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Myths to Recover By

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There are many bodies of literature that people in addiction recovery and their families and caregivers can draw upon for understanding and guidance. These include autobiographies, religious texts, self-help literature, scientific studies and clinical reports, but there are other less obvious sources that can serve as instruments of illumination and catalysts of personal transformation. I have long been fascinated with the ancient myths and fables of Native America, Greece, Rome, Africa, and Asia. It is difficult for me to read the classic myths and fables or the stories drawn from the great religions without seeing these through the lens of addiction and recovery. Consider the lessons imbedded in the stories of the following mythical figures.

Curse of Icarus

Daedalus and his Son Icarus were imprisoned by King Minos of Crete within the Labyrinth that Daedalus had built for the King. To escape, Daedalus constructed a set of wings for he and his son Icarus that were made from feathers attached with wax to a wood platform. Daedalus cautioned his son not to fly too close to the sun, but upon

escaping and intoxicated with his power of flight, Icarus ignored his father's warnings and flew too high. When the wax melted, Icarus plunged to his death into the sea that today bears his name. The story of Icarus is a morality tale about the virtue of moderation and the danger of excess. It is an admonition about the importance of limitations.

Addiction is at its core a disorder of excess. The cells and the psyche scream in harmony, "higher, higher, ever higher," fueling flights that, like Icarus, many addicts do not survive. The Icarus story is a story about self-intoxication—"self-will run riot" as AA co-founder Dr. Robert Smith characterized it. Addiction for many is not just about a drug, but a broad pattern of excessive behaviors that touches most areas of one's life. So where does that leave the modern day Icarus? There are really only three broad choices. One is to succumb to the voices, ever pushing the boundary toward death and a life of crashing consequences and devastation to self, family, and community. The second is to stem this propensity for excess through self-talk (personal mantras of moderation) and by developing daily rituals of moderation in one's life as antidotes to this drive toward

excess. The final option is to channel this propensity for excess into areas that are less destructive. This final option can bring unanticipated rewards. The addict's capacity for self-destruction is matched only by his or her potential capacity for creative contribution. Both may spring from the same source—this zeal for excess that can be expressed in infamy or greatness. A good lesson: the excess that has caused us so much pain can be transformed into a virtue when properly channeled.

Narcissus Revisited

Narcissus was a beautiful youth who rejected the attentions of all. One shunned maiden prayed that Narcissus would one day experience what it felt like to be wounded by unfulfilled love. Hearing her prayer, a goddess condemned Narcissus to fall in love with his own image seen on the surface of a clear pond as he drank. He finally recognized that the image he so loved was himself and that this was a love that could never be possessed. Tormented, Narcissus plunged a knife into himself, the blood seeping into the soil and giving rise to the flower that today bears his name.

The myth of Narcissus captures the absorption with self that is so central to the experience of addiction. Manifested in self-centeredness, self-aggrandizement, self-hatred, self-pity, and above all self-encapsulization, addiction brings a strange sense of social alienation and isolation that leaves one feeling terminally unique. Addiction is above all a disease of disconnection—a disorder some feel is rooted in problems of attachment and that all agree erodes authentic intimate and social connections. For those who view the core of addiction as that of the wounded self, the antidote seems to be a process of getting into oneself through various forms of therapy and personal development activities. Entire industries—books, tapes, videos, workshops, therapists, and gurus of all flavors—flourish in their promises to help this “getting into oneself” process.

Interestingly, addiction recovery through Twelve Step programs provides a

fundamentally different approach to Narcissus—the “destruction of self-centeredness.” That approach is not to get further into oneself (although it includes some intermediary steps that do just that), but to connect with resources and relationships BEYOND the self. Twelve Step programs are at heart about breaking out of the narcissistic shell. The language of the Steps is not a language of “I and my” but a language of “we and our.” Twelve Step programs are about mutual identification, repairing past relationships, forging new authentic relationships, forging a relationship with a “power greater than myself,” and service to others. In the view of AA, NA, and other Twelve Step Programs (and many faith-based pathways to recovery), the ultimate antidote for Narcissus is not getting deeper into oneself, but getting out of oneself.

The Redemption of Sisyphus

Sisyphus, the son of King Aeolus, was a trickster known for his cleverness and deceitfulness, particularly his seduction and harm of the innocent. When ordered to be chained for revealing secrets of the gods, Sisyphus tricked Thanatos, death's messenger, into shackling himself, which granted humans immortality until Thanatos was freed. After Sisyphus refused to die and remain in the underworld, Zeus created a unique punishment. For eternity, Sisyphus would be driven to repeatedly roll a large stone up a steep mountain only to have the stone roll back down as it neared the top.

