

## A Life Remembered and, Hopefully, a Lesson Learned

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Some feel abuse of alcohol and drugs is a moral issue. People make bad choices. They are inconsiderate, thoughtless and selfish. And sometimes their choices have disastrous consequences. On July day, a tragic boating accident took the life of a 10 year boy. We received a message from the superintendent of our school district relating the details of the accident where a boater who was driving under the influence of alcohol and cocaine ran over this child. Our community was shaken and saddened by the loss of this vibrant and loved child. Many were angry at the boater and his choices to abuse substances and not pay attention to those trying to wave him off. He apparently wasn't even aware he hit the child and had to be chased down and brought back to the scene of the accident.

When the medical and psychiatric communities talk about substance abuse as an illness, eyes glaze over and arguments quickly begin that we are only making excuses for bad behavior that cause others so much grief. I often feel this way too. However, as a counselor, I also try to understand. When the opportunity arises, when someone who has abused alcohol and drugs asks for counseling, I want to get pass my sadness, hurt and moral outrage to help.

We all know drinking alcohol and drug use can cause many problems. In May, 2013 the American Psychiatric Association released its new diagnostic manual. Key to understanding substance abuse is the idea of loss of consistent control in choices around use of addictive substances (cocaine, uppers, downers, marijuana, hallucinogens, etc.). You stop by a bar to have a drink and end up closing it. You know you drink too much and vow to cut down, only to find yourself repeatedly unsuccessful. Your life gets oriented around your use—in obtaining, in using and in recovering from substance effects. Your use creates repeated absences or poor work performance. Your job gets in jeopardy or even lost. If you are a student, you may be suspended or expelled from school for substance abuse. In most cases your school work declines and you lose interest in it. If you are a homemaker, your children may be neglected or household work doesn't get done due. As a friend or family member, you feel hurt, disappointed, angry and discouraged when your loved one continues use despite the persistent or recurrent problems it causes and over your repeated complaints and pleadings that they stop. As much



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as we hope for moderation or abstinence, abuse continues. Eventually, life gets smaller and smaller for everyone. Important social activities are given up. You stop going to church, clubs or gatherings of family or friends. Vocational ambitions get lost. You hold onto your jobs and hope at best you can keep it. You don't exercise, bike, play tennis, golf or other sports. You give up hobbies. You just focus on getting, using and recovering from our substance use. And you recurrently use substances in dangerous or hazardous situations. The boater who killed the 10 year old boy had a record indicating he was arrested 16 years ago for driving a boat recklessly under the influence. Doesn't anyone ever learn? This time it was fatal and tragic. Unforgiveable!

Sometimes addiction is described as a thinking disorder—"stinking thinking." We use denial, minimization and blaming to justify our continued choices. We denied that our use is a problem or even that we even use. We underestimate our use's impact on others, our functioning and even our health. We blame others for triggering us to use. We learn to become fundamentally dishonest with ourselves and others.

In the movie, *Flight*, Denzel Washington plays the role of Whip Whitaker, a drunk, drug-using airplane pilot whose vices help him land a crashing plane. The rest of the film finds him dealing with the consequences of his heroics – going to rehab and dealing with a justice system that must decide how to punish him. In the end he comes to believe there is a better way to live—sober and honest. As a counselor, this is what we hope for. In spite of the loss of control, we are left with some choices over what we do have control over. Whip decides to work on a life in recovery, working a program that calls for honesty moment by moment and day by day.

Addiction as a disease can describe with symptoms listed in a psychiatric manual. However, we know the human tragedies that can occur like the boating accident last summer. The Hollywood ending in *Flight* with the miraculous landing of a disabled plane upside down by a substance impaired pilot is not the usual ending. And not everyone who abuses substances comes to accept responsibilities for their actions and seek a life of sobriety and honesty. But for those who do, there is hope.

Tony B., the 10 year boy who died after being struck by a boat on Lake Petite, was remembered as a wonderful, vibrant, fun loving and special boy. "If there is a heaven, and I believe there is, there is no one more qualified to go there than my son," his father said. His sisters, who were tubing with him at the time of the accident, remember him as a best friend, always happy and loving. One sister reflected that forgiveness may never come for the man accused of killing her brother but she believed that Tony would have already forgiven him because that was who Tony was. She commented, "But there wasn't just one victim that day. We're all victims because of this. What I saw, what my family saw, I will never forgive him. All because he wanted to get high that day." The loss of Tony we mourn with his family. And his life and memory we celebrate.