



The Recovery Odyssey II:

Navigating the Path

..... of Sobriety Through Alcoholic Wanderings

To read Homer's *The Odyssey* visit classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.html



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Author's Note: This is the second installment of a series that uses Homer's *The Odyssey* as a vehicle to explain the process of recovery from alcoholism. For the first installment, please see the Fall 2003 issue of *Annals*

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Introduction

Narrative has been used as a method of imparting information since the days of old. In Homer's epic, *The Odyssey*, an ancient narrative doled out life lessons in dynamic detail, displaying dreaded difficulties and delightful diversions. The behavior patterns found in classical myths often run parallel to events in the lives of individuals in contemporary times. Just as Odysseus' voyage home from the Trojan War was fraught with problems and perils, so too is the journey for a modern day martini-mariner in search of the route of recovery and a safe voyage home. Psychotherapists often utilize metaphors and narratives within counseling sessions for clients in recovery from alco-

hol addiction. This article will examine how *The Odyssey* can offer lessons for individuals making the journey toward recovery from alcoholism.

Preparing for Sobriety

Before attempting recovery, an alcoholic must develop a series of sobriety navigational skills. These skills are acquired as one attempts to sail in the midst of life's stormy emotional events. Overcoming these difficulties results in changes in thinking patterns, behavioral habits, and associated emotions. However, before embarking on this journey the voyager must have an understanding of how to manage the ship of his or her sobriety. This is accomplished by practicing the Twelve Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), by steady and consistent rowing involving daily maintenance practices, and by using stars for guidance through an active sponsor. Although sailing the path to sobriety may begin with

the development of strategies for success by acquiring a schedule of AA meetings, continual cruising without relapsing depends upon choosing an appropriately helpful AA group—the most important aspect being frequent contact with a sponsor to guide one along the way.

By analogy, the recovery process is similar to Odysseus' 10-year battle and his 10-year return home. The raid on Ismarus against the Cicones appears to be a turning point, as his crew celebrated their victory for too long and were driven away in a retaliatory attack. Many alcoholics begin the recovery process by overextending revelry until they are confronted with a painful loss and dire outcomes. The only time that an active alcoholic considers ending the battle with the bottle is when the painful consequences outweigh the passing pleasures of alcohol consumption.

