

THE CITY INSIDE



Nehemiah and the restoration of the wall of Jerusalem:

An allegory of addiction recovery.

The City Inside. Nehemiah and the restoration of the wall of Jerusalem; an allegory of addiction recovery.

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There would simply be too many people to thank and acknowledge if I wanted to give credit to all who helped me recover a life in which I am free to write this book.

Thanking first my wife and my children, but also my sponsors, counselor and many friends is a small acknowledgement of the tremendous debt of gratitude I owe, and for the love and friendship we share.

If these pages contain any insights into the condition of addiction and the spirituality of recovery, I owe them to the tested wisdom of my friends and counselors in recovery and in faith. Special thanks are due to the few courageous ones who provided feedback on the first draft of this manuscript, starting with my friend Neal B., a critical and erudite mind if there is one, as well as a model for determination to “rise up and build.”

I dedicate this work to all who suffer from their own self, because of the pains of addiction and compulsion. To all who have accepted to look in the eyes of their own powerlessness, and have recognized that addiction is a slow destruction of their soul, spirit, life and of all that surrounds them. To these friends, brothers, sisters, who have started or want to start a journey of restoration and sobriety through trust in a “Higher Power” and mutual commitment, I owe the understanding of the state of my own City, and the strength to start rebuilding it. One day at a time.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

And they said, Let us rise up and build.

So they strengthened their hands for this good work.¹

*Drink-debased, vice-defeatured, pride-puffed, wealth-bollen, vanity-smearred,
they will yet be brothers, yet be sisters, yet be God-born neighbours.²*

There are three main reasons for you to open this book, and three for you to shut it down immediately. So, let's cut to the chase and start by the latter.

You should shut this book and put it down immediately if:

- You are looking for a “how to” book, with steps and tear-out pages, to diagnose, cure or manage an addiction—yours or someone else.
- You are looking for a magical, biblical, infallible formula to forget that you have “this little problem which tends to recur” and finally be the great personality you have always been destined to be or, even better, be the great *spiritual* personality, the great *Christian*, the great *moral leader* you know in your heart that you are. (Well, in spite of “this little problem which tends to recur.”)
- You know all there is to know about addiction and recovery; or you know that there is actually nothing worth knowing about addiction and recovery.

Now, if you are still with me, I would like to suggest three possible reasons to stick around. You might want to read this book if:

- You have “this little problem which tends to recur,” and when you are honest with yourself you see that it is getting bigger and wrecking your life. You wonder whether you are alone in this world, or if you've lost your mind and you are starting to despair.
- You are a person claiming a religious faith and maybe you've prayed, you've fasted, you might even have “confessed” once and repented a hundred times, but still the problem is there. Maybe you've heard about recovery and 12-step programs, but—particularly if you are a Christian—you may have heard that

they are “bad,” that they refer to a “God of our understanding,” not Jesus at all. You’re afraid to lose your mind if you stay alone; and you’re afraid to lose your faith if you step out of your church or community of faith, even though you’ve sort of given up on being rescued by either.

- You are already in recovery and not necessarily in any kind of faith community. Maybe you are building time in sobriety, but occasionally you question yourself about the purpose of it all, particularly all this talk of a “spiritual element” in recovery. Or perhaps you are still struggling with keeping your sobriety and you’re tempted sometimes to throw in the sponge. Even though you know addiction is a “cunning and baffling” illness, it *really* baffles you. Every now and then you start wondering what the point is since your recovery is not all that it promised to be.

If you can relate in some measure to any of these situations, I hope you will find something of value in these pages.

This book is about the spiritual journey of addiction recovery seen through the images provided by an Old Testament text, the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah tells the story of the reconstruction of the wall of Jerusalem after a long period of devastation, and it provides particularly insightful principles and imagery to those trying to rebuild their own life.

This book is also a personal work, based on how the allegory which Nehemiah provides seems to echo many of the lessons I am learning in this day-to-day walk. Apart from a personal postscript, however, I will not spend much time on my personal history. I hope to focus more on the healing and restoration that recovery brings to life, than on describing the sickness of addictive behaviors. The reader might have a painful journey of his or her own, and wouldn’t learn a whole lot by reading *ad nauseum* about my own pathos. Addicts tend to look like addicts. Only in recovery do we start to look like our original selves again, in all the diversity of character that God or Nature has given us.

I claim neither to be an expert in recovery, nor that my story is particularly original, nor to have had a particularly dramatic recovery. Consequently, I do not offer this book as being particularly original or having uncommon wisdom. It simply reflects

the pieces of understanding I have gleaned on this new road and at this stage in my life through the reading of an ancient story. I am probably writing for myself primarily, at the point I am at now. I am still just learning this new way of life one day at a time. I have not graduated. I am not an expert or a teacher. I am just a student of life and sanity. To stay with an academic analogy, this book is more term paper than textbook.

I only hope to convey some of what addiction has meant to me, both in terms of the havoc wrecked on my life and in terms of the healing that recovery has brought to my family.

I hope the reader will get a glimpse of what recovery is all about; not of all that recovery entails, but what is at the heart of it, starting with why it is so necessary. Maybe someone who has shared my experience with failures in spite of all the best religious efforts in the world will better understand why spiritual pursuits seem so futile until we discover the barrenness of our inner condition as addicts. Much like the people of Jerusalem had to find out that they needed a wall around their city before they could have a new temple and a new life.

I also hope that the story of Nehemiah will provide an encouragement about the power of God to rebuild, through us, what we are unable to even consider from the bottom of our hopelessness.

Finally, I hope to convey how truly spiritual and life-changing recovery is, yet how mundane and practical its steps are—much like the building of a wall. I will strive, much like Nehemiah, to bring into this a vision not only of the wall—the recovery—that we need around our lives, but of the city—the rich human and spiritual life—we are building the wall to protect.

Chapter 2 – The wall and the city

*Like a city whose wall is broken down is a man who lacks self-control.*³

*Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself.*⁴

Nehemiah presents us with the story of a city and beyond the city a nation coming back together and overcoming tremendous odds to form again a spiritual community. It will help the reader to get comfortable with the basic plot of the story before we extract its allegoric themes in the rest of the book.⁵

The plot

The Hebrews of antiquity went through many ups and even more downs, from the original call and promise made to Abraham to bless all nations through his own (yet unborn) children, through the centuries. The story we read in Nehemiah is one episode in a long series of adventures of the Jewish nation.⁶

Nehemiah's narrative starts around the year 445 B.C.E. More than a century before his time, the territory of Israel was invaded and conquered by a foreign king (Nebuchadnezzar) from the powerful city of Babylon. Shortly after his conquest (in 586 B.C.E.), Nebuchadnezzar exiled the Hebrews to a distant land. This exile has lasted for almost a century and a half by the time Nehemiah first becomes stirred to action.

In the biblical narrative, Jewish struggles and victories are associated with spiritual lessons and generally come as the result of events charged with spiritual meaning – God always encouraging His children to turn away from all sorts of idols, to return to Him and to let Him fulfill the promise made to Abraham that his children will be a nation walking under the light of God, and a blessing to all humanity. Failure to follow the prescribed path usually results in more oppression, division and general calamities. The years preceding the exile, as told in the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament provide abundant examples of this. After some time, suffering

usually allows the voice of prophets to be heard again, and opens the path for a return to God. This tends to lead toward a more prosperous and peaceful life, preferably in the Promised Land. Nehemiah's story is one of these critical moments of national and spiritual restoration in Jewish history.

But the story is not as simple as it seems. Efforts to return to Palestine and restore the Jewish community had, in fact, started before Nehemiah's time. It is important to consider how far these efforts went in order to understand the importance of Nehemiah's contribution.

Some time prior to Nehemiah's own awakening to the fate of Jerusalem, different initiatives had taken place to restore both the temple and sacrificial worship in Jerusalem. The first effort was allowed by the Persian emperor Cyrus, who had in turn invaded and conquered Babylon (regime change in Mesopotamia, what else is new?). In 539 (remember we are counting years backwards) Cyrus authorized a first group of Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. The rebuilding, however, did not start seriously until 520. Some time around 458, Artaxerxes II, king of Babylon after his father Artaxerxes I (political dynasties were also popular back then), mandated the prophet Ezra to establish temple worship in Jerusalem again.

Nehemiah's story starts a decade later in 445. By then some progress has been made. For example, the temple, or at least most of it, has actually been rebuilt by Zerubbabel under the authority of Ezra. It is critical to observe, however, that no matter what the extent of Ezra's achievements has been, progress remains limited and is felt to be unsustainable. The residents of Jerusalem continue to live in a devastated city; their behavior remains geared toward individual survival rather than community life; and worship—the physical evidence of a spiritual life—remains a low priority.

Sacrificial worship apparently started almost immediately upon the first return of exiles, but the temple construction lagged for a long time. Even once started, work was arrested at one point for 17 years. Ezra makes the point⁷ that the Jerusalemites lived in fear of the neighboring peoples. Building of the temple was stopped by opposition from “northern neighbors” and the demoralization of a Jewish people continuously in fear.⁸ The intimidation and influence of the neighboring peoples also

manifested itself in the continuation of idol worship (the epitome of corruption for the Jewish people), and by the priority given to private real estate development over service of the temple—the spiritual heart of the Jewish community. Ezra’s narrative focuses on the spiritual challenges of rebuilding the temple and restoring worship, but it digresses regularly into struggles and opposition to the rebuilding of the city itself. This obviously impacted negatively his primary objective. In the end the temple is rebuilt by 515, but struggle with idolatry, fear of invaders and corruption endures until the time of Nehemiah.

At the root of this uncompleted restoration is the fact that Jerusalem remains unprotected and “unwalled.” The state of the city and its wall in particular was clearly a serious concern to Ezra. He makes references to the insecurity and instability created by the lack of national independence, materialized by the absence of an established city. At one point he refers to the Persian government protection as “*the only wall in Juda and Jerusalem.*”⁹ For a Jewish prophet, this must have been a heart-wrenching confession.

Of course we no longer develop walled cities in our day and age. (Well, except maybe for “gated communities.”) In our 21st century the proper parallel would be to think of a country without recognized borders. The city of antiquity was the center of community life and political identity. To draw a parallel with our modern culture, think about the fate of the Kurds, Palestinians, Chechens, and Tibetans in our century. No matter what these peoples do to maintain their cultural identity and community, the fact that there are no recognized borders to a Kurdistan, Palestinian State, Chechnya, or Tibet is a vivid reminder of defeat, powerlessness, and what has been referred to as an “existential threat.” In antiquity, the city was what stood for the state. A nation based its power and identity on a network of strong cities. Rural areas, roads, and other elements of their geography were in the hands of the nation only to the extent that these elements were linked to a recognized and strong city. And a strong city required a strong wall.

When Nehemiah cries about the state of Jerusalem, he does not dismiss the work that has gone into rebuilding the temple, or how many people have been able to return to live around the city. No, his gripe is specifically about the absence of a wall and what

this means in terms of community, spirituality, and identity for the Jews residing there or in the Diaspora.

Because Nehemiah serves King Artaxerxes, he is able to turn to him and get a mandate to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the wall. He then goes to Jerusalem, examines the state of the city's destruction and establishes his credentials with the local authorities, who have *de facto* been running the place. He stirs the Jerusalemites into action by awakening them to the state of their city. And things start to change. The first turning point is when the people stand up communally and declare, "*let us rise up and build.*"¹⁰

What follows is the story of efforts of a population facing both external and internal challenges. The Hebrews must be organized in order to work with discipline. External threats require organizing the city's defenses while they rebuild the wall. The restoration of the wall will be very consequential and will give Israel's enemies the signal that it is time to switch from random bullying to a concerted repression of this perceived act of rebellion. In addition to this, Nehemiah's efforts will face threats from within the community, through a mix of compromise, complacency, betrayal and a loss of sight of the end-purpose of the journey.

In the end, the work is completed, in as much as there is a wall around the city; and this establishes some measure of authority and autonomy of the Hebrews over their land. Nehemiah and Ezra organize a call to renewal and a spiritual revival follows, with a return to the Holy Scriptures, repentance and a return to the Law (all very meaningful steps in Jewish tradition). Things are so well on their way that Nehemiah, probably satisfied with a job well done, is able to return to Babylon and account for his actions to the king.

When he returns to Jerusalem, however, he finds that all is not *that* well. The end of the book seems full of loose ends: a great restoration has taken place and has revived the nation such as it is. But people remain people and have to face the same problems as all the cities of that age. In the end, Jerusalemites have traded chaos, insecurity and isolation for a new set of challenges. The city, however, is now their own. And there lies all the difference.

This is the plot in a nutshell.

Now how does this relate in any way to human struggles with addiction? In which way can it be read as an “allegory” of addiction recovery?

The allegory

According to Webster’s dictionary, an allegory is “*a description of one thing under the image of another; a story in which people, things and happenings have another meaning, as in a fable or parable: allegories are used for teaching and explaining.*”

There are a number of elements in the story of Jerusalem, which will provide images of our own journey and hopefully valuable lessons about its conduct and direction. By “our own journey,” I mean two things:

- (a) The specific journey of those who find their life in shambles because of addiction, and who try to rebuild in what first looks like a field of ruins; and
- (b) The general journey of perhaps all humans, at least those who have reason to see some desolation and destruction in their life, and who are seeking a way to rebuild something in themselves.

The dominant image we will try to picture is that of the “City Inside” each of us. Maybe we need to step back for a moment and reconsider the complex ways in which our human reality is built.

There is first an unmistakable physical reality to our life, which—when we are even more misled than usual—we mistake for life itself. We breathe in and out, the heart pumps blood around, and organs perform their assigned roles and responsibilities more or less successfully.

Inside the envelope of all human beings, however, is also a complex world of thoughts, feelings, wants, desires, conflicting passions, fears, hopes, aspirations, faith, doubts, anger, memories, love and hatred. These are mental and emotional building blocks, which we are more or less comfortable with, and accordingly organize with varying degrees of neurotic art.

Finally there is also a harder-to-apprehend spiritual reality, which is often simply ignored in the rush of modern life. This spiritual reality has to do with more than what

we do (the physical element of human life), or what we feel and think (the mental and emotional), but rather with who we are in relation to all living beings, from the possibility of an omnipresent deity to those amazing and irritating people who surround us.

Much as the city of antiquity was the way to establish ownership and authority over the land and to define the working terms of life, the multifaceted and complex physical, emotional and spiritual building blocks we harbor within ourselves define the City Inside our human envelope. Regardless of how strange, beautiful, or sagging the envelope is, we claim authority, ownership, wholeness, and life through the edification of this City Inside.

The relationships we build, the ability to form a community if only with one other person, the spiritual experiences we can discover, our ability to order our thought and emotional-life constructively and artfully, and in the end even our mastery of the physical elements of our life are all dependent on the City we start building within our own heart from the first day we breathe air, until the last.

There are many things which can affect the City Inside in all of us, with a range of consequences reflected in the human condition. Addiction is one of those things.

This is not the place to discuss what addiction is precisely.¹¹ The reader probably has come to this point with his/her own questions and understanding of the issue. Therapists, theologians, clinicians, and the pop-psychology equivalent of Monday morning quarterbacks present many theories of how different elements combine to cause addiction. Geneticists and social scientists can argue about the relative weight of nature and nurture in the genesis of the illness. Some are not even comfortable with the term illness, preferring the use of theological language: addiction is a sin; end of discussion.

As interesting as these discussions may be, we are not going to address them in more than tangential ways. It is enough to recognize that addiction is a reality which affects all the building blocks of our City Inside, physical, emotional and spiritual, much as the pioneers of the twelve-step movement have always understood it to be.¹² Genetic determinants most likely play a role in framing why some are susceptible to alcohol in a unique way while others are not. We also see that some elements of nurture—or rather ill-nurture—affect many people (but not all) who will develop compulsive behaviors. What respective role do these determinants play is a question that has not been answered, and certainly will not be here. Addiction is painful and destructive enough to stand as an obvious human stain in its own right. Depending on our individual standards of social acceptability, we can paint addiction either as the epitome of shamefulness, or dress it up as a “hip disease.” But those are exercises of dubious value. I simply offer this observation: yes addiction is a sin; it is a *damn* sin against humanity, against nature, against our very self and against God. But it is also and literally *a hell* of an illness, with all the randomness, unfairness, and sadness of any other human illness.

So we start with the recognition that addiction comes from many things. Genetics, environmental determinants, and personal choices combine in a mix we don’t have to understand fully. What’s more important is to acknowledge that addiction brings chaos to all the elements of the City Inside of those suffering from it. This leads to ever more disorder, pain, madness, and sickness in and around those suffering from it. Addicts can be just as motivated to have a spiritual life as the next person. We may have a passion for living with true and loving relationships. Many come to be “sick and tired of being sick and tired” and long for peaceful and balanced emotions. We

may have put long efforts into restoring our life. But the addiction is like the destroyed wall of the city; until there is a remedy to the devastation it represents, these efforts will remain fruitless in restoring a life that is whole. An unprotected city can strive to survive, but will not host a community. Without recovery, an addict remains subject to all the devastation of an illness, which will threaten the building blocks of a meaningful life.

In our allegory, we consider the wall as an image of the safe boundary of our character and identity. Addiction is so destructive because it breaks this barrier. If one steals my wallet, only something external to me is touched. If one touches my spiritual self, through wounding my children, or wounding my inner child through abuse, it is this wall that is damaged. In addiction I can be both the victim and the victimizer. It ultimately does not matter if “someone did it to me” or if I “bear the fruit of my own wrong choices.” The fact is that the protective wall around my life is in ruins. The intensity of my efforts to claim authority upon my life, or the zeal with which I pursue a spiritual life will bear little fruit until I come to see my situation for what it is and acknowledge this fact.

There is a City, a holy place inside each of us, where our spirit can be whole and be connected to what around us is good, alive, and safe. Without a safe wall around it, our lives are turned over to greed, anger, ambition, lust, meanness, depression, loneliness and the other rotten fruits of addiction. If we can see this, the battles and the work of restoration of the Jerusalemites become relevant themes for us to examine, as allegories of our own battles and work through the recovery journey.

Chapter 3 – Realization

*Sadly, sadly, the sun rose; and it rose upon no sadder sight than the man of good abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away.*¹³

Life in recovery is rarely a very smooth adventure. But one of the most critical hurdles is the first one: coming to accept and recognize our situation for what it is. Although we live daily in the wreckage of our own life, there is a high price to accepting the truth that will let us start anew. And like the Israelites it takes something or someone to open our eyes and help us through this difficult step.

Realizing the devastation

Before the arrival of Nehemiah, the Jerusalemites were going about the business of raising goats and trading milk, or whatever their daily work was, having grown accustomed to how desolate their city had become. Donkeys and cattle walked freely in and out of the city. More problematic was the fact that thieves and enemies could also come at any time, stir unrest, even rob and destroy. There was no safety from even the sandstorms hurling through the desert. The residents of Jerusalem could actually do a lot of the things done in every other city, but they had lost the ability to control and determine their future. They were prisoners of a desert for lack of a wall. And they could know no real peace. Their neighbors let them be as long as they were content trading goat milk and paid their dues. But they certainly were not able to ensure the safety of their new temple and go back to the collective worship practice their forefathers had known. As long as they complied with the domination symbolized by the broken wall, they could fool themselves and think they were free. Of course, as soon as they tried to regain freedom and take control over their life, being without the protection of the wall, they were vulnerable to punitive attacks from their many enemies. True freedom and the expression of their spirituality were impossible. They could in fact continue to feel free and spiritual only just as long as they pursued neither freedom nor true spirituality.

Nehemiah becomes acutely aware of the situation when he hears that “*those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The*

*wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”*¹⁴ He recognizes first the moral failing which caused the collapse of the city. He sits and cries. This may be the first step of action. But he also calls onto God and reminds Him (and maybe himself) of God’s undying love for His people, and the promises He made to them.¹⁵

For those living with addiction, this is the realization not only of the evil and misery of the situation, but also of a promise that there is something else than an addict in the person God made us to be. This is in some way the rallying cry of “I am not a bad person. I am a good person who does bad things.” One may agree or disagree with this statement about the human condition. Humanists will agree, where Judeo-Christian theologians generally will not (a.k.a. they might support the validity of the opposing argument: “I am not a good person. I am a bad person who does occasionally good things.”) However, if recovery is to mean anything, we probably all must accept that we are, at least potentially by human destiny or by divine purpose, someone of a higher nature and quality than is portrayed by the pitiful life of addiction.

The next part of the realization requires Nehemiah to get up from “sitting and crying,” go to the king, get a mandate to rebuild, travel to Jerusalem, and finally examine for himself in detail the condition of the city walls.¹⁶ This first discovery is secretive and lonely, like a man looking in a mirror. *“By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal¹⁷ Well and the Dung¹⁸ Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.”* Not only is the final observation rather distressing, a visual confirmation of the disturbing news which initially drove Nehemiah to the city, but the places he has to go through are evocative of the layers of sadness and shame, which discovery and acceptance will take the addict through. This imagery is painfully reminiscent of the addict’s journey toward recovery. There will be “valleys”, plenty of “snakes” or “dragons”, and enough “dung” or “refuse” to discourage many from looking at the truth.

The next step is for the people of Jerusalem to come to the same realization. This obviously starts in Chapter 2 and will lead them to action under the leadership of Nehemiah.

Before examining the inner (personal) condition of life in addiction that draws further parallels, it might be useful to consider just one of the most widespread and potent addictive “substances” freely available to all people, in all societies of the world, and generally legal.

Dissecting an ubiquitous addictive product

One of the probably most potent addictive substances on earth is neither crack cocaine, nor heroine, but simply one commonly available in each person’s heart, yet pushed by industries of seemingly endless resources. This “substance” is lust. And one of its most common forms is sexual lust.

Lust has fed the pornographic industry and been the uncontested leading force in the technological advancements of the Internet on a massive scale. Lust sells cars, empires, even yogurt. Lust can trigger a man’s ambitions, a woman’s cravings, a desire to control, to own, and to possess. And it finds an incarnation of almost magical power in sexual imagery, fantasy, and behaviors.

There is little question that sex is a wonderful thing; a truly original and imaginative gift of God to His creation. Through sex we share ineffable feelings, we express love, and we form a unity no words can recreate. Through sex we “make love,” and through making love we make children in the likeness of two individuals. As teenagers say, this is really “cool.” Sex is truly a beautiful thing.

It is also a powerful thing. This is the reason why sexual offenses, assaults, rapes and abuses are so traumatic on the victims and are looked upon with shameful condemnation by society. One might joke about a daughter marrying a reformed bank robber. But no one would find humor in the groom-to-be being a former rapist. It touches an existential raw nerve in all humans. It holds too much power to be made trivial. The taboos about sex have not come from religion, contrary to what is often claimed. The taboos about sex come from its power over us. Religions have only tried to recognize the power of sex, and sometimes to preserve its beauty (granted this effort has often been far from perfect or even very honest).

At any rate, because sex is both beautiful and powerful, it is a lightning rod for lust. Sexual lust is far from being the only kind of lust, but it epitomizes the thirst to own,

control, possess even under the guise of seeming to protect. It seeks to abuse for one's own pleasure what is coveted. Many wars and human troubles have been caused by other kinds of lust: lust for power, lust for violence and blood, lust for vengeance, lust for wealth, and lust for glory and fame; but sexual lust, or lust for an illusion of love, is the most common, maybe the most primal, certainly the most affordable of them all. Finally, we live in a world where lust is used as a powerful marketing tool. It is also marketed for its own sake over countless media, the Internet being the last and one of the most powerful of them all.

Conservative societies tend to think that lust comes from the outside of man. Usually women are the identified culprits, probably because men are frequently more sensitive to visual stimuli than women, and also because men generally have had more power and influence to impose societal rules. Thus some Islamic states require women to hide under a burka.¹⁹ Christian and puritan influences also encourage modesty in women's attire, although with perhaps less dogmatism in this day and age. In both cases the underlying logic seems to be that the appearance of women will provoke lust in men. This of course is a fallacy. Lust is self-propelled, generated from inside the heart of humans. In the Christian Gospel, Jesus explains to religious holders of orthodoxy that lust, strife and violence come from inside the human heart. Not from the outside.

For this reason, external measures of social control have limited success in restraining this phenomenon. I remember an Iranian friend who used to travel back and forth between Iran and Europe in the years following the Islamic revolution. She had to wear a chador which covered her from head to toe when she was in Iran, whereas she would walk the French southern beaches in a bikini or even topless. She found out she was more likely to be harassed, pinched, and rubbed against by men in Tehran than in Nice. Covering herself from head to toe in formless black robes apparently did nothing but entice the lust of men. It is unsure whether shipping all women to the moon would actually do much to stop male sexual lust on the planet.²⁰

If conservative societies' attempts to control lust frequently fail, more liberal ones do not necessarily have a better record. Lust is born in the heart of humans, but there is no question that external stimuli can stir the flames of it, particularly at sensitive human developmental ages, and when these stimuli are delivered on a massive scale.

TV channels in many countries peddle such an amount of “cheap skin” that even liberal commentators sometimes come to question when enough is enough. While TV floods the evening hours with “soft” material to provide “recreation” to the masses, the Internet has expanded the delivery of “adult” content exponentially from the teasing, to the tasteless and the downright repulsive. Not surprisingly, sexual offenses have become one of the highest causes for incarceration in some Western countries.

Pornography is a very flammable compound thrown on the burning ashes of human sexual lust. While conservative societies will find out that they cannot eradicate lust by controlling and locking women in, liberal ones will find out that pouring oil on the fire may not be such a smart idea either.

Personal devastation

These observations, however, are at the level of societies. What does lust mean to the individual addict? Whether living in restrictive or permissive societies, obviously not all people end up enslaved to obsessive-compulsive behaviors. In the same manner, not all people who drink a beer or smoke a cigarette or marijuana end up alcoholics or drug addicts. Some of us, for whichever reason, end up losing all power to alter our behavior once it has been indulged. Resorting to our drug of choice, be it lust or something else, sooner or later becomes not a choice but a requirement. When the thought comes, when the trigger is activated, at seemingly random times, the compulsion arises and we find out we have actually no defenses against it.

Some addicts live for years with their destructive tendencies, always aware of how much they hate them. Through heart-wrenching efforts of will power, they may even keep demons at bay for shorter or longer seasons. The unavoidable defeats being all the more bitter for the efforts made to escape them. Others seem to give up all perspective and totally forget how abnormal, diseased and corrupt their behavior has become. The disruption brought by addiction goes to the root of the human ability to discern right from wrong at even the most basic level. The pain of daily living is somewhat buffered in that case because conscience itself has been muted. But the moment of realization and acceptance might be the more painful for it. Of course the stories of “hyper-religious” people being discovered in sexually compromising situations always make the headlines. These sad episodes might not be as much

illustrations of a much-denounced hypocrisy, as extremely instructive examples of powerlessness and unmanageability.

Some addicts are complacent and some downright schizophrenic about their addictive behavior. But we all slowly lose the awareness of how much it really disrupts our life. Like the Jerusalemites in their dust, being imprisoned in addiction for any length of time we fail to recognize the extent of the destruction and ravage caused by our behavior. We may have gotten accustomed to living in a pile of rubble and to the lack of a safe boundary around our soul. Even if we realize that we have a problem with a particular obsessive-compulsive behavior, we probably fail to see all the other aspects of our life which are under its control. Addiction is not only obsession, compulsive use and acting out, it is also an inability to manage life, to deal with emotions, to relate to our loved ones. This does not mean we cannot be very successful in life. We may be doing great at business, be a recognized speaker, author, we may be esteemed and rewarded by our peers for our achievements. But addiction destroys the inside, the soul, the heart and relationships. It creates a random and wanton scattering of our life's efforts, particularly with those that are the closest to us, starting with our own self.

Not surprisingly and no matter what our success is “outside,” addicts become isolated, angry, bitter, resentful, and feeling slighted or unloved by those closest to them. All these things spill into rage or withdrawal, meanness, complacency, a growing and repressed sense of panic and a pathological self-centeredness. Unable to have a boundary between our City Inside and the external elements, we withdraw behind our personal pile of rubble. It is a paradoxical effect that total openness to the whims of the outside world makes us protectively self-centered. (By rebuilding the wall, the healthy boundary, recovery will allow us to engage the world again on a new basis.)