There is much in the persona of Sisyphus that reflects addiction-related transformations of personal character—the dishonesty, the manipulation, the disregard and injury of others, and who could not recognize in Sisyphus' repetitive attempt to get the stone to the top of the mountain the addict's compulsive attempt to gain mastery over his or her drug consumption. One can actually imagine Sisyphus' thoughts and promises as he re-enacts each climb: *This time will be different. I just need one more chance. I will stop after this one last effort.* Sisyphus and the addict share the

frustration, futility, and ultimate absurdity of trying to achieve an impossible task but being unable to give up trying.

So how is Sisyphus to be redeemed? There are millions of people in the world today who achieved recovery by the simplest of acts: walking away from the mountain. Their exit marked both the abandonment of the Sisyphean effort at drug control and their escape from the culture of addiction—the people, places, and things that embraced the rituals of drug use. If the mountain and the endless ritual of stone rolling stand as metaphors for addiction, then several key questions can serve as a form of daily self-inventory.

- 1) Do I reaffirm today that all efforts to regain control over alcohol and drug use would be futile?
- 2) What actions can I take today to maintain my physical and emotional distance from the mountain?
- 3) What stones other than my past efforts at drug control do I continue to push up the proverbial mountain?
- 4) If I am to truly leave my life on the mountain, what am I doing today to build and embrace a new home and a new life?

The paradox in the Sisyphus story is that one wins the struggle for control by abandoning the effort—experiencing power through the acknowledgment of powerlessness. The mountain and its endlessly repeated ritual constitute forms of imprisonment in which the cell door has always been unlocked. All you ever had to do was open the door and leave. Release and recovery are first and foremost a shift within one's own mind and a turning and walking away. In retrospect, it was so difficult and yet so simple.

Prometheus Unchained

In Greek mythology, Prometheus molded humans from clay and served as humankind's advocate before the gods. His efforts on behalf of humans included tricking

the gods to obtain the best offerings at least for humans and then stealing and giving fire to humans. In retaliation, Zeus ordered the creation of Pandora as a curse to humans (see below) and ordered Prometheus to be chained to a stake on a mountain where his liver (or heart in some versions) would be eaten, regenerated each night, and re-eaten the next day for eternity. This punishment continued until Prometheus was freed by Hercules.

There is much in the Prometheus myth that mirrors the experience of addiction and recovery. Prometheus, like Sisyphus, is bright, clever, and rebellious—traits that have often been linked to addicts. The nature of Prometheus' punishment also resounds of the addiction experience: the image of restricted freedom and being bound, having one's liver and heart attacked only to regenerate and be attacked again, and the inability of Prometheus to free himself solely with his own strength and resources. While one yearns to see Prometheus breaking free from his bonds, it is only with assistance that his freedom is achieved, confirming the recovery folk wisdom that "you can do it, but you can't do it alone." That the source freeing Prometheus was Hercules suggests the need for great power to free one from the state of addiction.

The Heel of Achilles

Achilles is a heroic yet tragic figure in Greek mythology. He was the principle character in Homer's Iliad and the great warrior of the Trojan War. Legend has it that Achilles' mother sought to make him immortal by dipping him in the Styx River. His body was invulnerable except for that small portion where she had held him—his heel. It was thus a small wound on his heel from an arrow shot by Paris that later led to the death of Achilles. The phrase "Achilles' heel" has since been used to refer to the source of a person's vulnerability.

AA historian Ernest Kurtz has suggested through his writings that the acceptance of imperfection—accepting that

one is “Not-God”—is at the very core of AA spirituality. Such acceptance requires knowledge and acknowledgement of the precise nature of that imperfection. Not taking the next drink in AA parlance and in professional models of “relapse prevention” requires knowing and protecting one’s Achilles’ heel. Such vulnerabilities can be rooted in certain physical and emotional states, certain patterns of thinking or in encounters with particular “people, places, and things” that reawaken the sleeping dragon within. The lesson of Achilles is that we must remain vigilant in protecting the points of our greatest vulnerability.

Addiction’s Siren Songs

Sirens, as portrayed in Greek mythology, were sister seductresses—each half woman, half bird—whose beautiful voices lured unsuspecting passing sailors to crash their boats on the rocky reefs of the island on which the sirens resided. It is said that Odysseus escaped this fate in passing the Sirens’ island only by plugging his men’s ears with beeswax and ordering himself tied to the mast of his ship as they passed the island. Siren song has since come to mean the sweet voices of temptation that draw one toward personal disaster.

