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Note From the Author:

One of the dilemmas that I faced in the process of writing this article was that in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous there is the essential declaration in meetings that the person is an "alcoholic." This process is crucial in breaking down the defense mechanism of denial. I agree in principle with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV-Revised (DSM-IV-R), the American Counseling Association and American Psychological Association that specific terms can be limiting, including referring to a person with a label, and I have found their guidelines to be both humane and considerate as I have worked with individuals with developmental disabilities. In light of this, I have attempted to reduce my use of the noun "alcoholic" while still keeping with the spirit of AA.

Introduction



he process of recovery from alcoholism is fraught with difficulties and diversions, which at times resemble the path of Odysseus on his return home from the Trojan War. In fact, the story of Odysseus offers many parallels regarding the trials and tribulations of one who embarks upon the journey of recovery. This article will elaborate upon the various events recorded in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* as related to contemporary issues: The Lotus Eaters (prevalent drug culture), the Floating Islands (poor individuation), Guidance from Tiresias in Hades (help from an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) sponsor), Circe's Island (indulging the appetites), Seductive Song of the Sirens (environmental triggers), Scylla and Charybdis (navigating around anxiety and depression), Calypso (continued absence from family), and Vanquishing the Suitors (getting rid of character defects).

Pre-recovery: Preparing for the Long Journey Home

Just as Odysseus supplied his ships for the return home, the person who suffers from the addiction of alcoholism must provide for the lifelong journey in recovery. However, before attempting recovery, the individual must develop navigational skills by learning how to manage the process of living sober by using stars (other AA members with lengthy sobriety) for guidance, including daily maintenance through the AA 12-Step Program and active sponsorship.

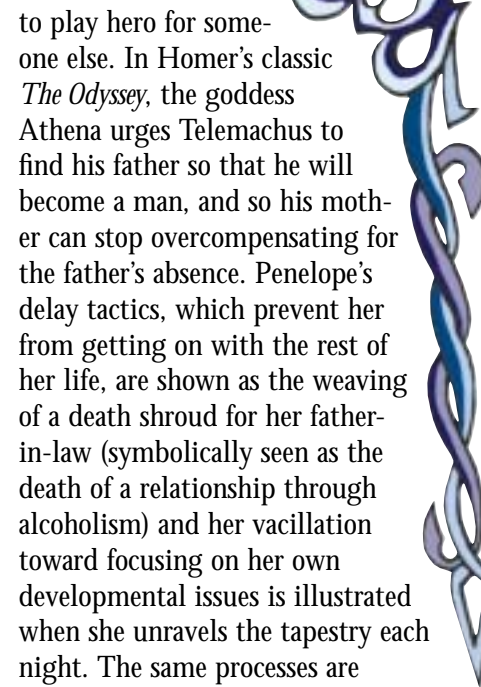
Trading

Addictions &

Family Developmental Tasks

One of the first wayward stops by Odysseus was with the Lotus Eaters, who represent our contemporary drug culture. Many physicians offer medications in order to help the alcoholic escape from the consequences of anxiety while beginning the initial sobriety process. This is not a recent phenomenon; both AA co-founders Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith indicated the use of drugs in their initial attempts at sobriety (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1976; *Pass It On*, 1984). Drug use distracts from the primary goals in recovery: sobriety, serenity, and service to others. Even after the initial stage of sobriety, other compulsive behaviors may be substituted, including drug use, gambling, pornography, Internet addiction, compulsive overeating, and addiction to work.

