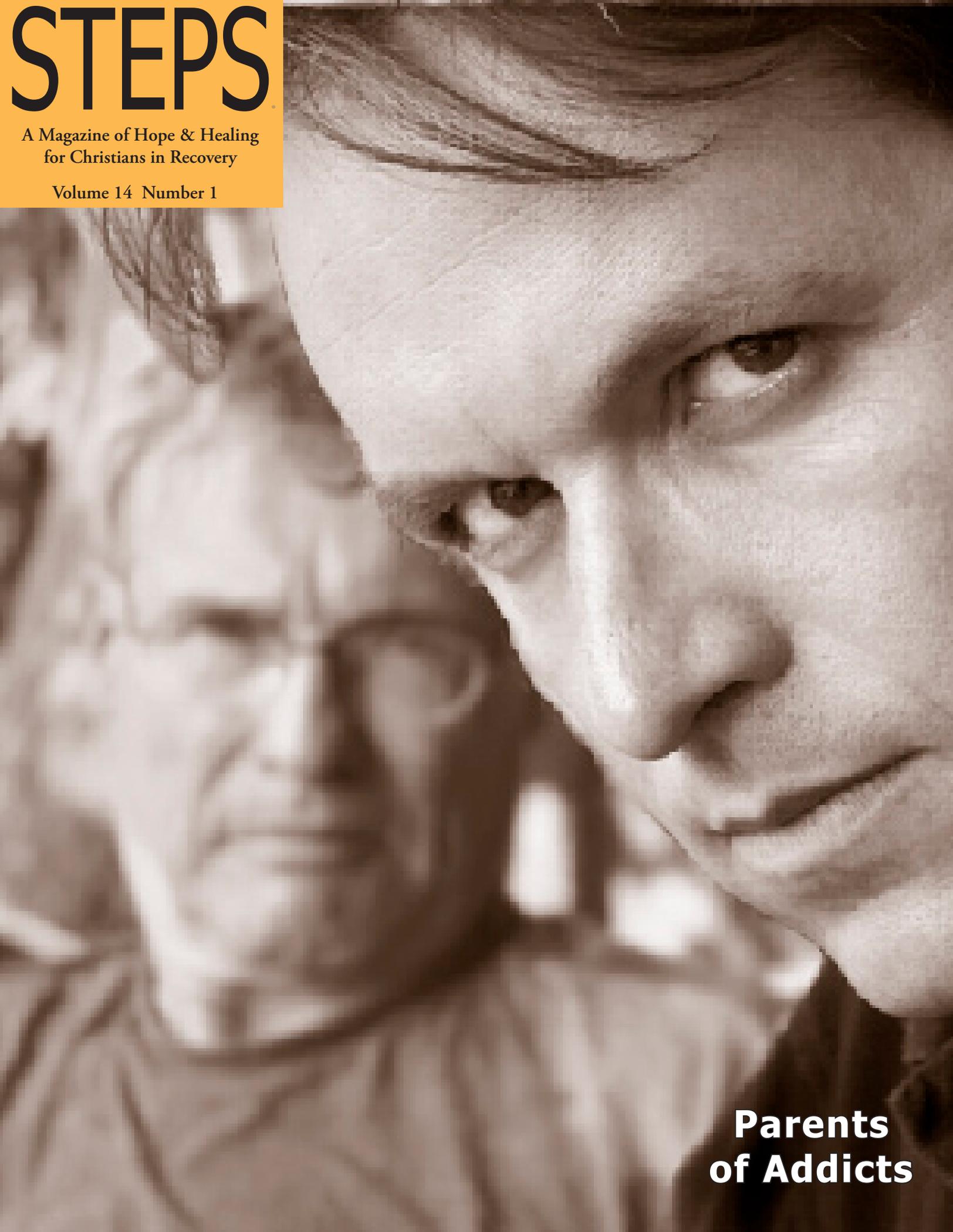


STEPS

A Magazine of Hope & Healing
for Christians in Recovery

Volume 14 Number 1



**Parents
of Addicts**

CONTENTS



- 2 **Beyond Anonymous**
- 3 **To Our Readers**
It Takes a Village to Make an Addict
by Dale Ryan
- 4 **What I Learned While Our
Son Was Still Using Drugs**
by Juanita Ryan
- 8 **Crisis Intervention and
Mistakes Families Make**
by Jeff VanVonderen
- 10 **Kid's Bad Decisions Do Not Mean
We Are Bad Parents**
by Norma Bourland
- 13 **Illumination**
Unmasking Your False Self
by David G. Benner

Crack babies are born addicts. So it does happen. But it is the exception rather than the rule. Most of us were not born addicted. We had to learn to be addicts. For many of us, the skills we needed in order to become an addict were learned in our families. It was there that we first learned shame, and fear, and denial—all the things which make such good soil for addiction. Some of us can look back in our family systems and see nothing but addiction for several generations. Parents in recovery face some very unique challenges. How do you take responsibility for the things you are responsible but not take responsibility for the things you are not responsible for? What do I let go of? And what to I hold on to? It can be a most confusing maze. Our prayer is that this issue of STEPS will provide some encouragement, strength and hope for parents in the process of trying to sort out these difficult matters.

Great Moments in the History of Denial



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I just think the world would be a nicer place if we all just smiled a little more!



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Honest dad, you can leave off the fake happy ending this time. Just make a note to let my therapist know.

Surgical Approaches to Recovery: An early fail



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Yes, you do look a little thinner. After we removed all the shame and fear there really wasn't that much left.

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It Takes a Village to Raise an Addict



I recently read a report entitled “The Formative Years: Pathways to Substance Abuse Among Girls And Young Women Ages 8-22” which was published in 2003 by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University*. One of the most extensive studies yet of substance abuse in young girls, their conclusions make very clear that substance abuse is not just something going on inside an individual’s brain. Here are some quotes from the study’s conclusions (with my titles) :

It takes expensive marketing campaigns to raise an addict:

“A new breed of sweet-tasting alcoholic beverages known as “alco-pops”—fruit-flavored, malt-based drinks that come in colorful packaging—hide the taste of alcohol and may be particularly appealing to girls. British girls, ages 11 to 16, drink alco-pops more frequently than any other alcoholic drink; girls are likelier than boys to prefer alco-pops to other types of alcoholic drinks (56.4 percent vs. 37.1 percent).”

It takes abusers to raise an addict:

“Seventeen percent of high school girls have been abused physically; twelve percent sexually. Girls who have been physically or sexually abused are twice as likely to smoke, drink or use drugs as those who were not abused. Girls who have been sexually abused are more likely to abuse substances earlier, more often and in greater quantities.”

It takes social support to raise an addict:

“The more friends a girl has who smoke, drink or use marijuana or other illegal drugs, the likelier she is to smoke, drink, binge drink or use marijuana or other illegal drugs.”

It takes ineffective churches to raise an addict:

“The more frequently girls attend religious services, the less likely they are to report smoking, drinking, binge drinking or drug use.”

but

“Younger girls report more frequent attendance at religious services than older girls. The level of importance of religion and spirituality to girls declines between middle school and the end of high school—fifth grade girls report the highest level of importance and high school senior girls report the lowest level of importance.”

It takes medical negligence to raise an addict:

“In a large survey of youth in grades five through 12, smoking, drinking and drugs appeared among the 10 most frequently cited health topics that girls felt their doctors

should discuss with them; yet less than 30 percent of these girls identified smoking, drinking or drug use as topics their doctors did discuss with them.”

It takes troubled families to raise an addict:

“The worse a girl’s relationship with her parents, the earlier her initiation of alcohol use and the greater her likelihood of drug use.”

“Girls whose mothers drank alcohol moderately to heavily during pregnancy are six times likelier to report having drunk alcohol in the past year than girls whose mothers drank less or not at all during pregnancy.”

I could go on. But the point is clear. The evidence suggests that addiction is a systemic problem. The ‘reasons’ for addiction are both *inside* the person who is addicted and *outside* the person who is addicted. The roots of the addictive process are everywhere.