Of course it doesn't take a lot of perspicacity to observe that a wall is in shambles and in a pile of ruins. Especially for an outsider more familiar with what is “normal.” But humans are quite adaptable and tend to adjust to chaos. Although we see and live in chaos—the piles of rubble and ruins, the compulsive destructive thought processes of the addict—our senses get numbed to this reality. Somehow we must go through the day, and chaos just becomes part of the landscape of our life. Yes, we have to climb over a pile of rubble to get to the field, but after awhile this becomes the familiar path.

Yes, wild animals come and roam at night and we must fend them off over and over. And more often than not we lose our hard earned possessions in the process. But this becomes life as we know it. Like the Jerusalemites, just because we groan and complain about the state of life doesn't mean we see it anymore for what it is: an unlivable, untenable sham of a life.

The realization that Nehemiah brings to the people lets them see what lies in front of them and just how ruinous their way of life is. For the addict, the point needs to be made over and over (and over) before the moment of understanding takes place.

Realizing past failures

Part of the realization allowed by Nehemiah is implicit in the people's discovery of their condition; the futility and failure of so many past efforts to self-reform, to heal, and to change. We have already seen that the Jerusalemites had attempted repeatedly to make their city livable and more specifically to restore its temple as a spiritual center. But their situation remained miserable and somewhat hopeless until Nehemiah arrived.

In essence the Jerusalemites are confronted with a dual truth: (1) the wall is down; (2) everything the community has tried so far has failed.

Similarly, many addicts entering recovery have tried again and again to restore their City Inside. Of course, at times we may have gladly indulged the addiction, invited it, and thought acting out our obsession was "a lot of fun." Many other times, however, we have engaged in painful inner battles trying to fend off an invisible enemy. We tried more spirituality, more self-control, or self-imposed controls on our time, self-discipline—even painful attempts at self-discipline—therapy, avoidance strategies, more frequent and more intense religious activities, more "healthy" activities, repeating bible verses like mantras, confessing to a religious authority, making promises and resolutions, banging our head against a wall, finding other escapes (which we thought less destructive) and in some cases drowning one addiction in other addictions (it is not infrequent for recovering alcoholics or drug addicts to uncover a lust addiction once some sobriety has been gained). At some point in my own life, nearly suicidal behaviors became a way to explore new avoidance strategies. After all, it is hard to act on our impulses from a grave.

If we are addicts, however, the fact is the wall is down. We have lost the necessary protection against the ubiquitous appeal of the substance which enslaves us.

It is not that nothing ever “works.” In fact, self-will and determination can sometimes give a temporary semblance of success. The problem is that this actually never lasts. One household in Jerusalem can rebuild a mud perimeter around its living quarters, develop a system to fend off the jackals at night, and get better at defending itself. But ultimately it lives in an unguarded city. Sooner or later a sand storm will submerge it; or the next group of raiders will be larger and impossible to fend off from one single household position. So it is with the addict pouring efforts into self-reformation. Such efforts are not on a scale and nature to change the final outcome. One common denominator of all these failed efforts is a reliance on self-will. Whether they involve religious zeal, anger, determination, even pride or simply fear, they tend to be self-centered, self-reliant and ultimately rest on a crumbling basis: the character and conditioning of an addict. They are not based on a realization of the truth. The truth is simple; the city is unprotected and cannot thrive without a wall; we are powerless and cannot heal without recovery.

For the Jerusalemites, things start to change once they accept and see with their own eyes the diagnosis that Nehemiah brings to them. Nehemiah is a representation of God himself here—perhaps a messianic figure. He sees first; he understands first; he accepts first; and he initiates the life-changing process. The Jerusalemites have to accept his diagnosis and leadership. They have to accept that he will be in a position of higher authority over them. They have to accept that they have been and that they are powerless, no matter how many bright ideas they have implemented in the past. They have to accept his authority and leadership. This means that they will act, respond, build and fight on his command.

It is noteworthy that before it hits the people, the realization is carried by Nehemiah. This also happens in recovery when a spouse, a friend, a counselor are instrumental in showing us how miserable our condition is. We can be encouraged to action, like attending a meeting, under the realization and hope *they* formulate for us. Ultimately, however, this realization will have to become fully ours, as in Chapter 9 of Nehemiah

when the Jerusalemites come to profess a full realization of their situation and exclaim, “*we are slaves.*” It is the same journey an addict goes through from the simple “I have a little problem” to a realization, which can take days, months or years, that “I am powerless and my life is unmanageable.”

This realization is very much at the root—or rather the start—of any successful recovery. Accepting individual powerlessness. Trusting a higher authority. Choosing to follow His direction.

There is a reason why it so often takes so long to come to that moment of realization. Simply stated, this reason is pain. This pain can be heard in Nehemiah’s prayer:

“In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways. But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.”²¹

It is painful to live in a devastated city. It is painful to live in addiction. It is painful to see every effort we have made to build a home, a life, as a failure. It is painful and heart-wrenching to see ourselves as powerless, and to contemplate a picture of devastation undisguised by our subtle deceptions. It is painful to be so beaten down that we are ready to let go of pride and self-will to surrender to the leadership of One who is higher, and other than our self. It is particularly difficult in a society which values so much self-reliance, self-actualization, self-esteem, self-improvement, self-control, self-making, self-loving, and self-satisfaction to finally come to a place where we can say, “The wall that is down is my very own self; the shattered boundary of my own City Inside is the rubble of my character; the main fault line of my restoration and defense is not the world, society, politicians, the media, the Internet, my spouse, ‘young people today’, or ‘all these jerks at my work.’ No, the failure, the collapsed

foundational structure is *me*. All my efforts to rebuild can only fail and daily life is unmanageable because they are built on this shamble of a foundation: a defeated, wounded and collapsed self. My only hope is not self-reliance and self-will; it is accepting failure and submitting to the God who calls for my restoration even if I don't recognize any of His varied faces.”

It is one thing to pronounce words of powerlessness and recognition of God's grandeur in a religious ceremony. It is quite another to say them to the mirror one morning, and the next, and then the next.

Such a painful acceptance and first surrender comes from at least recognition that there is something or someone who can stand outside of our self-centered universe and bring some new words and directions. This “Higher Power” can and will take many faces, which we will learn to recognize. Whether we believe in God or not, something about the reality of a Higher Power will have to enter our life.

Chapter 4 – A power greater than our self

You who read these words already know this inner Life and Light. For by this very Light within you, is your recognition given. In this humanistic age we suppose man is the initiator and God is the responder. But the Living Christ [Messiah] within us is the initiator and we are the responders. God the Lover, the accuser, the revealer of light and darkness presses within us. "Behold I stand at the door and knock," And all our apparent initiative is already a response, a testimonial to His secret presence and working within us.²²

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!²³

Accepting the idea of God, a Higher Power greater than us, should really be an easy task for addicts. After all, our lives have for years been dominated by powers much stronger than anything we are or have in us. Alcohol, emotions, lust, drugs or rage are internal and external masters, which have ruled over us sometimes for decades, demanding and taking more and more, pushing all boundaries, crushing self-determination, and claiming always more abdication of our principles.

Yet coming “to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” somehow remains a common obstacle on the road to recovery. Believing that someone or something can restore us to sanity gets easier once we acknowledge insanity, and accept it instead of denying it. But even then, accepting the need to turn to God is often difficult regardless of the addict’s personal beliefs. If it were just a matter of intellectual knowledge and verbal confession, religious people—Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, or any other—would be able to avoid compulsive behaviors, by virtue of their faith. At the very least one of these groups would be spared and get it right. The reality is different. Even among the strong believers of any of these groups, however, addiction can take roots in a life and control it. It is as if faith were no longer operational in this one particular area of life controlled by addiction. It seems that the religious person’s creed, confession, and level of conviction bring him/her no advantage in the discovery of the healing journey, at least until some different connection is made.

The Jews themselves are in essence a religious community; and yet they also have to rediscover the Higher Authority destined to guide their life. It comes in stages.

Nehemiah's first instinct is to turn to God, as soon as he hears the news about Jerusalem. He has a deep trust and commitment to Yahweh, the God of Israel, and his sadness and distress immediately orient his thoughts toward His "Higher Power." God is the invisible thread throughout the book; both the purpose and the means of deliverance.

Nehemiah's trust in God is not only a silent motivation, an inner-inspiration to get him started, but it is also a practiced reflex, revealed at the first encounter with opposition. This comes "*when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab ... mocked and ridiculed*" his mission. Nehemiah does not flaunt his trust in God. He does not hide it either. Faced with a threat from potential foes, he does not boast in himself and his own strength; he naturally turns to a higher authority. His response²⁴ is in fact illustrative of the overall theme of the city's restoration and our recovery. If we examine it, we can make three observations, which will be recurrent themes of the next chapters:

- Nehemiah's first instinct is that the outcome is dependent upon God—"The God of heaven will give us success."
- Second observation, there is going to be plenty of work for the people involved—"We his servants will start rebuilding." In other words, if God is in charge of the outcome; His people are responsible for going through the process.
- Finally, the structure of authority and domination over the city is going to be unequivocally altered—"but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it." For the citizens of Jerusalem, this means that there is no way to carry the past relationships and past domination into the new life that is emerging.

These three observations are directly applicable to the changes introduced by genuine recovery in the life of an addict; but what makes Nehemiah particularly relevant to us is not only his dependence on the God of Abraham but also how this translates into an

acceptance of “lesser Higher Powers.” The Hebrews are on their way to restoring worship and dependence on God, but this path will require them to accept different Higher Powers—“transitional Higher Powers”—on their way to a true spiritual life.

- For example, after his heartfelt call to God in prayer, Nehemiah’s next step is to turn to the human ruler, the king. Nehemiah does not play, Blues Brothers-style (“we’re on a Mission for the Lord”) the “mandate-from-God” card to dispense from obedience to human authorities. What he does is demonstrate a first rule of genuine humility: submission to the true God leads to an appropriate submission to other human authorities. Too many times, false religion and false spirituality seem to provide an overabundance of dedication to God, which only serves to exempt the egotistic and the proud from ever having to yield to another human. Since addicts can be quite good at both egotism and pride, it is no wonder being religious rarely prevented anyone from falling into addiction. Even faith can become just another way to manifest self-centeredness for such a person. Like Nehemiah, we sometimes have to accept the world as it is; and this includes the authority of a “king,” who certainly wasn’t voted in by any of us.

- The next thing is that Nehemiah himself becomes a Higher Power to the residents of Jerusalem as soon as he shows them the state of their city. The people will become Higher Powers for each other, at times working side by side²⁵, and others working under the authority of community leaders.²⁶ Each of these early steps, from Nehemiah leaving Babylon to the Israelites gathering behind him actually requires a measure of acceptance of some sort of higher authority, and through that authority, ultimately of God Himself.

Both Nehemiah and the Jerusalem community as a whole illustrate for us many steps to the working of a relation with not just God as the ultimate Higher Power, but also with our own “interim” or “transitional” Higher Powers. This concept may sound strange at first, but we will examine different types of Higher Powers, which apply to the addict’s life: another human being, a group of other people, a higher moral law, and finally God himself.

Listening to a brother or sister

The first image of a Higher Power which Nehemiah exemplifies is that of a brother, a friend whose authority becomes recognized by all. Can we imagine what kind of construction would have gone on without his recognized authority?

Without a recognized authority, each neighborhood of the city would have wanted its quarters to be rebuilt first, its door to be larger, stronger or using the better wood. Cliques would have formed and dissensions would have ruined the prospect of ever completing a task for the entire city. Nehemiah is a man of no greater or better nature than his fellow Jews, yet his authority is vital to the completion of the task. If the Jerusalemites had chosen to claim obedience to God only (and not to Nehemiah), chances are they would never gotten anything done. It is because their hearts is subtly being turned to God that they can actually listen to a man, just like them.

How does this apply to the addict? Leading a Middle-Eastern community to work and battle requires a level of coordination that we would not think required for organizing the life and actions of a single individual. Isn't the addict's life, however just like a city where each neighborhood has a different goal and a different master?

Alcoholics want to help their neighbors as much as everyone else (which means sometimes not at all and sometimes a great deal), when drinking does not get in the way. Lust drunks want to love their family whenever they have a break from compulsive behavior. Heroin addicts want to bring world peace if they get a chance. The problem is not that any of us fails to want to do good, be strong, be stable, be mature, be responsible, and—like Mary Poppins—“practically perfect in every way.” No, the problem is that we want all these things, and sometimes we even try to achieve some of them; but we also want many contradictory things: success, recognition, admiration, “stuff,” money, power, happiness, absence of stress, total freedom... These sometimes conflicting wants and needs are common to the entire human experience. Perhaps some of them are more acute in the addictive personality. In addition, they are seasoned with an intense, all-demanding craving for escape, pleasure, and always more of the drug of choice. As addicts dealing with the black hole of self-will, craving for our drug and at the same time wanting to save our City, we are like the undirected and incoherent citizens of Jerusalem, submitting to nothing except our conflicting passions.

Accepting guidance from a brother, a sister, a friend becomes a necessary step into recovery. Frequently through twelve-step programs, this will take the form of a “sponsor.” A sponsor is just another messed-up human willing to give us a hand — usually with a longer time in recovery than we have—whom we become willing to listen to, and at times ask to arbitrate the cacophony of our thoughts and ambitions. In my experience, this person is far from pretending to be a guru of any kind, and would never presume to run someone else’s life. But he/she can be a manifestation of the grace of God, giving a word of wisdom at the hour of need, listening and encouraging at all times. Our reliance on a sponsor can also be a manifestation of our willingness to stop running the show. In essence, it is a first step toward submitting to the will of God for our life, manifested by occasionally listening to the voice of someone outside the chaos of our desires and emotions.

I heard a story, which illustrates something of this small miracle.

A friend in recovery was struggling with an overwhelming urge to take his car and drive off to get some of his favorite drug. He felt worn out and ready to give up the fight, even wondering whether all his recovery efforts meant anything at all. Somehow he found the strength to pick up the phone and call his sponsor, who recommended that he should say the Serenity Prayer seventeen times in a row and then simply go to bed. This was a short phone call, and the struggling man found himself wondering why seventeen was so much better than fourteen or fifteen; whether twenty would not have been a rounder number; and even asking himself why those seventeen prayers should do any better than the hundred or so he had formulated on his own. The point is he stopped debating and he accepted that a brother had been put on his path to help him stay sober; he chose to obey the strange request. It worked. He went to bed sober.

Is reciting the Serenity Prayer seventeen times the sure way to avoid using or acting out addictive impulses? Is that the secret, and all there is to it? It sounds like a self-help library success in the making. I only wish it were.

The secret manifested here is simply that the man was willing to listen, obey, turn over his will and do what *another* human being—his sponsor—asked him to do. By

this process he was forced out of the closed-circuit and maddening loop of an addict's obsessive thought process. Perhaps by doing so he also accepted the will of his invisible and silent God, finding the will of his Higher Power through the willingness to obey a transitional Higher Power, a fellow recovering friend, who came up with a strange request.

Recovering addicts can share a hundred such stories of wisdom gained by simply picking up the phone and listening to the wisdom of a friend or counselor. This has nothing to do with the pure wisdom of the said friend. It has everything to do with muting the addict's demanding voice by surrendering to the will of God manifested in a human form.

Yielding to a group

Before the wall restoration project started in Jerusalem, the wise course of action when an intruder party raided the city might have been to stay behind your heap of stones, bury what little you had, and hope the raid would target other parts of the city. Isolation, being away from the others, and being self-sufficient might have been a good strategy for survival. Similarly for repairing damages, it might have been better to be self-sufficient, and to handle things without anyone's help. Struggling for survival in the midst of ruins, the Lone Ranger would fare better than the rowdy van-Trapp family from the Sound of Music.

But isolation leads to confusion and betrayal. In recovery, the tables are turned. Battles are not fought alone, and victories require the wisdom of others. We stop deceiving ourselves as we share who we are and submit it to the wisdom of others. Helping others and responding to their call, we gain more strength. Calling for help and receiving a hand from a friend, we gain safety.

Nehemiah gives us regularly the listing of who worked with whom and toiled with which group.²⁷ This illustrates the next and obvious step of surrender that Jerusalemites had to follow by becoming willing to yield to and work within a group.

If each man/woman in Jerusalem only sought to conduct his/her personal reconstruction plan, there would be little hope of restoring an entire city. Group work requires group discipline, which requires a certain abdication of personal sovereignty.

I haven't quite begun to understand this, but it seems to be the way recovery happens. Individuals tend to recover within a group, and to some extent by submitting to this group.²⁸

Once again, it is not the exceptional wisdom of the group which is the salvation itself. After all, recovery groups essentially consist of people who have displayed quite a lack of wisdom in the conduct of their personal existence (at least at some point in their life). What seems to be at play is the willingness of the individual addict to stop running his/her own show, to get out of his/her own self and head, to help others and also to accept the help of others. Once again surrendering to flawed humans whom we see, becomes a stepping stone and a demonstration of our willingness to surrender to God whom we do not see.

Addiction is such an isolating illness. Addicts falling prey to their compulsion are locked within themselves. I have heard it said repeatedly, "when you live in your head, you are behind enemy lines." How true this is. For this reason God seems to place others on our path—transitional Higher Powers—to teach us what a poor master our self-will has been.

Submitting to the Law

Another surrender of Nehemiah and Jerusalem is the return to the Law, the Torah which was supposed to guide the Jews since the days of Moses.

At the risk of pushing our metaphor too far, addicts in twelve-step programs usually refer to a body of literature which almost seems imbued with a similar value as the Ten Commandments.²⁹

The point is again that something visible—a written law, a written text—is acknowledged as a higher authority than one's best judgment. Given all that we learn through daily life; all the automatisms and convictions, all the certainties and life-skills, not to forget the incredibly inflated ego addicts have in spades, it is a challenge to trust in the authority of the Law, the Scriptures, or even twelve-step literature. But it seems to be all part of God's plan for teaching us one simple thing: we do not write the Law; we do not set the rules; we do not choose the principles of Life, we do not define right and wrong; there *is* a higher authority over us. If we are having trouble

keeping our eyes on an invisible God, a few black and white pages, maybe strange and uncomfortable for us, will be claiming our allegiance for the time being.

God... as we understand Him

The beginning and the end of the journey, however, is indeed with God. So why can't we simply skip the previous steps, go directly to God, and not have to mess with flawed friends, confused groups, and constraining texts?

A story about a moment of surrender during a "Christian revival" illustrates to me why we need to accept brothers, sisters, friends, groups, and the law as transitional Higher Powers in order to live surrendered to our divine Higher Power (please follow the story to the punch line, even if the very concept of a revival meeting offends you):

A man went to a big tent revival. As is customary, at the end of the message the preacher called "sinners" to come forward to "accept Jesus as their personal friend and savior." The man was squarely sited in his chair, decided not to move. When a young usher came to him and asked whether he would like to get up and step forward, he responded: "Don't you think I can just as well accept Jesus on my chair as I can in front of the altar?" The usher left him alone that night, but the man came back the next one. At the end of the service, the same call was made, the same usher came to him with the same invitation and he responded in the same way, "I don't need to step to an altar to accept God in my life." Of course the statement was simply an affirmation of his free will and independence.

He nonetheless came back to the revival every evening, and had the same exchange with the young usher every time. Finally, on the last night of the revival, he was stirred and moved beyond words and realized how drastically his life needed changed. He also became ready to embrace that God was present and ready to intervene in his life. As the altar call was made and the same young usher walked by, reluctant to get in the same dead-end discussion, the man called to him and said; "Help me! This is the last night and I need to respond to the call. Please help me make it to the altar." Smiling, the usher responded: "Why don't I sit with you, sir? We can pray together right here. I

think you can just as well accept Jesus in your chair as you can in front of the altar.”

The moral of the story is fairly evident: when we are truly surrendered to God, surrender to our brethrens is not so essential, but it is no longer a difficulty. But when we refuse to surrender to any other human being, group, or law, we are probably not surrendering to God either.

Each surrender is a step of humility, of renunciation of the kingship of self, and a tutor to learn what surrender to God truly is.

One question always perplexed me when I started in recovery, perhaps because I already had fairly formed theological beliefs. Why do we emphasize surrender to God “as we understand Him?” Shouldn’t I surrender to God *as He is*, instead of the God I make Him to be? Stated this way, the answer seems obvious. Yet, I have come to be reconciled to the fact that the best I can do is turn my will and my life over to God “as I understand Him.” And here is why.

The God of our understanding is in fact the only God we can really ever follow. It is not that our understanding defines Him. He *is*. He is, regardless of what we believe, understand, or make up in our mind; but we understand or see Him “*as through a mirror darkly.*” We fathom who He is only partially. George McDonald³⁰ explains that every revelation of God to Abraham, Moses, Elijah, or any other of these men of faith was always a partial revelation. And it was a better revelation for being a partial one. A full revelation of God to man would be overwhelming. But the partial revelation is the one showing God’s servant what he/she can do and thus learn next. In what little we understand of his infiniteness, we are called to trust and to obey. This leads to actions. Actions are the demonstration, the establishment of our beliefs, because beliefs without action are merely personally appealing concepts. Once an action is taken, it reveals as much as it establishes our real belief. So, we do not act on concepts—even the best theological concepts will not take us very far—but based on beliefs, on the understanding we have today of whom God is and what His identity calls us to do.

We may have the concept that God is all-powerful, but it is hard to live by that belief. In our limited understanding of God, we may actually be able to grasp that He is at least powerful enough to keep us sober for the next hour, to work out the outcomes if we refrain from rage and anger, and to preserve a friendship if we choose to forgive rather than to resent.

Now, one man may claim the conviction that God is all powerful but do nothing about it, while his sister may claim doubts about God's absolute power, but get on her knees to seek strength in rejecting rage and choosing forgiveness. It is the latter of the two who will grow in faith. She may be unable to grasp that God is *all* powerful, and we may judge that her brother's theology is more accomplished. But the point is that the only true meaningful choice that this woman has is to act—get on her knees with a specific purpose—based on her partial understanding that God is able to help humans deal with anger and resentment. She cannot trust the all-powerful God. But she can believe in (a.k.a. trust / base her actions on) the ability of God to bring peace and forgiveness in the moment. Her brother's theology may sound more comprehensive, but who knows what he will really believe at the moment of testing?

Actually, God probably doesn't any of us for good theology. What He asks for is obedience and dependence today. What we understand today defines the obedience we are called upon for today. This in turn will deepen and broaden our understanding; it will establish our faith and belief; it will lead us to better know God by the prosaic step of building a wall, be it of stones or of sobriety. So "*turning our will and our life*" in action may actually lead us to truer theology. Exemplary theology, in and by itself will no more guide us than rebuilding the temple did for the Hebrews when the city was left unprotected.

Action before belief

Jerusalemites always believed in God. But their belief was theological and compartmentalized to the "religious domains" of life. To be operating their faith in God needed to let them accept the Higher Power incarnated in Nehemiah and in their neighbors, before they could return to the Temple and truly worship the God of their greater understanding.

God is going to lead us to a changed life. The classic, perhaps religious picture of how lives are changed is that a new belief enters the heart of man. This new belief leads to changed attitudes, and in turn this brings new behaviors. It is not only religion which describes this pattern. Behaviorists and anthropologists have looked at explanatory models and belief systems as a way to explain culture, norms and behaviors, and have sometimes considered similar processes. There is, however, also plenty of evidence to suggest a different one. Those who make their business of “selling behaviors” to the masses have long figured out that humans will actually change their beliefs in order to support behaviors they have already adopted for a variety of reasons. Thus behavior actually creates beliefs and attitudes. The same goes for hardened criminals and trained killers. It doesn’t seem that people inducted into the Mafia, into gangs or into Death Battalions spend much time being taught to disconsider human life until their belief system allows them to kill. The act of killing itself, cold-bloodedly and sometimes repeatedly as an act against nature (and the natural belief system of the inductee) is what leads the new member of the group to adopt the attitudes which will allow full belonging in the new culture and belief system.

It is interesting that both the Old Testament (the Jewish Torah) and New Testament (its Christian addition) can also present a narrative which supports this order of things. Jesus said “*come and see*” to his disciples and led them into action. The Old Testament places prominently Ten Commandments for behaviors, actions and attitudes to be followed, presumably to manifest and establish the belief system of its disciples. Both texts are replete with exhortations and calls to act, go, and do. Almost every belief is marked and expressed by an action, for example baptism. One may think that baptism (which already existed in the Jewish tradition) is the consequence of belief. Obviously this is largely true; but it also seems that the act of baptism is the first action in a life of growing faith and beliefs—yet to fully emerge. So many times when Jesus faced people in need, his response to them was a command for action. And their response—through their action—set them as believers.

The point of this is not to start a theological debate, but to point that beliefs follow actions almost as often, if not more often than the opposite. At any rate this is frequently the case for the recovering addict. The old Alcoholics Anonymous (AAs) say, “fake it till you make it,” and “you can’t think yourself into right acting, but you

can act yourself into right thinking.” We will see later what kind of actions will foster this right thinking.

Our understanding of God is going to grow as we learn to listen, obey and act; just like the Hebrews were able to grow in their understanding of Yahweh by completing the restoration of the wall and temple of Jerusalem. There are, however, perhaps a minimum of things we can already contemplate about the character of God that can encourage our growth, and maybe give us enough confidence to want to engage on a path where we can grow even more in Him.

The character of God

Pages have been and will be written on the topic of God and His character. For us it is enough to ask what are some of the essential lessons about God’s character which come from the story of Nehemiah? They might be described through two paradoxical elements of His character: God is loving, but He is also holy—an awkward concept to the 21st century humanist in many of us. Secondly He is a God of grace, but He is uncompromising about truth.

God’s love and holiness

God is love; he is loving. It is out of love that God stirs Nehemiah to care for the children of Jerusalem. It is God’s love which inspires them to build a temple, the symbolic place for the people’s reunion and relationship to God. It is love which even inspired God’s old promise that the Hebrews could live in a land of milk and honey, in a city of peace, ruled by justice. All these things are echoed by God’s purpose for the addict.

God’s love calls for freedom from the slavery of compulsion and use. When many humans are willing to dismiss addicts as disgraceful perverts, hopeless human failures, pathetic shadows, and a plague of society, God calls in love and seeks a relationship with each addict. It is love that calls for the restoration of a unique and free identity. People under the influence of drugs or alcohol, men and women sold to lust and sexual addiction tend to behave in the same way, repeat the same pointless rituals, fight the same dead-end battles, and be overwhelmed by the same sadness and hopelessness. Out of love God sees each one as a different individual, a child that is

unique in nature, name and destiny. Give a “joint” to people who want to smoke it, and everyone’s identity will soon be enveloped by the same cloud of delusion. Sober up all these people, and no two will be alike; each one will stand with his or her quirks and originality. It is out of love that God calls for the restoration of the wall, which will allow this individuality to materialize.

But God is not only loving, He is also holy. The word “holy” sounds old to our ears, and refers us to pictures of God sitting on a throne, throwing darts at us, and speaking with the voice of James Earl Jones. Maybe the word has become an impediment to our understanding, and we should try to define new words for this essential element of the character of God. Other words for “holy” could be uncorrupted, incorruptible, perfect, set apart, complete by Himself, out of reach of human compromises. Among the human race, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupt absolutely.” To be holy is to be so perfectly whole that absolute power shines through without a trace of corruption. It means to be so completely Oneself (God tells Moses “tell them ‘I AM’ sends you) that perfect love radiates untouched by our petty manipulations.

Semantics apart, we are much more comfortable with the love of God than with His holiness. The reason is simple: love calls us to restoration and freedom; while holiness brings forth a standard of righteousness, which corrects and might even judge the actions of our life.