Path of the Hero in Recovery

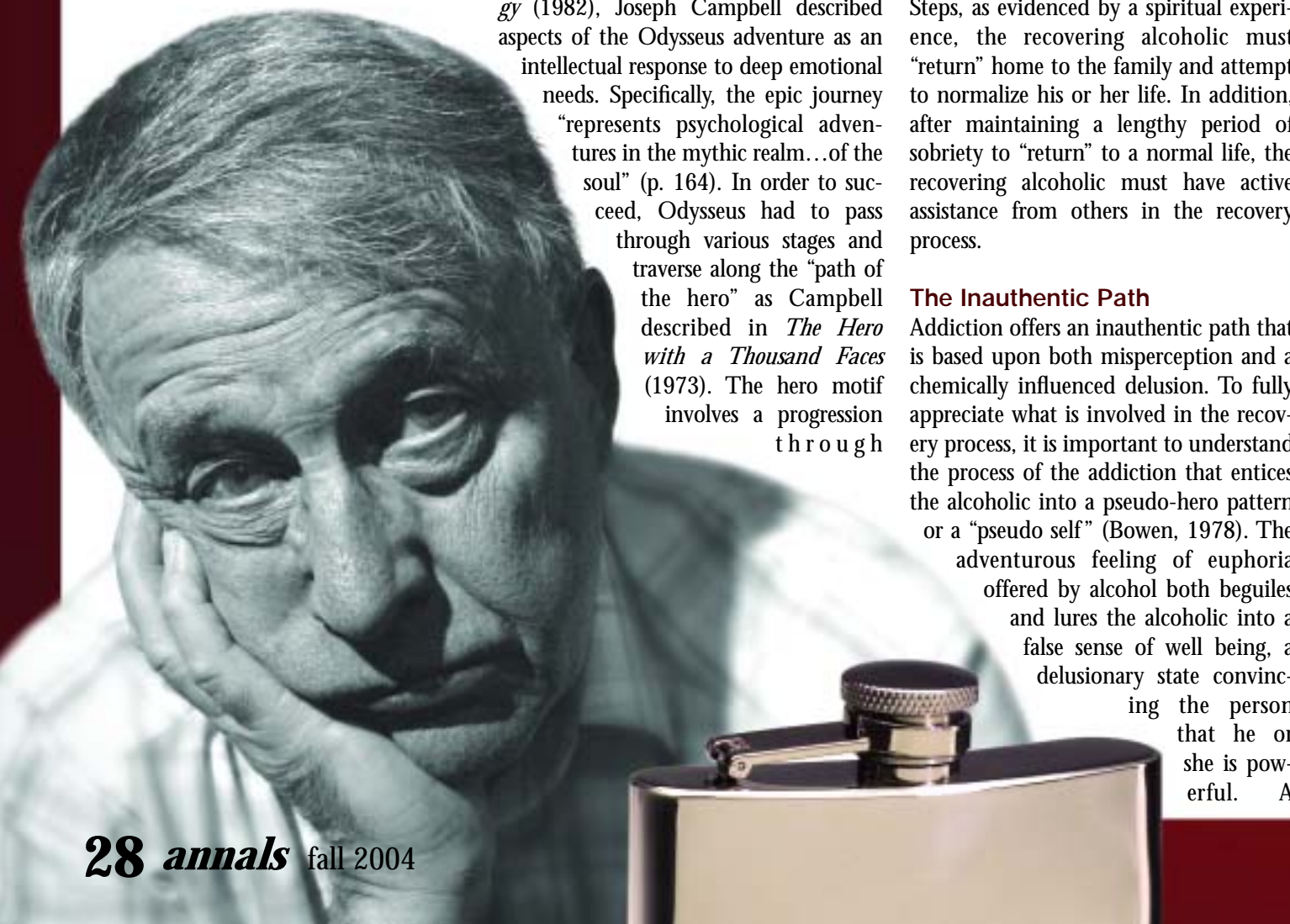
In *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (1982), Joseph Campbell described aspects of the Odysseus adventure as an intellectual response to deep emotional needs. Specifically, the epic journey “represents psychological adventures in the mythic realm...of the soul” (p. 164). In order to succeed, Odysseus had to pass through various stages and traverse along the “path of the hero” as Campbell described in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1973). The hero motif involves a progression through

three stages that include a separation, an initiation, and a return.

The recovery process offers an adventure that demands a rigorous discipline in both thought and deed. The disciplined Twelve Step program of recovery is designed to overcome the seductive wiles of a deadly addiction. Alcohol addiction not only wreaks havoc with the emotions but also wracks the soul with alluring enticements and wrecks the body with physical ailments, which at times lead to death. For recovery to be successful, one must follow Campbell's Path of the Hero. Initially, this process includes a “separation” from the company of those with a compulsion to drink; one must also cease other behaviors associated with drinking. Second, one must become “initiated” into the productive actions in order to make the sobering journey of recovery with the help of a knowledgeable guide (an AA sponsor) who has successfully traversed the path of recovery. Upon successful internalization of the Twelve Steps, as evidenced by a spiritual experience, the recovering alcoholic must “return” home to the family and attempt to normalize his or her life. In addition, after maintaining a lengthy period of sobriety to “return” to a normal life, the recovering alcoholic must have active assistance from others in the recovery process.