The reason for emphasizing the systemic nature of substance abuse is not to suggest that addicts are not responsible for their own personal behavioral choices. The society-made-me-do-it excuse is just another form of denial. Nor is the point to spread the ‘blame’ around. Nothing good comes from the blame game—no matter how thinly the blame is spread out. The reason for emphasizing the systemic nature of the addictive process is that little progress will be made in reducing drug and alcohol abuse without a systemic response. We need healthier families, healthier peers, a more responsive medical community, better informed and pro-active schools, better informed and pro-active clergy and congregations. We need better informed and more pro-active public policy makers. And we need a dramatic change in how the media portrays substance use and abuse. And even more effective controls on how alcohol and tobacco are advertised. It really does take a village to make an addict. And the whole village will need to change if we hope to reduce the number of addicts we create. No one is without a role to play.

What is true of addiction is also true of recovery. It takes a village to make sobriety possible. There are people who seem to be able to sustain a kind of white-knuckle, trying-harder, just-say-no kind of sobriety for long periods of time. But, more often than not, it just leads to exhaustion. And that leads to relapse. Without a support system the quality of our sobriety will be very poor. Sober and miserable is better than not sober. But sober and sharing in the experience, strength and hope of many other people, is a whole lot better than ‘sober and miserable.’

May God help you to do whatever it takes to find a supportive community in which to do the hard work of recovery.



Dale Ryan

What I Learned While Our Son Was Still Using Drugs

by

Juanita Ryan

Children are some of our best teachers. They teach us, experientially, to open our hearts. To give of ourselves. To seek wisdom. To set limits. To embrace. To let go. Children never stop teaching us. But as with most of life, the greatest lessons often seem to come during the toughest times.

The year our oldest son dropped out of high school and became an addict was a very dark and difficult year for us. It was also a time of deeper exposure to life's most important lessons. I didn't fully realize it until much later, but it was during that anguished time that our son taught me a greater understanding of humility, honesty, courage, trust and grace.

Humility

Humility is, in many ways, the opposite of shame. Shame causes us to judge and attack ourselves for our limits and weaknesses, leaving us scrambling to hide or pretend or try harder. Humility, on the other hand, does not make negative judgments about our limits and weaknesses, but instead embraces them as reality, as simply what is. Shame pushes us to say "I should" even in the face of our powerlessness. Humility frees us to say "I can't" when we are faced with things that are beyond our control.

When our son was using, I thought I should be able to do all kinds of things that I could not do. Intellectually I knew better. Even experientially I knew better. But this was my child. Everything in me seemed to scream that "I should." I should be able to figure out when he was using and when he was not. I should be able to reason with him. I should be able to make him stop. I should be able to keep him away from his using friends. I should be able to get him the right help. I should be able to protect him from harm, including his self-harm.

I tried. For months I tried. But I could not. I could not do any of these things. Believing I should be able to do what I could not do, and endlessly trying to control what I could not control, left me in my own insanity. It was only when I grew sick and tired of my own insanity that I was able to recognize that my life had become unmanageable. And it was only then that I was ready to learn new lessons in humility.

Humility helped to restore my sanity. I could not do for my son any of what I, as his parent, wanted so desperately to do. I could not. That simple truth was excruciatingly painful. Yet it was wonderfully freeing. And it ultimately was what opened the door for my healing and for our healing as a family, because healing could occur only as I lived in that humble truth and got out of God's way. I stopped trying to do what only God could do when I humbly admitted, "I cannot."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus taught us, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We open ourselves to receiving God's healing in our lives when we come to the end of trying to control

what we cannot control. Every time we acknowledge our spiritual poverty—our creaturely dependence on our loving Maker—and live in the truth of our need for God, the kingdom of heaven is ours. When we let ourselves be who we are as God's much loved children and we let God be God, the doors and windows of our lives are thrown open for us to receive God and all God's love and life and goodness into our lives. This is the amazing grace of true humility. It is the central dynamic of the first three steps of the Twelve Steps.

Honesty

Honesty is the capacity to tell the truth about ourselves. It is the ability and choice to let ourselves and others know what we are observing, what we can do and what we can't do, what we are thinking and feeling, what we are wanting and what our behaviors have been. Honesty is reality unadorned, the truth with no spin. What Jesus taught us about the truth is that it will set us free.

Honesty is a twin sister to humility. It is the freedom to let go of attempts to manage what others think of us. It is the relief that comes with being real about our limits, our flaws, our poor choices, our sin, our fears, our shame, our longings, our love. It is the joy of being able to let go of the self-image we may be attached to and to allow ourselves to be an ordinary human being.

The truth we need to let ourselves know and speak is, most importantly, the truth about ourselves. The first step of honesty that I had the opportunity to take when our son was using drugs was to stop focusing on his insanity around drugs and to focus instead on my insanity about him. In my attempts to control what was beyond my control I was playing God. As a result, I became increasingly out of touch with reality, obsessed and irrational. I had to admit my own insanity before any positive change could take place.

The second step of honesty became possible for me once I admitted that I could not control what was out of my control. Paradoxically, this admission allowed me to take a much clearer look at the significance of what was happening. There was a problem. Our son was in trouble. I had to stop minimizing and denying this truth. I had to see and admit to myself, to God and to others the existence of this problem. And I had to let myself see clearly its enormity, its progressive nature and its life-threatening reality.

The third step of honesty I needed to take was to acknowledge that I was a part of the problem. This can be tricky territory because we often want to take either no responsibility or total responsibility for other people's behavior. And because usually neither of these is the truth, we end up in confusion and continued chaos. I had to sort out what was my part and what was not my part of the problem.

The clarity that humility brought me made it easier for me to see that the choices my son was making were not my doing. I was not forcing the drugs into him. He was doing this; I was not. I did not cause these choices; I could not control these choices. His addiction was his problem.

There were ways, however, in which I was a part of the problem. First, I was part of the problem because I had passed on burdens of shame, fear and guilt to my son long before I knew that I carried these burdens myself. Like all parents, there were ways I had hurt my son and had failed him. The inherited burdens of shame, fear, guilt and unresolved pain that he carried were, in part, what made him more vulnerable to making self-destructive choices.

Second, I was part of the problem because I continued to try to fix or control my son and his problem. In doing this, I continued to slip back into minimizing or denying his drug use, wanting to avoid the truth because I didn't want to face the pain.

Third, I was part of the problem because I was not taking good care of myself. I was so busy with all the insanity of the situation that I neglected some of my own basic needs.

Telling myself and God and a few other people these basic truths helped to free me from adding more shame and fear and guilt to my life or to our son's life. Honesty freed me from getting lost in self-blame or from needlessly blaming others. Shame and blame only add to the problem. Telling the truth, however, is like shining a light in the dark. It brings a simplicity and a clarity. The simplicity and clarity that were evident when I told the truth was that there was a problem of great significance; our son needed help; I needed help; our family needed help. Truth, when we find it, is always freeing.

Courage

Courage is the capacity to take action in spite of our fear. Courage does not feel like freedom from fear, because it is not. The fear is still there. Courage is choosing to not allow the fear to decide for us what we will do and what we will not do. Courage is the God-given strength to make decisions based on the wisdom we have gained from humility and honesty, rather than based on our fear.

The serenity prayer teaches us to pray for the serenity to accept what we cannot change, the courage to change what we can and the wisdom to know the difference. Accepting the truth about my son's problem and the truth about my inability to change or control him led me to see the things I could change. I could not change him, but perhaps I could, with God's help, change myself. I was a part of the problem. Perhaps I could also be a part of the solution.

One thing I could change was to take better care of me. It took some courage to begin taking better care of myself, because in this situation I sometimes confused self-care with selfishness and was tempted to berate myself for even the most basic acts of self-care. But self-care is always a gift to ourselves and to other people in our lives, because it fosters self-respect and respect of others and because it allows us to live more sanely.

For me, at the time, taking better care of myself meant not living my life obsessed about our son's choices, but allowing myself to pursue my own life. It meant spending time alone with God and time alone with my husband. It meant spending time with our other son and spending time with friends. Taking care of myself also meant getting all the help and support I needed, so that I could continue living in humility and honesty. All of this took courage, because I was afraid that if I moved my primary focus off



our son and onto my life, I was in some way abandoning him and that might make his problems worse.

When I took better care of myself I began to notice my limits. Our son was living in our home, and he was often up all night. His behavior was erratic. He had days of paranoia and times when he lashed out at us verbally. All of this was not only painful to watch but very disruptive to our lives. I began to see clearly, because of my ongoing self-care, that I could not go on living that way.