For the Jerusalemites the holiness of God manifests itself in different ways, each time challenging the use they make of the freedom that God’s love has granted them. It first manifests itself in Nehemiah’s confession of sins in his first prayer. It comes up again at every phase of awareness and celebration of an achievement, like the completion of the wall.

For the addict, God’s holiness calls for a response to the consequences of his/her choices and actions. Only love can bring a person to the place of considering these things; but it is only through a rigorous moral inventory that this person will ultimately grow in love. God’s love says, “Live free of condemnation.” But God’s holiness says, “See what your actions reveal about your heart.” God’s love says, “You are not enslaved nor defined by your compulsion.” But God’s holiness says, “Your compulsive actions are not without effects on your soul and on the life of your

neighbors.” Of course we prefer to hear about His love. “I’m not a bad person, I’m just a good person who did bad things” is simply more popular than “when I look at what enslaved me (what caused the devastation of the City I reside in), I must acknowledge that there is in me something which stands against justice, purity, honesty, humility and the love of my neighbor.”

This last acknowledgement would be unbearable and self-defeating if it wasn’t brought through a discovery of God’s love. But if we try to receive God’s love without coming to the place where His holiness shines on the dark recesses of our hearts, we’re probably not going to complete the restoration.

Grace and truth

The same tension exists when considering that God is not only graceful and forgiving, but also that He is true.

God’s grace calls us to receive forgiveness for the madness of the past; He is graceful in that He will take the smallest thread of hope in our life and from it rebuild a full person. It doesn’t matter how enslaved one has been to addiction, or how long it has been since we have had a sober thought and what the awful consequences have been for our families. God looks at the devastation of the City and sees that it can be rebuilt with a bright and promising future.

It has been said that God is in the business of second chances. For Jerusalem as for the addict, His gracefulness probably means He is also in the business of third and fourth chances.

One of the New Testament’s most told stories is that of the Samaritan woman, who had lived a totally promiscuous life, in a day and age which was not so “tolerant” with such lifestyles. Yet Jesus’ encounter with this woman is a magnificent display of grace. King David in the Old Testament would have fit many characteristics of what we call today a sex addict; his obsession led him not only to adultery but to murder in order to “get his fix.” Yet God still reached out to him and helped him return to a meaningful life. A few hours spent in recovery rooms will let anyone discover a never ending series of human stories where God takes people at the bottom of skid row and shows an unfathomable amount of grace to restore them to a fuller life. God’s grace is

evident in so many places (and particularly where religion would rather He not set foot) always hoping, loving, struggling to restore and to heal.

Again, this universal grace of God is also unflinchingly rooted in truth.

Nehemiah does not come to Jerusalem speaking only words of comfort but neglecting to call its inhabitants to the truth about their condition. *“You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”*³¹ If you missed it “disgrace” is not a compliment he makes to the residents.

When he leads the people in prayer, he does not try to embellish the story either;

*“Our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate; slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, ‘This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,’ or when they committed awful blasphemies.”*³²

God’s love and grace will not let Him change one iota of the truth to make it more palatable to His children. His desire to restore the person and enter a living relationship with each individual, no matter how enthralled that person is in drugs, alcohol, sex, power, or greed, will not cause Him for one second to paint a rosy picture of the bloody cost of a life dominated by drugs, alcohol, sex, power, or greed. Thus, the way for us to move forward in healing and relationship is to accept to face the truth that is shown to us from day to day. Much is made of—and appropriately so—in twelve-step programs of the need for “rigorous honesty.” In fact the AA Big Book places little hope for the person not willing to “a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty.”³³ Truth is sometimes violent and painful. Grace means that we can face and accept the truth that is shown to us on this day, not escape it. “More will be revealed” at a speed which God’s grace and love have carefully measured for us.

God is many more things, and I probably would not scratch the surface if I tried to describe the little bit I think I understand. But considering these four simple yet awesome traits³⁴ might help us find the initial courage and determination that Jerusalemites needed to commit to the journey. For us addicts, the question might not be whether to accept that our life be ruled and guided (and rescued!) by a Higher Power, but rather which Power we choose to entrust our life unto. If we choose not to choose, then we have not fully realized that dominating and enslaving powers actually already rule our actions.

There is an alternative to the ruins and the domination of compulsion. God is loving; He loves us. God is holy; He does not compromise with darkness of any kind. Addictive behaviors will never be “OK” and acceptable for one of His children. God is graceful; He is the God of second, third and of as many chances as life can spare us before we hit the final wall. God is true; He never deceives nor dilutes His words for us, and He expects from us a commitment to rigorous honesty.

In the next chapters we will look at how Nehemiah’s story reflects the recovery process through changed behaviors, changed attitudes and changed beliefs in that order. The God of our understanding is at the beginning of the journey, calling to sanity through love, offering grace to lead us from deception into truth, and He will also be at the end of it. But we do an awful lot of walking in between.

Chapter 5 – First steps of action

*When will once begins to aspire, it will soon find that action must precede feeling, that then man may know the foundation itself of feeling.*³⁵

There is a parallel between what we have discussed so far in the text of Nehemiah and the famous twelve steps of recovery.

- There is an obvious correspondence between realization (Chapter 3) and acknowledging (step one), *“that we were powerless and that our life had become unmanageable.”*
- Acceptance that only God—however we may understand Him—is our hope (Chapter 4), is of course quite similar to step two (*“We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”*³⁶)
- The third step is making a *“conscious decision to turn our will and our life over to the care of God, as we understood Him.”*³⁷ Much of what happens in following steps of recovery is about taking actions, which turn us day-by-day toward surrender to God’s care. Much like the Jerusalemites, this involves personal commitment, group discipline, all the logistics and management of a building project, and a readiness to respond to a call, or be the one to call on friends to engage in a fight when enemies press in close.

The necessity of a program of action in recovery was best illustrated by a story I heard from an old-timer in recovery:

A lady taking a walk in the countryside saw a man working in a beautiful garden, with many flowers, fruit trees, vegetable patches, and a stone well in the middle. Greeting the gardener, the woman complimented him; “You have a beautiful garden there. God has been very gracious to give you such a beautiful spot.” The gardener answered: “You’re right. God sure has been gracious to me. But you should have seen this place when He had it to Himself!”

The same is going to be true for Jerusalem. A strong city, a livable city, and a city at peace was always a gift of God, a manifestation of His grace to the Jerusalemites. But

the story of Nehemiah makes amply clear that His grace and gifts require a lot of work on their end.

The number of action verbs used to describe what takes place from the second chapter of Nehemiah on is impressive. Description of attitudes and spiritual revival will become more dominant later, starting around Chapters five to seven.

From the moment Nehemiah addresses the king, his request is pregnant with actions to follow. He does not ask for a general permission and blessing, but for specific authority over the governors of the relevant provinces, rights of transit, and access to wood for specific construction tasks.³⁸ The moment of decision for the residents of Jerusalem is also first and foremost a decision for action. *“They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work.”*³⁹ This good work takes a great many forms. In fact many sections of the book of Nehemiah are honestly quite tedious to read, giving us the list of who did what, with whom and almost down to how. There is a flurry of activities, described with the level of detail of a summer camp newsletter trying to make sure no one is forgotten. Gates are rebuilt, dedicated then set in place. Section after section of the walls are restored or rebuilt from scratch. “Beams, doors, bolts, sections, gates, bars” are put back together by “goldsmiths, perfume-makers, priests, sons and daughters, noble and ordinary men, merchants, district rulers, half-district rulers and entire half-districts.”⁴⁰

“Whatever it takes” is probably a good summary of what is involved in getting the wall rebuilt, as well as in recovering from addiction. The simplest summary of this action plan that I have heard was stated quite plainly in a recovery room; “It’s a simple program. You’ve got to change your whole damn life.” As often in such an ambitious program, the mastery is in the detail. We can look at this program of action in three directions: getting help; bringing the inside out⁴¹; and serving.

Getting help

The first thing Jerusalemites have to accept is that they need the direction of Nehemiah and that they have to help each other. No longer can their survival strategy be to hide and weather the next storm individually. Each resident will now have to depend on his/her neighbors for his/her defense.

As we will discuss in Chapter 9, self reliance is usually one of the best deceptions humans, and particularly addicts live with. The first actions of healing and recovery all convey the same simple message. Simply stated, it has all the metaphysical complexity of the cry “Help! I’m drowning.”

For many this starts with joining a group. Addicts are often like Groucho Marx who applied to a country club but, once accepted by the club, rejected its invitation, because he could not stoop to join an establishment so crass as to include people like himself. We usually do not consider that a bunch of drunks, junkies, or “perverts” are going to have much to offer to people as great and unique as we are. However, by going to meetings, we swallow a little of our pride and receive the help we need from other flawed people. Taking part in a group also breaks one of the greatest downfalls of addicts: isolation.

Isolation and loneliness in an addict’s life come from the perfect storm created by a hyper-inflated ego, tremendous pain, excruciating shame, and the compulsion to escape. Under these four factors, there isn’t a lot of room left to belong to a group, or share intimacy with loved ones. Addicts can be in the middle of a crowd, surrounded by a loving family, or even be a “popular” center of attention; but usually none of this takes away the deafening loneliness of a life dominated and undermined by addiction and compulsion.

Maybe this last sentence needs rephrasing: Nothing *but the compulsive use of the addictive substance or behavior* seems to erase the deafening loneliness. Of course since the addiction quickly dominates and undermines life itself, the addiction really does not take away the loneliness. Whatever the addiction provides—and it provides something, or no one would get caught in it—it is essentially an appearance, a deception. It *seems* to fill a hole, but it really digs a grave. There are a lot of more hopeful and fruitful ways of responding to pain and loneliness, which recovery is going to teach us.

The first meetings with a recovery group require “just a little” deflation of the ego. Saying for the first time, “Hi, I’m an alcoholic”, or “I’m a drug addict”, or “I’m a lust addict” is quite a shock to the system, trust me. When Nehemiah tells the Jerusalemites what their situation is fair and square (“*You see the trouble we are in:*

Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.”⁴²), and they get up the next morning and gather to start working, maybe they feel a little shame and embarrassment at the seventeen years when they tried to build their homes in the middle of ruins. So it is with meeting other addicts. In addition to a blow to the old pride, it is one of the first places where pain and shame are laid on the table, and where one acknowledges personal powerlessness and the need for help. The enslaving compulsion takes one of its first hits when we become a part of a larger suffering but hopeful community.

The amazing thing is that all these things may be taking place without anyone realizing it or actively pursuing them. The only unconditional requirement is to show up; to take the action of coming to a meeting and sitting on a chair. Rarely has a miracle come so cheap. Recovering addicts don't necessarily come to meetings because they realize their ego is overweight, that they can't help themselves out of their pain and shame, and that only surrender will free them from compulsion. But those who start showing up and attending meetings for a while, maybe just out of sheer despair, will sooner or later discover this and the freedom that comes from belonging to a fellowship of recovery.

The next action step requires an even more personal call for help. It requires picking up a phone or making a date to meet face-to-face with a fellow recovering addict. Asking for help no longer takes place in the relative anonymity of a meeting, but suddenly requires listening to a voice or looking into another human's eyes as a friend, as a fellow sufferer, but also as one who will have some experience and wisdom relative to our unsolved problem.

In Jerusalem this may have been the moment when a resident of the city had to acknowledge to his neighbor that he really freaks out and loses it when raiders overtake the city; that panic overwhelms him when his meager possessions are threatened, and that he will need direction, coaching, even supervision to hold his position if he is to help restore the city. A proud Jerusalemite, a child of Israel had to

look into his neighbor's face and ask for help and direction. It might not have been the easiest thing. It certainly is not for the addict put in that situation.

Once again, who can predict the wisdom that will come from a barely recovering addict who not so long ago was him/herself down in a spiritual gutter? How can you expect that this person will have a word—and maybe more importantly an ear—which will help you from a deadly isolation? The point is that it all starts with a step of action outside of our own self. Picking up a phone. Knocking on a door. Going to another addict and asking for an opportunity to share one-on-one. Even going to a counselor or therapist requires a similar willingness to humble oneself, make the call and ask for an appointment.

I don't think there is a recipe for what "works" in recovery. Some people go through a lot of therapy; others don't. Some go to meetings every day, twice a day; some only go once or twice a week. Some make a lot of phone calls; others need to schedule many face-to-face visits with their sponsor. It is quite possible that the sons of Hassenaah who restore the Fish Gate have an altogether different approach to building the wall and gate, than Malkijah "son of Recab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem" has for the Dung Gate.⁴³ Nehemiah tells us that some work on the section of the wall facing their house, and others take more ambitious tasks, linking sections together and rebuilding some of the gates. Some work within their district structures, and others are asked to work under the authority of a supervisor who is new to them.

The common point is that, for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and for addicts, actions must be taken: whether meeting with the rest of the tribe, calling for guidance on construction techniques, confessing the sense of powerlessness and helplessness to one's neighbor during battle, standing watch, or picking wood.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem is not run by Nehemiah as a goodwill amateur project. Specific tasks have to be carried out in different corners of the city with the appropriate method. It would not work if Joiada and Meshullam in charge of the Jeshanah Gate⁴⁴ decided that another project was more deserving of their efforts. Also each neighborhood group charged with fighting and building has to have a way to collaborate and work—build or fight as we will see later—in a manner that is

appropriate for the geography, the potential attackers, and the construction task at hand.

The same goes for us in recovery. There isn't one set of tools that we can all use in the same way. It is not either about picking up the tools we just prefer. It is all about taking and using the tools that God has ordained as appropriate for the geography of our personal turmoil, the specific attackers that happen to trigger and assail us, depending on where we are at in our recovery journey. Some can never touch a bottle again; others must avoid certain situations or places; some must swear off movies, television or the Internet; some of us develop specific protocols or plans of action for certain situations, like travel. Most addicts are affected, but affected in different ways by hunger, anger, loneliness and tiredness. We may live with very flexible rules for part of our life; and more rigid rules may be recommended by a sponsor, an experienced friend, or basic common sense. We may discover special precautions we need to take for particular situations that trigger our illness.

Action is key. And appropriate and timely action is even better. One of the ways to be sensitive to God's guidance in deciding what actions of recovery are appropriate for us is to be willing to discuss our steps with our "sponsor." We already discussed the role of such a person as a "transitional Higher Power" in the previous chapter. A sponsor relationship is the continuation of efforts to reach out to friends in recovery; so what is so special with that friend, which warrants this "sponsor" label?

This may be one of the few situations in life where the label is in fact important.

Consider an adult man, confident in his own stature and superiority, deceived enough about how the world works to compulsively abuse drugs, relationships, alcohol, rage, or sex and wreck the life of his wife, children, and so many others around. This man is prone to shake his head or even get enraged at the stupidity of just about everybody else around him. He angrily affirms his unique rights and unsatisfied entitlements. Such a man could maybe accept the help of another human for five minutes; but beyond the immediate problem at hand, he would most certainly very quickly take the reins back in hand to remain master and commander of his own fate. Such a man might not even have much of a problem being "submitted to God" within what he considers his religious duty. In fact he might be so "submitted" and of such service to

poor old God that the hypocrisy and lack of commitment of everyone else around only adds to the flames of his irritation and anger.

Can you now imagine this man admitting that his own thinking, his personal choices, his feelings, his will, and his basic humanity are so corrupt and debased that he needs a full time referent, a brother to call and be accountable to; a friend to receive directions and guidance from on a daily basis? Can you imagine this state of affair being so official that this friend receives a title, a label, which makes him more than a peer; a brother imbued with just an ounce more wisdom, hope, and sobriety than himself? Obviously our man will have to go through drastic changes in order to have a “sponsor,” or he will soon grow tired of this sponsorship idea.

That is the value of the sponsorship relationship: first of all a personal acknowledgement that our best thinking is not and will not be enough, materialized through a flesh and bone relationship of accountability and long-term commitment. The man or woman who can honestly call another “my sponsor” may have started reaching for help in a way that revolutionizes his core identity. This is a concrete step of action which acknowledges personal powerlessness, and calls for help in a humbling yet hopeful approach.

Bringing the inside out

The rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem probably starts with excavating a few ruins, moving old stones out of the way so foundations can be uncovered and restored, and discarding burnt wood so a real gate can be erected. So many of the recovering addict’s steps, from joining a group, talking to fellow recovering addicts, to working regularly with a sponsor are just a way to bring the secret and sickness inside out, in order to begin the healing process. As the addict calls for help in meetings, in phone discussions, having coffee with a sponsor, and by getting on his/her knees, little by little the secret shame, the inside story, the hidden character flaws and insane behaviors just start coming to light so they can finally be discarded.

Only experience will allow uncovering the real issues. The strength of a new door, the flaw underneath a panel of a wall all become revealed at the time of struggle. As the addict engages in actions of recovery, thoughts, feelings, obsessions, fears, past hurts, rituals and automatisms all come to the surface to be recognized and examined.

Sharing with a friend or counselor, writing in a journal, and working the steps through meditation, reflection, discussion, or writing are all ways of bringing to light what had been kept hidden. Each surrender is a moment when we acknowledge the truth about a deep seated twist of our human instincts. Each trigger, threat or slip can lead to a deadly spiral of destruction, but it can also be used to bring light to what is hidden inside us. By bringing it out and taking actions based not on our own wisdom, but on principles of recovery conveyed by a friend, a sponsor, a group of recovering addicts, or the gentle soft voice of God in our heart, we learn a new way; we are taught a new identity.

Of course a relationship with God is a great way to bring things to light and open up to change and healing. Learning to turn to God in simple steps is a central action of recovery. It is just that so much deception has crept into the chaos of life that it is easier to trust our own understanding of God's words to us when it reaches us through a friend. For those discovering a spiritual journey, seeking and talking to God may not be the easiest thing. This is why it is not the grandiosity of one's dedication to God that is essential but the simple actions we take. Actions such as staying in silence; actions such as turning to a forgotten bible or inspirational text with attention and humility; actions such as going to church not to see great things but to acknowledge dependence on God and have an honest look at ourselves.

The key point here is that recovery—the restoration of a life we had all but lost—is achieved through taking whatever active step will lead us to turn to a brother or sister and ultimately to God in truth, bringing our secrets and inner confusion to the outside.

Service

Finally, whether it is participating in the defense of the revived city, the erection of its wall, or joining a recovery fellowship, there is an unspoken call to take further actions of service. It is an obvious paradox that healing from the slavery of addiction, which required always more and more servicing of the ego's black hole comes about by making the ego a servant⁴⁵ of fellow humans. Actions of service can be as simple as helping set up chairs at a meeting, bringing the literature or making coffee. But they can get more difficult especially when they get closer to home.

Inability to serve is usually a good sign that something is amiss in our restoration efforts. Imagine citizens of Jerusalem refusing to bring sand or stones to the right area of construction, or being too self-important to stand watch at night. Nehemiah tells us that one section of the wall “*was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.*”⁴⁶ Pride preventing service and leading to fruitlessness is certainly not a hypothetical risk. What would have happened to the efforts to restore their city if this attitude had spread throughout the community?

The same goes for the addict who may genuinely want healing, but does not feel ready to serve. Innovate, create, lead, invent, recommend, direct, propose, criticize, improve, upgrade, or make drastic changes; those are all easy things for the inflated ego. But acting in the position of a servant of other “undeserving”, “unworthy”, and “selfish” addicts; that’s the revolutionary step. I once painfully watched a friend accept to take a “position of service” in a meeting without ever accepting to *be* a servant. He spent six months announcing grand improvements and redesigning the position almost on a weekly basis. During that same period he was never able, not even once, to come to the meeting five minutes early, and simply set things up as required to serve his function. There was probably something at the root of this reluctance to serve, which also hindered his efforts at recovery during that period.

Let’s imagine a Jerusalemite with the same attitude. He would be rushing about telling Nehemiah and the entire city how high the wall should be, which wood should be used to build the new gates and where they should be, but never taking steps to rally when called, and never taking the simple action of carrying rocks and sand to raise a new panel of the wall when asked.

Acts of service are so essential in these small things, because serving in a fellowship of recovery is training ground for going back home and serving our loved ones. The truth is that, whatever our pattern of behavior was as addicts, we have used and abused our loved ones; we have asked the world to serve us, serve us first, and serve us without restraint. At some point in recovery saying “I am sorry” just isn’t enough. (Actually “I am sorry” can get old after an amazing short period when actions fail to follow.) It is amazing how much recovery can be found in taking the trash out, washing the dishes, waiting patiently past the expected time, picking up a child after

school and driving peacefully without displays of frustration or irritation. Service is basically doing the little things we have always felt were not ours to do. It is probably through service that we learn to love again. It certainly is a good way to burst the pride bubble, and an example of action preceding and forming attitudes and beliefs.

Asking for help, bringing the inside out, and serving are actions that addicts can decide to take. Not using, not acting out, not drinking seem to be decisions outside of our power. Just as the Jerusalemites are powerless to decide to have a built-up, spiritual and peaceful city, but can receive it as a gift from God once they've applied themselves to obedience, love and service; addicts are not in a position to actually "just say no," until it is given to them by God's grace. The Jerusalemites chopped up wood, gathered stones, made scaffoldings—very basic and visible activities. The choice that is ours is to engage in reaching out, trusting, serving, and sometimes at the end of the road, learning to love again. All these actions are, taken individually, quite simple and basic. What is amazing is how drastically they change the person who takes them.

Chapter 6 – A discrete change of attitude

The love that enlarges not its borders, that is not ever spreading and including, and deepening, will contract, shrivel, decay, die.⁴⁷

It may be useful to define what is meant here by “attitude,” and how this is different from a belief although the two are related.

A belief frames what we expect things we cannot see to be. For example, events and systems: we cannot truly see how the world economy works (although some believe they do), but we have beliefs about what its engines, players and rulers are. One can believe in The Market, supply and demand, the ‘invisible hand of the market’ perfectly regulating all the elements of the economy. Marxists believe in (or at least used to) class struggle: the economy is led by Capitalists trying to extract as much as they can from the Proletariat. Others believe in a conspiracy or another—the Trilateral group gathers in secret places to determine how we poor people will be affected. The economy is just an example; I could have chosen what we believe about death. None of us has ever considered and examined death (and lived to tell about it), and so we hold different expectations—beliefs—about this unseen reality: heaven, hell, reincarnation, biological degradation, etc.

Attitudes are not as conceptual as beliefs; they are a stage in-between a belief and an action. If beliefs are about the unseen, attitudes are about how we will interpret and respond to what comes to be seen. Someone with a “victim attitude” will always take offense at the slightest event, which a person with a “live and let live attitude” would not have thought much of. A “superior attitude” interprets everything as a validation or an attack against the greatness of the one who holds it. Some people live in an attitude of fear and discouragement; any news or new event will be received as an increased reason to be anguished and deflated.

Our attitudes are in a hinge position between our beliefs and our actions. Because of our attitude, we will respond to an event by a specific action with specific consequences. And of course some of our beliefs can condition us to have one attitude or another. If we believe God is “out there to get us,” we are likely to live in an attitude of fear or defiance.⁴⁸ If we believe that life is a wonderful experience where

beauty and generosity can always be encountered, we will probably develop attitudes to filter events in a way that validates these views. And already we are seeing that beliefs influence attitudes, but that now attitudes influence beliefs. In a similar process of reversal, actions taken purposefully may help us change our attitudes. One may fight against a proud attitude by taking actions of service, or making courageous moves in order to overcome an attitude—an inclination toward fear.

Once again, the Jerusalemites in their rubble and the addicts in their life-rubble share in another problem, attitudes developed over years that lead to ever more fear, ever more selfishness, and ever more despair.

The change in attitudes of the Israelites is more progressive and discrete than truly radical; and it is also somewhat understated in Nehemiah's narrative. Once again, Nehemiah does not start by telling the Jerusalemites: "Let's fix your attitudes, so we can get to work." It is the other way around: work starts; people get up; and attitudes start to change.

Attitude changes are implied by the story, more than they are described. For example, we read about a lot of people learning to work *beside* a lot of other types of people.⁴⁹ We read about a district chief—Shallum son of Hallohesh—needing to be helped by his daughters.⁵⁰ This would definitely have been newsworthy at the time. Nehemiah also tells us about priests—Levites—not only having to do some of their own work, but also having to do so under a lay person's guidance.⁵¹ This too is a break from tradition. We can imagine how the decision to pull up their sleeves and get to work challenges the attitudes of each of these different people. The mere fact that they are working side by side and under each other's guidance suggests some radical adjustments, which in turns lead them to respond to the world in a new way.

One example is when Sanballat (a neighboring nemesis) ridicules and threatens the Jews in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria and comes out at the Hebrews with fighting words. On that day, instead of the usual response of fear, the Jerusalemites demonstrate a new attitude of faith, dependence and commitment, and this affects their response. Nehemiah sums up the response in a way that reveals two core attitudes; "*We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*"⁵² The first reflex is to turn to God. The second is to take action and organize.

The attitudes that are revealed are dependence on God for the outcome, and commitment to continuing action. Ultimately Nehemiah attributes the progress made on the wall to the fact that “*the people worked with all their heart.*”⁵³ Trust and again commitment are the attitudes of the heart which are implied here.

Of course, anyone who has given a shot at self-reformation knows that old habits die hard. Every day in Jerusalem did not carry the same positive response. At some point, for example, frightened by the threats and most likely worn out by hard work, a large part of the city starts losing hope. The people in Judah exclaim, “*The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.*”⁵⁴ The attitude this outcry reveals (defeatism or discouragement) is most understandable. It is a sense of being overwhelmed by the task and by the challenges ahead. In this case the people, under considerable stress and fatigue, start to believe that they are in charge of the outcome—self-reliance redux—and of course cannot fail to be disheartened.

Once again, the story of this community, through its successes and challenges, resonates all too well with our own. It reminds us how difficult it is to change one’s core attitudes and ingrained instincts. Trying to do so is noble, but actually frequently doomed to failure. We basically lack the power to change our own attitudes by an exercise of self-will. What we can do is practice new actions to the level where they become disciplines. Sooner or later we will discover that our newly acquired disciplines are changing our attitudes. From there, we can welcome these new attitudes and reinforce them by continued action.

I once heard this presented as the difference between “trying” and “training.” *Trying* to run the marathon unprepared would lead any of us to total failure (if not to a heat stroke and heart attack). But getting up in the morning and *training* for it is the way to get a body in a different shape or *attitude*, which will at some point allow us to run the race.

In recovery, each individual has to examine and accept God’s work on a different set of attitudes; usually through flesh and bone encounters and daily events. Let us consider how some key attitudes seem to emerge and combine to produce the fruit of sobriety.

Acceptance

My first sponsor used to repeat “acceptance is the key” every time I shared a new bafflement or struggle. I must say that for a long time it did not make a whole lot of sense to me; but I have come to see that it may be the first and most central attitude that an addict needs to develop.

There is something at the core of the addict’s personality that simply cannot accept things as they are. In his/her defense and all irony set aside, life in this world certainly seems to have some unacceptable terms. The human longings and feelings that are stirred in our hearts are sometimes unbearable. The behaviors and choices of those who surround us can be unbelievably wrong. Pain, unfairness and injustice are often unacceptable, but maybe not as unacceptable as *my* pain, unfairness to *me*, and injustice against *me*. In response to this sad state of things, what are addiction and compulsion if not a way to create an alternate reality, filled with pleasure instead of pain, filled with fantasy instead of an unacceptable world, and filled with escape instead of acceptance?

People who observe the addict’s behavior from the outside can see how this maddening attitude transpires. They may be tempted to shake him/her into change. The problem is that in order to “just say no” to such attitudes, addicts would have to first see them, then actually have the power to reform themselves. But they do not. And they cannot. They have as much ability to carry out such changes as the Jerusalemites have to organize a block party while raiders are storming through the unprotected city.

The hardest thing to accept is the true status of our life, the powerlessness, the unmanageability, the total inability to make it on pride, self-will, intelligence, or guts. The myth of the superman is often a particularly tough one to destroy. This is ironic because it usually is such an unconvincing myth to everyone else around. Yet, we frequently tend to hold on to it.