The Inauthentic Path

Addiction offers an inauthentic path that is based upon both misperception and a chemically influenced delusion. To fully appreciate what is involved in the recovery process, it is important to understand the process of the addiction that entices the alcoholic into a pseudo-hero pattern or a “pseudo self” (Bowen, 1978). The adventurous feeling of euphoria offered by alcohol both beguiles and lures the alcoholic into a false sense of well being, a delusionary state convincing the person that he or she is powerful. A



simultaneous process includes erasing all fear and worry from one's life. The combined effect of these two processes offer a false sense of reassurance based upon a chemically induced feeling of euphoria. Other undesirable aspects include arrogance based upon ego-inflation, emotional detachment, and disdain for others (Tiebout, 1954). The grandiosity of an inflated ego is misperceived as true power (Sandmaier, 1980) while the alcoholic is under the influence. As the elated effects of drunkenness wear off, the alcoholic is plunged into both fear and worry—emotional states that cry out to be placated and silenced.

The following is the three-fold path of the person addicted to alcohol:

Separation: Answering the call to adventure [euphoria] and subsequent wanderings.

Initiation: Learning of mood changes with alcohol ingestion, followed by actively seeking the use of alcohol and the development of a harmful addiction.

Return: Going back to the bottle in a vain attempt to attain the same euphoria, which is unattainable due to a change in tolerance. The love-trust relationship with alcohol is broken as the person feels betrayed by alcohol and, as a result, develops a mental obsession along with a physical allergy of craving.

The Path of Odysseus

The initial theme of *The Odyssey* is revealed in the first line of the epic poem, where Odysseus is described as “the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course” (Homer, 1997, p. 77). This depiction must be understood both figuratively and literally. In the figurative sense, Odysseus was very clever, as evidenced by his deception in the development of the Trojan Horse and his interactions with Circe and Polyphemus. The literal sense is evidenced by his diverse wanderings of being blown off course and the frequent distractions and diversions he encountered on his journey.

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The events depicted in *The Odyssey* span the 10-year period of Odysseus' wanderings and culminate with his homecoming from the Trojan War. However, these episodes do not appear to offer the coherence of an ongoing plot; instead they seem to be a collection of the stories that Odysseus tells about his past adventures.

The Path of the Alcoholic

The path taken in the epic poem may seem at times to be truncated and convoluted, often resembling the meandering of one under the influence. The winding and weaving pattern appears to be similar to that of an individual in early recovery who has trouble relaying episodes in a clear, coherent, and chronological fashion. Those in recovery also appear to jump from one story to another in a seemingly random fashion. Even after years of sobriety, the alcoholic often resembles Odysseus as “the man of twists and turns” (Homer, 1997, p. 77). One who suffers from alcoholism may develop the same qualities as the substance to which he or she is addicted. Specifically, alcohol is described as being “cunning, baffling, powerful!” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1976, pp. 58-59).

The skilled psychotherapist may utilize the techniques of metaphor to clarify the alcoholic's path by emphasizing the misdirected wanderings that occur within the process of recovery. Consistent behavioral patterns of the alcoholic are detected by the perceptive eye of the psychotherapist. Knowledge of these patterns is helpful in the prediction of future behaviors and the prevention of relapse.

In AA meetings, the members often discuss events related to the recovery process. Some topics of these talks include the current length of sobriety,

various wanderings away from sobriety, the arrival home, and the healing of relationships. At times there are striking similarities to the episodes in *The Odyssey* in personal stories shared by the AA members in their meetings. This process is reflected as the various members tell their war-stories of what they were like, what happened, how they are today, and the need to sponsor others in their quest for recovery. Specifically, the Fagles translation indicated, “... many pains he suffered ... fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home” (Homer, 1997, p. 77).

The Wanderings of Odysseus

Odysseus' adventures on his voyage home from the Trojan War are punctuated with “wanderings.” His desire to return home to be at one with his family was the Greek ideal. Like Odysseus, the alcoholic's yearning to seek out alluring distractions and tantalizing diversions often causes him or her to stray from the path homeward. Such deviations from the path may be preceded by an initial unrealistic anticipation followed by a resulting disappointment. In addition, unfulfilled expectations often occur by being blown off course by an opposing wind. Odysseus' weakness of character appeared in the face of pleasurable temptations, which led to the sacking of the Cicones (ambition for glory), the raid on Polyphemus' cave (greed), and his long sojourn with Circe and Calypso (lust).