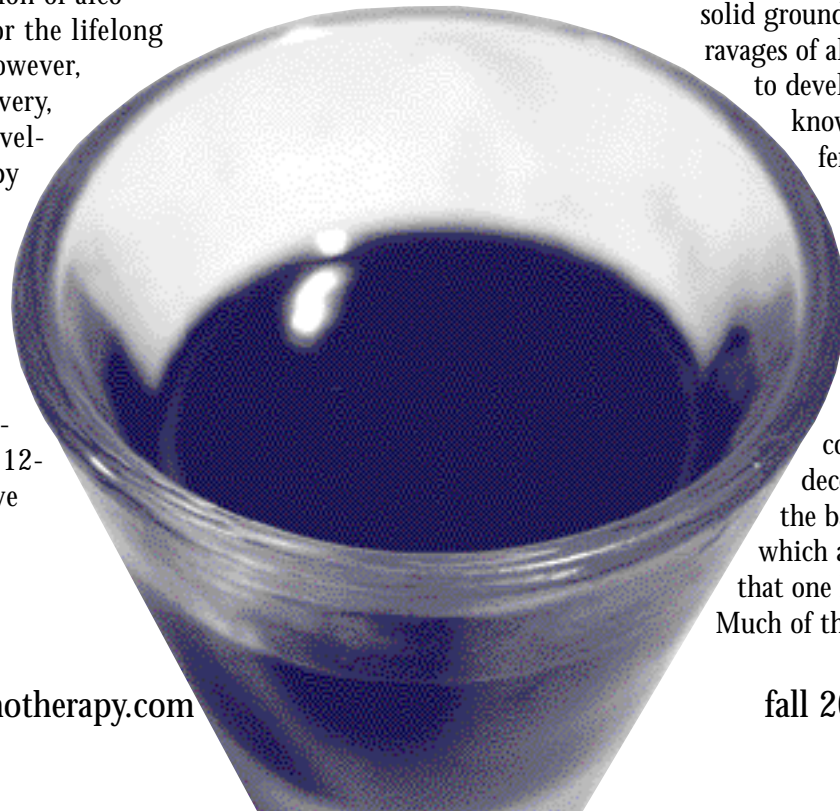
The family members undergo a change as the alcoholic parent is away, and must avoid developing addictions of their own. Family members become resigned to that fact that even if the alcoholic is physically present, he or she remains emotionally aloof, detached, and ready to leave the family



to play hero for someone else. In Homer's classic *The Odyssey*, the goddess Athena urges Telemachus to find his father so that he will become a man, and so his mother can stop overcompensating for the father's absence. Penelope's delay tactics, which prevent her from getting on with the rest of her life, are shown as the weaving of a death shroud for her father-in-law (symbolically seen as the death of a relationship through alcoholism) and her vacillation toward focusing on her own developmental issues is illustrated when she unravels the tapestry each night. The same processes are observed within the family of the alcoholic, as family members often put their lives on hold until the alcoholic returns to the family in a sober state.

No Terra Firma: Life on a Floating Island

The individual recovering from alcoholism resembles Odysseus, who enjoys the revelry on the floating Island of King Aeolus as he fails to stand on solid ground. Analogously, due to the ravages of alcoholism, this person fails to develop a solid sense of self, known as individuation or differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978). King Aeolus gives Odysseus a bag that contains all of the unfavorable winds. The illusion of controlling the unfavorable winds maintains the delusion of having no consequences. This self-deception is maintained until the bag of winds is opened, which accompanies the realization that one has been blown off course. Much of the energy that is used for



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overcoming life's daily struggles, strengthening character, and enhancing personal self-development is diverted to the pleasurable good times offered through excessive drinking. As long as the alcoholic has the "party on" mentality, no emotional growth can take place. The alcoholic relishes the illusionary effect that alcohol has on his or her perception. The bag of winds represents a repressed spirituality – spiritual development is held at bay because of the false transcendence offered by the alcoholic revelry. As the bag (inflated ego) deflates, the person



understands through painful consequences that he or she is off course. In returning to the king for help, Odysseus is rebuffed. Similarly, the alcoholic's bubble of denial is burst and can never be repaired. For one who struggles with alcohol addiction this is both a premonition and a precursor to deflation of the ego – an essential stage in the recovery process.