Frailty, neediness, weakness, basic humanness are just next in line. The way we learn to accept that we are needy is essentially by calling for and receiving help from others so many times that our attitudes change. It is not that we intellectually understand our need for others, and hence decide to call for help. It is that we are so beat up by a

maddening disease that, among all our action steps, we learn to call for help. Since calling for help usually “works,” our attitudes change a day at a time. We are no longer so sure of being “self-reliant” and we start to accept what our life is making so obvious: we need others (God, friends, family) to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The battle for acceptance in our life is not over the day we say “yes, I am an addict.” Through finally connecting with a Higher Power and joining forces with others in need, however, we slowly discover the need to accept some things. Some call it “living life on life’s terms.” At each complex twist in the discovery of our personality we find something new we need to accept. “How can I be fearful when I have taken so many risks in my life? How can I possibly be proud, when I have been so indulgent to less deserving people all my life? How can I possibly harbor resentment, when I have forgiven the awful way they treated me? How can I dread loneliness, when I am such a competent, self-actualized person? How can I be susceptible to such appalling triggers for compulsion, when I am such a nice standup guy?” We may not understand any of this, but little by little we start accepting what is.

Of course, there are many things in the human experience, which should not be accepted with complacency. Injustice, pain, destruction, abuse, terror, oppression, war, and basic meanness should not be considered “business as usual.” (Neither should addiction.) It is right to be upset when we witness them; it is right to want to do something about these things. Many of these things are part of the “things we can change” with a little courage. But the attitude of the addict may not be what is required to actually change the wrong in them.

While addictive personalities may in fact be involved in very worthy struggles, the lack of acceptance will usually lead to a heavy payback. The price is often paid in judgmentalism, anger, resentment, bitterness and more compulsive behavior. It can advance to such a point that every good intention to redress wrong with right is totally drowned by a flood of compulsion and obsession. In recovery and sobriety, one can finally accept that “evil” exists and can affect the life of other human beings. There is a deep emotional acceptance to be found, which is not complacency. It is the acceptance of the reality of the human condition. And that reality transpires both inside and outside of our self. On the outside, we realize that other people are also

human, flawed, weak, and needing the grace of God. On the inside, we realize that *we* are human, flawed, weak, and acutely affected by things we thought we could handle. Sometimes we are affected out of proportion with the wrong we witness.

A little acceptance will help us deal better with both these internal and external realities. Acceptance comes with a lot of added benefits such as patience (or at least more of it), and learning to take it a day at a time (rather than demanding instant solutions). If we so choose, it may actually lead us to become more useful in God's battle to bring some grace and truth to the mad world of humans. But, as in everything in recovery, acceptance is a day-to-day discovery.

Humility

The collateral of acceptance is a first measure of humility. This is a new and liberating discovery coming in small doses for most humans, and particularly for recovering addicts.

It is a paradox of life that there is so little humility to be found at the bottom of the pit. What the drunk who slams her car on a preschooler discovers; what the drug addict who just stole money from his mother faces; what the sex drunk coming home to his spouse after a binge in the red-light district knows so well; and what the compulsive gambler who has to lie once more to her family is confronted by, is not humility. It is humiliation.

Humility and humiliation are two very different things. Humiliation leads to shame, disgust, self-loathing, depression, but also its fair bit of rebellion, anger, resentment at the entire world, desire for revenge, lust for a re-inflated ego, despair and finally the unavoidable return to escape and destruction. Only through a process of bringing light, truth, honesty, and—oh, that awkward term—“repentance,” can humiliation actually appear to lead to humility. In fact, humility does not depend on the level of humiliation; some people go deeper and deeper into destruction, lust, despair and humiliation, yet never seem to gain one bit of humility. In the downward spiral of their journey, they pick up plenty more pride, arrogance, entitlement, and deceptive vanity. Others will have one shocking life-event which reveals their true face and leads them to soul searching and to taking humble steps for their restoration. So, it is not humiliation which builds humility. Quite the contrary. What leads to humility is

acceptance. Each step of acceptance can lead to a measure of humility. Here are a few facts that Jerusalemites and addicts have to accept.

Whatever their responsibility in it, citizens of Jerusalem have to accept that the city is indeed in ruin and unlivable, that no temple can ever stand in its heart when its wall is in tatters. Certainly the Hebrews as a whole have played a part in the fate of their holy city. When Nehemiah comes to the city, some of its current residents might be collaborating with the occupiers, dealing in a black market, and being dishonorable to God and to their fellow residents. Many, however, are probably just as decent as the next guy. They just happen to be born in a disaster area. The same is true for addicts.

We certainly have our weight of responsibility. At the same time it is also true that many addicts are also victims of heredity, abuse, as well as destructive family and social situations. Whichever is the case, humility comes from accepting what is, instead of what ought to or should have been. Both the addict who has been victimized one way or another in early years, and the one who had everything going for him/her and finds his/her soul trapped and sunken by a baffling illness, have cause to raise their fist in anger and frustration. The first because of the unfairness of the abuse and victimization of an innocent child. The second because there is no rhyme or reason to something which is destroying a life promised to greatness. The point of this is not to dismiss or negate the grave crimes which are caused by, yes society as a whole, and—even more painful—loved ones, even parents against children, and the consequences these will bear. These are serious, not trivial matters and must be addressed as such.⁵⁵ Whatever the path and the responsibility of “others” in their ordeal, however, addicts must come to terms with the situation that is. This comes through acceptance, in many repeated steps. And it leads to greater humility.

Another thing Jerusalemites have to accept is the authority of Nehemiah in guiding the restoration of their city. After all why should an exiled Hebrew who served as a cup-bearer in the court of a foreign king be put in charge? And if a local leader is not chosen, why not follow the guidance of Ezra for example, who at least is a prophet? And how can Nehemiah claim to be administrative authority, engineering expert and battle leader all in one? No matter how legitimate these questions may be, Jerusalemites have no hope of getting anywhere in the restoration of their city until they simply accept this higher authority over their collective life.

Of course the parallel with the addict's recovery is obvious and we discussed it at length in Chapter 4. The logic of trusting another addict to hold oneself accountable and to provide wisdom is baffling on face value. That a group of compulsive people who report consistently their inability at managing their own life will be a voice from God in one's life is simply a hard concept to defend rationally. Yet, most successfully recovering addicts seem to come to this point of acceptance. The link between this acceptance and humility is striking in some common twelve-step sayings: "When I am in my own head, I am behind enemy lines;" and "my best thinking got me here."

Trust, dependence, and sobriety

Another central attitude change is to become a person who trusts and depends on God in His many manifestations. This of course is the corollary of much of what we considered in previous chapters. It is also not specific to addicts, and many spiritual testimonies and theological treatises address the issue much better than I will here. But the curse or blessing in addiction is that it is a vital, non-negotiable discovery when steps of recovery are taken day by day. "Find God or die!" says the well-known AA ultimatum. The point is not so much that we *choose* to trust and depend, but that actions (reaching out, calling for help, finding recovery friends or a sponsor, and placing our trust in God through practical steps) are growing in us a new attitude of trust and dependence.

Sobriety may not so much be the non-action of avoiding acting out the compulsion, or not consuming the lethal drug—an outcome which many in the end consider a gift to the addict rather than a choice he or she makes—but rather an overall attitude that grows into the person who follows a new path. Not acting out can sometimes be achieved by sheer rage, "white knuckling", and drastic self-reformation efforts. Though this is unlikely to lead to a long-term solution it may on occasion prevent a binge, save a day, or avoid an impending disaster. But there is also such a thing as a "dry drunk," who has not touched the bottle for a while but is so wired, angry, self-centered, and on edge that all but the most dedicated friends avoid him or her as much as possible. Is such a person sober? In a "technical" definition of sobriety the answer would be yes. But in a larger sense "angry, self-centered and on edge" is hardly a description of what sobriety is. The avoidance of compulsive behavior is not sobriety. Certainly not all of sobriety. Instead a more genuine freedom from the compulsive

behavior is the wonderful liberation that is given each day from actions of healing, which develop in us an attitude of acceptance, humility, trust, and healthy dependence⁵⁶. This personal character-altering transformation of the self might be the better definition of what true recovery really is.

Going back to our allegory, waking up in a livable, inhabitable city is the visible fruit of a restored community. Action steps were taken and collective attitudes grew until the time citizens of the city one day wake up, meet in the city's agora and realize they can live and not just survive; they can continue to build and not merely hide from intruders; they can raise their children in devotion to their values, not simply hoping to find food for the next season; and they can again be a neighbor to their fellows instead of being suspicious of each other and competitors for scarce resources. They can even open their doors and be hospitable. They are a city. Not being a victim of fate and disasters, man or nature-made, is not a choice, but the consequence of new attitude, which a restored community can choose.

I must acknowledge that I am still learning and discovering what sobriety really is, how and what attitudes can grow in us as we practice recovery. Be that as it may, those who are familiar with the twelve steps know that the journey does not stop at the first or even the three first steps (admitting powerlessness, coming to believe that something greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity, and turning our will and life over to God.) The journey needs to continue, or we will find ourselves heading back a painful road. New actions lead to new attitudes. Pretty soon new attitudes will grow new beliefs in us.

Chapter 7 – Coming to believe—new expectations

*The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums.*⁵⁷

*There can be no happiness if the things we believe in are different from the things we do.*⁵⁸

The tenets of faith of the Jewish community are reaffirmed ceremoniously in the second half of Nehemiah's narrative. This is the only indication we really have of when the beliefs of the Jerusalemites are being expressed again, and perhaps restored. What their story displays more readily are examples of progressively changing expectations.

– Eliashib is the High Priest in Jerusalem, and he leads his colleagues into the reconstruction—properly followed by a dedication—of the Sheep Gate.⁵⁹ He has developed the expectation, or belief, that God will reward not just religious prescriptions and proclamations, but disciplined work under the command of His messenger.

– Another example; when “*Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod*” present a gathering threat and disruption of the work, in spite of prayer and vigils, there is a natural return of the fears which had plagued the residents of the city. They report that “*the strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.*”⁶⁰ Nehemiah responds by organizing the work and defense of the city as parallel tasks. Then he exhorts the people through words, which express implicit beliefs; “*Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.*”⁶¹ The first belief is also a constant in the book: God is in charge. But it gets more practical than that. The assumption behind Nehemiah's exhortation is that each can do for his/her neighbors what he/she cannot do for him/herself.

– The behavior of the people also suggests evolving expectations about the expected outcome of their efforts.

“From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked.”⁶²

Is this indicative of a group of people starting to think of themselves as a community? It seems to be. It is also the sign of a group believing they have a common good to defend and that, even if God is in charge of the outcome, their work and combat can be effective to advance and preserve that common good. The belief in a dichotomous burden of responsibility—to the people the responsibility for following an organized process, and to God the charge of preserving the outcome—is summarized by Nehemiah’s words to the leaders of the community: *“Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”⁶³*

– Finally, the entire ninth chapter of Nehemiah is devoted to retelling the story of the Jewish people, how and why they ended up where they are. What transpires is the affirmation of a renewed belief about the meaning of their history. Although there is still an acknowledgement of pain, suffering and enduring slavery, there is an affirmation of the people’s responsibility in their own story. Oppression is still called by its name, but the belief that transpires is no longer about victimhood but about human responsibility, divine grace, and the hope that resides in humans working together in a new story, a common “narrative” under the guidance of God.

Of course, we need to point out a difference between a confession and a belief. The Jewish people are frequently caught in situations where they confess one thing (Yahweh being the one and only true God), and reveal by their actions a different set of beliefs (for example that it might be good as an ‘insurance policy’ to also sacrifice to a few idols in the land). We often confess things we are trying to believe. What we really believe comes out when we don’t have time to think before we speak or act. For this reason, it is hard to define people by what they believe. They may all confess one thing, yet believe many different other things.

For the Jerusalemites we observe both efforts to profess and confess the essential of Judaic faith, and some indications that true beliefs are indeed changing.

Coming to believe

Going back to our own personal City, we observe similar changes through recovery.

There are many things we believe in. Sometimes an addict will really believe that there is nothing wrong with seeking self-satisfaction at all cost, that pleasure and escape are the normal way of life, and that the world does indeed revolve around his/her own story. More often, people hold a range of beliefs making room for scattered spiritual tenets of faith, some of them contradictory, and at least a few basic beliefs about human decency and community. At least those are the beliefs that would be elicited from the simple question, “what do you believe?”

Of course we assume that our beliefs determine our actions; although more often than not they merely justify them. How we do that is widely illustrated through the flow and writings of human history. Demosthenes wrote “*Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true.*”⁶⁴ We believe what we want to believe, and we maintain the beliefs which comfort us in our behaviors. This is called *ex post-facto* rationalization. “*Most of our so-called reasoning consists in finding arguments for going on believing as we already do.*”⁶⁵

Recovery challenges all this. In a certain way, all of recovery is summarized in this simple phrase “coming to believe.” “Coming” is taking action, physically, morally and spiritually. We move from one spiritual place to the next, leaving our patch of self-pity to join a meeting with a friend or a group of friends. Reaching new beliefs is what new actions and rediscovered human attitudes are leading us to. This process is sometimes almost surreptitious.

*By taking, we had separated ourselves from others, ourselves, and God. By giving, we found true union with others and God, and, lo and behold, love itself. But it slipped in unrecognized through the back door. “Surprised by joy.”*⁶⁶

As we grow in recovery we start realizing that actions reveal beliefs a lot better than words do. Few people would ever answer “yes” to the question, “Do you believe that a drink, a drug or a look can take away your problems?” But faced with the incredible discomfort and pain of life, addicts regardless of creed and confession demonstrate a

robust belief that a drink, drug or look will not only take away the pain, but that it is the necessary and only way to remedy it. Recovery is a process which changes this.

We progressively discover new beliefs about three things: ourselves, others, and life. Along the way we may continue to grow into either new or renewed beliefs about God and how He relates to those same three.

What we believe about our self

When we start confronting our illness and the shambles we have made of life, we are forced to accept new beliefs about who we are. In a way wrong beliefs (about what was necessary in life, what we *had to* do, etc.) were always at the core of our fear, pride, and all the other defects which locked us in destructive behaviors. The first essential change is admitting our condition, but this really only touches the surface. For those in 12-step programs, steps four and five go deeper. They require writing a thorough moral inventory, which is then brought to light with a trusted friend, who helps us internalize truer beliefs about ourselves.

We will examine in Chapter 9 some of the moral issues we need to confront. What needs to be emphasized here is how essential it is to start rejecting the lies we held on to about ourselves (raising us up, putting us down, or tying us in a knot), to start believing in our own value and our own weaknesses, in our own suffering and our own crimes, in our own self-loathing and our ego inflation, in our own despair and in the hope God has for us.

Changing what we believe about ourselves is essentially changing what we expect from ourselves.

If we expect that some ridiculous trigger can corner us into compulsive acting out without much say on our part, we are probably coming to believe in the truth about our powerlessness. If we expect that we can handle life and will do all right, our belief is still that we have the power and capacity to manage our illness, regardless of what we claim. If we are addicts, however, nothing could be further from the truth.

If we think ourselves likely to overreact to a simple misunderstanding with a loved one, we are probably starting to believe that we are missing a few emotional pieces of our inner fabric. If, on the other hand, our assumption is that the misunderstanding

stems from our spouse's (replace with children, parents, boss, or friends as needed) inability to truly understand (replace with love, value, or appreciate as needed) us, then we probably still hold to the belief that we are at the center of our self-serving life-drama.

Our actions and choices will reveal from day-to-day how much of the old and the new beliefs we still combine at our core. And every time we catch ourselves acting or reacting to a wrong belief, we need to reach out, talk with a friend and take actions to disprove the lie. Through practice we learn to respond to the lies with the help of others, and we start to ingrain new and healthier beliefs into ourselves.

We started with the new expectations and beliefs that come about among the Jerusalemites. But the story also tells us of old beliefs dying hard. There is an apparent moment of victory and achievement of a promise: *“When all [Israel’s] enemies heard about [the completion of the wall], all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.”* At that moment however, the Israelites themselves continue to believe and place reliance in Tobiah⁶⁷, a known enemy who claims to provide security to the city (Jews were “under oath” to him—a concept maybe not that removed from getting “protection” from the mafia.) So while new beliefs emerge, the old ones—in this case that the community is indebted to the local bully—do not disappear overnight. It will take awhile for the city to actually deal with this character under the guidance of Nehemiah. As addicts we may also need time to truly internalize a new understanding of what we really depend upon for living.

What we believe about others

Another series of steps, which can be taken formally through a program (steps six to nine in 12-step recovery) or invisibly through the lessons of life, leads us to consider how we have treated others and what we believe about them. Once again, it is not what we say which defines our beliefs, but rather how we act.

What does our treatment of our spouse show about what we believe? How about our children? The next-door neighbor? Our colleagues, our boss? Confronting our

behaviors and attitudes reveals a range of core beliefs we might appropriately feel rather ashamed of. But what we should be more ashamed of is never confronting this.

As we discover we are (a) flawed and (b) not the center of the universe, we start seeing what we have done or allowed to happen to those around us. In 12-step jargon this is followed by “making amends.” But making amends might not be so much the response for correcting some of the wrongs we have done; as the genesis of new beliefs we grow into about the rest of humanity.

While there is of course room for apologies and restitution in the process of making amends, I suspect that more often than not amends should be ongoing daily actions such as being present, shutting up and listening, being courteous and attentive, taking the trash out, fixing something if we know how to, and quite generally shifting our priorities from being self-centered pity-full attention-grabbers to being a neighbor, friend, co-worker, child, parent and spouse. Once proper actions have developed in us the attitudes of a friend, colleague or spouse, our beliefs about who we are friends with, working with or married to are going to change as well.

As always new beliefs do not come overnight. We “blow it” and hurt our loved ones; we talk with a friend, share at a meeting, and see a little better why and how we act the way we do; we apologize. More importantly, the next time a similar situation occurs we act on the new belief about our self-righteousness and about the spouse or child we are confronted with; maybe we break off an argument long enough to make a call to a friend, or take a walk to calm down and ask God for help, but we change the way we handle the situation, acting on and building up a new set of beliefs.

What we believe about life

Finally, by growing in the discovery of a Higher Power, truer beliefs about ourselves and others, we slowly start to change our outlook on life as a whole.

We are getting freed from the bondage of self; we start to believe in being part of something greater. We start to believe in service as something of value. We start believing in silly things like hope, forgiveness, second chances, and compassion.

It is impossible to describe what “we come to believe about life,” as if it were one thing for all of us. We will find common (general) things that we start believing in, but we will all also have different personal specific beliefs to internalize.

What is essential to understand is that beliefs are not a list of statements about what we claim to have faith in. Rather, they are core understandings and expectations about what works, and will guide our actions in specific situations. These beliefs are about the role that God and our self actually play together in the drama of life. Not just *our* life. The life which far surpasses us, and takes place all around us. The life in which we are invited to play our part, alongside many strangers and a few loved ones.

I simply cannot shrink down on paper all the amazing (and painful) changes we can go through. The point is that recovery is not a process which only stops us from acting out or using a drug of choice; it is a mechanism by which our entire life changes. And through this change we come to believe a whole new set of things about who we are, how we should treat and care for others, and how God can work with us. Coming to believe is developing new practical expectations about the way our world works. It is ingrained into us through new actions and disciplines taken on a day to day basis.

Chapter 8 – Building and fighting

*If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*⁶⁸

*But the light fades, the will weakens, the humdrum returns. Can we stay this fading? No, nor should we try, for we must learn the disciplines of His will, and pass beyond the first lesson of His Grace.*⁶⁹

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every human endeavor was a matter of developing awareness and understanding about where the faults in our life plans lie, followed by a straightforward path of redemption? If the figures of the Old Testament, for example Abraham, Moses and Joshua, are any indication, it does not seem to be God's way of fixing us, frail and broken humans that we are. Nehemiah and the citizens of Jerusalem have more on their plate than simply designing a construction project and seamlessly implementing it. The obstacles and hurdles are many.

From the onset, a diverse group of neighboring enemies led by “*Sanballat the Horonite*”⁷⁰ build a full-court press against the efforts of the Hebrews, suggesting that Nehemiah is trying to disrupt the natural order of things. “*Are you rebelling against the king?*” they ask. The implication of that question is obvious: what the Jews are attempting is unheard of; it is against the natural order of things, and simply cannot stand. Nobody rebels against the king of Babylon! (Subtext: what's wrong with the way you have been leading your life so far? Do you want to lose what you have? Everyone else is happy with the way things are; what fantasy are you pursuing?)

We have already seen how this verbal opposition organizes itself into an aggressive stance and plan of battle by the coalesced enemies.⁷¹ The Jerusalemites will have to develop progressively more involved defense and response strategies. Initially it is through the transmission of warnings by the Jews living outside of city limits,⁷² then by posting day and night guards,⁷³ arming the guards, organizing families and groups to watch over exposed parts of the city,⁷⁴ and finally totally overhauling the way the city community lives, works, builds, fights and structures itself.⁷⁵

“From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.”⁷⁶

This will not stop the opposition, which comes out again and again even when much reconstruction has already taken place.⁷⁷ Throughout all this, however, the Israelites build in the middle of fighting, and fight in the middle of building.

Building and fighting in recovery

As the wall of sanity and sobriety builds up around us, there are less battles and hence more resources in us available for labor and construction. This means that the more sobriety we have, the more recovery we can build. When our mind is not incessantly flooded with lust, alcohol, adrenalin, drugs, rage, or any other self-defeating stimulation, we are able to move more easily through the day. We are freed to consider our neighbor, our spouse, our family and their needs. We have a little more energy to turn to a friend or counselor and examine the true nature of our character. We are able to hear the still small voice of God calling us to grow, to let go of the things of the child, to let go of these defects and to act based on His justice, mercy and grace. Many of these steps might be painful, just like hoisting heavy stones to rebuild a wall, but as we take them, each leads us to a stronger and deeper freedom from our flaws and immaturity.

As we grow and build experience, it becomes easier to spot where the attacks are coming from, and to do what needs to be done—call for help, resist, battle, pray, surrender—to make it through the difficult moment. We get better at seeing where the wall is wobbly or fragile; we can listen to a friend, a sponsor, a loved one, a total stranger, and accept the need to strengthen a foundation we thought was firmly established, even if it means putting into question a part of our life where we are “no worse than the next guy.” If we work through a twelve-step program, this is taking any of the steps four to ten as called for in the day.

If we are wise we will have a program that relies not on us but on direction from God, who has the “big picture,” just like Nehemiah relied on God, and the Jerusalemites in turn started by relying on Nehemiah. We start to share the burden with friends who share the same challenges. Although we might not see it, as we take on each battle, we actually strengthen one section of the wall. And little by little we discover that we are collectively spending more time building than fighting.

But we need watchmen, a sensitivity to the old flaws, a readiness to respond to the first hint of a challenge on our sobriety. Sober alcoholics may for a time, or forever, be unable to even get close to, or visit a bar. The gambler should probably be wary of the thought that the school raffle is no harm at all. And the visual-addict, whose escape mechanism has been endless hours spent watching videos or surfing the net, might not need to check out the new dress of a movie star for the Oscars, even if everyone at the office is talking about it.

While for most people these things may be harmless, inconsequential, or simply silly, for the addict trying to rebuild a wall torn down, it is the equivalent of letting in a few horsemen from the invading party, and letting them torch down the scaffoldings which support a still solidifying wall.

Not only does a first drink of alcohol or lust call for another and another drink, but with the scaffoldings falling, the old dissatisfaction, loneliness, emptiness, bitterness and rage all come back with a vengeance. One indulged look of lust—”looking for love in all the wrong places” says the very true cliché—and all of a sudden the love of spouse and children seem to have vanished. A whole week of work is needed to rebuild a scaffolding or replace some of the stones that had not been cemented yet. Every time we let our addiction take over, we lose the ability to see what God is trying to build in our life. Having let one attack open a breach in the wall, we must now pull resources from reconstruction efforts to fend off the new invasion from our enemies. We may for a while ignore the breach and pretend that we are still building, but the enemies will amass their troops, gather around the breach, infiltrate our inner-city and take down a whole wing of the wall, until our construction has been brought to the ground. If we let a little rage, a little drinking, a little escape come through, we find ourselves getting angry at people we love and who have caused us no wrong. Even if they did wrong us, our reaction will be out of proportion. We once again

become unable to accept imperfection in others, just as our own imperfections are expressed more and more loudly; and once more, we feel slighted by a world which does not understand us and which conspires against our well-being.

Of course, it is not always an all-or-nothing process. But we must be vigilant and we cannot take lightly protecting our sobriety.

For the longest time we don't know if we're building or if we're fighting. It seems we are always fighting, struggling with surrender, facing another trigger, and dealing with another challenge to our sobriety. We feel we are just treading water. So, neither our story nor Nehemiah's follows the simple path of awareness-decision-battle-reconstruction-victory. It is made of steps forwards, some more hesitant and shaky than others, some steps back, which teach us how to work together better, call on each other, and take on the task at hand—fighting or building or watching—sometimes seemingly against the whole world, and other times simply in spite of our own self.

Recovering in spite of “the world out there”

When we start recovering and rebuilding, we would like to think that our inner struggle is enough, that the world will understand that our hands are full, that it is painful and difficult to reinvent ourselves—be it under the guidance of God and with the help of friends. Consequently the world should give us a break from having to fight outside enemies in addition to the inner ones. Well, this is a nice thought. But it simply is not the way the world works. There is a reason the Jerusalemite's neighbors wanted the walls down. They loved to trade with the Jews and have access to their labor. But they certainly did not expect them to build a city and have a say in the region's destiny.

We face the same once we enter recovery. Neighbors—both regular and circumstantial neighbors—can quickly become “enemies” of our recovery, often unwittingly. There are many societal systems and nearby people who have a vested or latent interest in tripping our recovery when we don't spoil it ourselves.

There are in every city bars that will serve you alcohol for free if you “cash in” your A.A. chip. The old drug dealer's pitch is “the first one's free.” And there is an entire multi-billion dollar industry based on selling pictures of women (and men)—here too,

the first suggestion and the first thousand pictures are free. This industry feeds on the lust of men particularly and has no interest in seeing them live sober.

Then there are sometimes well-meaning friends, who cannot accept our choice of a different way of life. They may feel their own lifestyle is questioned or threatened by our recovery choices, and they find it unbearable. They may express the best intentions in the world and mean well, but for some reason the “good” they wish on us is not reconcilable with the saner good we are discovering is meant for us.

One of the sad realities is that even loved ones, who have been on the receiving end of our destructive chaos, may have only endured it by developing protection mechanisms, even letting their own character and behaviors be twisted in a way which ensures survival. Professionals talk about systemic family dysfunctions. No matter what the lingo is, it is easy to understand that behaviors and identities have to be bent in order to make it through a life with addiction.

When we addicts start being transformed through recovery, our spouses and children may not get the memo immediately. Additionally, we may be focusing a lot of energy on staying sober—the fighting—and not have realized yet how much of the rebuilding involves our inner family circle. When we start learning to change our behaviors, this may not be recognized for what it is, may not be accepted, and may actually disrupt the precarious “balance” that had been created. There will assuredly be painful times in the transition. At worse there might be actual resistance and fights, where we feel misunderstood. It seems so unfair that recovery brings (or may appear to bring) more resistance than what we faced when we indulged the compulsion. But that is part of tearing down to rebuild.

This is probably one area where powerlessness takes its full meaning, and the help of sponsor, friends, counselor, or therapist is most welcome. Some relatives of recovering addicts will find that they need a recovery program of their own.⁷⁸

Whether they do or not, the addict in the relationship can learn that not all fights are worth fighting, and that not all arguments are worth winning. In fact, upon cool-headed consideration many arguments are only illusions of arguments. With experience, we will discover that a lot of discord, tensions, and memorable fights stem out of nothing, except personal discomfort, fear, pride, and self-deception. Something

bothers us internally—a fear, an insecurity, a disappointment—but we do not see it, and we think the person who faces us—perhaps a spouse—or something he/she said is the cause of our turmoil. When we learn to stop the battle early enough, and call on a friend for advice, it becomes possible to discover the inner distress at the root of our anger or resentment. Of course in relationships, the problem is always squared. The spouse of an addict may go through very similar emotional inner-deceptions, and be equally blind to the true cause of overwhelming feelings and tensions. If one or the other learns to break the argument and to make room for a moment of peace in order to seek advice and discover the true roots of the tension, both may find that there never was a genuine argument to start with, and at the least that the response to a disagreement was vastly out of proportion with its object.