One day my husband and I agreed that we could not continue to live that way any more. We contacted a treatment center to secure a place in their program, and then sat down with our beloved son, who was terribly paranoid by this time. We told him that we loved him and that we could not continue to live with his drug use. We told him that he needed to either go to this treatment program or move out on his own. We knew that moving out on his own would mean he would be on the streets, loaded and paranoid. Our fear was so great that we felt like our hearts would stop. And yet, by God's grace, we found the courage to do the sanest thing we had done in months. God granted us the courage we needed to change what we could change, the courage we needed to tell the truth and the courage we needed to speak from humility rather than from shame or blame.

If we had allowed our fears to be the guiding principle of our decision making, the chaos and insanity of our lives and of our son's life would most likely have continued. But when we humbly told the truth about our limits, when we accepted that we could not stop or control our son's drug use, and when we were granted the courage to change what we could by asking him to go into treatment or move out, new possibilities for healing were opened for all of us. This particular act of courage required that I learn another vital life lesson, the lesson of trust.

Trust

Trust is the ability to rely on or depend on another person's help and support and care. In the second step of the Twelve Steps we come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. In the third step, we make the decision to turn our lives and wills over to the loving, capable care of God. We make the decision to trust God.

I had heard this short catch phrase—"Trust God"—all my life. It had been said all too often in my hearing as a kind of magical spell, a quick fix. It seemed to be thrown out as an easy answer by people who hadn't even bothered to listen to the problem. Trust God. What did it mean? How does one do this? What does it change? More often than not, it seemed to lead to shame and confusion rather than to restored lives.

When our son was addicted to drugs, lying about his use and growing more and more paranoid, the phrase "Trust God" took on an entirely new and desperate meaning for me. It sounded like I was being told, "Let go of your son even though it feels like he will fall to his death. Let go of him and trust that God will catch

and hold him and care for him." This seemed impossible to me. I felt like I was being asked to do the impossible.

But it is what I had to do. I could no longer put my trust in my abilities to fix the problem. Only God could restore our son. My work was to entrust myself and our son and our entire family to God's loving care. Every day. Multiple times a day. Trusting God was no longer a simple slogan. It took on urgent meaning. It became something visceral. At first it was like performing a high-wire act, expecting to fall at any moment, but choosing to believe that there was a safety net beneath us even though I could not see the net or understand how it could catch us.

So what steps did I take as I inched my way out onto that high wire? I took steps like praying. Not long, theologically correct prayers, but short, urgent prayers for help, for guidance, for courage. I took steps like asking others who knew us and loved us to pray for us as well. I took steps of facing and accepting the seriousness of the problem we faced as a family, and of facing and accepting our powerlessness to cure addiction. Ultimately, we took the step of requiring that our son go into treatment or move out. That was the moment when we actively, fully let him go and entrusted him to God's care.

A friend who was praying for us told me in the midst of our darkest days that she sensed that God was inviting me to rest. Rest! The word startled me. It seemed so bizarre in my circumstances. And yet I could feel the difference it would make. I could climb down from my imaginary high-wire act and crawl into God's loving arms. And rest. For me this became the deepest, truest meaning of the word trust. And it, too, was visceral—this

sense of being securely held in the arms of love, this sense that everyone in my family was being held in God's loving arms. I did not have to let my son fall; he was already being held. Letting him go simply meant that I stopped getting in God's way, that I quit acting as if there were no God who was powerful and loving and able to heal. Letting go meant resting in God's powerful love for me and for my son.

It was a great grace-fullness that our son agreed, reluctantly, to go into treatment. This might not have been the outcome of our intervention. He might have decided to spend time on the streets before he became willing to end the nightmare. There is no way to know in advance how long the journey with addiction will go on. It is not something we can control. But, fortunately, that was not his choice. We found out later that he decided to go to treatment partly because he had become so paranoid that he wanted to get away from the people he thought were after him. God used the insanity he was experiencing to help him make a sane choice.

The outcome of the story is that we let our son go and we got him back. God held us all in arms of love and brought healing to our son and to our family, one day at a time, day after day after day. "It is a story of redemption," our son said a few years later. It is a story of redemption, a story full of grace.

*I could
climb down from
my imaginary
high-wire act
and crawl
into God's
loving arms.
And rest.*

Grace

Grace is the healing, saving, blessing activity of God in our lives. Grace is God being God. It is God with us.

I learned grace in new ways while our son was still using. I experienced God with us in that dark time. God did not wait until we figured things out. God did not wait at all. God was with us through it all, in it all, extending healing, and blessing to us all. It was God's grace that drew us into humility and honesty. It was God's grace that gave us courage when our hearts grew faint with fear. It was God's grace that taught us to entrust ourselves and our son to God's loving care.

Sometimes people define grace as "unmerited favor" and then go on to talk about grace as if it is something God extends to us in spite of our lack of value in God's eyes. I experienced deeply that this is not what grace is at all. Unmerited favor (or unearned favor) means that grace is something we cannot earn because it is already ours. God's grace, God's love are ours. Already. Always. Unmerited favor means that God's loving-kindness toward us does not change as we change. It is constant, unchangeable, and therefore absolutely reliable. Grace is God always seeing and knowing our infinite value. Grace is God actively seeking to awaken us to God's love for us and to our everlasting value to God.

When our son was at his worst, his value, his preciousness, in our eyes never changed. We loved him and treasured him. If we, being broken parents, could extend that kind of grace to our son without even trying, how much more does God's love and valuing of us never fail. This is the grace I experienced in new ways while our son was still using.

Jesus told a story in which God is a parent whose child has lost his way. This is the familiar story of the father whose son has taken his portion of the inheritance and quickly spent it all, most likely on mood-altering behaviors. The father looks down the road day after day, filled with longing for this son he loves and values beyond measure. The father endlessly scans the horizon for his son, waiting for the day his son will return. The father never forgets for an instant his son's infinite value or his own endless love for his child. So when the son first appears far off down the road the father runs toward him with arms outstretched and joy in his heart. The father does not listen to the son's rehearsed speech about not being worthy; instead, the father demonstrates to the son the son's great value. The father throws his arms around his son, embracing him in love and gladness. Then the father places his ring on his son's finger, his coat on his son's shoulders and tells his servants to prepare a party in honor of his son. This is grace. It is God's extravagant, unshakable valuing and loving of us. This is God's grace toward us as parents. This is God's grace toward our children. This is God's never ending grace toward each and every one of us.

Humility. Honesty. Courage. Trust. Grace. These lessons were hard won. These lessons were pure gift. I am grateful beyond telling for our son's recovery and for our recovery as a family. And I am deeply, daily grateful for the life lessons God taught me while our son was still using drugs.

May the God of grace keep you in all peace. May you, by God's grace, know the freedom of humility and honesty, and the possibilities of courage and trust. May God's grace bring full healing to you and to those you love.

Juanita Ryan is a therapist at Brea Family Counseling Center in Brea, CA and a frequent contributor to STEPS.



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In recent years the phenomenon of intervention has caught the eye of the broadcast media. And thanks to them, what people envision when they hear the word intervention usually falls into one of four categories. The first is the “Sopranos”-style intervention, where at the end the “good fellas” beat up on their fellow fella and threaten to ice him if he doesn’t go to rehab. Second is the talk show-style intervention on a drug addict as presented recently on a TV show. Next is the “South Park”-style intervention, where after being intervened upon, the character Cartman goes to “fat camp.” While there he figures out a way to make money on the side by selling candy bars to the other clientele. And finally, there’s the more traditional view, as we hear about in television interviews with well-known people such as Betty Ford, who describe their own intervention experiences.

The concept of intervention conjures up the scene of a room, usually an office, where a group of people are sitting nervously. They are waiting in secret for the arrival of the “intervenee,” whose relationships (and perhaps whose life) are being threatened because of a condition that the person needs help with. Soon the intervenee is led into the room under the illusion of being there for some other purpose. The counselor or interventionist then guides the group through confrontation after confrontation about the identified person’s unhealthy lifestyle and the harmful effects it is having on their health, their job performance, their co-workers, or the psychological and emotional well-being of family members—often multiple generations of family members. Finally, the intervenee breaks down, says, “Yes, I will get help” and is then smothered with tearful, grateful hugs. Or the intervenee jumps up and storms out the door while the friends and family members sit in shock, wondering if they should have gone through with the intervention in the first place.

