

THE W O U N D E D H E A L E R

by John Howard Prin, BA, L.A.D.C.

“Meaning focuses on rendering our past coherent and giving value to our present. Purpose provides a framework for linking present activities to a desired future” (White, Laudet, Becker, 2006, p.18).

Bringing Purpose and Meaning to Clients’ Pain and Misery

Purpose and meaning can be an effective part of therapy to help clients recover from addictions and the mental/emotional fallout that often disables them. The following true story illustrates how they can be used to help a client.

After 33 years, “Joe” sensed his life meant nothing — neither his own nor anyone’s. Life for all people, for everybody, he believed, had no meaning. Although he was college-educated and a hard worker, Joe’s life lacked direction and he felt fed up searching for it. This impasse led him to his main purpose: to end his life.

Married with a 3 year-old child, Joe knew his method of suicide and timing needed to have as little impact on his wife and daughter as possible. He lived in Hollywood, California, and worked on television shows, so his current string of jobs on camera crews had to play out in order to pay the bills. He wanted to leave as much money for his wife so she could move on after his death.

His emotional pain from growing up tormented him. Whenever it got unbearable, he scribbled out his disjointed thoughts in a suicide note. Each time he tore the note up, unable to capture his confused feelings just right. To escape his mounting doubts and sinking feelings, he binged on alcohol, marijuana and cocaine — excesses bordering on addiction.

Joe could not make sense of everything that had led up to this time of crisis. He tried listing certain things: an absent father who never spoke his mind and died young, a tyrannical mother who selfishly demanded Joe’s time and energy and whom he had hated since junior high, a stymied career as a “wannabe” screenwriter stifled by his lack of contacts in Tinseltown and the selfish agents and studio gatekeepers who refused to give him a break. After the past seven years of failure, Joe now envisioned driving his work van at high speeds through Santa Monica’s streets, crashing through a wooden barricade at the edge of a 300-foot palisade, and plunging far below into the Pacific Ocean’s jagged rocks. The exact moment when he would enact “the plan” was the only remaining element.

Three weeks later Joe found himself 1800 miles away in a Nebraska wheat field. Kneeling in the black soil, sobbing, pounding his fists in rage, he experienced a profound spiritual awakening. An actor had told him two weeks earlier, “If you don’t know why you’re alive, Joe, then ask God who knows.” In response Joe had barked, “I don’t believe that God

exists. So how could he know?” Here, now, on his knees, Joe pleaded to a silent, unseen, never-before-knowable divine source, asking that spiritual source, “If you exist at all, then become real to me!”

A big surprise happened for Joe. In a flash, in a powerful jolt, in an instant that became hours and lasted for days, Joe felt the divine source become real. Peace flooded his being. Fear and frustration vanished. Waves of grace lifted him. Mercy and joy washed over him. His doubt melted away and certainty filled him up like an ascending balloon. As time passed, his miserable past faded into the caverns of memory.

In one cosmic moment, purpose and meaning sprang into Joe’s present — along with hope and faith about his future. With fresh clarity and glowing gratitude, he vowed silently to follow this divine higher authority wherever it would lead him.

The remainder of Joe’s story demonstrates the battles to overcome addictions and intense negative emotions, to set selfishness aside and focus his efforts on contributing to others, and the myriad other tasks of successful recovery. The focus of his life changed from his being “the boss” to his being accountable to a loving higher power. Now the answers when he asked, “Who am I? Why am I alive? What does it all mean?” emerged from prayer and the timeless wisdom of ancient scriptures. Now he received the guidance, the direction, the firm and constant encouragement he’d always yearned for. With a new code to follow, his feeling of being empty and cheated by the world disappeared. He belonged to a spiritual family, a long line of fellow believers dating back centuries. His strident need to end his life transformed into enthusiasm to live life to the fullest. Depression and bitterness shriveled away. Courage, confidence, and commitment filled his heart and helped make the inner problems and outer obstacles he faced manageable.

Having quit marijuana, tobacco, cocaine and other street drugs, only one adversary remained in Joe’s path: alcohol. He couldn’t give it up. Another 15 years of walking with a Higher Authority were necessary before he walked into his first AA meeting in 1996 and stayed sober for the next decade.

In that decade, Joe became a wounded healer. I know because I am “Joe.” As an addictions counselor and author, I help others who suffer like Joe did through the mazes and messes of life.

One of the primary functions of a licensed alcohol and drug counselor is to educate abusing and dependent clients about the numerous negative effects of alcohol and drugs on their brains and behavior. Another is to help them see that their abuse/dependency has harmful consequences to themselves, loved ones, and society. While both of these functions are worthy of much time and effort, the most vital part

of my treatment work is to guide clients into understanding their life purpose and to pursue it wholeheartedly.

White, Laudet, Becker (2006) explain the desire to help others as "... a stage in which addiction/recovery paradoxically shifts from the status of a stigmatized curse to that of a gift that opens new horizons of experience, a new sense of self, new and renewed relationships, and a new depth of living" (p.22).