The Source of Alcoholic Wanderings

For those in recovery, diversionary wanderings appear in the seeking of momentary thrills. Bowen (1978) described a phenomenon known as differentiation of self. This concept is related to the basic

strength or level of self and is related to the degree to which a one has a "solid self" or solidly held principles by which to live one's life. Bowen contrasts this concept with the "pseudo self" composed of inconsistent life principles that can be corrupted for the exhilarating benefit of the moment. Bowen viewed the lack of differentiation of self as a fusion of the person's emotional and intellectual functions. In essence, the person makes quick, impulsive decisions based upon the perceived emotional gains. Viewed from a different perspective, the lack of differentiation of self is approximately equal to a lack of emotional maturity. These individuals act impetuously by succumbing to the opportunity of a passing pleasure. In addition, people with a poor differentiation of self become stressed easily and display character-compromising behaviors. It is no small wonder that these individuals act in a dysfunctional manner and adapt poorly to stormy life events. They are also prone to addictions and have frequent relapses when attempting recovery.

Behaviors of the person addicted to alcohol often reveal the same pattern, especially in avoiding scrapes with the law or escaping from various consequences. These behaviors tend to baffle those who are not alcoholic. Despite years of sobriety, the person in recovery seems to become obsessed with various activities that appear to be performed for the thrill of the moment. Results from research (Sandoz, 1991) indicate that despite an average sobriety of over 2 years, a group of recovering alcoholics had lower levels of differentiation of self than did a group of non-problem drinkers.

What Lies Beneath

Quite often in early sobriety, other addictions appear while the drinking behavior is held at bay. Although these behaviors and tendencies were previously masked by alcoholism, various dependencies emerge in the forms of workaholism, addiction to substances other than alcohol, gambling, sexual addiction, and others. To stop these addictive behaviors, it is necessary for the

person in recovery to perform daily maintenance with the Twelve Step program. This process helps to rid one of the personal shortcomings and character defects that emerge when faced with instinctive impulses. The members of Odysseus' crew may be viewed as the personification of various defects of character that would lead him astray. Actions are based on lust, greed, pride, fear, anger, and ambition, all of which are empowered by will. Temptations cause one to give way, as noted by AA's co-founder Bill Wilson who said that the will of the alcoholic is "amazingly weakened" (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 7).

The alcoholic's personal shortcomings are identified and inventoried in the 4th step of the Twelve Step process. In the 5th step, the pattern reveals how someone caused a hurt that festered in anger, fear, or resentment, and caused the one in recovery to harm another. These actions are based upon our human instinctual appetites that have become distorted and warped by ambitions and desires. Slowly but surely, the crew of Odysseus perishes by personal actions based on pride, greed, lust, power, or pleasure. With each tempting encounter, the number of his shipmates dwindles until he is left alone to contend with himself.

The End of Wanderings

Perhaps the respite with Calypso represents the chemically induced periods of amnesia known as "blackouts." Odysseus was promised immortality and perpetual youth by the nymph. For the alcoholic, the spell of alcohol casts a wonderful illusion that is known as euphoric recall. All Odysseus need do is agree to stay on the island of Calypso and life will be wonderful. If the alcoholic succumbs to the illusionary lie then recovery is lost.

At one point when his crew was intact Odysseus put wax in their ears. In addition, he had his crew bind him to the mast of the ship. By being bound he was unable to yield to the seductive song of the Sirens, who would lure the unwary to their deaths. So too it is for the person in recovery. A binding commitment must be made to the routine rowing of the Twelve Step

program. A daily dedication of oneself to the ongoing maintenance of sobriety is essential. It is only after the commitment has been made that the wax is removed from one's ears, and by that time one has moved out of troubled waters.

Conclusion

Odysseus was distracted by many diversions, and his path homeward was beset with delays. In a similar fashion, the alcoholic often strays from the path of recovery by directing energy into activities that detract from the quality of sobriety and serenity. The wary sailor must be on watch for storms on the horizon; so too must the savvy seeker of sobriety be on guard against the threat of wandering into another addiction or an alcoholic relapse.

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