

The Recovery Odyssey III

By Jeff Sandoz, PhD, LPC, DAPA

Piloting the Passage of Sobriety Between Scylla and Charybdis



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Note from the author: This is the third installment of a four-part series that uses Homer's *The Odyssey* as a metaphor to explain the process of recovery from alcoholism. In writing this article, I was faced with a dilemma, perhaps my own Scylla and Charybdis. On one hand, in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) there is the essential declaration in meetings that the person is an "alcoholic." This serves to break down the defense mechanism of denial. On the other hand, referring to a person as an "alcoholic" reduces that person to a mere label, a practice that is disdained by members of the American Psychological Association and American Counseling Association. In light of this, I have endeavored to hold the use of the term "alcoholic" to a minimum while attempting to maintain the AA's spirit of fellowship.

In *The Odyssey*, Circe explains the dangers of Scylla and Charybdis to Odysseus:

"When your crew have taken you past these Sirens, I cannot give you coherent directions as to which of two courses you are to take; I will lay the two alternatives before you, and you must consider them for yourself. On the one hand there are some overhanging rocks against which the deep blue waves of Amphitrite beat with terrific fury ... no ship that ever yet came to these rocks has got away again, but the waves and whirlwinds of fire are freighted with wreckage and with the bodies of dead men. The only vessel that ever sailed and got through, was the famous Argo on her way from the house of Aetes, and she too would have gone against these great rocks, only that Juno piloted her past them for the love she bore to Jason.

Of these two rocks the one reaches heaven and its peak is lost in a dark cloud. This never leaves it, so that the top is never clear not even in summer and early autumn. No man though he had twenty hands and twenty feet could get a foothold on it and climb it, for it runs sheer up, as smooth as though it had been polished. In the middle of it there is a large cavern ... you must take your ship this way, but the cave is so high up that not even the stoutest archer could send an arrow into it. Inside it Scylla sits and yelps with a voice that you might take to be that of a young hound, but in truth she is a dreadful monster and no one—not even a god—could face her without being terror-struck. She has twelve mis-shapen feet, and six necks of the most prodigious length; and at the end of each neck she has a frightful head with three rows of teeth in each, all set very close together, so that they would crunch any one to death in a moment, and she sits deep within her shady cell thrusting out her heads and peering all round the rock, fishing for dolphins or dogfish or any larger monster that she can catch No ship ever yet got past her without losing some men, for she shoots out all her heads at once, and carries off a man in each mouth.

You will find the other rocks lie lower, but they are so close together that there is not more than a bowshot between them. [A large fig tree in full leaf grows upon it], and under it lies the sucking whirlpool of Charybdis. Three times in the day does she vomit forth her waters, and three times she sucks them down again; see that you be not there when she is sucking, for if you are, Neptune himself could not save you; you must hug the Scylla side and drive ship by as fast as you can, for you had better lose six men than your whole crew.'

'Is there no way,' said I, 'of escaping Charybdis, and at the same time keeping Scylla off when she is trying to harm my men?'

'You dare-devil,' replied the goddess, 'you are always wanting to fight somebody or something ...'

Key Words: alcoholism, addiction, recovery, enablers, mythology, Alcoholics Anonymous, AA

Abstract

Mythological stories often describe an ancient hero who travels a path to wisdom, both literally and figuratively. These stories reveal the learning process of characters who discover aspects of their internal terrain while simultaneously exploring the world beyond their homes. The ultimate impact of the journey is felt inwardly. The outward adventure touches on moments of great triumph and times of intense sadness, leaving the heroes with inner wisdom and altering their personalities forever. Counselors can use aspects of these heroic tales as metaphors to encapsulate the meaning of life events for clients.

The purpose of this article is to shed light upon the process of recovery from alcoholism by clarifying the essential quandary that both traps and ensnares individuals who suffer from this dreaded disease. This aspect of the journey toward recovery reveals a treacherous path that individuals must navigate. This path provides recognizable landmarks of which the recovering individual should be aware in order to steer clear of dangers that test the mettle of one's sobriety.

Alcoholic Recovery: Navigating Between Scylla and Charybdis

"He runs on Scylla, wishing to avoid Charybdis." -Virgil

The metaphorical phrase to be "caught between Scylla and Charybdis" has been used for centuries as an expression for a dilemma with two unattractive and undesirable alternatives. Joseph Campbell, in his classic *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, created this idea as "Odysseus chose the route between the pair of opposites Scylla and Charybdis and passed through" (1982, p. 172). Being caught in a dilemma of Scylla and Charybdis is an appropriate

metaphor for a recovering alcoholic. The dynamic tension between this deadly duo not only propels but empowers the addicted individual with the ambitious drive toward success.

The process of alcoholism is both fostered and furthered by ego defense mechanisms that distort reality. Complications emerge as the alcoholic's perception of reality becomes twisted and deformed to such a degree that the person denies all problems, issues, worries, and concerns. Furthermore, perceptions are strengthened by the enlisting of enablers to perform those bothersome tasks that may distract the alcoholic from focusing single-mindedly on whatever goal is set. Enablers supply more alcohol, furnish finances, or provide services that help the alcoholic attain a goal or satisfy a whim. At times, these enablers may sacrifice the energy they need for their own development and personal growth. For example, in Homer's classic *The Iliad* (Rouse, 1938), Agamemnon sacrificed his youngest daughter Iphigenia to appease the gods for favorable winds, thus enabling the ships to sail to Troy so that he would attain glory. In summary, the alcoholic taps into the energy of enablers to chase an impossible dream or to run from imaginary fears.