For centuries, people in recovery have personified addiction as beasts, dragons, and devils whose inviting voices must be resisted. In AA traditions, such self-talk has been castigated as “stinkin’ thinkin’” and early NA members referred to such thoughts as “needling oneself”. Christian recovery literature similarly warns of the Devil’s voice, and secular recovery literature is filled with reference to the “Pavlovian Pull” (Christopher, 1988) and to the amplified voice of “the beast” (Trimpey, 1989). Put simply, addiction is often fueled by a pattern of self-talk whose troubling presence can continue long into the recovery process. Recovery is in part about changing how we talk to ourselves.

The Lure of Pandora’s Box

In the mythology of ancient Greece, Zeus, the supreme god, sent his daughter Pandora to earth to marry Epimetheus along with the gift of a mysterious box that came with the admonition that it could never be opened. It was perhaps inevitable that a day would come when the lure of the box would become irresistible. When Pandora opened the lid of the box, all of the evils known to humankind quickly escaped from the box. “Opening Pandora’s box” has since stood as a warning that some things are best left unexplored. But wait, the Pandora story as popularly recounted is incomplete. Once the evils had escaped from the box, one thing was remaining that Pandora removed from the box—Hope.

There are of course many ways this story could be explored in the context of addiction and recovery, but I would like to offer the following. Each of us is the box of Pandora and within us resides primitive thoughts and emotions and closely guarded secrets all protected with the admonition that they cannot be released to the world. And so each of us is left with the burden of what precisely to do with this shadow side of ourselves that is so often the source of guilt and shame. We are often told that this shadow feeds our addiction: “You’re only as sick as your secrets.” Twelve Step programs—the steps of self-inventory, confession, amends, and service to others—provide a framework to address this shadow. Similarly, numerous schools of addiction psychotherapy are based on the assumption that recovery comes only through purging the hidden, distressing emotions that have long been self-medicated with drugs.

I think the myth of Pandora offers several important lessons. First is the acknowledgement of this shadow side and the parallel understanding that the good within us can only be fully discovered and valued through a path that traverses our shadow side. To become whole and healthy requires acceptance of all of who we are—Ernie Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham have referred to this as the “spirituality of imperfection.” In the Pandora story, hope

only becomes visible and accessible after the evil spirits have escaped. And so we have the peculiar situation of an illness, addiction, whose remedy involves a most unusual form of medicine: honesty with self and others. But there is a second lesson and that is the unpredictability of opening the box via the risks to self and others. Buried within the Twelve Steps are an understanding of this risk and certain limitations on disclosure of past wrongs (e.g., defining the context of disclosure and prohibiting disclosures that would do harm to others).

Releasing powerful emotions requires, like bleeding, the ability to clot—to bring emotion back under control once released. There may well be people who lack this ability to emotionally clot—a condition that could be thought of as a form of emotional hemophilia—and who would be harmed rather than helped by such release. There is also the issue of context—the degree of safety in the choice of timing and place for opening oneself in this manner. All this adds a note of caution and care about how this process is managed and the recognition that recovery for some involves not a release of emotion but mastery of how such emotion can be controlled. Like so many areas of recovery, the message, “easy does it,” is quite apt.

The Procrustean Bed

Dr. John Strang recently called my attention to another mythical figure whose story will close this initial exploration of myth and recovery. Procrustes was a robber who lured visitors to his home with the promise of a magical bed that perfectly fit each person’s body. Once the victim was tied to the bed, Procrustes would stretch the body if they were too short or cut off the legs if they were too tall. Ironically, Procrustes would later die by this same method. The phrase “Procrustean bed” has since referred to the act of forcing someone to conform to a fixed way of doing things.

Well, there is much food for thought here for those seeking help for an addiction. First, all of those offering you help and hospitality are not necessarily your friend. Second,

when a bed doesn’t fit you—whether that bed be your own methods of problem solving, a particular treatment approach, or a framework of recovery mutual aid—get out of the bed and find one that does fit you. Third, when people try to force you into a bed that does not fit, escape! And of course, for the addiction professionals among our readers: stop stretching people and cutting their legs off!

If there is anything modern research on recovery is teaching us, it is two critical lessons: people with alcohol and drug problems—even the most severe of such problems—are not a homogenous population, and there are many pathways and styles of long-term recovery. These growing varieties of recovery experience should be cause for celebration, not a trigger for defensiveness. As Professor Strang suggests, “We need to come to terms with the imperfection of any one model, and recognize that we need different-sized beds for people of different sizes.”

Conclusion

What can be found in these classic myths are valuable lessons about how to achieve recovery and live a meaningful life in recovery. They convey lessons about the dangers of hubris, the value of humility, and the protection of vulnerability. They also suggest that freedom is possible, but not always achievable by oneself.

References

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