man is rich. It’s that he has become blind through his wealth to the needs of Lazarus. Even in the

netherworld, he still doesn't get it, asking Abraham to send Lazarus with some water for him.

The point is actions have consequences. Bob made a choice to drink and became an addict; the consequences were failed relationships, stress, and nearly job loss. But Bob also made a choice to reach out to God and others, and then to reform his life and become a better man. And the challenge for us is to think about the reality of judgment; that we will stand before God, and to prepare for that moment as life goes by by taking that seriously by growing into holiness and using the power of the Holy Spirit to help us become saints, and to do what Paul says in the letter to Timothy, namely to "lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called." To become who we are called to become. So how do we do this?

The starting point is to acknowledge our weaknesses, our sins, our addictions. We do this at Mass asking for mercy. Shame says you are not loved and you are a horrible person; guilt says I am loved but am not responding to that love as I should. We need to open our eyes and see the impact that sin has as Bob did. Sin isolates us from others; it causes us to change as people for the worse. The more Bob drank, the more bad

decisions he made; the more a person gossips, it becomes a habit of destroying people; the more a person abuses images of the human body they shouldn't look at; the more they see a person for a body only and not the soul; the more a person demeans others the more they see them just for their function (e.g., their job) rather than their humanity. At the final judgment, if we haven't seen what our actions have done (ala the rich man perpetuating Lazarus' poverty by doing nothing) God will open our eyes and show us that what we did not do for these, we did not do for him. Sin destroys families and relationships, it hurts people, and there is no such thing as a private sin - so as Bob did, we must open our eyes to that reality.

With that though, we lay hold of eternal life as Paul says. Bob got on his knees and begged for God's help. And God came through. God does the same for us. Paul of course persecuted others and even killed them. And God transformed him. He moves forward in the twilight of his life because he knows full well that God loves Him. God loves us too more than we can ever imagine. Our problem is we sometimes do not express our love for Him and one another as we should. So we look at whatever it is we are prone to do, and say yes this is a problem, but I am no longer going to run

away from it, I am going to confront it with God's mercy and own up to it, and become a better person.

Lastly, we then move forward to doing what Bob did too, namely making the changes to avoid sin and to set things right. If we've wronged others, we talk to them and apologize rather than pretend as if nothing happened. But also too, we rely on one another. Bob trusted Alice to make him better, and she has. So look for people who will tell it to your straight and help keep you on that straight path to sainthood, people you can go to for advice, prayer and counsel and do the same for them.

Laying hold of eternal life isn't easy. It's far easier to just drift from day to day and stay addicted to whatever sin is our poison; or to just minimize it. It's also easier to not confront evil and just keep the uneasy peace with others. But when we look at the crucifix, we see what happened when love confronts evil. Jesus triumphs and has the last word. We can lay hold to eternal life because He is the bridge that the sinner can cross to heaven. It's up to us to cross it by following the blueprint in the second reading, to "pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness...(to)..Compete well for the faith" rather than stepping over our

sins and ignoring them as the rich man ignored Lazarus. So let's open our eyes now. It's something we can do when we trust in God and others to help us make the journey. Bob, who wrote his story back in July, doesn't know how much longer he has left. But thanks to his eyes being opened, he now knows where he is going. Hopefully we do too by using grace and faith to be transformed into saints by confronting evil in our lives and the lives of others, and using God's amazing grace to not be fearful of our sins and struggles, but to illumine them with his love and learn how to overcome them forever. Sin is ugly indeed, but far more beautiful and powerful is the love of the Lamb of God who truly takes away the sins of the world. So let us welcome Him on our altar and respond to the love that we are given by growing closer to Him, and allowing Him to open our eyes so that one day we truly can be with Him in heaven and see what eye has not seen, and ear has not heard.

Readings: Amos 6:1, 4-7 | 1 Tim 6:11-16 | Luke 16:19-31