Interventions originally developed mainly in the field of alcoholism treatment. Alcohol is involved in a high percentage of all accidental deaths, traffic fatalities, violent crimes, domestic violence and child abuse. A high percentage of suicides involve the use of alcohol in combination with other substances, and additional deaths are related to the long-term medical complications associated with alcoholism. Unfortunately, only 15 percent of those with alcohol dependence seek treatment for this disease. So the need for interventions in this area is clear.

In addition to alcoholism and drug abuse, however, there are many other situations in which interventions are appropriate. Consider the following: a 50-year-old woman is losing her family as a result of her workaholicism; a 25-year-old anorexic or bulimic can barely carry her 100-pound weight on her 5-foot-10-inch frame and is at risk of sterility or the shutdown of internal organs; a 35-year-old husband and father physically abuses his wife and children; a rigid, controlling man who no longer gets drunk and abuses his family with his fists now uses religion and words to achieve the same results; a bipolar man and his family are living on an emotionally dangerous roller coaster because he refuses to take his medications.

Crisis Intervention and Mistakes Families Make

Jeff VanVonderen

For all these situations, and many more, it is appropriate to consider an intervention. When a person is stuck in patterns that disrupt, endanger, or demean the quality of life for themselves or others, an intervention is more than appropriate and can make an enormous difference in the present and for generations to come.

This article explores some of the mistakes that families commonly make when they experience a crisis that would make an intervention appropriate. These mistakes are wasting the crisis, playing solo, skipping rehearsal, accepting half measures and caving in afterward.

Wasting the Crisis

When a series of events culminates in a situation that is no longer under control, we call it a crisis. Until the crisis, a loved one has been walking on a stressful, dangerous, perhaps life-threatening tightrope. Friends and family often feel helpless. They are an unwilling audience for this dangerous balancing act. And that can sometimes make them feel like they’re on a tightrope as well. When the crisis occurs, it’s like the loved one has fallen off the tightrope. They have gotten fired, abused someone, gotten arrested, received a drunk driving citation, or any of a myriad of other experiences. Now they are dangling by a fingernail. It’s an emergency. Action is imperative. Time is of the essence.

Yet, all too often, family members and friends reach up and prop the loved one back up—or reach down and pull them back up—onto the tightrope to resume their dangerous act. Then they wait anxiously for the next incident and hope that it never comes, or if it does come, that it isn’t too serious. They do this because they don’t know exactly how to give help that will really be helpful. Or they do it because they have been trained through other tightrope mishaps in the past. Or they do it because they find meaning for their own lives by rescuing people who fall off tightropes. Whatever the reasons are for helping a person get back on the tightrope, the important thing to remember is this: The problem is not that the person has fallen off the tightrope. The problem is that they are living on it in the first place. So helping someone back up onto the tightrope is, as they say, merely rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. At best it is a Band-Aid. In essence, if in a time of crisis we help someone back onto the tightrope, we have wasted the crisis.

The goal of an interventionist is to utilize, not waste, the crisis. When it is impossible or improbable that the loved one is going to climb down off the tightrope on their own initiative, it becomes the job of the interventionist to provide a loving, supportive environment in which people who care can “push” the loved one off the rope, resist efforts to prop them back up, and provide a net of appropriate, qualified, expert help to catch them and help them resume life with their feet on the ground.

Playing Solo

A person in need of an intervention is incapable of seeing, or is unwilling to see, the impact that his or her lifestyle is having on those around him. Those who are concerned about their loved

one have found that the efforts they've made alone to suggest, hint, lecture, or otherwise help have failed; sometimes their efforts have even been met with hostility. So each person has tried to be helpful; each person has experienced part of the problem. And although each person sees part of the picture, the whole picture is very difficult for them to visualize. To put it another way, trying individually to help someone is like trying to play one instrument's part of an orchestral piece. Without the other instruments, and without a conductor, the music is ineffective and the audience won't listen. Or worse yet, the audience may try to take charge and conduct the music themselves.

The task of the interventionist is to help friends and family members play their parts together so that during the concert the loved one can hear the music, or begin to understand what their life looks like and how it affects others. An interventionist is a conductor who trains the musicians to play a piece of music clearly and crisply, music in which the audience can hear the strains of their own lives. Only when the musicians play their parts in concert with one another, under the guidance of the conductor, will the music have a chance to be heard.

Skiping Rehearsal

The most important day of the (usually) two-day intervention process is the first day—the pre-intervention training day. Typically, this involves a lengthy and intense training session during which family members and other participants (not the prospective client) become equipped to communicate their concerns and proposed course of action to their loved one in ways that are the most helpful. During this time the interventionist gathers and organizes information about the person whose life is out of control because of their addiction or other life-interrupting behavior patterns. Every single detail is considered. Who will speak first? In what order will people speak? What will be said? Who will sit where? Will the person be brought to the intervention, or will the intervention be brought to the person? And how? What if they say no? What would likely be their main objections to accepting treatment? Every base is covered, every crack filled. The second day involves the actual intervention with the identified patient, followed by referral and escort, if necessary, to an appropriate helping agency.

And herein lies another common mistake made by family members. Time and time again, I have seen people skip that most important first day, the day of preparation. As a result, they may wind up repeating the second day, the intervention, over and over again. If they are not well prepared, the intervention usually fails. They don't get the answer they want, the person denies the problem and refuses to get help, and the painful wait for the next crisis begins again. In addition, they have given their loved one a greater opportunity to reinforce the defenses that have kept them in their destructive patterns up to that point. Or the family members may actually get the answer they want: "Yes, you're right. I need help and I'll get it." But then nothing changes. Perhaps the "right" answer satisfies the immediate concerns of the family and they back off. Perhaps the family was not prepared with a plan of action, let alone prepared to act immediately to put their plan in place.

Accepting Half Measures

Sometimes when a person agrees to seek help, family members are so excited that they accept an inadequate solution to the problem.

It's as if they are all passengers on a stalled bus, and suddenly the most out-of-control person volunteers to drive. They are so relieved to have the bus moving at all that they go for a ride to an undesirable destination. For instance, a person who is addicted and whose body is physically compromised from years of alcohol abuse needs to go to treatment. But first they need a safe, medically supervised detoxification program to avoid the dangerous and sometimes life-threatening effects of withdrawal. But they refuse to go to detox, for whatever reasons. Instead, they offer to quit on their own and promise to go to outpatient treatment and A.A. meetings. Their loved ones are so thrilled by their admission of the problem and willingness to get help that they accept the plan. While continuing to drink can kill some people, quitting (on their own) can kill them as well. Is there another life-threatening condition for which we would settle for inadequate or less than the best treatment? And yet when it comes to addiction, families do exactly that, far too often.

Again, that is why, prior to the two-day intervention event, the interventionist is busy behind the scenes planning for the effectiveness and safety of the intervention: orchestrating the time and place for a pre-intervention training session and deciding who should be present; choosing which participants will be the most effective in the intervention and weeding out those who would likely sabotage it during the event or prior to it by tipping off the loved one; prearranging admission to appropriate recovery services (doctors, lawyers, psychologists, inpatient or outpatient treatment centers, and so on) if the loved one becomes willing to accept help. Will she need detox? Does he need to be escorted? How can the time between the client's "yes" and when they actually enter a facility be minimized and the arrangements be as seamless as possible?

Caving In

I know a person who works for a crisis telephone line. When she suggests to a family that they consider using an interventionist, the most frequently asked question is, "What are the chances that it won't work?" Her standard reply is, "The most common reason for an intervention not to work is that the family doesn't do what the interventionist says to do." I would have to agree. Often someone gets ahead of the plan. Someone thinks they can do it on their own because they have a "special" relationship with the client. This abandonment of the well-planned group intervention almost always leads to failure. I have even had a couple of occasions where a family member caved in and began defending the loved one in the middle of an intervention. I understand that it's hard to stop rescuing someone when that has been your main job for years and years. But my experience is that people who choose to get help as a result of a group intervention are more likely to get more comprehensive help, are more likely to do better while they are in treatment, and are less likely to leave before an approved discharge.