Scylla

For the alcoholic, the source of Scylla's origin may begin with the pursuit of an unattainable goal that takes shape clouded with ambition, fantasy, and delusion. The initial enthralling attraction leads the alcoholic to believe that if this goal is achieved, he or she will attain self-worth, self-confidence, and the respect and praise of others. Because so much is at stake, the person develops a do-

or-die attitude. This rigid all-or-nothing mindset soon evolves into an all-consuming monster, which can be represented by Scylla.

Scylla is often portrayed in the literature as an octopus with tentacles pulling victims beneath the surface of the sea. Metaphorically, Scylla represents the multifaceted monstrosity with eight tentacles: perfectionism, pride, pleasure, power, prestige, pressure of ego-inflation, playful distractions, and the painful price of anxiety. Each arm of this ambitious monster drives the alcoholic in a unique but relentless fashion.

Perfectionism must be understood in its proper context, as it is a *specific* perfectionism that is designed to provide the push to reach beyond an individual's own potential and means. It is a jealous drive that will squeeze out any competitor for time, energy, and passion. Family members are often bewildered by the fact that the alcoholic cannot leave well enough alone. This desperate drive is an attempt to reach an ideal state that is virtually impossible in reality, although in the deluded mind of the alcoholic it seems possible to attain.



Spouses, children, friends, and co-workers are often co-opted to work in a slavish fashion to assist the alcoholic in the achievement of some goal or whim.

Pride is seen as the drive of the alcoholic to be first or number one in everything. The ego-inflating activities trigger the human will by firing and fueling it with the hope that this new thrilling endeavor will be the long-sought-after answer to a person's problems. Once this goal is attained, the alcoholic will supposedly achieve the long-deserved praise and the desperately sought-after acknowledgment he or she desires.

Pleasure takes many forms. The seeking of pleasure to change an individual's mood may begin in childhood; however, it tends to take on more serious proportions in adolescence and early adulthood. Specifically, the modes of pleasure seeking are as vast and expansive as the imagination. Alcoholics are prone to be hedonistic and are constantly in search of anything that will improve upon the euphoric delight of drinking. Recovering alcoholics are warned about trading in one addiction for another. While giving up alcohol, the focus often shifts to drugs, sex, gambling, pornography, or any other activity that consumes the attention, time, and energy of the alcoholic.

Power includes the surge of pseudo-confidence associated with an inflated ego. This aspect may become rather pronounced as an individual approaches middle age. In AA circles, alcoholics have been described as egomaniacs with an inferiority complex. Manifestations of this observation are seen when alcoholics force their will upon others with excessive and unreasonable demands.

Prestige concerns usually emerge in late adulthood as a person's power begins to wane. The collection of objects substantiating worth and personal value are props used to support a sagging ego. Much time is spent reminiscing over past conquests that supposedly define one's character. The empty trophy is but a hollow reminder of the

glory days of the past.

The **pressure of ego inflation** must be maintained in order to counter fear. This pressure offers a counterweight to the possibility of an attack against an individual's self worth. This buffer is an attempt to bolster the alcoholic's sense of honor, which may be questioned at any moment. It is not enough to have an expansive collection of awards and certificates, honors, degrees, and privileges to be used as evidence to counter any criticism. The lurking sense of inadequacy promotes a constant need to prove oneself worthy, especially when one's integrity or self-esteem is challenged. This cushion must be inflated at all times to insulate (as well as to isolate) the alcoholic from the piercing glance that knows of the fears and insecurities residing within the alcoholic's empty soul.

The amusement of some **playful distraction** takes the edge off of the hyper-vigilance of the alcoholic. This is the pause or momentary reprieve that refreshes for the alcoholic. It is a time-out from the harsh demands of the alcoholic's inner and outer world. This playfulness is often found when a child is caught up in the awe, wonder, thrill, and excitement of being one with the moment. At such times there is no self. There is only the activity in which the person is so enthralled.

The last tentacle of the beast is the **painful price of anxiety**. This consists primarily of the emotional turmoil that results from being driven so hard in the ultimate quest for power, pleasure, or prestige. Anxiety has a way of encircling a person and slowly immobilizing him or her into a state of paralysis and inaction. Closely associated with this last tentacle is the **pathetic state of self-pity** represented by the beaked mouth of the beast. Slowly Scylla opens wide its gaping maw in anticipation of the feast. The hapless alcoholic is slowly consumed by self-pity, eaten alive by Scylla as the excessive drinking increases in a feeble attempt to dull the pain. The

drive for success slowly devours the alcoholic until all that remains is the empty shell of a human being, hollowed out by the driving ambition of alcoholism.