Seeking Guidance

In a desperate attempt to find a path homeward, Odysseus goes to Hades, the abode of the dead, where he seeks the guidance of the prophet Tiresias. Similarly, after experiencing the painful consequences associated with a relapse of heavy drinking, some individuals are willing to go to hell and back to find a successful path. In an attempt to find a successful path to recovery, many will seek help from members of Alcoholics Anonymous, knowing full well that they have lived through the hellish existence of alcoholism. After a painful relapse, the person in recovery from alcoholism is most receptive to the guidance offered by a knowledgeable sponsor in AA.

Unmasking Other Appetites & Addictions

The stay-over on Circe's Island represents a yearlong respite. Circe, a spell-casting witch, uses the appetites of the ship's crew to transform the men into pigs. However, Odysseus receives special help from the god Hermes to overcome her spell. What reprieve is available for the person addicted to alcohol? To shed light on this process, it is helpful to examine the tenets of Aristotelian philosophy (Vessels, 1979), which offer a description of the nature of vegetables, animals, and mankind. Vegetables eat, grow, and reproduce. Animals move and have appetitive senses. Human-kind possesses reason and has free will with the ability to love. Men and

women can turn into pigs when pleasure is sought at the expense of reason. Men and women with alcoholism often fail to display love to their spouses, as evidenced by an unwillingness to sacrifice the personal pleasure of drinking. The result is a failure to grow emotionally. Alcoholic men and women often become "pigs" when the pleasure associated with drinking becomes more important than the relationships with family and spouse. Those with alcoholism are likely to develop other addictive pleasures, including unhealthy preoccupations with gambling, food, sex, entertainment, the Internet, or drugs. The special guidance from an AA sponsor will help to overcome the transforming spell of alcohol.

Daily Maintenance & Avoidance of Triggers

As his trek homeward continues, Odysseus begins to learn painful lessons from his wanderings, and takes steps to avoid the temptation of the seductive call of the Sirens. As a preventative measure, Odysseus puts



wax in the ears of his rowers and binds himself to the mast of his ship. Working the 12-Step Program is the daily discipline of action. Step-work provides recovery maintenance involving a repetitive rowing in order to stay on the course of sobriety. In making a commitment (i.e. binding oneself to the mast of recovery), one must make contact with a sponsor. Furthermore,

being bound to the mast involves not responding to the seductive voices that lead one to believe the lie that drinking is acceptable. The ever-present seduction of the mental obsession to drink (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1976) lures unwary sobriety-seeking seafarers onto the rocks, where the Sirens of their own drinking compulsion consume them. The path of recovery is fraught with danger, but the recovering person must navigate continually toward sobriety.

This process must include the ability to recognize and resist the allure of enticing environmental triggers.

Scylla and Charybdis

As Odysseus sails homeward, his vessel is caught between the terrifying images of Scylla and Charybdis,

which are represented as a sea monster and a whirlpool, respectively. Those recovering from the addiction of alcoholism may find that through the process of refraining from drinking, they become aware of problems in life, which may throw them back into the drink. Scylla is often portrayed as an octopus with its tentacles pulling victims beneath the surface. Anxiety has a way of encircling a person and slowly immobilizing him or her. Similarly, Charybdis, in the form of a whirlpool of depression, may cause the recovering alcoholic to be pulled down into the depths of despair and self-pity. Both anxiety and depression can be dealt with in an effective manner with the proper medication and counseling.

Still Missing In Action

Just as Calypso keeps Odysseus from returning home to his family, AA meetings are viewed as competition for family time by frustrated spouses and family members. Initially, the process of moving from the "Fellowship of the Drink" to a "Fellowship of Recovery" in AA may be very subtle for the family members, because the alcoholic (although now sober) is still "missing in action."