There is another time when caving in undermines the whole process, and that is after the client is in treatment. Often a person in a treatment program threatens to leave or complains about their situation: they don't like their counselor; they are "not as bad" as the other people there; the food isn't good; another client is getting on their nerves; they don't like their roommate; the center is not Christian or religious enough; the center is too Christian or religious. Suddenly, instead of understanding that their loved one's new "crisis" gives them a chance to change and grow, family members give the

Continued on back cover

Kids' Bad Decisions Do Not Mean We Are Bad Parents

by Norma Bourland

Our son started using drugs when he was 14 years old. We had just moved to another state for the second time in two years, after living overseas as missionaries for the first 12 years of our son's life. This was a lot for all of us in our family to handle, especially for an adolescent. Because my husband was the pastor of a small evangelical church, we lived on a limited budget, whereas our new community was very affluent. Our son's new high school was huge, with about three thousand students. He was the youngest one on his soccer team, and although he was very skilled because he had been playing almost from the time he was born, he had a bit of an accent and was unsure of American ways. So he kind of stood out.

In the early years of our son's drug use I certainly didn't suspect he was using. I just thought he was having difficulty adjusting to high school and to the non-Christian values of his new friends. I prayed and talked with him about being a good testimony to those he was with at school. I talked to him about how he could influence his friends in a positive way. A good opportunity for him, I said. I thought for sure that his little rebellious moments—broken curfews and drinking parties—would be used by God in my son's life as a good learning experience for him. I completely expected that someday he would be a giant of a Christian preacher.

Slowly I became confused and frustrated as my son's habits and patterns of behavior developed. I tried to make sense of the chaos in his life that was emerging. I preached to him passionate sermons. I punished him with endless groundings. I shamed him with my tears and my pleading. I tried hard to get my husband to "do something." Why couldn't we get through to him? Why did he continue this destructive behavior? Why wasn't he listening to us? Why was he doing all the things we were telling him not to do? I became desperate and angry and very, very tired.

Four years later a turning point came for me, a point of beginning to regain a bit of sanity. When we finally knew for sure and accepted the fact that my son was abusing drugs and alcohol, it was a relief to stop trying to figure out what was wrong. We were able to let our desperate questions go. We were then able to get a little help for our son. We took steps to address the real problem instead of all the symptomatic behaviors.

The year following our son's high school graduation we sent him to a private prep school with great hope that he would improve his grades so that he could go to college. But when he returned home at Christmas, we determined that he was using heavily. In fact, he was using cocaine heavily. He was deeply depressed and lethargic. After confronting him in a long and difficult session in our living room, we were able to get him into an outpatient treatment in our neighborhood. My husband and I also received some counseling

there.

In the midst of all these difficulties, my husband decided to take a new position as pastor of counseling in a church in another state. This move had the promise of a new beginning for all of us and offered some relief for my husband from his senior pastor responsibilities and the scrutiny of a small church. Shortly after the move, however, we discovered that instead of progressing in recovery, our son had escalated his use. We found crack cocaine and other drug paraphernalia in our car one day after he had used it.

We didn't waste much time confronting him. We called around and found that we had unknowingly moved to the drug recovery mecca of the United States. One of the centers in our city admitted our son, and our whole family was soon attending the center's mandatory family week, which included drug education classes and some very painful, emotional group sessions with other families. All this was going on while we were just settling into a new pastorate and while our new church family was trying to be welcoming and hospitable toward us and get to know us.

Fighting Shame

I kept declining invitations from the church hospitality committee to attend a monthly coffee morning for newcomers, but I finally agreed to go. Reluctantly I pushed myself out the door that day and went to the beautiful suburban home of the hostess. I walked in and everything was absolutely perfect. The hostesses were wonderful and very welcoming. I sat down in a small circle with a group of women of varying ages and was just starting to relax when the hostess said, "Norma, why don't you start by telling us a little bit about your family and yourself, and we'll go around the circle."

I died inside. I didn't want to tell them about my family and myself. But I took a deep breath, smiled and said, "Well, we have just moved here. My husband is your new pastor of counseling. We have four children. Our oldest son is at a Christian college. Our second son is 18 and he's in drug treatment at St. Mary's. Our daughter is in high school, and our youngest son is in junior high." Then I turned to the woman on my right and smiled, hoping she would jump in quickly so that nobody would remember what I said.

I sat frozen as the introductions went around the room. I really did not know who was there or what they said until the last woman, sitting directly across the table, looked at me and said, "My name is Carol, and I too have four children, and my second son was also in drug treatment at St. Mary's."

I couldn't believe it. I'd been feeling like I was probably going to die from this horrible thing I was going through, and here was a woman my age, looking well manicured and fairly sane and sen-

sible, and yet she had lived through this. In fact, she seemed to be functioning quite normally.

Suddenly I felt hopeful. I thought, Maybe I can get through this somehow. I thought of the verse in which Job says of the Lord, “He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). And I saw my new friend Carol sitting there as gold. This woman became a friend at a desperate time in my life.

One of the ways I cope with any difficulty in my life is to talk about it. I talk it through, and then I talk it through some more, and then I talk about it again. So I was talking about my son to everyone who would listen to me. I needed my longtime friends to listen to me and tell me how they remembered what a good mom I was and what a sweet boy my son was and what a great family we were. I needed to be reassured that the past that I remembered was what really happened.

I guess I was hanging onto pride. I didn't really want to face the issue that maybe I or our home life had anything to do with my son's drug use. My friends were really patient with me.

Slowly I became angry, and especially when I heard Christians say things like, “I don't know where my kids would be today if it weren't for my prayers.” As if I hadn't prayed or I hadn't prayed enough or I hadn't prayed the right prayer or God didn't like me or my kids as much as them. And I got angry with God for not protecting our kids and not answering my prayers for them over the years. We had dedicated each one of our kids to God when they were little, and I had never expected them to be in this kind of destructive situation. I stopped reading Christian books and magazines, and I avoided group prayer meetings. I turned off the Christian music and the radio.

I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. Our family life felt like a mockery to me. I screamed within myself whenever I heard other people refer to drug users as losers or scumbags who should be put away for life or given the death sentence or shipped out of the country. I wanted everyone to know that one of those “losers” was my son, whom I had nurtured in my arms every night with stories and songs of “Jesus Loves You, This I Know.” Things had not turned out like I thought God had promised they would. A longtime friend of mine remembers all that anger, because she patiently listened to it.

My new friend from the hospitality morning took me to Al-Anon. It was there that I listened to my anger through the mouths of others. Al-Anon was painful for me, and I didn't like it. Every time I went, I left saying, “I'm not going again.” I just didn't understand what “letting go” meant. I didn't appreciate having to share my personal feelings and stories with people who would give me only their first names. But each time I went I repeated the serenity prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” And I listened to others read the 12 Steps. From day one I began slowly, very slowly, to realize that the deci-

sions my kids make are not mine. They do things for their own reasons. Even though our decisions affect each other, we are not the source of each other's happiness or peace of mind. I cannot change my kids or control their choices. I can only change me and control my own choices.

Some days I had to work real hard not to allow my kids' well-being, especially my son who was using, to be the focus of my life or the source of my happiness. My well-being has to be my own decision every day. This releases me from being enmeshed in my kids' choices. When I finally realized this, I told my son, “You are not the source of my happiness.” He seemed shocked and a little disbelieving as he said, “You've never told me that before.” And he was right. I'm sure that all the tears and the ranting and the sermonizing and the punishing over the years had told him otherwise.

Somehow I had bought into the idea that I was responsible for my children's choices. It hadn't dawned on me that perhaps they make their choices for their own reasons, just as I do. I thought that if I taught them well enough and disciplined and trained them the way I was supposed to, they would avoid all the evil trappings of the world. They would be blessed by God and would be Christians who could live above the circumstances and experience only joy and goodness. It was what was required of me as a parent. Good kids had good parents; bad kids had bad parents. I was diligent and committed and determined in this task of parenting. Everything seemed clear-cut to me. Black-and-white. If I did what I was supposed to do, they would be good.

So of course I was very, very disappointed and I took it personally when my kids did something I considered wrong.

One day I was sitting in a training workshop in the midst of all this going on in my life. The speaker walked to the podium and without introduction said, “God is God, and I am not.” And then was silent. In a brief moment something happened to me. I heard nothing else. Those words sank deep within my heart and I felt free. In that moment I gave God back his job of saving my children and making them into Christians. And I took on the job of mom, loving them for who they are, not for who I was trying to make them be. And that moment began a process of my trying to live this out on a daily basis. Letting go doesn't change the circumstances, and the circumstances can be tough and painful. But letting go frees me from trying to fix or control circumstances or other people. It allows me to experience peace in the midst of chaos.