Addicts have to learn and accept that such is the nature of human relationships, particularly intimate relationships. If we do not understand this and recognize our powerlessness over both our feelings and the emotions of our loved ones, we will fail to protect key sections of our City wall, and fall prey to recurring and destructive emotional assaults (as much as we will inflict those assaults upon others).

Recovering in spite of our own failures and shortcomings

Regardless of the difficulties encountered in our relationships, we are however often “our own worst enemy.” We simply do not know how many falls we need to accept what is. It can be discouraging at times to build a whole panel of the wall and discover that a door has been ransacked; to walk and progress for a month, only to fall prey to a trigger and slip; to work so hard at mending our ways, only to face a bitter dispute, or the resentment of a loved one, even if it is explained by our past actions.

The hurts coming from outside can feel bitter and unfair, but those we inflict ourselves are the cruelest. While some addicts seem to “get it” when they cross the door to their first meeting, others appear to have to go through fall after fall for a while before reaching a safe harbor. An added insult is the power of places, memories, and situations we have little control over.

Long before understanding addiction was also my issue; I became friend with a lovely young woman who had long “cleaned up” from a heroin addiction. We met in a church youth group; she was lively, fun-loving, held a steady job; she later married a

common friend of ours and started a family. After some time she shared with me her past addiction history, which nothing would have led me to imagine. All in all, she gave the sense of having long overcome something which had nearly destroyed her life. And she really had.

After discussing it with her inner-circle, she decided to pay a visit to friends from her “old life,” see how they were doing, and maybe share the changes that had taken place in her life. It had been a long time since she had been with these people, but she still cared about them a great deal. Unsurprisingly she found out that most of them were still wrapped up in drug use and the life that goes with it.

I remember vividly her final comment about that bittersweet day. “By the end of the day” she said, “I realized I had stayed as long as I could and that the appeal of those days was starting to become all too real and powerful again.” This renewed appeal came in spite of observing the damage of a life of dependence to drugs and the obvious toll it took on her friends. The place, the memories, and the situation obviously had not totally lost their power on her.

Addicts recovering from substance abuse learn to avoid situations that will trigger the old cravings, even if they can grow with time more comfortable with places they have to totally avoid at first. Lust addiction presents the added particularity that the substance itself is not contained in a bottle, a powder, or any physical place. Even after some time in recovery, the toxic substance is still not further from reach than a thought left to linger. It is quite disconcerting for addicts who have built some sobriety and invested most of their daily energy in recovery to face a situation which awakens the old cravings. Fatigue, jet lag, isolation, sickness, stress, conflict, turmoil, unfamiliar settings can combine to create a perfect emotional storm, where triggers we thought had long been conquered, come back with a vengeance. Perhaps more than in other programs, recovery seems to sometimes require many falls and failures on the road to success. That is unfortunate, but not infrequent.

What should we then do after a slip or a relapse? Each one is an open door to discouragement, hopelessness, and—as already discussed—a lot of destruction. If all our efforts have led not to victory but to another defeat and another blow to our sense of self-respect, why go again through the pains of healing, surrender and growth?

Isn't it simpler to surrender, not to God but to the illness and its lure of satisfaction? After all, one of the reasons we fall again, when we have been stressed, disoriented, anguished, or frightened, is that addiction "works." It delivers what it promises, right here and right then. Guaranteed results. The pain, shame and self-loathing that comes with it? Well, for a minute or a few hours, we are not forced to pay that toll. And it invites us to escape all this unpleasantness by simply indulging again, and again, and again. The downward spiral quickly starts again. So what should the addict do, when he/she finds him/herself again in that trap?

The example of Nehemiah encourages us to simply keep building and fighting in the day at hand. Inventory the damages to the structures. Assess the status of the reconstruction, estimate the enemies' forces amassed in front of a gate. Take the measures we have been taught. Above all, do not trust our feelings! A breach in the wall or a slip in sobriety can only awaken fear, deception, maddening loneliness, deceptive cravings, anger, shame and despair. Trusting or following those feelings can only lead to more and more desolation in the addict's life, much like they would have for the residents of Jerusalem. I have often thought very true the saying of a friend in recovery, "your feelings may be real, but they are not the truth."

Recovery certainly flourishes in continuous sobriety. But when it must pierce through less favorable circumstances, it is still recovery. Truth, action, and trust (a.k.a. "reliance, not defiance") are the key ingredients which ensure that the aftermath of a fall is still recovery. Despair is the main alternative, the lethal alternative. The enemy is at the gates; there isn't really time for crying and lamenting. Today should be about rebuilding a gate, or at least gathering stones for the panel of the wall which fell yesterday.

True recovery one day at a time

Dealing with opposition, Nehemiah's story expressly avoids two scenarios of false recovery, which we so easily repeat:

- First, he does not simply figure out the city needs rebuilding, gather the team with the right stuff, and get it done in one fell swoop. That's the Hollywood story. In reality, Nehemiah faces setbacks, failures, and possibly quite a bit of fear and doubt, which transpire in his prayers.

- Secondly, he does not start working with the conviction of God’s blessing, to later face repeated and difficult challenges, just to get discouraged, disheartened, betrayed and finally to give up. This is too often the human story of people who get seduced by religious dreams of achievements. “God had told me.” “God will do such and such.” “God has shown me, and you obviously don’t understand my path.” Such peoples’ stubbornness continuously leads them to more pain as reality refuses to conform, until they hit a wall and their refrain starts to change. “God has failed me.” “God is not love.” “If God were just, He would have listened to me...” “The church / the group did not understand me, so I am out of here.”

On the contrary, Nehemiah gives us another example. He faced the tough times, over and again, and persevered, doing the next right thing.

This is the path of all who want to walk the road of recovery. When we think we have learned a lesson—and we certainly learn those lessons as we go—we often discover yet another lesson that has to be learned. And we too often do so by failing. O, if there was only one lesson to learn! But addiction has destroyed so many fibers and nodes of our soul, there are many parallel paths of recovery we need to follow. While we work on one, our emotions may get in tumult and challenge us in another way. We may be learning to handle hunger, tiredness, anger, and isolation to be suddenly surprised by an old emotional scar that had been kept hidden through years of escapism. We may be dealing with a spiritual question, and forget how vulnerable we can be to the aggressivity of an unbalanced neighbor. As Nehemiah, we have to deal with building and fighting. And at the end of some days, we may wonder whether the project is making any headway. But there is no other choice. We must see each day what the next task is, dismiss the failure of the day before, learn a lesson if there is one to be learned, and toil ahead.

So we failed again. The question is what can we learn from it?

- In the face of recurring failings, complacency seems the dreaded enemy. *Fear of complacency*, however, might be just as common in the perfectionist, compulsive, ego-driven personality of the addict, than complacency itself. And it is equally dangerous. Fear of complacency will lead us to hyper-activity instead of right actions.

It will lead to “beating ourselves up”—a useless and still ego-centered step—instead of rightfully returning to Someone Else. Addicts in recovery should sometimes worry themselves less about this fear, but rather test whether their response to a fall meets three simple criteria: truthfulness, taking simple actions, and reliance on God. If the response lacks any of the three, then there is cause for concern. Otherwise, the rise of the ego manifested through an inappropriate fear of complacency is just another enemy to watch for.

– This being said, one of the first lessons that bears repeating is that a key ingredient to true recovery, is to actually have a plan. We don’t get the sense through the story of Jerusalem that people were just let loose to do as they felt, with wishes for good luck, Nehemiah and Ezra cheering in the background, “Remember, you’re not bad chosen people. Just good chosen people who let idolatry tear down your city! Just follow your heart. Go Hebrews!” Both the narrative of the organization of the work we read about at the beginning of this chapter, and the way the Jews retell their story at the dedication of the wall⁷⁹ give us a feel very different from the “I’m OK, you’re OK” philosophy of the age.⁸⁰ More of an “I’m *not* OK, but it’s fixable by God’s grace and a lot of work”-approach.

We may have already known that we need a power outside of and greater than ourself, but we are also the ones who must stand by the breached wall day by day, call for help and sound the alarm when the enemy is at the door. We are the ones who must get up each morning and decide to be willing, choose to stand by and build with the other citizens, call on their help, use their skills, and depend on God over and over again, when nothing makes sense. We don’t know the next phase of the building plan, we will just know what place we need to hold for today. We will hear the call to fight if we listen. We will respond to the need to build if we pay attention. And we will know when to rest and pray, if we stay in the moment.

Actually, part of the benefit of working with a sponsor in recovery, is making sure someone holds us accountable to our plan of recovery. I personally do not think there is one plan for everyone; but there certainly is a plan for each of us.

What’s our plan for the next situation of isolation? What about when we feel stressed, or tired? What about when we simply have a normal casual day? When we go to a

family meeting, lose our job or get a promotion? Let us be practical: what's the plan when we are alone in a city; what are places to go, and situations to avoid? What about having a conflict with our spouse? Will we let the old anger, shouting, slamming of the door, and resentments take over, or will we plan to choose healthier behaviors instead of our instincts? Many addicts work with their sponsor to develop rules and plans for dealing with the Internet for example. These rules may be sealed in stone and long-term, or designed for a particular time and situation. One thing is constant: an addict cannot rely on instinct and feelings. Those are two sure recipes for lack of progress and possibly disaster. Building the wall and defending our City Inside require a plan for today.

– Healing comes both from following a well ordained plan to avoid a slip, as from our response to the unavoidable challenges that will come our way. Nehemiah does not organize the people with the assumption that everything will go without surprise or temporary setback. He has a response for continuing the reconstruction, even when a weakness in the defense of the city is exposed. The same applies to us.

It does not mean that we *have to* slip and take a step back in our sobriety. In fact, each time we do, a part of the wall goes down again, and we are left open to further intrusions from our enemies. Who knows which attack will be fatal? So we do not take lightly our daily task of sobriety. But if we do fall, we simply must learn from it. We must burn into ourselves new reflexes, new responses to life's challenges, hopefully not alone, and by all means not alone within our head. If an attack occurs, we must call for help and raise the wall. If it recurs then we must fortify further. By being guided through these new responses we teach ourselves behaviors, attitudes and a spiritual way of life that will vanquish our inner enemies.

We don't know how long we will build. Probably forever. And we cannot do more than what is at hand in the day. But that is enough. Today we build. Today we fight. Today we pray. Today we rest. Today we share and open up. Today we talk to a friend. Today we account for a wound we inflicted in our past. Today we just do all we can to stay sober one more day; we call a friend and do "what doesn't come naturally." And most of the time we see progress. Even when the day has been fraught

with challenges, perils, and even the wounds of failure, we know that our response—physical, emotional, and spiritual—is letting God make it a day of progress regardless of what we see or feel. Regardless of what we see or feel.

Chapter 9 – The enemy within—changing one day at a time

*Himself is his dungeon.*⁸¹

While we build and battle against enemies from the outside including compulsion, we also discover forces which have served our enemy from within ourselves. They are sometimes the most formidable. The inner conflicts of the Israelites (about who does what, who supervises who, whether it is wise at all to disturb the status quo, whether the city can be rebuilt, what to do with old alliances, not to mention what God's will is and who is speaking for Him), get as much coverage in the book of Nehemiah as the report of opposition, threats and plots from external enemies.⁸²

Our construction project, just like Jerusalem's, might go through many failures and defeats before success is visible. Not only will external factors encourage slips in our sobriety, but so will inner conflicts, emotional bumps on the road and personal traumas, small and large. In fact, each of us will suffer from idiosyncratic turmoil and trigger points. Some however appear to be more frequently shared among us than others.

Balancing the spiritual, moral and practical

One of the reasons Nehemiah is such an interesting reflection of our human struggle in recovery is that it is both the story of a spiritual / moral journey, as well as a tale of physical struggle, engineering, and organization. Some religiously-oriented recovery literature, though well-meaning, treats all questions concerning recovery as exclusively moral questions and fails to see the point that the struggle has many facets. Not every battle in the life of an addict is a moral battle. We need the kind of perspective and balance for our recovery, which Nehemiah brought to his own task.

Of course, the addict seeking sobriety through practical steps and tricks, and neglecting spiritual and moral issues will only go so far. An old twelve-stepper who had long struggled with “the God part of the recovery program” once said: “the more I get into it [the God part of the program], the more I realize there is no other part.” Nehemiah was not simply a wise engineer, community organizer and military leader; he was a spiritual man, shining a spiritual light on the Jerusalemites' struggles.

On the other end, Ezra who was himself a prophet, a man who spoke for God and was keenly sensitive to spiritual issues, could never achieve what Nehemiah accomplished. With the spiritual, Nehemiah brought the organizational and the practical. Experienced sojourners in a recovery program usually look at each other with a knowing smile and maybe some concern when a newcomer discovers one more time “the” spiritual lesson that is finally going to set him or her free once and for all. If you could, you might hear those old timers think to themselves “keep it simple;” and “just stick to the nuts and bolts.”

Not enough God in the program, and hope is in scarce quantities; too much God and one has to be reminded about these practical “nuts and bolts” of recovery: avoid being hungry, angry, lonely and tired; show up for meetings; have a sponsor; make the phone calls; etc.

We cannot actually have “too much God” in our lives, but we are easily deceived by a false and hyperbolic spirituality, which magically would free us from having to repair our side of the wall, or stand for battle for our fellows when a door of the city has been burnt to ashes. So, a mix of spiritual walk and down-to-earth work forces us to examine both our character defects—those traits of our personality dominated by anger, selfishness, lust, greed, jealousy, entitlement, pride, self-centered fear, and other moral gaps—and our human frailties, like the fact we get fatigued, jetlagged, lonely, hungry, saddened, and generally affected by all the things which affect the “natural man.”

As addicts, we need to accept that our humanity affects us in a peculiar manner. A sane person confronted with hunger will want to eat. An alcoholic in the same situation will be inclined to drink. A normal woman feeling tired will simply want to rest. A gambler will want to give play a try to relieve this fatigue. A healthy man facing jet-lag and loneliness will seek social contacts and some well deserved rest. The sex-addict will start lusting, will isolate and increase both his solitude and confusion by indulging lust. Yet neither hunger, tiredness, jet-lag, nor loneliness are moral stains. They are simply part of the human condition. They cannot be fought; maybe managed better sometimes, but even then they still exist. For the addict, refusing to accept those realities is one of the ways the illness takes control of his or her life. Surrender in that case means accepting that those are laws of the universe, or

at least of human life. Acceptance is the way to overcome the peril of these benign internal enemies. (They are intrinsically benign; it is the addict's unnatural response to them which is dangerous and lethal.)

Facing human frailties

While some would consider frailties or natural weaknesses less critical than moral flaws, called “sins” in the religious jargon, both present an equal level of danger to the protection of our personal city. It hardly matters whether the sentinel supposed to guard the Lion's Gate of the city is missing because of treason—a moral flaw—or exhaustion—a consequence of human limitations—the fact is the sentry is missing and our labor is at risk. The lack of protection can lead to more wanton destruction, which will set us back or even bring the whole city down to ashes. Being tired, lonely, upset, hungry, or sick are not moral flaws to be battled. Those are realities to be accepted. As we have seen, Nehemiah responded to external threats by defensive strategies. To internal limitations he responded by intelligence and organization. Maybe management would be a better term to describe his response. As addicts in recovery we recognize that “our life had become unmanageable.” Is it a surprise then that one of the steps of recovery is to learn to *manage* better the realities of our human condition?

For some reason, this is a difficult lesson for many of us. How many recovering addicts still have trouble getting themselves to bed when they are tired? How many of us struggle to have healthier eating habits, still tend to isolate, and generally do not accept to deal with life on life's terms? Nehemiah teaches us that the spiritual journey will not lead very far, even after a thorough moral inventory, unless we also recognize and accept the need to change our practical grasp of reality. On any given day, we will still be subject to the fragile equilibriums which rule our nature. The more we accept and surrender, the better we will be positioned to also let God address flaws in the moral realm.

There is in fact something quite unfair and “random” to the disease of addiction. Presumably this is captured in the old A.A. catch phrase of a “cunning and baffling illness.” If it were a purely moral issue, then moral remedies—religious and others—would solve it. This is often the way fundamentalist religious groups like to look at it.

“Just say no!” “Pull yourself by your bootstraps!” “Don’t tell me you’re a victim, just stop what you’re doing.” For these groups addiction is a sin (and it most certainly is), and it is only a sin; an individual choice to engage in repeated sinful activities.

These people may sometimes be legitimately reacting to behaviors and speeches which evoke complacency. And there is no question that complacency is a great risk for the addict. But if moral determination is all it takes to overcome addiction, I suppose there isn’t much purpose for me to write and for the reader to go through this book. If the “just say no” group is right, then I and many a friend are just hopeless wimps having deluded ourselves for years. For some reason we needed a program of recovery to finally decide to do the right thing (a decision we presumably could have made long before if we had simply been serious about it). Why some with decades of sobriety then choose to continue in the program after having successfully “pulled themselves by their bootstraps” is simply a mystery (not to mention a waste of their time). The position of these religious groups might simply be more expedient for assigning responsibility (guilt) than it is helpful to providing healing (recovery).

Additionally, those who know addiction from its torturing inside are rarely as morally complacent as the caricature made of them is. Many go through years of being “sick and tired of being sick and tired” before finding a road of recovery. While recovery programs usually acknowledge the great moral challenge addicts find themselves in, they start by nuts and bolts readjustments to life on life terms. Many have tried every sort of moral self-improvement, religious commitment and re-commitment, personal chastisement and discipline, only to find themselves falling again, and again, and again.

The cunning and baffling nature of this destructive parasite on self-will is illustrated by a striking story from the AA Big Book:

"I decided to drive to the country and see one of my prospects for a car. On the way I felt hungry so I stopped at a roadside place where they have a bar. I had no intention of drinking. I just thought I would get a sandwich. I also had the notion that I might find a customer for a car at this place, which was familiar for I had been going to it for years. I had eaten there many times during the months I was sober. I sat down at a table and ordered a sandwich

*and a glass of milk. Still no thought of drinking. I ordered another sandwich and decided to have another glass of milk. Suddenly the thought crossed my mind that if I were to put an ounce of whiskey in my milk it couldn't hurt me on a full stomach. I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I vaguely sensed I was not being any too smart, but I reassured as I was taking the whiskey on a full stomach. The experiment went so well that I ordered another whiskey and poured it into more milk. That didn't seem to bother me so I tried another..."*⁸³

The story goes to record another destructive spiral down to the asylum in spite of past efforts to sober up.

There is randomness, an irrational path that addiction takes, which is hard to accept and comprehend. A person can devout himself or herself to spiritual growth, recovery activities, discipline and general personal efforts—which under a reductionist purely moral paradigm of addiction should yield great fruits—to find himself at a moment of fatigue, an instant of discouragement, or an ordinary every day situation overtaken and going for the “whiskey in the milk,” which can doom him and throw him back on the ground he has labored so hard to get up from. Sometimes he/she will be able to recognize some ordinary culprits such as excessive fatigue, mental exhaustion, lasting loneliness, hunger and sickness, even mental anguish and stress as provoking or facilitating factors. At other times it will seem that an instant-made tidal wave appeared from nowhere and took the person down the familiar and humiliating road of self-destruction again.

Here are normal, even prosaic situations which would cause nothing but a ripple in the daily life of an ordinary person. Yet they might bring the tidal wave which catches an addict by surprise, and threatens days, weeks and months of efforts:

- One individual finds himself in a situation of stress and confusion because of rapid changes in life or in the workplace. He struggles to deal with the situation and do the best he can, but he really doesn't know whether he is handling it right or not. Self-doubt is plaguing him, while at the same time his ego plays games with his minds. At any given moment, he doesn't know whether he is soaring up into the atmosphere, or crashing down and biting the

earth. He is doing the best he can, but he does not dare ask for advice or admit what he doesn't know; and when he does, he feels like a complete fraud. As he comes home, he has no idea he is bringing with him a three thousand pound stress-gorilla, and he does not understand the looks and words he gets from his family. All the while, he has no idea what fearsome loneliness is building inside of him. The dominant recurring thought in his subconscious is that something has got to give.

- Another person finds herself at the end of a long period of work and efforts, having expended herself to serve, help, or simply carry out her responsibilities. She might feel tired; but more critically she may find it hard to switch from intense activity to a new calmness; she may not know how to deal with, and take care of herself. She is at loose ends, and cannot decide what to do next. She wants to rest, but doesn't know how; she wants to catch up on work which had been put on the back burner, but can't seem to find the energy to do so. Her mind does not want to focus on anything in particular. And she is not even sure how she feels. But she certainly feels. She feels too much. And this feeling had better stop.

- A third one is living a week of success after success. He receives a positive appraisal by his boss. He is even offered a promotion. Maybe he belongs to a club or a church group, and friends organize a small event to acknowledge the value of his contribution. Maybe he is asked to make a presentation or lead a series of meetings. On the home front, his siblings praise him for the way he has handled challenging times. By chance he finds himself alone for the weekend. He wakes up, looks in the mirror, and no one pats him in the back. He remembers all the positive and sympathetic words of the past week, but he feels neither happy nor sad about them. Actually he doesn't know how he feels about all this. People have treated him like a "big shot," but all of a sudden, he doesn't quite know what to do with the time on his hand. He may feel that he needs another reward. Perhaps he feels like a lost child, but he simply doesn't know it. For some strange reason, the adulation of the past week feels all wrong and unhelpful. He needs both more of it and a whole lot less of it. Confusion and loneliness are becoming overwhelming.

In all three situations, the addict's personality predisposes the individual to a great dive into the abyss. Recovery offers a strategy to avoid it; but it doesn't make the abyss less irrational and unpredictable.

Not all addicts will be affected by exactly the same situation in the same ways. But addicts who recover will usually learn to recognize those particular moments, which reveal human frailties they would better accept and learn to work through, whether it is "fair" or not, and whether they did anything "wrong" or not.

Threats disconnected from a moral responsibility are also found in the story of Nehemiah. His crews seem to work as hard as they can, follow construction plans, prepare for foreseeable attacks, anticipate the damage that stray animals can cause on a still fragile edifice. This places a moral responsibility on each participant, whether that responsibility is vigilance, determination, discipline, steadfastness, willingness to serve, or good stewardship of available resources. A failing in any of these responsibilities will be a moral failing, and one that will threaten weeks and months of work. But we can also imagine times when, through the fault of no one, a block supposed to hold collapses and takes down with it a door or the beginning of a new dwelling. There might be wandering raiders which no one heard about, coming in the middle of the night and bringing down in flames a full panel of the city wall. A group defending a position might find itself out numbered and overtaken by the raiders. Who knows what potential step backwards the Jerusalemites face, which cannot honestly be blamed on any one's moral shortcoming?

Even if we cannot always understand the battles that are lost and the falls we had done everything in our power to prevent, we can still look at Nehemiah's example. No matter how many steps back the residents of Jerusalem face in their great endeavor, they seem to always get up the next morning, rally the troops and the workers, and tackle another wall panel, strengthen a door and even rebuild it anew. They continue to trust; and we should start each day by trusting in a higher authority telling us that if we persevere, He will take us to the place where the City Inside is restored and livable.

Now if we understand that there are a lot of practical, concrete even pragmatic issues to consider in a recovery journey, we also recognize that recovery is not only about

finding the energy to get up after each fall, and developing a better understanding of our human, physical and emotional limitations. There is an ultimate spiritual direction, and there are many truly moral issues that need redress in the addict's life. Those are the true enemies within, illustrated in Nehemiah's story of fear, pride and resistance to change, all the way to collusion with the enemies.

Moral failings

True and meaningful recovery programs will help us see and address these moral issues. Maybe those of a "conservative" slant who tend to see only the moral debate are just reacting to an equally reductionist feel-good, self-help, me-first, "I'm not a bad person, I just do bad things" culture fad. Nehemiah certainly does not seem to spend a lot of time asking the Jerusalemites whether they are feeling better, patting them on the shoulder and blaming the dirty Babylonians for leaving them in this condition. Indeed, his interaction with them gives plenty of room for moral renewal. Lack of consideration of our moral flaws (yes, basically our sin) will certainly empower internal forces as destructive as the enemies from the outside.

Let us now consider some of these moral challenges, at least some of the most common ones such as over reliance on oneself, pride, fear, and immaturity.

The prideful myth of self-reliance

Self-reliance is often presented as a desirable quality, particularly in Western cultures. But the inhabitants of Jerusalem could never build the city they needed, as long as they relied only on themselves as individuals. Until the higher authority represented by Nehemiah gives them practical day-to-day direction, all their skills and best intentions led them nowhere. In fact, as long as each relied on self alone, all of them were prey to all kinds of perils and were totally lacking in safety and true collective-reliance.

The same very much applies for us addicts. Self-reliance looks like a good idea, but there are two situations where it will prove itself to be a very mixed blessing: first when it fails us; second when it actually works.

The danger in lack of self-reliance

When it fails—when we lack self-reliance—we are in great danger of falling victims to the devastating loneliness which plagues the addict. It is a particular bend of the addict’s mind that loneliness can be so crushing, no matter how many loved ones surround him/her. Maybe it is a plight of all humans, simply felt more acutely by addicts; or maybe even the intensity of the feeling is shared by all, and it is the escape response of the addict which sets him/her apart. But what is certain is that loneliness can strike hard and at the most unusual time. It can strike one who is alone, as one in the middle of a crowd.

In sharing about the roots of their addiction many will describe feelings of abandonment, and an overwhelming panic-like feeling at the thought of being alone. With addiction, the feelings are entirely numbed and it may take time in recovery to realize they were part of the motivation for the escape. In the addictive behavior we feel connected, no longer alone. Of course, it is a deception; it is in fact a misconnection, a destructive misconnection. The sense of connection is a lie, preventing us from seeing the origin of our loneliness. And just as the escape into addiction is essentially a lie, the root of our loneliness is also a lie about who, what and where we are. As addicts we live so much “in our head” that we start to believe the world it is creating—the empty and somber world of greed, lust and unquenchable thirst. We start to believe that we are owed something, entitled to some reward or delivery from our feelings, that we are a victim in absolute need of the tantalizing escape. We can also truly believe that we are totally lonely and abandoned, unable to reach out for love or friendship; unable to see this love even when it is close at hand. The blatant insanity displayed in addictive behaviors is the only way to get a sense from the outside of the intensity of these misplaced feelings.

As we grow in the restoration of the City Inside, we will start to recognize the fallacy of these misbeliefs, and start to live by new principles. But old habits die hard. A harsh word, a new stress, or simply the sound of a hotel room door shutting, and the lies awake in an instant. We feel alone. The enemy inside has risen and we need to escape. We are so sure that we cannot live and make it on our own, and we are so sure that we are absolutely totally on our own, that we are willing to give up and cut loose. It will take a Higher Power—perhaps first a Nehemiah—newly entered in our life to dismiss these lies.

Of course, the great paradox is that the more we have followed the addictive path, the more we have found ourselves isolated from everyone. Addictive fears are usually self-fulfilling prophecies. And so the more we live within the isolation of self, the more our lives become unmanageable. We are doomed to live alone with the only being that cannot fail to lead us astray and let us down: our own self.

More functional—“self-reliant”—human beings might know how to handle themselves better in those situations of stress or isolation. What is revealed here is a great gap in our human make up, an inability to find the minimum reliance on ourselves which we should have inherited from our education. Ultimately we will see the depth of our loneliness, and we will understand that we are self-deceived and definitely not self-reliant. At last when self-reliance has totally failed us, we figure out that we need to look outside ourselves for a solution. This is commonly called hitting bottom.

The greater danger of excessive self-reliance

On the other hand, because it can prevent us from seeing our true self, self-reliance can be even more dangerous to us when it seems to work.