Returning Home

In the process of returning home, Odysseus is regarded as a *persona non grata* by the other suitors who are vying for Penelope's hand. He is also a *persona incognita* in the disguise of a beggar who submits himself to the taunting abuse of the suitors. In returning home, he is faced with a set of new responsibilities that include becoming united with his son Telemachus and marshaling trusted allies to get rid of Penelope's suitors. As a guest in his own home, Odysseus does not want to be associated with the behaviors of the suitors. In destroying the suitors, who represent the type of person he was when he was

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at war, he is able to rejoin his wife and family, thus attaining the Greek ideal of family unity.

Odysseus' task to win back the hand of his wife, Penelope, is not only to bend the bow (or his will, to change his wayward wanderings) and re-string it (with a firm commitment), but to shoot an arrow through the open space of 12 axes where the handles are removed. Odysseus remains on-target with the 12 axes, which metaphorical-



ly represent his ability to remain emotionally centered.

The newly recovering person may find that his or her status has changed upon the return home. Initially, the individual in recovery is regarded as a *persona non grata* by the other family members, who are plagued with memories of bad behavior and remember what he or she was like while drinking. In addition, the recovering alcoholic is a *persona incognita* to the family, who may not yet recognize the individual whose selfish and self-centered behaviors have changed since he or she is no longer under the influence of alcohol.

For the recovering alcoholic, the bending of the bow represents a willingness to open oneself to a new way of living based upon a program of sobriety. In extending the metaphor, the 12 axes represent the 12 Steps through which the person in recovery must take aim and center his or her life on a daily basis. The release of the arrow philosophically represents a Heideggerian “thrown project” (Stumpf, 1982), as the individual becomes what he or she is not yet. In simple terms, the individual becomes what he or she has the potential to become – in this case a recovering “sober” alcoholic.

Just as Odysseus disposes of his own character defects (as represented by those of Penelope’s suitors), the recovering person must overcome his or her defective personality traits. In essence, the individual suitors represent the various defects of character that the alcoholic must jettison through daily maintenance work with the 12-Step Program.

Conclusion

The exploits and adventures of Odysseus in the ancient epic offer a metaphorical route detailing the process of recovery from alcoholism. This mythic tale charts a course for the

alcoholic by offering a reliable map of the perils and problematic times, including wayward wanderings. The ongoing voyage continues with guidance from the stars (AA members who have attained lengthy sobriety and peace of mind). Although the journey is long and arduous, there remains hope that one will arrive home in sobriety and safety. And like those classic heroes of legend who return home from a perilous voyage, the heroic recovering alcoholic is changed inwardly by the journey and offers a tale of hope to others as they begin to chart their own paths to recovery.

About the Author

Dr. Sandoz is a prolific writer and professional speaker who has been a member of The American Psychotherapy Association since 1999. He has written numerous articles in scientific journals (*Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, *The Counselor*, *Journal of Ministry in Addiction & Recovery* and others) and has presented his research in national conferences throughout the United States. His television media exposure has included *Your Mental Health* and *Your Open Mind* on two affiliates of PAX - TV. Dr. Sandoz has been a weekly newspaper columnist for over 5 years in the *Opelousas Daily World*. In addition, his radio programs include *Mind and Spirit*, *Your Radio Retreat*, and *Radio Retreat for Couples* on Radio Maria, (the National Catholic Radio Station in Alexandria, Louisiana), with simulcasts throughout Louisiana, Texas, and the Internet. Dr. Sandoz has earned numerous honors and awards in Toastmasters International for his public speaking ability.

He earned a masters degree in Counseling Psychology from Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, where he specialized in Marriage and Family Therapy. He furthered his training by completing his doctoral studies in Psychology at

Temple University in Philadelphia. He has taught for over 20 years at the high school, college, and university levels in Texas and New Jersey, and he currently teaches at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette. In addition to his academic endeavors, Dr. Sandoz maintains an active private counseling practice. He is a Licensed Professional Counselor, serves on the executive board of Louisiana Mental Health Counseling Association, is a Diplomate of the American Psychotherapy Association, and a Certified Sports Counselor (Diplomate) of the National Association of Sport Counselors.

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