Charybdis

As Scylla represents the drive, Charybdis epitomizes the dive into self-pity and the sensation of being overwhelmed by fear. The alcoholic uses the assistance of enablers to provide any material objects (money, etc.) in order to avoid the trap of the gigantic emotional whirlpool Charybdis. The alcoholic must constantly be on the run in order to avoid being pulled down within the huge negatively spiraling vortex of fear. The void is filled with feelings of inferiority, insecurity, insufficiencies, and inadequacies. In the 12-Step Program of AA, the personal inventory taken in step four examines all fears and analyzes them under close scrutiny. The alcoholic often displays escape, avoidance, and withdrawal behaviors by fleeing in order to escape from personal responsibilities, avoid the unpleasant aspects of life, and withdraw from confrontations. This combination of forces propels a person to seek any type of distraction from the insecurities that prompt behaviors based upon character defects.

The Interplay of Scylla and Charybdis

Fears drive the alcoholic from within. Enablers support the alcoholic externally by supplying energy and material or financial assistance. Giving the task to an enabler prevents the alcoholic from being responsible. These are tasks the alcoholic should complete. Perhaps for some, the swirling Charybdis represents a fear of being responsible and entails a hidden fear of success. For others, Scylla may represent a fear of failure.

Deflation of the ego occurs when the energy feeding the drive (Scylla) is exhausted. No one is there to assist or enable the alcoholic by providing alco-

hol or money or by purchasing distractions from the pull downward and inward. The alcoholic must understand the role of personal responsibility in exploring what motives and character defects drive him or her to act in such a way. Here is the realm of the undiscovered country. Here is domain of the hidden void that must be explored in depth. Here are the hidden tendencies, personality flaws, and defects of character that all reside within the prevailing inner darkness of this arena.

Inflated Ego Versus the Inner Void

The push-pull effect between Scylla and Charybdis will either cause a desperation drive toward Scylla or a downward dive into Charybdis. The process of navigating between Scylla and Charybdis is seen as the metaphor for the relationship between the monstrous inflated ego and the sinking inner void. The ego inflates and expands in an attempt to escape from the inner emptiness resembling Blaise Pascal's concept of the God-shaped vacuum of the soul.

The inflated ego relishes any positive, pleasant distraction that entices the appetites. This momentary reprieve appeals to the base biological instincts of human nature. This pause is an attempt to evade the emptiness associated with a confrontation with Charybdis, one's inner void. The expansion of the inflated ego insulates the alcoholic only briefly, propelling a person outward to seek a grandiose goal beyond his or her reach. This drive continues until the person is abandoned by the army of enablers. Usually the timing of being forsaken by others coincides with a depletion of the alcoholic's finances or material reserves. This simultaneous erosion of all support and material gain pulls at the individual inwardly, resembling a celestial black hole within his or her soul. The aperture of the hole expands unless related factors are acknowledged in the fourth and fifth steps of the AA program.

Coming to terms with the emptiness is found through a conversion experience. The recovering alcoholic begins to understand that resentful thoughts, fear, displaced anger, and the dwelling upon of his or her hurts and shortcomings hurl up acidic vapors, widening the mouth of the gaping hole in the soul.

Both heaven and hell begin now. Each resentful thought and unresolved anger adds another step to the stairway descending into an emotional hell. Similarly, with every AA prayer uttered for an individual's persecutors and with each willful act of forgiveness offered, another step is paved in the staircase ascending to heaven.

Hope from the Fourth Step

The fourth step of AA's 12-Step Program enables a person to navigate safely between both Scylla and Charybdis and provides a safe vantage point to discover his or her own character defects. Piloting through this passage involves the sailing between the two extremes of Scylla and Charybdis.

Course Correction by the Fifth Step

By sharing his or her character defects in the fifth step of the AA program, the recovering alcoholic has a chance to view the problematic patterns of thoughts and actions based upon faulty character traits. The fifth step evokes a course correction from within an individual's life. For some, the written inventory, shared with another, often provides details resembling a navigational map that serve to guide the person in recovery to the safe shores of serenity, sobriety, and spirituality.

Conclusion

Although the active alcoholic is caught within the dilemma of Scylla and Charybdis, the opportunity for change presents itself. When an individual's life has become threatened by the choice of facing either an ambition-driven inflated ego or the profound emptiness of the

inner void, then the only viable option would be to navigate through both by exploring the uncharted regions of his or her self. Only by taking inventory of his or her character defects is a person able to finally take command of the helm and steer the ship of his or her life into a safe passage through Scylla and Charybdis.

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About the Author

Jeff Sandoz, PhD, LPC, is a prolific writer and professional speaker who has composed numerous articles in scientific journals, has presented his research at national conferences throughout the United States, and has been featured on several television and radio programs. He has also been a weekly newspaper columnist for over five years, and has been featured on several radio programs.

Dr. Sandoz earned a master's degree in counseling psychology from Texas Woman's University, where he specialized in marriage and family therapy. He furthered his training by completing his doctoral studies in psychology at Temple University. He has taught for over 20 years at the high school, college, and university levels, and 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 the Louisiana Mental Health Counseling Association, and is a certified sports counselor. He is a Diplomate of APA, and has been a member since 1999.

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