To be sure, there is a lot of value in knowing how to do something, to handle oneself, or face a problem, and be confident about one’s ability. This is part of what adulthood is about after all. We use the skill of self-reliance not only in our social life—with a friend, a partner, a spouse, a parent—but also in our professional life. Someone totally lacking in self-reliance and self-confidence can be tiresome, and is unlikely to be entrusted with much in the workplace.

I am personally totally incompetent in many areas having to do with home improvement or gardening. I always feel like I am an imposition on the neighbors and friends on whom I rely so much. It is a good thing that I don’t feel as incompetent in every area of life, or I would quickly become a tremendous burden on everyone. So there is something we all appreciate in self-reliance.

However, there is also a danger there. Wouldn’t I look even more foolish if I insisted on doing by myself a task I am obviously not fit to carry out properly? We all know the stereotypical story of the man who refuses to ask for directions, even though he is

totally lost. We can see from this simple example how the lethal side effect of self-reliance is pride. And pride will prevent the addict from calling for help; it will prevent him or her from even acknowledging to him/herself the truth about his/her desolation, while s/he is claiming the highest degree of self-reliance.

I will illustrate with a life-example. We had a good friend in Africa, who was extremely gifted in many of the areas in which I am not. He could fix things; he understood how his car worked; and if it broke down, he knew how to repair it. On the other end of the spectrum, I tend to believe that things are dead-set on contradicting me; so I interfere as little as possible with their operation, and I would never trust myself to extricate anyone out of a mechanical jam.

One of our popular weekend activities was to drive off and camp in the desert for a few days. Since I could not trust myself to survive in that environment on my own, I always chose to join a group and travel in a convoy. My friend feared nothing and knew exactly how to handle every situation. Or so he thought. He would go on great expeditions and adventures on his own or with his family. He amazed me in the self-confidence this revealed. As it turned out, twice within the same year, his wife had to call me for help because he was stuck somewhere, having either hit errand livestock, or broken a clutch on a beach while the tide was rising. On these two occasions, I organized a rescue party and we got him out of trouble. (Notice that I did not take off to rescue him on my own; that would have been akin to the blind leading the blind. I found competent people and led them to him; I got points for a good assist.) What my friend suffered from was an *excess in self-reliance*, maybe leading him to a hazardous sense of invincibility. There is no question that he was smarter than me with the challenges of exploring the desert and driving through it. But his competence led him to believe in his own self to a level that left him high and dry at least those two times.

Addicts are somewhat in the same situation. We are often talented people (of course a debatable opinion), with our respective gifts and smarts. We spend years relying only on ourselves until we “hit bottom.” Further down the road, we may discover and work a healthy program, build some sobriety and start to think that “we’ve got it.” Self-confidence and self-reliance might start taking the place of God-dependence.

We frequently recognize feelings that are common among us, which overstate self-reliance and act as a barrier to asking for help. “I can handle this.” Or “I should be able to do this.” “There is no reason I shouldn’t be able to do it.” Even more absurd “I *shouldn’t* feel this way.” All these deceptive thoughts are based on mistaken assumptions about how the world works, and even greater deception about personal competence and self-reliance.

Of course, anyone truly working a twelve step program knows that it has nothing to do with “self-help.” Self-help is what leads addicts to the bottom of despair. The entire program is about relying on a Higher Power and our neighbors—those we can call to fight when an enemy attacks. Having brought up many panels of the wall, and being aware of the work we put into it, we may be deceived into thinking that we are now able to manage the challenges to our sobriety. We may look down at those still struggling and reporting frequent “slips,” and think to ourselves that at least “we know how to handle those situations;” we start to believe the subtle deception that there is something in us capable of handling the trigger, the situation coming our way. What we are playing with actually, is a latent form of pride. That same pride which is said to precede the fall.⁸⁴

In fact, self-reliance may be a subtle form of God-defiance, particularly in personalities prone to compulsively drown themselves into toxic fantasies and substances, paid for in scars inflicted on their loved ones.

While both low self-reliance and an inflated self-confidence are character flaws, the danger of the latter is much greater than the annoyance of the former. A man of limited skills can still be of help in small tasks around the wall construction or in its defense. But a man of inflated value in his own eyes will build flawed panels of the wall, or call too late for help against an attack, when the enemy has already overpowered his section of the wall. Experience shows that addicts, maybe because of pride or an inflated ego, too frequently lean on the side of excessive self-reliance. Much of recovery is about learning to depend on God, on friends, on just about anyone but the deceptive self.

Pride

Excessive or misplaced self-reliance is only one of the symptoms of a ubiquitous and historical human flaw: pride. We discussed in an earlier chapter the simplest illustration of pride and its fruit in Nehemiah, when the “nobles from Tekoa” refuse to join their brothers in the reconstruction.⁸⁵

Pride has this funny characteristic that the more we have of it, the less we notice it. A friend—with whom I might share a level of comfort with self-importance, hopefully waning a bit with age for both of us—used to joke frequently that he had a huge array of impressive qualities, but that his greatest was unequaled humility.⁸⁶ It is easy to see through the fallacy of his joke-statement, but strangely enough many of us miss it in our daily ramblings about how everybody else is out to wrong us, when we do so much for the common good. The second paradox of pride is that the more we have of it, the more we are affected personally when it flares up in others. A humble person might smile sympathetically at the logorrhea of a self-important acquaintance. A person struggling with pride will quickly feel offended at this vain attempt to steal his or her thunder.

Before getting into this much longer, I need to point out that being “proud of” is not being “proud.” There is a useful distinction in the French language between two words that are rendered by the term “proud” in English: the first one is “fier”, the second is “orgueilleux.”

“*Fier*” most closely resembles being “proud of.” One can be proud of a great piece of personal work, of the achievements of loved ones, particularly children, even of personal achievements. The pride is outward bound. While there is some level of self-recognition (i.e. if I am proud of my children, I might have had some role to play—be it ever so small—in how they turned out), most of that pride is outgoing: it is the character or achievements of the children, it is the goodness of the results of one’s efforts, be they trivial—a few pounds off—or life-changing—Heimlich inventing his famous maneuver—that matter. I am “proud of” (“fier”) having been part of something beautiful, or wise, or useful.

“*Orgueilleux*,” on the other hand, is pride which looks inward. It matters little what the issue at hand is—success of a child, work achievement, athletic or other personal

success—this kind of pride feeds the bottomless ego. Its collateral is a fair bit of contempt for everyone else. The point is not what is happening in the life of my children; it is that they speak to my greatness. It is not about what my work will provide to others, it is not even about the efforts I put into it; it is what it says about me which matters. I am proud to be beautiful and wise and so uniquely useful and gifted.

Religious people, among others, sometimes mistake the two types of pride. They know pride is “not good.” And some will occasionally fall in the trap of negating justified pride at a worthy achievement to avoid sounding proud. “You did a great job on that construction / music show / kids’ program” in this case is not met by a gracious “thank you,” or an excited elaboration about the struggles and joys of the accomplishment, but by something like “it wasn’t me; it was the Lord” (with gravitas). “The Lord” thus gets blamed for a lot of mediocre church plays along the way, but more importantly—much as in my friend’s joke—the person gets the benefit of feeling proud about being so humble.

In the addict’s life, it is sometimes amazing to watch the ruins and the debris, the dust and the rubble surrounding pride as the last standing structure of the shattered city which is our soul. Our homes are in ruins, we make a mockery of the values we claim, we spend our time in places and activities which shame us, and our loved ones are getting hit by the collateral damage of our insanity. Yet we stand tall in the middle of the devastation. The endurance of pride as an artificial crutch in a life in shambles is reminiscent of Monty Python’s Black Knight, bleeding, armless, hopping on his last remaining leg, and calling for the surrender of King Arthur, the dueling opponent who cut off his limbs. How many of us refused to go meet with “a bunch of losers” in twelve step programs, based on the notion that we were of such a higher caliber, while everything around us talked of the unmanageability of our lives?

Much more could be written about pride, but it remains hard to define. It might be easier to describe some of what pride does in a person than trying to describe it.

There might have been a dose of national and religious Hebrew pride when the citizens followed the efforts of Ezra to rebuild the temple.⁸⁷ Was it reasonable to expect the temple to stand when the city was unprotected? Was it even wise to follow

that path? Or was it a visceral pride-response: “Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes!” Recovery literature tells us that “you cannot give away what you haven’t got.”⁸⁸ Pride tells us we can go and save the world, when we cannot even save ourselves.

Denial might be nothing more than a way to preserve our pride and arrogance. If acceptance leads to humility, denial of reality might be both cause and effect of unchecked pride. This may be one of the main reasons why the absolute non-negotiable condition for participating in a recovery program is a commitment to rigorous honesty. We cannot fight our own pride, but if we live and work a program of rigorous honesty, others will certainly help us do that.

Pride allows us to call disaster success and to justify the unjustifiable. It makes us so unique, “terminally unique” as AA’s say; it makes our struggles incomparable to anyone else’s and thus prevents us from accessing the solution available to others. Pride makes us raise a fist and say “I will not surrender; I do not need a solution that puts me on my knees; I can, I want, I will achieve recovery on my own; I am not like “them;” it is not my fault, and I have been failed by those around me; I have done nothing that others haven’t done either; I have done nothing worse than anyone else; I deserve a little slack because I give out a lot and no one understands all that I do.” Pride gets irritated every time our idea is not recognized for its brilliance, when “those idiots” just don’t get it. Pride says my spouse should be so lucky to have me; she never notices all that I do and put up with. Pride has this amazing quality that it gets us revved up to the same levels by the “crimes” of a bratty child, as by those of a blood-thirsty dictator across the globe. It has many alternative targets: the crooked politicians, the media, the “bloody liberals,” the “damn conservatives,” the “churches full of hypocrites,” and the list goes on and on.

Pride makes us feel wronged by so many others in so many ways. It is in fact a great resource if we are reluctant to act on our selfishness and egotism. Something in humans (maybe decency) tells us we shouldn’t cut to the front of the line; we shouldn’t expect love and support from our spouse if all we give is grief; we should not get respect and obedience from children who only get to see our rage and self-pity. So this human “flaw” (in the sense that decency in these situations limits our self-enjoyment) requires a counter-measure. And pride provides just what we need to

justify putting ourselves before others without ever noticing it. Thanks to pride, a man who cheated on his wife, left his children essentially alone through the struggles of childhood and adolescence, and who drinks himself to sleep every night can still find the energy to be outraged at how selfish and uncouth his children are. Without pride, this man would bury his head in shame, cry uncontrollably, and wait for death. An even more drastic option would be to look for healing and redemption, and enter a program of recovery.

While pride can help us sustain our worse traits, it can also corrupt our best endeavors. It can morph genuine and worthy efforts at helping our fellows into something quite different. It does so by once again putting our ego at the center of it all, through a mixture of “big-shotism” and messianic complex. Agnostics will prefer the former while religious people usually form a line behind the latter. You can guess which club I joined. It is once again this inward looking self-centered attitude, which transforms everything into an ego show. Later in recovery, pride will poke its head out again and try to convince us that the grace we receive, the gift of sobriety, is actually our personal achievement.

This points to another characteristic of pride: its relentlessness. It is like the flu epidemic; it simply comes back every year, and you need your shot every year if you want to be sure to avoid it. Once again, action steps are needed to change our attitude. This may be one essential reason for the importance of service in recovery. Pride is, as most of our character flaws, something we really have little power to change on its own. But take enough steps of humility, like service, like courtesy, like putting someone else’s needs first, and pride will be deflated at each step. It will come up again and again, and as we take action again and again we will develop new habits, new disciplines, and new attitudes. Pride won’t so much disappear from our life, as it will become less operative. We will be able to smile and laugh at it with trusted friends, instead of letting it take us for a ride that would damage our friendships.

But pride has one practical advantage which I have not mentioned yet. It is an effective way to avoid feeling fear. And the erosion of pride can bring a new revelation of what fear we live with.

Fear

Fear is ever present in Nehemiah's story, explicitly or not. It is with Nehemiah himself as soon as the king asks him the cause of his obvious discontentment.⁸⁹ He has reason to fear. After all he has a good situation, and much to lose by disturbing the status quo. How does he know whether the city is salvageable and what his fate will be?

Maybe because he has felt it himself, Nehemiah is able to guide the Israelites through their own fear. That fear underlies most of the questions and hesitations we read about between the lines of the book. We mentioned in the introduction to this chapter how it reveals itself in the tribe of Judah. That's the tribe supposed to hold the scepter for the country; but from that same group comes the statement, "*The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.*"⁹⁰ From the context we can easily guess that the rubble would not seem so high and the strength of the laborers so low, if Sanballat, the army of Samaria, and a few other like-minded foes were not surrounding the city at the time. Fear distorts perceptions.

Finally while the sixth chapter of Nehemiah reports the completion of the wall, that momentous event is almost a by-note in a report of all the fears still plaguing the Hebrews. One of them lives as a shut-in and invites Nehemiah to stay with him in hiding,⁹¹ while the nobles of Judah (once again the "blue blood" of Israel) continue informing and collaborating with the enemy, because of dubious family ties, and a long sworn oath which ensured them protection when the city was defenseless.⁹² The allegory with addiction is stunning here, with fear as the chain that links back to an old way of life, in spite of very real and substantial achievements.

For the Hebrews trying to restore their identity, as for recovering addicts, it is almost impossible to underestimate the importance of fear.

Fear is a funny thing. You would think that a group of people able to live in ruins, unprotected from the environment, having to struggle not only for food and shelter but also for safety, would be a pretty hardened group. And they probably are, hardened and "fearless." As for addicts, their entire lifestyle shows an ability to take risks and face danger. What fearless people these ought to be!

For the citizens of Jerusalem as for the addicts, the truth is that things are not necessarily as they seem. Apparent fearlessness can hide a lot of genuine fright. We humans just have to survive, whether we are surrounded by wilderness and ruins, or more commonly by the wreckage of a life out of control. We need to survive and we hide our fear to do so.

My first sponsor once told me “There’s good news and there’s bad news about recovery. The good news is that you start feeling. The bad news is that you start feeling.” Fear is one of these feelings, which were always with us but were hidden by various artifices until recovery started. Of course we are all different, but we can examine a sampling of the kinds of fears many of us discover along the path of recovery.

The first two fears are actually once again a paradox. On the one hand there is a fear to be so totally different from the rest of the human race that we will never fit in; and on the other, the absolute terror of being ordinary, on a par with the rest of humanity, and fitting all too well.

Some addicts look back and recognize that “our insides never matched what we saw on the inside of others.”⁹³ That fear may be old and hidden beneath layers and layers of rebellion, anger and a little aging, but it is here nonetheless. As everything else, it may be a fear common to the entire human race. Every child, teenager and even adult at some point faces echoes of such a fear. The fear of not fitting in is one of the most ordinary experiences of life. It is not necessarily more acute or qualitatively different in addicts, but once again, maybe it is the response we have developed to our fears and experiences that is so pathological. The fact that we have hidden from it for so long instead of growing up and maturing is what requires us to address it in our recovery.

The other side of the coin is the ego-centered fear of being common, ordinary, and just like “the rest of them.” This, of course, is a very pride-centered fear; what some call “terminal uniqueness.” It takes a while to realize that so much of what makes us risk-takers, daredevils and sometimes mavericks is an actual fear of joining the human race in all its glory and shortcomings.

Both of these fears are about who we are. Of course they are irrational, and as such cannot be reasoned out. I suppose the answer to both is to join in a fellowship in which we can see just how similar we are to others, and also how unique. Basically joining the human race is a good recipe for no longer feeling at the same time so alienated and so superior to our fellows. Being surrounded by people in a similar journey of discovery and healing makes it easier to face our own defects. A lot of these fears are first encountered or even defeated by exposing them to a knowing and sympathetic crowd, who will at least get a good laugh out of them.

There are other fears, which are more about what we get from life than about who we are.

There is the fear of the future, which is basically the fear of not getting what we want tomorrow. There is anger, which I have heard described as the fear of not getting what we want now. That sounds pretty much on the money to me. And finally resentment, the fear of not having gotten what we wanted yesterday.

How these fears operate in each of our lives is hard to consider in general terms. That is why recovery asks of us very active steps of guided and honest self-discovery. As we follow these steps, we will discover that some of the behaviors which we thought trivial, ordinary, and definitely justified, only reveal how much fear has guided and still guides our life. We will not only discover how fear has kept us locked into the lies of addiction, but also how it has allowed us to be absolutely insufferable to those who surround us.

Whether our fears are about who we are, what we have, or what we ought to have, they are essentially self-centered fears. We overcome them in the same manner we discover them: by rubbing elbows and working with others, and by turning the core of our life from being self-driven to being God-led. We see how this principle works in the story of Nehemiah. There are basically no calls to reject fear, be courageous, or even have greater faith in the biblical narrative. But each report of feelings or actions explicitly or implicitly revealing fear is answered by prayer as a call for help,

followed by actions based on obedience and faith. Action (or trust-in-action) negates fear. Not words or mere thoughts.

Fear attacks us at the level of emotions. It will not be vanquished by rationalization. Not for a people who has lived without protection in a shattered city; not for a people who has lived submerged by a flow of conflicting emotions, cravings, and destructive compulsions. Surrender, dependence, and trust-in-action are the way to circumvent the impossible hurdle. Nehemiah could have sat for hours with the work group from Judah overwhelmed by the piles of rubble, and tried to have them talk about their fear. His encouragement to resist fear only comes through steps of action and renewed dependence on God.

Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."⁹⁴

The story is not written in advance. It is not for the Hebrews of that time; nor is it for us today. They face and we face many occasions to fear. Maybe old monsters in the closet will not frighten us as much as they used to, but chances are there will always be something that can surprise us, or an old fear which never totally disappears, even once the wall is up.

Recovery may teach us to fear less, but often it simply teaches us how to recognize and deal with fear, without resorting to quick fixes such as anger, rage, self-pity or resentment. One of the positive side-effects of all this may be a gain in maturity. Inversely, immaturity and refusal to be disciplined about our work will probably thwart many efforts to deal with fear, pride, and correspondingly to build some sobriety.

Immaturity versus discipline

Immaturity is not one of the traditional “seven deadly sins,” and of course is not stated *per se* as a sin at the root of Jerusalem’s poor state of affairs, though we can suspect it

plays a part in petty fights about who supervises who. It is suggested when we see in the book of Ezra a nation coming together to restore the center of Jewish life, but who uses the material available to build individual condos for the next seventeen years. It might also play a part in the greed and selfishness of citizens who exploit their Jewish brothers and sisters as slaves, when they are supposedly trying to form a city and a nation together again.⁹⁵

The more we progress in recovery, the more we see immaturity as part of the fertile ground for so many of the defects which feed into our addiction. Unless, of course, it is addictive behaviors themselves, which have kept us immature in many areas of life.

Immaturity is a state of incompleteness. It is a wall half-built which can easily tumble over, or be circumvented. It is the rage that comes because we feel slighted or wronged. It is the anger at a distant world event out of our control. It is not the natural sadness and anger at things that are against nature, but an out-of-proportion emotional response to a shocking yet distant reality. A man yelling at his children because—though this will not be the official reason—he did not get his way at work. A woman blackmailing her child for affection because she has been betrayed by her husband. A crowd full of cries for war and vengeance against strangers and presumed enemies, because each member of this angry group feels so powerless against the forces that control his/her life. An addict who must drink a beverage or use a drug because his wife and children have not been listening to his unspoken aspirations.

All these are signs of adults behaving like children; men and women unable to see what really stirs and disturbs their hearts and emotions. Just like a child who cries because she did not get the last piece of cake.

Immaturity cries out for more anger, more self-pity, more resentment, and more self-centered pride. It will also call either for always less work, or on the opposite unending agitation and effervescence. What it won't call for is simply the work that has to be done today, and no more. Ultimately immaturity is the natural companion of addiction. While once again, it exists in every human to some extent, the addictive personality has it in spades. The AA Big Book describes nicely for us the natural state of the addict's immature thinking:⁹⁶

Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wished, the show would be great. Everybody, including himself, would be pleased. Life would be wonderful... Our actor is self-centered, ego-centric, as people like to call it nowadays. He is like the retired business man who lolls in the Florida sunshine in the winter complaining of the sad state of the nation; the minister who sighs over the sins of the twentieth century; politicians and reformers who are sure all would be Utopia if the rest of the world would only behave; the outlaw safe cracker who thinks society has wronged him; and the alcoholic who has lost all and is locked up. Whatever our protestations, are not most of us concerned with ourselves, our resentments, or our self-pity?

The natural corollary of such feelings is resentment. Holding a grudge, feeling bitter, feeling slighted, insulted and overlooked are all precursors to acting out in anger and possibly blind rage. I have heard resentment described as “drinking poison with the hope it will kill one’s enemy,” and have often observed how people do get poisoned by it. The poison can be lethal for oneself and most certainly also for human relationships. Immaturity commands us to never let go of this resentment. The addict’s cries of “it’s not fair!” are far louder in life than any third-grader can be.

How do we deal with this acid in our soul? There are probably many answers. But the image projected by Nehemiah and his troops is one of surrender, discipline, dedication, organization, faith, and hard work. I presume the same ingredients can only help us as well. Counseling, therapy, meditation, prayer, journaling are also essential tools at our disposal. If we use the right tools, consistently, and every day, we will soon notice that we are building constructive habits. This is also called learning to be disciplined.

The moment we realize we are becoming disciplined, the immature addict in us cries foul. After all, there was liberty in a city without wall. Chaos can be seen as a form of freedom too. And we cannot forget either the fear of conformity. Immaturity makes us

loathe these things—it's boring!—and can be at the root of our refusal to follow the path of action prescribed for us today.

Immaturity may be one of the stealthiest defects we have to confront. But as we take action, we will not only grow into attitudes which enable the miracle of sobriety, we will also find that we are walking away from immaturity and its manifestations.

The Jerusalemites were not just building a wall; they were becoming a community, they were changing, growing. Recovery is not simply learning new behaviors. True recovery means that we change. We mature. We grow.

Chapter 10 – Moral perils—forgetting the purpose

*The whole constitution of human society exists for the express end, I say, of teaching the two truths by which man lives, Love to God, and Love to Man.*⁹⁷

It just takes 52 days to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah.⁹⁸ It is a tremendous achievement which inspires awe and fear in the enemies of the Jews.⁹⁹ But it is not the end of the story. Over half of the book of Nehemiah (from Chapter 7 onward) relates to events which take place *after* the restoration of the wall. A lot still has to happen before Jerusalem itself is restored to the living city of peace and justice it is meant to be. The message for us is that a whole lot of life still has to happen once we have restored some semblance of sobriety. What needs to happen is all about the purpose of recovery and the purpose of life itself. In this second part of the book, the Hebrews give the impression of being torn between the rediscovery of their purpose as a nation, and a reluctance to fully enter that calling.

Achievements and hopes

What happens in the second half of the book of Nehemiah? The wall construction is completed (Chapter 6); a census of the population is taken (Chapter 7); Chapter 8 is devoted to the reading of the law and the reinstatement of the feast of the tabernacle, followed by a time of confession and commitment by the people, during which old rules are reestablished and some new ones set forth (Chapters 9 and 10). All this takes place over a period of time, and another census is called for to account for new residents in Chapters 11 and 12.¹⁰⁰ Finally, the wall is dedicated (Chapter 12). At some point, Nehemiah goes back to Babylon to give an account of his work to the king.¹⁰¹ He comes back (probably after about a year) to face corruption and trouble in the city.

One bible commentator¹⁰² explains these chapters as follows:

“The reading of the law has been assigned to this section of Nehemiah because it was only after the completion of the wall and the settlement of the people that the conditions for the full restoration of the community were met. Separation unto God was internal as well as external. For this reason, Ezra’s

early reform and Nehemiah's building programme only served to foreshadow the full restoration. It has been reserved for the Nehemiah chapters to describe the formation of the ideal community of faith. This task required a combining of the sacred with the secular in a divine theocracy, and thus called forth the participation of both Ezra and Nehemiah as representatives of these two different offices."

In other words, the end of the book focuses on the internal restoration and spiritual renewal made possible by the external restoration of the city wall. It is only through the combination of spiritual purpose (common to Ezra and Nehemiah) and practical actions for which Nehemiah brought the specific vision and authority that the “*ideal community of faith*” can hope to be revived.

It is precisely during these times of community restoration, that the Hebrews risk losing their way once again.

How the new community risks losing sight of the purpose

It is not surprising for a human endeavor started with abundance of enthusiasm, to face questions and to lose sight of the destination along the way. It is the most natural thing considering human fickleness and—going back to a trait already discussed—human immaturity. The “*we will rise up and build*” of the second chapter of Nehemiah was probably a little weak on practical thought about the next steps. It is easier to stir the emotional fiber of a group, lead it to far-reaching declarations of intent, even chant, yell, and raise a fist, than to direct it to a moral examination of the underpinnings of its history, and to decisions about the life changes implied by its new commitment. The initial enthusiasm is good to get the testosterone going and to shuffle boulders around, but it always risks fading away when the time of moral challenges comes.

The first such challenge for the Hebrews is an old-time favorite on this planet: the simple fact that those who have can use their advantage over those who have not, and thus continue advancing their position. In other words: oppression and abuse of the poor by the rich, which the Law of Moses specifically tried to prevent and correct. Early on as the construction of the wall is still underway, some Jerusalemites come to Nehemiah and plainly state their situation.¹⁰³

“Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

Nehemiah is appropriately appalled at this situation, especially since he personally made sure not to take advantage of his position of authority for material gain. Angry, he convokes the “nobles and officials” and probably uses a tone of disbelief to tell them, “*You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!*” In our day and age, he might have heard back a somber “so what?” and maybe an astute comment on the future of interest rates, but the Hebrew officials knew better than that. We are told that “*they kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.*”

The call to community

In the biblical story, Israel’s calling is to form a society; but not just any society. They are meant to be set apart for communion with God and community between neighbors. Building a wall is the means to a first end: establishing the city. The city of Jerusalem, however, is itself only a mean to the true end of communion and community. The officials know this. How could it ever be reconciled with the injustice and oppression which greed leads them to? They have nothing to answer to that question.

Even in the middle of a restoration to regain their freedom, humans can easily be tricked by their old demons. Greed and injustice are simply two of the most common.

Of course greed has a fast track link to selfishness. And selfishness is probably at the root of the Jerusalemites also forgetting to maintain the temple—presumably along with communal worship— and neglecting the day of rest prescribed in Judaism.¹⁰⁴ Finally, the ultimate symbol of a loss of vision for Israel’s calling comes with the issue of “mixed marriages.”

It is hard to overemphasize the importance that the Old Testament—the Jewish Torah—places on the proscription against mixed marriages. In antique societies where marriage was often a way to forge alliances, and where tribalism and family relations defined the belonging and identity of individuals, marriage within the

community was the way to preserve the specificity of the commitment to Yahweh/God. Almost all questions of faithfulness to God, commitment, faith-belonging, and righteous living are paralleled by the human relationships forged by people. Marriage—in or out of the faith-community—adultery, prostitution, even celibacy are used in many stories of the bible as living allegories of the Jewish people's relationship to God. There actually probably isn't a better text to build a case for the spiritual meaning of sexuality than the bible, particularly the Jewish bible¹⁰⁵.

Most of the time, marriage out of the Jewish community was part of a package deal which also included worship of idols, sacrifices to unknown divinities, and a fair bit of sexual debauchery to be quite honest. It is not surprising that it comes to the forefront in the Nehemiah narrative as well. There can, however, be two different readings of the troubles that are described.

In a first reading of Nehemiah 13, it seems that the resurgence of mixed marriages is part of a drift toward idolatry, nepotism, neglect of worship and of the temple (manifested by the lack of offerings, and absenteeism from key positions of service). In essence, while Jerusalemites have gained some safety and stability, they start drifting toward their old habits. The obvious sense of discouragement which transpires from the prayers of Nehemiah in his last chapter seems directly linked to his sense that the people are at risk of losing everything by going back to their old ways.