At one point when my son was 19 he became discouraged with trying to recover and ran away. During those months we didn't know where he was. I exhausted all my resources in trying to find him. I even had a former FBI agent looking for him. I felt depressed most of the time and had to force myself to get up every morning. I cried a lot. I cried every time I talked about my son. I cried every time I tried to pray. I wrote in one of my journal entries, “Each day I wake feeling an urgent need to do something, and then I realize there's nothing I can do. The emptiness just has to be.”

My son had been gone almost a year, without a word, when his

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birthday approached. As I sat in my bedroom chair, my “safe place,” I begged God to do something to make my son call, make him come home and make him stop using drugs.

On his birthday, my son called. He was in jail, in another state, thousands of miles away. He said he had been thinking about his childhood and how good it was. He thanked us and said he didn’t want us to think we had been bad parents. We were amazed and glad, and we felt reassured that God was working in our son’s life. Even in that jail. I stopped crying and I made his favorite cake in celebration of his birthday. Then I called a few friends and we had a small party.

Two weeks later I had a vivid dream. In that dream my son was bound in chains and was surrounded by all of us who were at his party. It was dark and scary; evil things floated around in the air like in a horror movie. But all of a sudden a light came, the chains fell off and someone said, “He’s free. He’s free!” And beautiful peace and light and soft music flooded the room and flooded over me. Then suddenly I realized I was awake. In fact, I was speaking. I said, “He’s free!” out loud. I lay there for a minute. I felt assured in a strange way that God was speaking to me. God was in charge.

Not many days later we received a letter from a friend we hadn’t heard from in a while. He knew that our son had run away. The friend said in his letter that he had begun praying recently for our son and had prayed for seven days. He said he prayed that our son would remember his youth and his home and that he would repent and call us. When the seven days ended he decided to pray seven more days and to fast a couple of days, too. He finished praying on the same day that I had the dream. God used this friend to encourage us just when we needed encouragement. God seems to know what we need when we need it and goes to any length to give us what we need.

Our son came home a little over a year later. It was Christmastime, and he had been gone for two years. He brought his girlfriend, who was six months pregnant, home with him. They lived with us for three months while they got some things sorted out. Then they moved into their own apartment. After their son was born we watched their roller-coaster life begin to affect our little grandson. And later we had our grandson live with us on two occasions because either my son was in jail or he and his wife weren’t able to take care of their son.

Our grandson is now nine years old and has a little sister. Our son has been sober, we think, for several years. But the consequences of his past continue to challenge him and his wife. He’s 30 now; he lost some valuable growing-up years during the 12 years he was using, and he has had to catch up on learning some basic life skills.

Facing My Part

I couldn’t have honestly faced the question of what was my part in my son’s drug use while I was hurting so badly and feeling so disillusioned. Only recently have I been able to ask myself that ques-

tion, because I had to go through my emotional responses before I could separate myself from him. As long as I was enmeshed emotionally with him the question of what was my part in my son’s drug use felt like an accusation. It was too close to me.

But once I let go and let God work in my son’s life and in mine and I began to take care of my own well-being, I was able to see my son more clearly as a person. I saw what a heavy burden he must have carried, to be the evangelical pastor’s kid in an area where that wasn’t a popular affiliation. It must have been difficult for him when I pressured him to be a testimony to his friends and to be content with moving as often as we did. I began to see that I hadn’t had much empathy for my children’s feelings. I hadn’t even given them the permission to have their own feelings. I began to see that there was a reason for my son to rebel. I began to feel compassion for him. I began to want to hear his story and to support him in whatever he was feeling—not for my own purposes, but for his. My own pain helped me to understand his pain, helped me to grow spiritually and helped me to become a more compassionate person.

Our children are unique. They make their own choices for their own reasons, as we parents do. Parents are not to blame for their children’s temperament, personalities, character or choices. But parents do contribute. We choose how to contribute to their development, and even when we try to do our best, we fall short. We make mistakes. But God has trouble with his family too.

The anger in me has been quieted, and the disillusionment about God is gradually turning to ongoing insight. My deep hurt has turned into hope and anticipation and also appreciation for the journey that it’s taken us on. I still often sit in silence in the presence of God, in my chair in the bedroom, and let God hold me and quiet my fears. Although I often squirm in his lap like a two-year-old, he doesn’t let go. He reminds me that he looks at me with compassion as a father looks at his child. That he does not respond to me according to my failures or repay me according to my sins. And that he separates my sins from me as far as the east is from the west, because he knows what I am made of. That’s where I find “the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can,” and the wisdom to let God be the Savior of my precious children.

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Unmaking Your False Self

by

David G. Benner

The ideal of authenticity is something like the ideal of perfection. All of us have some idea of what we are talking about without ever having had any direct personal experience of it.

What we do know from personal experience is how to scramble after what we think is our best shot at personal fulfillment. We all seek a way of being that will lead to happiness. The reality is, however, that not all routes are equally authentic. If there is a way of being that is true to my deepest self, then there are also many other ways that are false.

Everything that is false about us arises from our belief that our deepest happiness will come from living life our way, not God's way. Although we may say we want to trust God and surrender to his will, deep down we doubt that God is really capable of securing our happiness.

PERSONAL STYLE

Early on in life most of us learn to take care of our own needs and satisfactions. We develop what Thomas Keating calls a personal emotional program.¹ This is our plan for coping with life and achieving happiness. It is our best guess about what we need to do in order to feel good about our self. It is our strategy for meeting our basic needs for love, survival, power and control.

Our basic style is often built around the things that were reinforced for us as children. It usually starts with the things we do well. Over time our repertoire of competencies grows, and we learn to live in a way that we think will work for us. This becomes "our way," or what we simply think of as who we are.

The problem is not that we do certain things well and have competencies and qualities that make us special. The problem lies in the inordinate investment that we place in this image and way of being.

At the core of the false self is a desire to preserve an image of our self and a way of relating to the world. This is our personal style—how we think of ourselves and how we want others to see us and think of us. I may have an image of myself as rational and careful. This will be at the core of my basic style. Alternately, my most prized trait might be my fitness, my intelligence or my sense of humor. Or it could be that my investment is in an image of someone who is loving, artistic, unpredictable, creative, fashionable, absent-minded, serious, spiritual or impulsive. Typically the trait that we prize is in fact part of who we are. But the truth always is that this trait is simply one among many. We live a lie when we make it the sum of our being.

Our false self is built on an inordinate attachment to an image of our self that we think makes us special. The problem is the attachment, not having qualities that make us unique. Richard Rohr suggests that the basic question we must ask is whether we

are prepared to be other than our image of our self.² If not, we will live in bondage to our false self.

As an example of this life of bondage to a false self, consider Saul before his conversion and new identity as Paul. Ambitious, fanatically zealous and homicidally ruthless, Saul was the terror of first-century Christians. The Acts of the Apostles describes him as working for the total destruction of the church, going house to house arresting followers of Christ and sending them to prison or execution (Acts 8:1-3).

Saul's falsity is seen most clearly in the light of what was true in Paul. The persistence of Saul's hatred pointed to a life that was badly out of alignment, but what exactly was wrong? In retrospect I would suggest that he was consumed by personal ambition.

Saul was making a name for himself. He wanted to be known as the one who single-handedly saved Judaism from the heresy of Christianity. What changed when he met Christ on the Damascus Road was that his prodigious talents and extraordinary level of passion were redirected away from the kingdom of self to the kingdom of God. In this redirection he found freedom from the tyranny of his private ambition. He found his true self.

No longer driven by hatred, he was now compelled by love. His life as Paul showed much of the same dogged determination that was seen in his life as Saul. But now it was not his ambition to make his mark and do it his way that propelled him forward. Instead it was his longing to reach what he described as the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14 KJV).

THE CHALLENGE OF AUTHENTICITY

Something else that we know from experience is how to hide and how to pretend. At some point in childhood we all make the powerful discovery that we can manipulate the truth about ourselves. Initially it often takes the form of a simple lie—frequently a denial of having done something. But of more importance to the development of the false self is the discovery that our ability to hide isn't limited to what we say or don't say. We learn to pretend. We discover the art of packaging our self.

We learn that even if we feel afraid, we can appear to be brave. We also learn to cloak hate with apparent love, anger with apparent calm, and indifference with apparent sympathy. In short, we learn how to present our self in the best possible light—a light designed to create a favorable impression and maintain our self-esteem.