Clients face multiple barriers, both inner and outer, and these barriers can prove powerful. A chemical dependency counselor is expected to be a listener, teacher, group facilitator, case manager, and advocate with the legal system. Sometimes I also play the unofficial role of "Designated dad or brother." With a majority of clients during the three to six months of time we spend together, I talk/think/encourage/hug/challenge the client as any responsible family member would. Once clients are able to face their issues honestly, hope of erasing their self-inflicted harm and transforming their lives becomes possible.

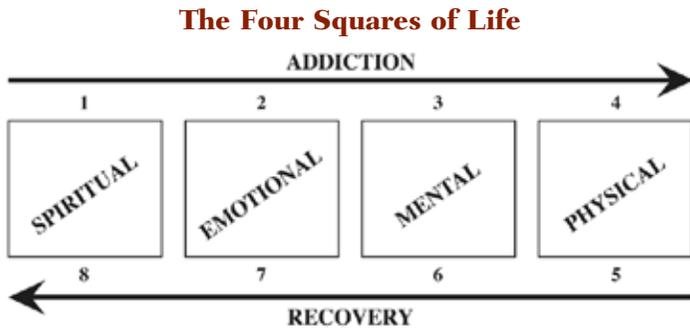
As their sobriety stabilizes (as it seems normal to *not* use instead of use), and as the immediate pinch of their consequences subsides (court fines, attorneys' fees, and job or marriage jeopardy lessen), clients are better able to face the Big Questions:

"Who am I?"

"Why am I alive?"

"What should I do with my life?"

An invaluable aid in arriving at new choices with these clients is the following diagram (Prin, 2006, p.134):



In eight micro-lectures (summarized below), I explain each of the phases in sequence, starting with the ADDICTION ARROW. Addiction involves:

1. *Disconnection* spiritually as we grow up (we come to believe spirituality exists outside ourselves).
2. *Damaged* emotions (hurts, betrayals, shame during childhood).
3. *Distorted* thoughts (lies and misperceptions due to hurts/betrayals/shame)...at which time *Drugs* may enter (age 10-18).
4. *Diseased* bodies due to the cycle of drug use/abuse/dependency, until *Denial* develops and *Disaster* looms....

Before it's too late a *Decision* to *CHANGE* is required!

OR

Injury/insanity/*Death* is inevitable

Client either *CHOOSES* health, serenity, recovery

OR

CHOOSES doom, disaster, death.

To encourage the person to make a healthy decision to be abstinent and stay sober, the dynamics of the RECOVERY ARROW help explain the benefits of recovery. Recovery involves:

5. *Returning* to physical health, because toxins no longer are entering the body, sleep improves, etc.
6. *Replacing* distorted thoughts (lies, exaggerations, and all-or-nothing thinking) with new realistic thoughts (12-Step concepts, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), daily affirmations, etc.).
7. *Restoring* positive feelings (improved moods) by identifying resentments and facing guilt, by acceptance and forgiveness, thereby disempowering prior damage.
8. *Reconnecting* spiritually and reviving the person's love for self and others based on trust in a revised worldview that empowers and rejuvenates the individual.

This crucial last square, Spirituality in Recovery (8), discusses how the client benefits from making a Higher Authority his/her partner and living with a new purpose. "Spirituality is 100 percent essential to your recovery," I tell clients. "And you know you are living a spiritual life when your life has *meaning*."

Counselors using this diagram then list the dreams and goals of the client including the things they want most in life (that most likely have been delayed or long forgotten due to addictions). Motivation takes hold and — commonly — soars. Purpose enters the picture; clients' plans and new sober choices start helping their dreams and desires become real. Recovery even becomes exciting and fun. The journey enlightens more choices and hope illuminates the way.

As a wounded healer, my past wounds — now healed — help heal the current wounds of others. I often observe how these clients discover purpose as they explore spirituality, from offering their best to others, from nurturing their families, and from discovering how best to use their reclaimed gifts. Meaning flows from their efforts in these areas. Gratitude becomes a daily emotion, even on tough days, because of the seismic shift in their attitudes. And recovery manifests in many forms into tangible reality through their transformed lives.

The following is a closing message based on the compelling findings of William White, Alexandre Laudet and Jeffery Becker (2006) and their Life Meaning and Purpose (LMP) studies in New York City.

"LMP can be increased through the guidance of addiction professionals and recovery support specialists. What distinguishes addiction professionals in their work with LMP is their tolerance of multiple frameworks of meaning and the ability to move across these frameworks (rather than within a single framework) to help each client achieve a meaningful and purposeful recovery that fits his/her worldview and belief system. The addiction professional's focus is not on which framework is true, but on which framework can ignite, sustain, and enrich the addiction recovery process" (22). ▼

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References

Prin, J.H. (2006). *Secret Keeping: Overcoming Hidden Habits and Addictions*, Novato, CA: New World Library. NOTE: The original model is credited to Hazelden Spiritual Director John MacDougall; however, the title "Four Squares of Life" and the text explaining the diagram are the author's.

White, W.L., Laudet, A.B., Becker, J.B. (2006, July/August). Life Meaning and Purpose in Addiction Recovery. *Addiction Professional Magazine*, 18-22.