The parallel with an addict going back “to do a little research” is quite obvious, and barely deserves description. A sense of entitlement or monotony in recovery; an urge to be rewarded; a misleading sense that sobriety is a sure thing and that using/acting out is not such a big deal can take us in a downward spiral rapidly if any of these feelings are allowed to grow.

In an alternative reading of the text, we need to remember that Israel—the “ideal community of faith”—had a double and somewhat paradoxical mandate: to be separated, set apart; and at the same time to be a light and a sign to the “gentiles” (basically the rest of us). The purpose of the exclusion of mixed marriages was to keep the Jews Jewish so to speak. There are many examples proving that God actually was not so bothered by mixed marriages, when they served to bring strangers within

the bounds of His alliance. From the wife of Moses, to Rahab the prostitute in Jericho, to the Egyptians who followed the Hebrews through the desert, to the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon, and of course Ruth—title-character of one of the most poetic books of the bible—the list of gentiles intermixing with Hebrews under the obvious blessing of God is long. It is noteworthy that in the genealogy of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Matthew, four women are listed. Two of them were involved in rather sordid adultery stories (Tamar and the wife of Urie), and the two others—Rahab, and Ruth—are foreign-born. The Old Testament actually condemns repeatedly the mistreatment of the “strangers in the land,” and at times God cries loudly over the absence of testimony to “His people” in Egypt and Syria! God’s purpose is then not to *exclude* gentiles, but to *preserve* a community from the corruption and destruction of idolatry and of the barbaric ways of living of the days. His goal is safeguarding, not exclusion.

Keeping this in mind, it is now possible to read Nehemiah 13 with a different twist. While Nehemiah does come back from Babylon to find corruption, abandonment of the temple, gaps in service, nepotism, and general sinfulness, these things seem to take place in spite of the fact that a separation from foreigners has been ordered and enforced at the beginning of the chapter, before his return. The Jews have effectively and conveniently identified the strangers in the land as “them”—the trouble-makers, the unregenerate, the sinners, the outsiders—given them the boot, probably felt better about their religious commitment, and rapidly proceeded to indulge in their favorite sins.

This is where we see a loss of purpose; spiritualism and ritualism instead of spirituality; pharisaic enforcement of the Law against “them,” while preserving a selfish need to lead life as “we” choose. By complying with a perfunctory act, which makes “them” (the foreigners) comply with the Law, the Jerusalemites feel they are themselves free from any genuine moral challenge. Indeed, what would have prevented the Hebrews from inviting those foreigners who were willing to stay within Jerusalem and abide by the new community rules? Maybe it is the fact that many of the Hebrew leaders themselves have little intention of truly pursuing righteous living. Casting “them” out becomes the convenient escape from inviting neighbors in a truly spiritual community.

Can this apply to people in recovery? Is it possible to be so proud of being in the church basement that we look down on the “church folks” in the chapel? Is it possible to exchange a genuine program of spiritual change for twelve-stepism? Is it possible to exclude “normies” and engage in so many “recovery” activities that we never have questions about the greater direction of our life? Can we be technically sober, yet arrogant, mean spirited, self-serving, greedy, and proud? Can we have a “successful” recovery, accumulating days, weeks, months and years of sober living, and yet mistreat others and treat God as our sobriety insurance agent and little else, while we refuse to really learn and change at a deeper level? Isn’t that what AA’s call a “dry drunk?”

If the Israelites are at risk of forgetting the purpose of their adventure, maybe we need to pause a moment to examine both their and our purpose, and ask ourselves whether we remember it.

A journey with purpose

There are certainly many different ways to understand and describe the purpose of recovery, just as there are many ways to understand the purpose of God’s care for a group of Hebrews camping in the ruins of a wrecked city. Let us just consider four elements of a purposeful life, which seem to be shared by the residents of Jerusalem and travelers on the recovery journey: spiritual living, community and communion, growing in truth and finally joy.

Spiritual living

After the wall is completed, the Israelites—men, women and children able to understand—spend a long day listening to Ezra and the Levites read the Torah. Many of them start to weep and cry at the realization of how much they have missed the point of their special identity. Their sadness is such that the priests have to keep comforting them and remind them that the point is not by how much they’ve strayed, but that with the prospect for a restored community, they can finally start to fulfill the purpose for their life in the land.¹⁰⁶ That purpose is eminently spiritual.

The same is described in twelve step literature about the end point of the recovery journey as “*having had a spiritual awakening.*”¹⁰⁷

I am unsure what a spiritual awakening is, but I know that I never felt more whole and more myself than when I stepped into a greater level of recovery from addiction or from life itself, even if my entire world seemed to go for a spin into the unknown. Spiritual living means many things to many people, but at the very least it will bring us back to the issue of who we are. Are we just flesh, blood, bones and synapses? Are we just biology plus emotions? Or is the City Inside of us also an intangible but defining spiritual link to God, to our neighbors and to the world?

In addiction we were all a similar compound of biological dependence and emotional cravings around a self-centered black hole, which we pointlessly tried to fill with more emptiness. In recovery, we get a chance to be a spiritual person, finally safe from ourself, and able to relate in a new and positive manner to whomever we reach out to—God or man.

The following text from another book of the Old Testament sounds very much like God calling for and watching over our recovery, and leading us to a spiritual place of rest.¹⁰⁸

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.”

One of the signs of a new spirituality is the emergence of faith and courage, as opposed to fear in the driving seat of our life. Fear is always going to be present in the human experience to some extent, no matter how long we have been in recovery, and how spiritual we think we are. But the rule of fear, which overshadowed every day in the life of the Jerusalemites and of addicts (whether they saw it or not), can be replaced by faith and the courage that it grants us.¹⁰⁹ A liberation which allows us to “serve without fear” is one of the promises of the announced coming of the Messiah in the Christian gospel.¹¹⁰

That is one indicator of the difference between religion which forgets the purpose, and spiritual growth in love, service and knowledge of God. The latter teaches courage

and brings freedom from fear; but the former is sometimes just as likely to fill the heart with fears—maybe new fears, but fears all the same.

Many and largely more qualified writers have written on the spiritual life. My point here is simply to identify it as a central element of purpose, which we must be determined to pursue daily. In a way, this book represents my best understanding to date of what spiritual living is as I walk away from addiction. Fortunately for each of us, God is our guide in this discovery, as long as we keep the door open to it.

Communion and Community

The eternal purpose of God for His people (Adam and Eve, Noah’s family, the Jews, the disciples and women who followed Jesus, all of the world that God famously “so loved”¹¹¹) is to guide them to communion with Him, within a dedicated and safe *community*. We can barely read the story of Nehemiah without being interrupted by long lists of who was where, who came, and who worked with whom. At the same time, the reading of the Law and the renewal of commitment (notice that it is taken as a group, not by disconnected individuals) are there to point to the call for *communion* with God.

The same is true for the new life of recovery. First it brings us together, friend to friend or friends within a group; and soon enough it draws us to this God of our renewed understanding. Recovery constantly breaks the automatism of isolation, which are so central to addicts. (This, by the way, has nothing to do with intra- versus extra-version. A person can be an extrovert, yet at some deeper level live totally within his or her head. Another can be an introvert, and yet be forging meaningful relationships within a rich community.)

The underlying theme or purpose we are being guided toward is relationship. Perhaps a less prosaic way to put this would be to use the word “love;” but “relationship” has the advantage of painting a concrete image. In all its forms, relationship calls us away from self-centeredness toward service, away from egotism and a neediness which takes all it can or gives more than it has, toward a love where sharing is the norm.

Because this principle of relationship reaches both to our fellows and to God, because it calls for help, but also reaches out in service, it leads to communion with God, and it establishes us within a community.¹¹²

God and our neighbor are not just the means of our recovery, but they are a huge part of its purpose. Whenever we start making either one a mean to an end—a tool to maintain our sobriety, to keep the wall up and nothing else—we are in grave danger of losing sight of the true purpose of the journey.

Growing in truth (acceptance)

The perception of reality by people living in situations of grave stress is known to drift progressively. Brainwashing, torture, imprisonment, hostage situations, and wars can dramatically transform a person's perception of reality, even long after the situation of stress itself has subsided.

The Israelis living in their city in shambles are exactly in the kind of situation where truth—a genuine accounting of what is—becomes perverted. Their emotions distort the picture of the larger world. The illustration is even more obvious for the addict, where the disconnect between what is and what the person perceives to be could not be greater.

This is why “acceptance”—the daily realization and acknowledgement of a truth long hidden from the individual—is so essential to recovery programs.

Acceptance is not just necessary to start in recovery, it is essential to *continue* in recovery. First we have to accept who we are. Then comes a time when we have to also accept who we are becoming. There is always a possibility that this will frighten us, and that we will refuse to accept who we are today. We can go back to who we were—the known, painful and destructive escape from reality. Alternatively, we can also refuse to accept the direction recovery is taking us, while fearing to go back. We remain in the no man's land. The image of Moses and the Hebrews walking in circles for forty years in the desert comes to mind. A purposeless recovery can lead to a lot of walking in circles.

However, if we want to move ahead one day at a time, we have no choice but to accept the person we are becoming under the guidance of God and friends, just like

the Hebrews have to accept that God gives them a new city not to remain survivors but to be a faith community.

This will usually manifest itself through steps of service and commitment lived in greater humility. For one person it will be service in the program; another will grow more dedicated to her work; yet another will start volunteering in the neighborhood or in his faith community. For all, the commitment at home is the most important. If we are married and have families of our own, there is a lot of commitment required to enter both the service and the leadership we have often failed to provide. If we are single, there are parents, siblings, friends who need our attention, service and simply an honest presence.

These are not just attitudes we develop (humility) or actions we take (service), but steps in acceptance of the truth. Humility is a reflection of the truth about who we are in the grand scheme of things. Service is the reflection of the truth about what a purposeful life is about: service to our neighbor and service to God. Humility is accepting how fragile and light we are on the surface of eternity. Service comes from realizing how essential and vital we are to the welfare of our loved ones and to that of the stranger on the street.

In that light, pride can be viewed as just ignorance and rebellion against the truth. “I am the center of my universe, and all must look up to me. I am the purpose of my world!” it says. On the other end, complacency and isolation keep us away from service through another lie. “I am still the center of my universe, but my universe is empty and has no neighbor or purpose.” Both are egocentric lies of a life without purpose. Rejecting truth is manifested by a chronic impossibility to live in acceptance, and is a guaranteed way to lose purpose in our walk.

Joy

The famous 20th century author, C.S. Lewis, wrote that “joy is the serious business of heaven.” Although recovery can be a tough road to walk, with plenty of occasions to fall, get scrapes and bruises, we should remember that joy is part of the purpose for the journey.

Most people, however, are in pursuit of happiness, a different concept altogether. It often takes the form of getting stuff, feeling good and seeking the companionship of those who make us feel good. It seems to require avoiding pain and discomfort, feeling safe and protected, getting the conditions just right for our growing ego to feel it has everything it wants, and that tomorrow will be even better.

Joy, on the other end, depends more on the communion and the community we embrace. It comes from starting the day with acceptance and contentment, in spite of the difficulty. It comes from trust and dependence on God and friends. It comes from knowing we will never have all we want or be what we want to be, but that we already have everything we need for the day at hand. Often it comes from wanting less and living in the moment at hand.

When we lose the purpose, we can become focused on *spiritualism* instead of our spirit; on religion instead of faith; on *twelve-stepism* instead a simple set of suggested principles, which have the power to reform our ways. It's the old battle between the "letter of the law" and the law of life; legalism versus living rightly. Through all these things, joy withers and hides from us.

The same is true with surrender. In recovery we learn to surrender to be freed, and we start discovering joy in surrender. When we lose the purpose of surrender to God—a healing connection, where He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves—we are tempted by the mechanics of a perfunctory surrender. If this happens to us, we will discover that it drives us away from God. It drives us away from others. We may remain "technically sober," but we lose the joy and life in sobriety.

Recovery does not promise happiness. But authentic recovery will provide a fair share of true joy through surrender, acceptance, community with brothers and sisters, and communion with God.

What are we to do then? Are we to watch over our shoulders at all time afraid we are losing our way? Question each step we take for fear of taking a wrong turn? Live in more confusion and fear?

As always the answer is in the actions we take in the day at hand. It is not about having more discipline; just having the right kind of discipline. One which calls for faith, courage and spiritual living. One which leads us into relationships inside a community and with a God we grow to understand. One where we continue to accept who we are today. One in which we reject the common human lies of greed, pride, materialism, vain ambition, selfishness, anger and resentment; and prefer to get a simple taste of joy when it is given.

Chapter 11 – Unended journey

"Do you understand all this, my Son?" said the Teacher. "I don't know about all, Sir," said I. "Am I right in thinking the Lizard really turned into the Horse?" "Aye. But it was killed first. Ye'll not forget that part of the story?" "I'll try not to, Sir. But does it mean that everything – everything – that is in us can go on to the Mountains?"

"Nothing, not even the best and noblest, can go on as it now is, Nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial, will not be raised again if it submits to death. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. Flesh and blood cannot come to the Mountains. Not because they are too rank, but because they are too weak. What is a Lizard compared with a stallion? Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed."¹³

In previous readings of the book of Nehemiah, I often found myself disappointed by its ending. After all there is momentum built from the start: Nehemiah realizes the desolation of Jerusalem; finds the courage to face the king and obtain a mandate to go and rebuild the city; then he has to rally a somewhat despondent local community to take the job; together they face their enemies and go ahead with a construction project; as the work progresses the spiritual purpose of this adventure becomes clearer leading to cleansing, re-focusing the heart of the people and to the promise of a revival. This tells the story of a movement, from awareness to mobilization, from mobilization to struggle, from battle to construction, from physical restoration to spiritual awakening. A story like this ought to conclude on some social and spiritual version of "living happily ever after." But this is not what we get.

We have considered in the previous chapter how the Jerusalemites get confused and are tempted to return to their selfish ways, in spite of an atmosphere of renewal. Other issues leave a strange taste, as if the story was still in writing instead of having reached a final conclusion. For example, leaders of the city still worry about the opinion of Tobiah, their old protector, even after the restoration of the wall.¹¹⁴ There is still quite a bit of work to be done to build houses for the residents, and the flow of new residents seems to only be starting to grow.¹¹⁵ There is a feeling that serious planning for the future is really just starting at the end of the book,¹¹⁶ that the risk of battle is not yet removed,¹¹⁷ that the Jews are at the start of their commitment rather

than at the end of one,¹¹⁸ and finally that Nehemiah continues to face many “management problems.”¹¹⁹

These last chapters really show people struggling with the pettiness common to all humans, even as historical and spiritual events take place. They show Nehemiah going back to deal with this pettiness, with sin, with selfishness and all the rest of the maddening human strife. Hardly the victorious coda that would satisfy the reader.

It is only recently, in light of the parallels drawn by this essay, that I have come to a different understanding of Nehemiah’s conclusion. One bible commentator describes this as follows:¹²⁰

“[The conclusion of the book of Nehemiah] is written to demonstrate what God has done without any necessary implications directing attention to future actions. Rather, based on the demonstration of what God has begun to fulfill, the godly reader is encouraged to anticipate a complete fulfillment of what He has begun. The godly Jews were expected to continue in purity of worship with an expectation that God would continue the work He had begun.”

This conclusion probably also applies to us, whichever point we may have reached in our recovery journey.

Life on this earth may always be an unended journey. And recovery life is particularly suited to this description. There is no Finish Line; there is no graduation; there is no fairy tale ending. As an allegory, Nehemiah continues to serve as a model: the city was devastated, unprotected, and unlivable. A revolution, revival and restoration had to take place to give rebirth to a city of peace which can be inhabited by a spiritual community. But once this has taken place, the community still has to deal with its humanity, its shortcomings, its struggle to remain spiritual and not materialist; loving and hospitable, not xenophobic; open and other-centered rather than selfish.

The same thing is true for the addict walking through recovery and building sobriety. Building sobriety and restoring the addict’s character are essential to finding life again. But once on the path of life, life itself remains as messy and frustrating as ever. It has simply become possible to find Joy in the frustration, not instead of it. And the addict, being saved from life in the shadow of a drug, lust, or obsession, now has to

live the down-to-earth difficulties of a life that is spiritual, not materialist; loving and hospitable, not xenophobic; open and other-centered rather than selfish.

All Nehemiah did was give the Jerusalemites the opportunity to face the same struggles as all other protected cities of the time. But the calling of God to the inhabitants remains a day-to-day challenge of love.

All recovery gives the addict is a wall to protect the city of his/her soul in order to have choices again. But the sober addict can still choose selfishness, greed, religiosity, pride, meanness, ambition and vanity to fill his/her days.

The protective wall is the beginning of the story, not its end. Without a wall, there was no city and no possibility for that city to write its history. Without sobriety, there is little character and personality in man/woman and no possibility for the individual to write his/her story. But once this possibility has been restored, we all face the daily choices, hopes and challenges of humanity. “Welcome to the human race!”

The last chapter of the book of Nehemiah is not a messy end to a great story; rather it is the necessarily messy beginning of a new story; that which the Jerusalemites will now write. Supposedly this restoration experience has taught them they can build with God as a community. Presumably, it has even taught them that they *should* build with Him as guide, partner, wisdom, inspiration, friend, and father. But the choice is theirs.

Life will be filled with continued battles, human conflicts, moral perils, falls, victories and necessary surrenders, which we achieve or miss. It is likely that under certain conditions stones or even panels of the wall will fall again; that enemies will strike again; and that internal dissensions will challenge the peaceful life of the city again. In a healthy and spiritual life, ups and downs will be met daily. As again C.S. Lewis once put it, it is not about how many times we fall, but how many times we pick ourselves back up. God is not the God of the perfect, but the God of living flawed and often-failing humans, being led to a meaningful, rich, spiritual and hopeful life only one day at a time. As twelve-steppers the world around like to repeat; “it’s progress not perfection.” Recovery gives us a new ability to choose a truer life, it does not make us perfect and docile robots.

In the end our understanding of what constitutes an inhabitable city is intimately linked to our understanding of who we are, who God is and who He is to us. This is why the last of the twelve steps of AA starts with “having had a spiritual awakening” and deals with how we try to carry out the principles we have learned “in all our affairs.”

The understanding of what the spiritual life is will remain eminently personal, even for people who share the same nominal faith. I can no more offer a satisfying conclusion to this book than Nehemiah does to his. His story fits in the greater narrative of a people called by God to form a human community based on new principles, on a new relationship to Him, to one another, and to all His children. Recovery from addiction similarly—as dramatic as it may be in each individual experience—is just a part of the larger canvas of the life God gives us to live together.

If you share the diagnosis that compulsive / addictive behavior has brought down the very fabric of your life; if you believe that the moral, emotional, spiritual and physical wall of the City Inside which forms your character and identity is down; and if you think that this situation has prevented you from recovering a life worth living in spite of many efforts; maybe the story of the restoration of Jerusalem can inspire you. I hope to have offered a few hints at the hope and encouragement I have found in surrender to God through grace and a program of recovery lived with friends. Perhaps you will be inspired to look at your situation more honestly and look to God for the authority and power to rebuild your life. You might have simply been encouraged to consider the next step in your own recovery journey. You may be free altogether of the painful bonds of addiction. If that’s the case, I hope you found something in these pages to stimulate your reflection on what you can do with the beautiful City you have inherited. (Finally, if nothing in these pages has touched you, I offer my sympathy and congratulations on having stuck with me so far. You might as well stick around now; we are almost done here.)

Wherever we may be in our journey; you, me, Nehemiah and the Jerusalemites are faced with the same unfinished—unfinishable—conclusion to the story. Now that a

wall is completed, we inherit a city finally inhabitable through dependence on God, hard work, and many battles—some lost, many more won day by day. What do we want this inhabitable city to be? What do we understand of God’s purpose for this City of Peace and of Justice? What is He telling each of us and what are our daily actions providing as answers to His probing?

These questions come daily, and we make corresponding choices also one day at a time. A peaceful, strong, safe and livable city comes from those thousand daily choices. No one can build a community now and forever. All of us must decide to get up each morning and to contribute something to this life. Even after decades of peace and security, a guard can always choose to desert his post; a mason can decide to use poor material in a maintenance restoration. On any given day, these decisions can be of either petty or tragic consequences. If the guard sleeps on his watch on a peaceful night, who will know? If he does so when the enemy is at the gate, there will be a heavier price to pay. So it is again for the addict. On any given day, I can decide to listen to the “call of the Sirens,” I can refuse to surrender, I can choose to listen to my fear, I can opt to let pride be my guide, and I can even be mean-hearted. Some days it will appear to be of little consequence. But under the “right” circumstances, I may be gambling not only my life but that of all those who love and trust me.

As humans, how we like to have a “system,” a guarantee about the future that this will never happen. The old time Hebrews following Moses and eating Manna in the desert didn’t get such a guarantee. The most famous Christian prayer itself—the “Lord’s Prayer”—leads us to ask for *today’s* bread only, not a year’s subscription with front-door delivery. The addict is basically on the same page as just about every child of God: there is enough and there is plenty for today. Each day. And each day, this plenty includes freedom, even freedom to wander and err. But day by day the city of Jerusalem is restored to safety and protection, through the work of a community turning to God; and a new vision of life and citizenry gets engraved in the people’s heart through daily disciplines of work, struggle, surrender and spiritual growth. We can also be edified and built up through our day to day walk in recovery. We can find, sometimes find again, the true self God intended us to be. We can work, and struggle and fight as a member of the human race, yet know peace, sanity, and even joy. We can learn to depend, each day in the moment, and we can grow. And at some point,

though the choice is never taken away and the Sirens never stop singing, we look to the madness of the deceptive appeal of addiction, shake our heads, take the actions we have been disciplined into and which continue to build us up, and say; “Why would I trust a lie? I have a place, a livable residence in my own skin, my City Inside. Why would I choose death over life? In me there is enough insanity to make the wrong choice again; but now there is a wall around me; inside the wall there is a city with friends, allies, guides. Together we are learning to live and work with God. He can certainly do for me what I can never do for myself. I trust Him, not how I feel. I choose to accept my weakness and gracefully ask for the help I need from my brothers and sisters. I choose life today.”

I have no further conclusion on Nehemiah’s story and how its images can illuminate or encourage our recovery journey. But I would like to share a post-script about what my personal struggle has been and what my own personal understanding of God is at this point in my unended recovery journey.

Chapter 12 – Post-script: snapshots into a personal journey

*Who am I? This of the Other? Am I one person today and tomorrow another? Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?*¹²¹

*It was a true, and of necessity a partial revelation—partial in order to be true.*¹²²

A bit of personal history

Let us start with the positive.

I have so far had a life that many would consider rich and “successful”, both personally and professionally. My wife and I have two wonderful teenage children, and we marvel at the unique opportunity of using “wonderful” and “teenage” in the same sentence.

We have taken some risks making our work mostly in developing countries. While this has often left us broke—which is quite different from being poor—it has paid off in the end in terms of friendships, life and professional experiences. I feel privileged working in international development, with people that are always stimulating and sometimes simply amazing. We have had an active spiritual life in (and out of) churches in different countries and, even though I particularly rarely feel totally at home in any given church and have sometimes wandered off in isolated paths, we find ourselves after over 20 years of marriage loving God, loving each other, and loving our children.

Although I hope that my writing was welcoming for people of all faiths (including those without a “faith label”) and walks of life, the reader may have gleaned from the references I used that I call myself a Christian (although in this world the term does not always carry the same meaning to all). I became a Christian through a personal experience which I lived when I was about fifteen years old. Through thick and thin this has been one of the defining experiences of my life. Later on, there was a point where I felt such despair because of the addiction I lived with that I started seeing God as the “Cosmic Sadist” C.S. Lewis speaks about.¹²³ But at the end of a long journey, I was led back into a relationship with God. That was more than 15 years ago.

Now for the other side of the coin.

While all of the above is true, I have also lived since my teenage years with something I only came to recognize some years ago as an addiction. It is difficult to summarize in a few lines 25 years of struggle with an invisible enemy which tore at the heart of my sanity. While this book might present insights into the devastating manifestations of this illness, I think it useful to share some of the features of this malady as it has affected me. Those suffering from any kind of addiction will certainly recognize some patterns here, even though the specifics vary with people.

As a teenager, after a mind-blowing discovery of “erotic” literature and then later pornographic magazines, I rapidly started using compulsive masturbation as an escape from reality, using the books and pictures available around me on a more and more frequent basis. There would be years to go through on the subject of how this developed, but I will spare the reader. Some may think that experimenting with pornography and masturbation is nothing but a normal developmental stage toward sexual maturity. If a vivid portrayal of “compulsive” even “ritualistic” masturbation might not be enough to disprove this opinion, I would suggest that the 25 years that followed definitely disprove all terms of the equation “normal,” “developmental,” and “maturity,” at least in my experience.

A few years before going to college I had the spiritual experience I mentioned above. By this I mean that I had a life-changing spiritual experience where I recognized Jesus as being alive, able to touch my life, and asking me to walk each day rooted in that reality (rather than based on how smart and ambitious I felt). I know this sounds crazy if you have no personal reference to relate to, but that’s what I did or tried to do from that day on.

For a few years after this conversion I actually lived a life free of the odd, shameful and embarrassing compulsive practices. I progressed successfully through college, met my future wife, started dating her, got engaged and got married. It almost sounds like the end of the story, but it is not. I was still an addict, though I didn’t know it. It was a matter of time before life, and maybe exposure to some media revived seductive and obsessive ideas, which once again totally overwhelmed me. No matter how much I protested, kicked and screamed, these ideas (which I now recognize as

lust) would occupy my thoughts and come back relentlessly until some compulsive action (usually masturbation) would “free me” from them. At least for a short while, until the cycle started again. There were times when I fought valiantly; there were times when I gave up and rolled over in capitulation. I spent many hours and many nights actually fighting with myself; unable to give up on the idea, yet unwilling to carry on with its obsessive command. I think it was years before I was so tired of fighting that I would actually purchase pornographic magazines for myself (those of my youth had been “loaners” from, no doubt, well-meaning friends).

Cruising the red-light district followed. For years, as the addiction progressed and increasingly affected me, I spent more time fighting myself, unable to break the deadlock of wanting so passionately something I abhorred so much, than simply indulging it. I think I spent hours of my life walking around the literature sales points, clubs or districts where my lust could be satisfied, yet not actually going in. With time the resistance to the unrelenting compulsion lost strength. Only a few times did my behavior cross the boundary of socially-acceptable norms. Although not public in nature, these episodes were enough to dispel any notion of normalcy about my path.

The problem was never stopping the behavior, but staying stopped. Over the years I had many periods of freedom from the obsession and compulsion. Because I had no understanding of addiction, I would always assume that I had put behind me a pattern of action I could not even recognize as really my own.

At some point I felt so sick with the disconnect (hypocrisy) between what I believed and wanted to do, and what I actually engaged in, that I dissociated myself not only from the church, but also from God. I started resenting Him, hating Him, identifying Him as an unjust oppressor who would doom me to a pitiful struggle and refuse to free me.

Needless to say those were harsh years at home. They were painful to an extent where divorce would have been natural had it not been for the grace of God (and the fact that my wife and I would have killed each other before relinquishing our children). But at some point of this journey into madness, little by little and over a number of years, God drew me back through friends and books which challenged my understanding of His grace, and gave me some hope again, until the day where I essentially felt that He

stood beside me and challenged me to surrender. I heard no audible voice, but it is as if God had asked me then; “Are you through? Have you had enough?” And the call was for me to accept His love and embrace with no further question asked. I had suffered enough in my own rage; I had seen enough of what it did to my family; so I accepted without understanding. I think the term is I “surrendered.”

From there I started rebuilding my life, including rebuilding my marriage. And my behavior improved 99%.