While this might seem quite benign, the dark side of pretending is that what begins as a role becomes an identity. Initially the masks we adopt reflect how we want others to see us. Over time, however, they come to reflect how we want to see our self. But by this point we have thoroughly confused the mask and our actual experience. Our masks have become our reality, and we have become our lies. In short, we have lost authenticity and adopted an identity based

on illusion. We have become a house of smoke and mirrors.

Few things are more difficult to discern and dismantle than our most cherished illusions. And none of our illusions are harder to identify than those that lie at the heart of our false self. The false self is like the air we breathe. We have become so accustomed to its presence that we are no longer aware of it. It is as elusive as the wind, seeming to disappear when the light of attention is shined in its direction.

The only hope for unmasking the falsity that resides at the core of our being is a radical encounter with truth. Nothing other than truth is strong enough to dispel illusion. And only the Spirit of Truth can save us from the consequences of having listened to the serpent rather than God.

LISTENING TO THE SERPENT

The Genesis account of the temptation of Adam and Eve helps us understand how we become the lies we choose to believe. The story tells of a serpent that, knowing our first parents wanted to be like God, offered them a way to achieve this. Their desire to be like God was not in itself the problem. For God had created them in the Divine image and wanted them to be like God. However, God's gift of likeness was quite different from that offered by the deceiver.

The core of the lie that Adam and Eve believed was that they could be like God without God. But without God the most we can ever do is make ourselves into a god. The truth is that we cannot be like God by means of a spiritual coup of Divine authority and sovereignty. James Finley puts it this way:

Any expression of self-proclaimed likeness to God is forbidden us, not because it breaks some law arbitrarily decreed by God, but because such an action is tantamount to a fundamental, death-dealing, ontological lie. We are not God. We are not our own origin, nor are we our own ultimate fulfillment. To claim to be so is a suicidal act that wounds our faith relationship with the living God and replaces it with a futile faith in a self that can never exist.³

Paradoxically, Adam and Eve got what they wanted—to be like God without God, likeness that was based on independence rather than surrender. This is why we must be very careful about what we desire. We might just get it!

However, what we get when we choose a way of being that is separate from God is the life of the lie. It is a lie because the autonomy that it promises is an illusion. We do not become free of God by a disregard of Divine will. Instead, by such disregard we forge the chains of our bondage.

What we get when we choose a way of being that is separate from God is the life of the false self. What Saul got when he chose his way over God's way was a self whose significance depended on accomplishments of heroic proportions—the destruction of the church....

The false self is the tragic result of trying to steal something from God that we did not have to steal. Had we dared to trust

God's goodness, we would have discovered that everything we could ever most deeply long for would be ours in God. Trying to gain more than the everything God offers, we end up with less than nothing. Rejecting God, we end up with a nest of lies and illusions. Displacing God, we become a god unto our self. We become a false self.

COPING WITH NAKEDNESS

With the self that is created in God's likeness rejected, our false self is the self we develop in our own likeness. This is the person we would like to be—a person of our own creation, the person we would create if we were God. But such a person cannot exist, because he or she is an illusion.

Basing identity on an illusion has profound consequences. Sensing its fundamental unreality, the false self wraps itself in

experience—experiences of power, pleasure and honor. Intuiting that it is but a shadow, it seeks to convince itself of its reality by equating itself with what it does and achieves. Basil Pennington suggests that the core of the false self is the belief that my value depends on what I have, what I can do and what others think of me.⁴ Thomas Merton describes this as “winding experiences around myself... like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface.”⁵

Because it is hollow at the core, the life of a false self is a life of excessive attachments. Seeking to avoid implosion and nonbeing, the false self grasps for anything that appears to have substance and then clings to these things with the tenacity of a drowning man clutching a life ring. One person might cling to his possessions, accomplishments or space. Another may cling to her dreams, memories or friendships. Any of these things can be either a blessing or a curse. They are a blessing when they are held in open hands of gratitude. They become a curse when they are grasped in clenched fists of entitlement and viewed as “me” or “mine.”

Saul clung to his zeal and force of will. Sounding like the prototypical Enneagram Type One

that he was, after his conversion he described this as his desire to attain perfection by the strength of his efforts (Philippians 3:6-9). What a relief it must have been for him to replace the perfection he had sought through hard work with “the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God” (Philippians 3:9).

We think of our attachments as anchors of well-being. We feel good when we are surrounded by what seem like innocent indulgences and think they secure a state of pleasure that would not be ours without them. In reality, however, they sabotage our happiness and are hazardous to both our spiritual health and our psychological health.

Attachments undermine our freedom, making our contentment and joy dependent on their presence. If my “innocent indulgence” is being surrounded by the latest high-tech gadgetry, I feel good when I get a new toy and not good when I see a newer version on the market and am unable to get it. An attachment to style, fash-

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ion and good taste operates the same way, making my happiness dependent on external things. Attachments imprison us in falsity as we follow the flickering sirens of desire.

Spiritually, attachments serve as idols: we invest in objects and experiences things that should be invested only in God. Anything that is grasped is afforded value beyond actual worth, value that is ultimately stolen from God.

Ultimately, attachments are ways of coping with the feelings of vulnerability, shame and inadequacy that lie at the core of our false ways of being. Like Adam and Eve, our first response to our awareness of nakedness is to grab whatever is closest and quickly cover our nakedness. We hide behind the fig leaves of our false self. This is the way we package our self to escape the painful awareness of our nakedness.

The problem with the false self is that it works. It helps us forget that we are naked. Before long, we are no longer aware of the underlying vulnerability and become comfortable once again.

But God wants something better than fig leaves for us. God wants us to be aware of our helplessness so we can know that we need Divine help. God's deepest desire for us is to replace our fig leaves with garments of durability and beauty (Genesis 3:21). Yet we cling to our fig-leaf false self. We believe that we know how to take care of our needs better than God.

RECOGNIZING YOUR FALSE SELF

While other people's excessive attachments and personal falsity often seem glaringly apparent, it is never easy to know the lies of our own life. There are, however, some trustworthy clues if we dare to be honest enough to face them.

One of these is defensiveness. Because of its fundamental unreality, the false self needs constant bolstering. Touchiness dependably points us to false ways of being. And the more prickly a person you are, the more you are investing in the defense of a false self.

Some people bristle easily if they are not taken seriously, thus betraying a need for others to see the self-importance that is so obvious to them. Others take themselves too seriously, perhaps being unable to laugh at themselves. Both reactions suggest ego inflation. Others have learned to mask these outward displays of defensiveness, but inner reactions of annoyance or irritation still point toward the presence of a false self.

I have always disliked being called Dave. Sometimes I correct people who do so. More often I simply remind myself how trivial the matter is and attempt to ignore my irritation. The obvious question, though, is why I am making such a big deal out of one consonant at the end of a name!

The answer points back to the core of my false self. David—I confess—seems to fit better with the image of seriousness I want to project. Dave seems too common and ordinary, perhaps too familiar. In the puffed-up state of self-importance associated with my false self, I want to be unique and I want to be important. I don't want to be content with ordinary.

That's how the false self works. Its touchiness is predictable. Pettiness is one of its most stable characteristics. The things that bother us most about others—our pet peeves—also point toward falsity in our own self. The speck that bothers me in the life of someone else is almost always the log in my own eye (Matthew 7:3).

If laziness in others is what really bothers me, there is a good chance that discipline and performance form a core part of the

false self that I embrace with tenacity. If it is playfulness and spontaneity in others that I find most annoying, then seriousness may be a central part of the self I protect and seek to project. If it is moral disregard that is particularly irritating in others, my false self is probably built around moral rectitude and self-righteousness. And if emotionality in others is what I most despise, emotional control is probably central to the script I have chosen to live.

Another clue to the nature of our false self is the pattern of our compulsions. Everyone tends to be compulsive about something, and for most of us it is what we think we most need. One person may compulsively pursue success or esteem, while another may invest the same energy in avoiding pain or emotional unpleasantness. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. The problem with compulsions is that they represent excessive attachments. They often involve a good that is elevated to the status of the supreme good by the disproportionate importance we attach to it.

Perfection may be desirable if welcomed as God's work in us, but not as an outcome of the relentless effort people like Saul tend to expend to produce it. Love is certainly also an unquestionable good, but the compulsive effort to always be loving that characterizes others reflects a denial of their humanity and always comes at the expense of authenticity. Similarly, success, beauty, knowledge, security, pleasure, self-reliance and contentment are all good things, but not the supreme good that we make them when we invest in them inordinately.

The most basic function of our compulsions is to help us preserve our false self. But maintaining this illusion is the source of all our unhappiness. As Basil Pennington observes, unhappiness is always a result of "not being able to do something I want to do, have something I want to have, or concern about what others will think of me."⁶ This brings us back to the core of the false self—placing my value in what I have, what I can do and what others think of me.

THE ILLUSION OF THE FALSE SELF

Perhaps an illustration will help clarify these false ways of being. While I would rather tell someone else's story, my own is the one I know best.

The root of my false self was the childhood discovery that by being a good boy I could earn love. Of course, learning how to interpret "good" took some time. A false self is never established overnight! However, over time the interaction of the dynamics of my family and of my personality suggested ways of wrapping my naked and vulnerable self with successive layers of accomplishment to secure love.

The problem was that these strategies worked. The more I accomplished, the more people seemed to like me. Consequently, I became better and better at being the little performing boy that I thought people would like. This gave me some distance from the abyss of feeling like a nobody. Even more important, it gave me a way of being not just a somebody, but somebody special. Tragically, however, it kept me from discovering just how likable I was without any effort to look good. And it set me up on a treadmill of performance.

Securing love by generating accomplishments leaves one dependent on the potentially fickle response of others. As I look back, it seems I put a spin on this as I shifted from seeking love to seeking respect, something that I unconsciously realized made the supply

of love even more secure. While love is freely given, respect is earned.

My longstanding investment in being respected has been an attempt to control my environment and guarantee the sense of specialness to which I have become addicted. The bondage in any false self is the bondage of having to keep up the illusion. I am not simply an overachieving good boy. I am not my accomplishments. The things I can do or have done do not make me special. In fact, the attempt to define myself by my accomplishments is as boringly common as it gets!

My compulsive pursuit of accomplishments and the respect of people who are important to me suffocates the life of my true self. It binds and inhibits my growth and restricts my freedom. It is important for me to remember that I am a human being, not a human doing. My worth lies in who I am, not what I can do or how I am seen by others. This is the truth of my existence.

A DIVINE BATTLE WITH THE FALSE SELF

If Jesus was—as Christians believe—both fully man and fully God, he too had to battle with the false self. He too must have been tempted by false ways of being and excessive attachments to his personal style. In his humanity, his identity in the love of the Father could not have been obvious from the first moments of consciousness as an infant. He had to find himself and in so doing must have been tempted by many false ways of living his life.

We know this to be true because we have a record of some of those temptations. Pennington suggests that the well-known account of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) is best understood as his struggles with three major potential false selves.⁷

After forty days of fasting, Jesus would have been ravenous. The first attempted seduction of the tempter was to turn stones into bread—a temptation to power. But Jesus said no to the invitation to establish his identity on the basis of his doing, particularly doing something that was independent of submission to the authority of God. Jesus had, Pennington notes, “a better food”—the Word of God (Matthew 4:4).

Then the tempter invited him to throw himself from the top of the temple into the crowds below, so they would immediately recognize him as the Messiah. Again Jesus rejected the temptation. He chose not to base his identity on prestige. And in so doing he took a further step to anchor his identity in the Father, not in what people thought of him.

Finally the tempter offered him all the kingdoms of the world. But once again Jesus rejected the offer, refusing to find his identity in possessions. He knew himself in terms of poverty of spirit and the loving will of the Father. He knew, therefore, that power was a poor substitute for this.

Jesus knew who he was in God. He could therefore resist temptations to live out of a false center based on power, prestige or possessions. By resisting these false ways of being, Jesus was moving toward an identity grounded in his relationship to the Father—an identity in which his calling became obvious as he came to understand who he really was.

COMING OUT OF HIDING

Every moment of every day of our life God wanders in our inner garden, seeking our companionship. The reason God can't find us is that we are hiding in the bushes of our false self. God's call to us

is gentle and persistent: “Where are you? Why are you hiding?”

The more we identify with our psychologically and socially constructed self, the more deeply we hide from God, ourselves and others. But because of the illusory nature of the false self, most of the time we are not aware that we are hiding. Coming out of hiding requires that we embrace the vulnerabilities that first sent us scurrying for cover. As long as we try to pretend that things are not as they are, we choose falsity. The first step out of the bushes is always, then, a step toward honesty with our self

We all tend to fashion a god who fits our falsity. If my false self is built on an image of moral rectitude, I will tend to bolster this by casting God in the same light. Or if my investment is in an image of self as whimsical, spontaneous and playful, it is almost inevitable that I develop a picture of God painted with these same colors. Having first created a self in the image of our own making, we then set out to create the sort of a god who might in fact create us. Such is the perversity of the false self.

Coming out of hiding is accepting God on God's own terms. Doing so is the only route to truly being our unique self-in-Christ.

If this is your desire, take a few moments to do two things.

First, ask God to help you see what makes you feel most vulnerable and most like running for cover. It may be conflict. Or perhaps it is failure, pain, emotional upset or loss of self. Allow yourself to feel the distress that would be present if you did not avoid these things. Then, listening to God's invitation to come out of the bushes in which you are hiding, step out and allow God to embrace you just as you are.

Second, prayerfully reflect on the image of your self to which you are most attached. Consider how you like to think about yourself, what you are most proud of about yourself. Ask God to help you see the ways you use these things to defend against feelings of vulnerability. And then ask God to prepare you to trust enough to let go of these fig leaves of your personal style.

There is an alternative to the false self. And it takes less energy and work. The way of being that is based on our life in Christ is a way of truth that leads to our vocation and to our deepest possible fulfillment.

From The Gift of Being Yourself by David G. Benner, InverVarsity Press 2004. Used with permission.

1 Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: the Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: Continuum, 1998)

2 Richard Rohr, *Enneagram: Naming Our Illusions*, audiotapes (Kansas City, Mo: Crredence Cassettes, 1998, tape 1

3 James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God Through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria, 1978) p. 31

4 M. Basil Pennington, *True Self/False Self* (New York: Crossroad, 2000) p. 31

5 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 35.

6 Pennington, *True Self/False Self*, p. 37

7 *Ibid*, pp. 33-34

*Bill needs a pastor
who knows something
about addictions*



*Beth is looking for
a church that understands
about childhood trauma*



*John is hoping the church
has some resources
for families of addicts*



*Mary is praying her
pastor knows something
about sexual abuse*



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Continued from Page 9

client an “out”—a ride, money for a ticket, even a sympathetic ear—and then are sad and surprised when the client leaves AMA (against medical advice). Even with these confusing circumstances an interventionist can help people stay on the clear course that resulted in getting the person into treatment in the first place.

Conclusion: Redefining Crisis

Typically, we think of a crisis as something like a drunk driving arrest, an injury resulting from a violent outburst, the sudden revelation that previous “unexplainable” behaviors are the result of drug or alcohol use. And we would like to avoid these crises at all costs. But I want to offer a different and more helpful definition for *crisis*. Rather than waiting for the DUI, or the injury, or the loss of a job, there is one crisis that families can and should embrace. It comes into being when they simply say “This situation cannot and will not continue, because I can’t live like this any longer.”

An intervention that is done correctly is much more than a bunch of people getting together for a confrontation during a time of crisis. The Chinese symbol for *crisis* contains two characters. The first is the character for *danger* and the second is the character for *opportunity*. The danger is usually obvious to a family in crisis. Finding the opportunity in the crisis and helping the family do whatever it takes to make the opportunity a reality is the role of an intervention specialist. The negative outcome that seems so likely and so terrifying is not the only possible outcome to a crisis. Good can come from a crisis—especially if we find the courage to tell the truth.

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Lots of people who wanted to come to STEPS 2003 were not able to do so. We missed you! But we have some good news. We have put 12 of the best workshops and plenary presentations from STEPS 2003 on audio CD and are making them available for only \$9.00 each. That means for a pretty reasonable price you could put together your own, personalized, day-long conference with some of the best speakers available anywhere. In addition we have put 8 workshops from previous conferences on CD and we hope to be adding to this collection regularly in the future. The sound quality of these CD recordings is significantly higher than was available on audiocassette. (We have discontinued distribution of workshops in the audiocassette format.)

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