But 99% is not 100%. And every now and then the old patterns again came over me. With the same consequences. The difference with the past was twofold. First, there seems to have been some containment of my behaviors, in terms of frequency, respect for social norms and risk taking. Next, and perhaps more lastingly, I embraced the concept of grace. This five-letter word is probably the one thing that has kept me alive through the more tumultuous years that would still come. I could be overtaken by lust and “sin,” and yet I could come to God, expect forgiveness and acceptance and try to walk again with Him. Again, and again, and again, and again. O yes, it reeked of hypocrisy, but my past experience told me I would rather bear that added shame than try again to make it alone. Grace covered both addiction and hypocrisy, I suppose.

I still did not understand that I was an addict. And two processes were ongoing and gained speed until I hit a wall again.

First, lust never gives up; it is like the appeal of alcohol to the alcoholic, relentlessly imposing its demand. There were periods of progress with some distance from acting out the addiction. These allowed my family to move through life somehow, and even see some sunshine. But the disease always naturally tended to progress and push my behavior through new boundaries.

The other process was that addiction of any kind, at least addiction to lust, destroys us from the inside out, and not just through our behaviors. I took my family in a journey through anger, resentment, dissatisfaction, restlessness, and bitterness. My wife was not aware of my sexual behavior (though I addressed some of it when we started mending our marriage), but she had to live, deal and ultimately also respond with anger and discontentment to my not-so-latent rage, if only for her own self-protection. It transformed our relationship. It transformed us.

Finally, late in the 1990's I entered the world of modern technology and gained access to the Internet. For the following year and a half my life spiraled again and in a new way out of control. Although I continued to progress professionally, I was being eaten alive by sexual acting out through the Internet.

I also used the Internet to look for information on sexual addiction, almost as soon as I started navigating it. It took me 18 months to finally find something that was both relevant and helpful, essentially through the writings of Patrick Carnes¹²⁴ and from there to different sexual addiction recovery groups (see the appendix for contact information to some recovery groups). That is when I recognized that I was a sex addict, and started discovering what these different 12-step fellowships could offer. I am grateful for what each offered me in those early days and I finally found a recovery home in the fellowship I continue to be in until this day.

Finding those groups was like finding fresh, cold water after a long walk in the sun. I wrote the following early on when I discovered friends who would stand beside me, share my burden, and help me find my life back:

A thousand defeats until victory

There are a thousand defeats to victory, A thousand wounds before the soothing balm, A thousand disillusion to guide us to the truth. It is weak and in defeat that I have found His hand, My knees bent, my head bowed under a thousand insults, After a thousand surrenders and a thousand failures.

At last I cried: "I am lost!"

Then I heard His voice, surrounded by a thousand friends; I found a path of rest, a path of salvation.

No one tramples the earth careless, shouts prideful, nor speaks haughty, They speak with regards, with words of tenderness; all watch over their steps, Yet their voices resound loudly and their feet mark the ground for others to follow.

I have lived a thousand defeats, and through them found the victory, I have bent my knee, He has lifted me, I have raised my arms to surrender, and someone seized my hand.

There are a thousand defeats that lead to victory, Time and years matter not, To reach that day is worth the loss of a thousand years

There are a thousand defeats until victory.

I wrote these words years ago, but they still ring true today. Trying to take the actions of a program of recovery has become part of my life and walk. So, although I expect that the reader of this book will have a faith of his or her own, different in nature if not in name from mine, I would like to describe how I see the “God of my understanding” in this tumultuous journey.

The God of my understanding

A disclaimer

Stating one’s personal faith in specific words tends to be frowned upon in this day and age, unless one is writing for the exclusive benefit of a group already in total adhesion with one’s beliefs and opinions. I hope this is not my case, so I need to explain how I engage in this perilous exercise.

We often try to show tolerance by hiding our experiences behind a religiously-neutral language. I think, however, that we can also be tolerant by accepting that each one of us is different and is going to express his or her experience through specific words and language, conveying specific experiences and understanding. Without the specific words that convey these differences we are being untrue to *all* our spiritual experiences. We may sound less offensive but we lose the opportunity of sharing the true perspective of how each one of us approaches spiritual matters and seeks the truth. For this reason, I prefer to explain the essentials of my faith in my own words, as simply as I can put it, hoping that this will help the reader—regardless of his or her own faith—better understand the “experience strength and hope” that I have been trying to share in these pages.

Another disclaimer

Of course, I ought to start with the caveat that the following are the things I am “coming to believe,” and that at times my actions and attitudes continue to demonstrate contradictory beliefs which I am only slowly learning to shed off, as discussed in Chapter 7. Do I also still hold conflicting beliefs? I must admit that it depends on the hour of the day. There are times of loneliness, fear, disconnection, or simply random occurrences when the old lies of addiction would appear to still hold at least a foothold within my belief system.

It is very much like the well-known story of the old Indian describing his inner turmoil to his grandson. “There are two wolves in me. One is full of pain, bitterness, resentment and rage at the things I have seen. The other wolf remains full of love, joy, and hope for beauty and life. Inside of me the two wolves are fighting to the death,” he says. The little boy asks “Which one will win?” And the old man answers, “The one I feed.”

My recovery is very much about feeding one set of beliefs, as they are established through faith in action, and starving off another set. Most days now, and most of the time in each day, I more firmly hold on to truth rather than lies. And when old deceptions come back around, I have friends, hope, tools and a faithful God to keep me safe, if I so choose.

So, here is what I believe. Most of the time. And more fervently as time goes by.

What I believe

I believe that my Christian faith starts with a *relationship* with Jesus-Christ. The summary of my addict career should make sufficiently clear that this gives me no assurance or illusion of perfection. But “meeting Jesus” at some personal level is an eternal landmark in a spiritual journey, which at last led me to a more complete life in recovery. It’s also worth raising the point that it does not end here, and it most certainly does not start and end with words and creed, but rather it is to be discovered through life and truth-in-action.

I believe that God is love, but love itself—or what we imagine love to be—should not be our God.¹²⁵ God’s essential nature is to love, but anything surrounded by loving feelings is not necessarily divine.

I believe that God was incarnated in Jesus. When Jesus said “I am the way, the truth, and the life,”¹²⁶ he was making a statement about how he perfectly exemplified and demonstrated the nature of God the Father. Jesus is unique and yet, because God has always been the God of the living, he chooses to find us in all the diversity of our lives, whichever label we may carry.

I believe that God will give everything for us, not because He doesn’t see any fault in us, but precisely because He sees the darkness of our heart, and yet still loves us.

I believe that God loves all of us and pursues us, whether we call Him by His true name, by another name, or even when we claim to carry His name yet misrepresent His true nature. That is why the best we can always get to is a God “of our understanding.” It is through practice and living that we learn to surrender and to form true beliefs (a “faith that works”.) That is why we cannot be wise by staying in study rooms and even focusing on the bible, the “word of God.” We come to the knowledge of God by combining learning (intelligence, starting through reading His word or hearing it spoken in the testimony of others) and meditation (inspiration nourished by prayer), with action (obedience, reaching to our neighbors, and daily acts of surrender).

I believe that God is the source of all life and of all that is good in our lives, regardless of what we believe or do not believe in. God’s love is as great for “Christians” as it is for Muslims, Jews, Agnostics, Atheists, Communists, Republicans, National Heroes and Terrorists, Saints and Whores. There are many things we take for granted, take the credit for, or consider happy accidents, which are signs of the presence of God and His care for us, whether we acknowledge Him or not. There are also many pains and terrible torments which pointlessly strike us and lead us to question the existence of a loving and powerful entity. People of faith are quite generally less comfortable discussing the presence of God in those tragedies. I know I am. It is one question that has been discussed in many theological and philosophical treaties: how does a loving all-powerful God allow so much suffering in the world?¹²⁷ I may not have the tools or time to discuss it here; but suffice to say for the moment that I also believe that a loving God, a caring God, can be recognized and found even in the absurd, random, unjust and revolting tragedies which strike us so often.

Finally, I believe that faith in Jesus-Christ is not a set of beliefs, a statement of faith about things to come, the value of a man-God as an example, followed by a decision to walk a deserving and valuable moral existence on our own. My faith in Jesus is based on the recognition of my inner inability to live this moral existence even when I choose to; my powerlessness to overcome the flaws that prevent me from even discerning fully a path for life. It is also based on the acceptance that my best understanding inspired by the best spiritual reading and teaching I can get my hands on will not allow me to be and act as the person I want to be in the moment. My faith

is that He is *alive* (that is, he historically died under a Roman consul, and bodily resurrected from this death in a unique, scientifically impossible event); He is *personal*, approachable, and responding to our individual questions (though not always as I would wish it). Bottom line, what makes me a Christian is not a set of beliefs; unfortunately it is not either a greater ability to live a moral life, except through learning day-by-day how to surrender and how to live. What makes me a Christian is a day-to-day walk in a relationship with Christ, who offered me faith and who promises to lead me to its completion. As in recovery—a journey of faith might be nothing more than a lifelong recovery from life itself—it all starts with simple actions: getting on my knees, calling out for help in surrender, and simply being willing and ready to make a life-changing encounter one day at a time.

I have often questioned the itinerary that this journey takes, and even more often not felt particularly spiritual before my morning cup of coffee. Yet I have believed and believe stronger now than ever that He is here, that He can be trusted, that He can be followed, and that I can dialogue with Him (granted the dialogue is sometimes not as straightforward as ordering food at Subway, but it is also more rewarding and life-changing.)

In short, I think that my personal understanding of God means one of two things: either the one commonly called Jesus (or Issa, or Yeshuah depending on your preferred spelling) is alive, personal, loving, and wanting to interact with us; or I am insane. Of course the case for the latter holds a lot of water and I can difficultly argue against it. This is why God has to be met individually and will grow in us as we grow in our personal understanding of Him. The answer of Jesus to those who questioned his true identity was, “come and see,”¹²⁸ not “repeat after me.”

If the God of your understanding is not this Messiah, or Christ; or if Jesus as you understand Him does not sound like the person I understand Him to be, this does not have to oppose us. If you suffer from the debilitating and destructive illness of addiction, I hope you can follow what *you* understand of God in actions of recovery today. His cooperation in saving our neck does not depend on doctrinal orthodoxy on

our part, but on our acceptance of what is and on rigorous honesty. This we can maybe already share.

Start rebuilding the city wall you need to live life to its fullest. Help me hold the gate. Let us help each other fight off the oppressors from the inside and from the outside. Let me help you stand watch over your corner of the wall. Help me raise the stones that protect us from the random attacks of thirst, greed, lust, fear, pride, and loneliness. Let us surrender together to One who “can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.” Let us be guided into a new way of life by the God each one of us can understand a little better today, at least enough to let go, trust, find courage, and build. If we do so, certainly “more will be revealed.”

Let us continue to seek, to ask, to hear, and to receive more revelation as we put in practice what understanding we have already received, including by listening to each other. With grace, honesty, hard work, surrender, and a love of the truth, let us learn to know, serve and love the God of our understanding as we serve each other in this messy and fun unended life.

Who knows where He will lead you and me?

Who knows the beauty and freedom we will discover in our restored City Inside?

Appendix – Contact information to some recovery groups

Following are names and contact information of different recovery families. The information listed under “About the group” comes from the groups’ own documentation, usually web sites.

Name	About the group	Contact information
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)	“Alcoholics Anonymous® is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking... Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.”	Alcoholics Anonymous Grand Central Station P.O. Box 459 New York, N.Y. 10163 www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/
Al-Anon/Alateen	“The Al-Anon Family Groups are a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems. We believe alcoholism is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid recovery. “ “For over 50 years, Al-Anon (which includes Alateen for younger members) has been offering hope and help to families and friends of alcoholics. It is estimated that each alcoholic affects the lives of at least four other people... alcoholism is truly a family disease. No matter what relationship you have with an alcoholic, whether they are still drinking or not, all who have been affected by someone else’s drinking can find solutions that lead to serenity in the Al-Anon/Alateen fellowship.”	1600 Corporate Landing Parkway Virginia Beach, VA 23454-5617 Tel: (757) 563-1600 Fax: (757) 563-1655 www.al-anon.alateen.org/
Christians in Recovery (CIR)	“Almost everyone has the need to recover from or overcome something in their lives. Christians in Recovery® (CIR) is a group of recovering Christians dedicated to mutual sharing of faith, strength and hope as we live each day in recovery. We work to regain and maintain balance and order in our lives through active discussion of the 12 Steps, the Bible, and experiences in our own recovery from abuse, family dysfunction, depression, anxiety, grief, relationships and/or addictions of alcohol, drugs, food, pornography, sexual addiction, etc.”	Christians in Recovery, Inc. P.O. Box 4422 Tequesta, FL 33469 USA www.christians-in-recovery.com/
Christian Recovery International	“A coalition of ministries dedicated to helping the Christian community become a safe and helpful place for people recovering from addiction, abuse or trauma.”	Christian Recovery International PO Box 215 Brea, Ca 92822 www.christianrecovery.com/
International Substance Abuse and Addiction Coalition	“ISAAC is an organisation that seeks to equip and enable individuals and projects around the world to be more effective in their ministries as they work to positively prevent and/or reduce the problems related to substance abuse and addiction. ISAAC seeks to encourage its members and others involved in addiction related work to work together to encourage one another, share information, training and expertise and to undertake joint activities such as research. We strongly encourage the setting up of local and special interest networks.”	ISAAC International Office 21a Woodlands Avenue Burghfield Common Berkshire RG7 3HU England Tel/Fax: +44 (0)118 983 6684 info@isaacinternational.com http://www.isaacinternational.com/

Group	About the group	Contact information
Narcotics Anonymous (NA)	"NA is a nonprofit fellowship or society of men and women for whom drugs had become a major problem. We meet regularly to help each other stay clean. We are not interested in what or how much you used but only in what you want to do about your problem and how we can help."	World Service Office in Los Angeles PO Box 9999 Van Nuys, California 91409 USA Telephone (818) 773-9999 Fax (818) 700-0700 http://www.na.org/
S-Anon International Family Groups	"The S-Anon Family Groups are a fellowship of the relatives and friends of sexually addicted people who share their experience, strength and hope in order to solve their common problems." S-Anon states, "If you have been affected by someone else's sexual behavior, you can find help in S-Anon, whether or not that person seeks recovery from sexual addiction."	P.O. Box 111242 Nashville, TN 37222-1242 TEL: (615) 833-3152 sanon@sanon.org http://www.sanon.org/
Sexaholics Anonymous (SA)	"Sexaholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover." SA considers that, "The sexaholic has taken himself or herself out of the whole context of what is right or wrong. He or she has lost control, no longer has the power of choice, and is not free to stop. Lust has become an addiction. Our situation is like that of the alcoholic who can no longer tolerate alcohol and must stop drinking altogether but is hooked and cannot stop. So it is with the sexaholic, or sex drunk, who can no longer tolerate lust but cannot stop. Thus, for the sexaholic, any form of sex with one's self or with partners other than the spouse is progressively addictive and destructive."	Sexaholics Anonymous International Central Office P.O. Box 3565 Brentwood, TN 37024 Phone: (615) 370-6062 Toll-free: (866) 424-8777 Fax: (615) 370-0882 saico@sa.org https://www.sa.org/
Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)	"Sex Addicts Anonymous, SAA, is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other so they may overcome their sexual addiction and help others recover from sexual addiction or dependency." "Sex Addiction can involve a wide variety of practices. Sometimes an addict has trouble with just one unwanted behavior, sometimes with many. A large number of sex addicts say their unhealthy use of sex has been a progressive process. It may have started with an addiction to masturbation, pornography (either printed or electronic), or a relationship, but over the years progressed to increasingly dangerous behaviors. The essence of all addiction is the addicts' experience of powerlessness over a compulsive behavior, resulting in their lives becoming unmanageable."	PO Box 70949 Houston, TX 77270 USA Tel. 713-869-4902; 1-800-477-8191 (US and Canada) info@saa-recovery.org http://www.sexaa.org/

Group	About the group	Contact information
Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (SCA)	<p>“Sexual Compulsives Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other, that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from sexual compulsion. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop having compulsive sex... Our primary purpose is to stay sexually sober and to help others to achieve sexual sobriety. Members are encouraged to develop their own sexual recovery plan, and to define sexual sobriety for themselves. We are not here to repress our God-given sexuality, but to learn how to express it in ways that will not make unreasonable demands on our time and energy, place us in legal jeopardy -- or endanger our mental, physical or spiritual health. SCA is a 12-Step fellowship, inclusive of all sexual orientations, open to anyone with a desire to recover from sexual compulsion.”</p>	<p>P.O. Box 1585, Old Chelsea Station New York, NY 10011 USA: 800 / 977-HEAL International: 1 212 606 3778 http://www.sca-recovery.org/</p>
Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA)	<p>“Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous is a Twelve Step - Twelve Tradition oriented fellowship based on the model pioneered by Alcoholics Anonymous.” “One of the resources we draw on is our willingness to stop acting out in our own personal bottom line addictive behavior on a daily basis. In addition, members reach out to others in the fellowship, practice the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of S.L.A.A. and seek a relationship with a higher power to counter the destructive consequences of one or more addictive behaviors related to sex addiction, love addiction, dependency on romantic attachments, emotional dependency, and sexual, social and emotional anorexia. We find a common denominator in our obsessive, compulsive patterns which renders any personal differences of sexual or gender orientation irrelevant.”</p>	<p>Fellowship-Wide Services P.O. Box 338 Norwood, Massachusetts 02062-0338 U.S.A. Telephone (1) 781-255-8825 Fax: (1) 781-255-9190 info@slaafws.org http://www.slaafws.org/</p>

Endnotes

¹ Nehemiah 2:18

² George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Series I; p.142.

³ Prov 25:28 – Bible quotes are from the New International Version (NIV) English translation. Bible verses are cited as customary, with the book title summary letters, followed by chapter number and verses number after the colon.

⁴ Thomas R. Kelly. *A Testament of Devotion*.

⁵ Now would be a good time for the reader to pause and read once through the book of Nehemiah (only 13 chapters), if he or she is not familiar with it. But I'll offer a summary of "the plot" just in case picking up a bible seems heavy on the wrist.

⁶ This section extensively draws from The Biblical Studies Foundation© (www.bible.org)

⁷ Ez 3

⁸ Ez 4

⁹ Ez 9 :9

¹⁰ Neh 2.

¹¹ Some even contest the validity of the concept of addiction itself, preferring for example to refer to "impulse disorder" or other clinical definitions.

¹² Alcoholics Anonymous. 'Big Book.'

¹³ Charles Dickens; *A tale of two cities*.

¹⁴ Neh 1:3

¹⁵ Neh 1:4-11

¹⁶ Neh 2

¹⁷ Other translations have Dragon or Serpent.

¹⁸ Also translated the Refuse Gate.

¹⁹ This refers to societal impositions on women, not to the individual choice of women (Muslim or from any other religious groups) to wear the hijab (veil) or any other clothing accessory.

²⁰ In this section, I speak mostly of the lust of men for women, but of course lust knows no boundary. Women can also be quite affected by lust, and lust can target the other or the same sex almost equally. For obvious reasons I feel more qualified speaking about this form of lust than the others. There is also probably something relatively unique to the male condition in its sensitivity to female visual triggers and stimuli.

²¹ Neh 9:33-37

²² Thomas R. Kelly. *A Testament of Devotion*.

²³ Mark 9:24

²⁴ Neh 2:19-20

²⁵ Neh 3:7-11

²⁶ Neh 4:9; 7:69

²⁷ Neh 3:6-11; Neh 7:66-72

²⁸ A friend of mine refers to this as a "positive synergy," based on the principle that "a burden shared is a burden halved."

²⁹ I sometimes wonder if some of the hostility of religious groups toward twelve-steppers does not come from the fear that the AA Big Book and its equivalents in other programs will replace the Holy Scriptures. I have no intention of going into discussions about the relative value of "program-approved literature" versus religious writings. To me this discussion is the equivalent of a debate on the relative merits of the Constitution versus the Operating Manual of the lawn-mower. Slightly silly and out of place, whether you're trying to run a republic or mow the lawn. Properly used, the Scriptures reveal to us God's purpose for humanity; twelve-step literature is here to give us experience, strength and hope about the pursuit of sobriety.

I need to thank Neal B. for pointing out another difference. The 12 steps are "suggested steps," and that it can be argued that following "suggestions" requires more active buy-in than conforming to "commandments." (Or maybe the 12 steps recognize that addicts have become so reluctant to follow directions that anything more than a suggestion would face rejection at first sight.)

³⁰ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Series I.

³¹ Neh 2:17

³² Neh 9:22

³³ Alcoholics Anonymous, Chapter 5. Page 58.

³⁴ The reader may be concerned putting an emphasis on these four traits in God is excessively Christian or Judeo-Christian. But let's put the question this way: if there is a Higher Power we want to surrender our will and our life to, what kind of a Higher Power would He be if He were either un-loving, un-holy, un-graceful, or un-true?

³⁵ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons, Series I*; p.138.

³⁶ Alcoholics Anonymous

³⁷ Alcoholics Anonymous

³⁸ Neh 2:7-8

³⁹ Neh 2:18

⁴⁰ Neh 3

⁴¹ This is called "personal house-cleaning" in 12-step jargon.

⁴² Neh 2:17

⁴³ Neh 3:3;14

⁴⁴ Neh 3:6

⁴⁵ The term "servant" comes to our modern ears as something perhaps pejorative, but it shouldn't necessarily be so. A servant is "one who serves;" not a slave, not someone of lesser quality and nature than anybody else. There are two directions to explore to understand our unease with the concept. The first is the human history of the strong dominating the weaker and making the latter work in a position of forced service or servitude. This is better left to the political and social historians. The second direction to explore is perhaps our individualistic and ego-driven rejection of the notion that *we* should be servants of one another. For those wanting to follow the example of one Jesus of Nazareth, his example—from washing the feet of his followers, to the promise that he will serve the wine in a big party in heaven—should at least challenge our attitude toward being called "a servant."

⁴⁶ Neh 3:5

⁴⁷ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons, Series I*; p.140.

⁴⁸ In my "theology" both attitudes are wrong and based on a wrong belief system; although the attitude of defiance is more readily criticized by a lot religious groups, who are quite willing to tolerate a fearful attitude among their members. They have not considered that it is just the temperament of the individual that differs in the two cases, not the underlying belief system about who God is.

⁴⁹ Neh 3

⁵⁰ Neh 3:10

⁵¹ Neh 3:17

⁵² Neh 4:9

⁵³ Neh 4: 6

⁵⁴ Neh 4:10

⁵⁵ There are two caricatures of the human condition we must refute. The first is usually thought of as a "liberal" slant. In this, personal responsibility is downplayed and every behavior can be explained for social and societal factors. The second is more frequently associated with a "conservative" bias. In this individuals are fully and solely responsible for all their actions; and any reference to social factors is just making excuses for peoples' poor choices. Of course both these caricatures are utterly ridiculous and easily disproved simply by walking through life with one's eyes opened. While I have met some people leaning toward the "liberal" extreme and underplaying personal responsibility (at least much more than I would); I have even more often been stunned to find friends of mine not just leaning but almost totally embracing the "conservative" caricature I have just described. This text does not pretend to enter this discussion, since it focuses much more on the individual path to recovery, than on social, policy and political issues which affect human behaviors.

⁵⁶ Of course all dependencies are not healthy. See Chapter 9.

⁵⁷ G. K. Chesterton (1874 - 1936), *Orthodoxy*; p. 14

⁵⁸ Freya Madeline Stark

⁵⁹ Neh 3:1

⁶⁰ Neh 4:10

⁶¹ Neh 4:14

⁶² Neh 4: 16-18

⁶³ Neh 4:20

⁶⁴ Demosthenes, *Third Olynthia*

⁶⁵ James Harvey Robinson

⁶⁶ Sexaholics Anonymous. 'White Book'

⁶⁷ Neh 6:16-18

⁶⁸ Heb 11:15-16

⁶⁹ Thomas R. Kelly. *A Testament of Devotion*.

⁷⁰ Neh 2:19

⁷¹ Neh 4

⁷² Neh 4:12

⁷³ Neh 4:9

⁷⁴ Neh 4:13

⁷⁵ Neh 3; 7:1-3; 70-73

⁷⁶ Neh 4:16-18

⁷⁷ Neh 6:1-9

⁷⁸ See the Annex for contact information of some of these recovery programs.

⁷⁹ Neh 9

⁸⁰ This should not be read as an attack on transactional analysis, about which I really don't know enough, but maybe one on one of its reflections in the late 20th Century Western culture. The latter I have observed more closely and frequently.

⁸¹ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Series I; p.145.

⁸² Neh 3:5. See the (very tedious) description of work boundaries in the entire Chapter 3 of Nehemiah. In Neh 4:10 an entire tribal group (Judah) comes to doubt the feasibility of the project. See Neh 6 on Hebrew collaboration with Tobiah, the enemy, including through false prophecies (Neh 6:12). And the entire Chapter 9 of Nehemiah addresses the ultimate purpose and vision behind the effort, which we gather from the story of Ezra had a chronic tendency to be forgotten.

⁸³ Alcoholics Anonymous. Chapter 3.

⁸⁴ Prov 16:18

⁸⁵ See Chapter 5 and Neh 3:5

⁸⁶ Thanks again to Neal B. for pointing to Charles Dickens' "David Copperfield" and the character Uriah Heep as a classic illustration of this kind of false humility.

⁸⁷ Ez 6:13-18

⁸⁸ Sexaholic Anonymous, 'White Book'.

⁸⁹ Neh 2:2

⁹⁰ Neh 4:10

⁹¹ Neh 6:10

⁹² Neh 6:17

⁹³ Sexaholic Anonymous. White Book.

⁹⁴ Neh 4:13-14

⁹⁵ Neh 5:1-5

⁹⁶ Alcoholics Anonymous. Chapter 5.

⁹⁷ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Series I; p.139.

⁹⁸ Neh 6:15

⁹⁹ Neh 6:16

¹⁰⁰ This census matters now that the wall defines the city because residency has become meaningful for setting the rules of community life. The wall is a physical boundary; the census draws the community boundary. Even in our day, rule-of-law based societies have institutionalized census in their laws, even their constitution.

¹⁰¹ Neh 13:6

¹⁰² Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, 636-37. In: *The Biblical Studies Foundation*© (www.bible.org)

¹⁰³ Neh 5:5-12

¹⁰⁴ Neh 13:10-15

¹⁰⁵ The Christian addition—the New Testament—essentially adds to the spiritual understanding of sexuality and relationships developed in the Old Testament.

¹⁰⁶ Neh 8

¹⁰⁷ Alcoholics Anonymous. Step 12.

¹⁰⁸ Hos 11:1-4

¹⁰⁹ It is probably fairer to specify that faith *in the living God* in as much as we understand Him, is the source we can turn to for the courage we need each day. Even though we only approach this God "as we understand Him," faith in doorknobs, for example, might be less inspiring or transforming.

¹¹⁰ Luk 1:74

¹¹¹ See the much quoted Jn 3:16 verse.

¹¹² For those who have felt burned by religion, the relationship with God can take a new meaning and perspective. In this comes the rediscovery of worship. Worship is just an expression of love, going

back to the true God who has loved us throughout our life, instead of directing this love to a bottle, a picture, a mind-altering substance, or a person we are deceiving ourselves about.

¹¹³ C.S. Lewis. *The Great Divorce*.

¹¹⁴ Neh 6

¹¹⁵ Neh 7 and Neh 11

¹¹⁶ Neh 12:24-48

¹¹⁷ Neh 9

¹¹⁸ Neh 10

¹¹⁹ Neh 13

¹²⁰ Elliott E. Johnson, "Ezra and Nehemiah," [unpublished class notes in 327 Seminar in Old Testament Historical Literature, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 1989], 5. In: *The Biblical Studies Foundation*© (www.bible.org)

¹²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Who am I?*

¹²² George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Series I; p.26.

¹²³ C.S. Lewis. *A grief observed*.

¹²⁴ Patrick Carnes has released a number of books on the topic, among which the landmark "Out of the shadows," and "Don't call it love."

¹²⁵ C.S. Lewis. *The four loves*.

¹²⁶ Jn 14:6

¹²⁷ See for example C.S. Lewis; *The problem of pain*. And Philip Yancey; *Where is God when it hurts?*

¹²⁸ Jn 1:39