

Spiritual Exodus

RECOVERY FROM ADDICTION

By Mark H. Butler



Photo Center: Philip Bruggen

I am a licensed marriage and family therapist, and also a practicing and believing Christian. In my work with individuals struggling with addictive behaviors such as sexual compulsions, alcohol and other drug abuse, and pornography, I have learned the power of God's grace—in conjunction with the best practices from the therapy profession—to save individuals and families from the ravages of these addictions.

A SPIRITUAL EXODUS

Spiritual exodus is the term I use to describe recovery from addictive behavior. Addiction is the one area of the mental health profession that has been drenched with the language of spirituality for decades. There has been an almost universal recognition that addiction is a pernicious problem that "goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (KJB-Matthew 17:21). Recovery is possible through combining spiritual means with all of the professional knowledge we have available. Clearly, addiction is not a good thing, but I have seen individuals and couples rise from the ashes of addiction—from sackcloth and ashes—to a newness of life. I have seen husbands and wives—with broken spirits and contrite hearts—humbly place their lives in the hands of God and meekly submit to his wisdom and will. I have seen a redemptive, healing power manifest in their personal lives and in their relationships. I have seen relationships lying, as it were, on their deathbeds like the youthful daughter of Jairus, only to be raised up and restored to life and hope and vitality. (KJB-Mark 5:22-24, 35-43.)

I would not wish the devastation of addiction on anyone. Gratefully, I have seen the power of God take this evil out of the lives of individuals, couples, and families and in its stead raise up an individual, marriage, or family that was stronger, more unified, more undivided, more loyal, more covenanted and consecrated, and more like Christ. I have seen the horrible weaknesses of addiction forsaken and replaced by new strengths in both marriage and personal life. I can echo the words of Psalms 30:5, which says that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." Nevertheless, the journey is a long night of darkness.

A CENTRAL MESSAGE OF CONVICTION AND HOPE—RELATIONSHIPS THAT HEAL, AND RESTORATION OF AGENCY

My experience in assisting those recovering from addiction has resulted in three central convictions. First, for recovery to be undertaken, there must be both conviction of conscience and hope for change. To lack either is to lack a necessary ingredient of commitment and action. Regarding conviction of conscience, the experience of addiction is its own best teacher. It does not take long for one to want to change, only a little longer to know one *must* change, and only a little longer to be desperate for change. After there is conviction of conscience, though, there must be hope.

And, indeed, the central message that I would like to share concerning addiction is a message of hope. Addiction is such a debilitating condition that hope

is often its most serious casualty, although hope for recovery should always exist. Stephen Glenn once said to a group of addictions therapists, "In today's world, an ounce of hope is worth a pound of confidence." Marvin J. Ashton has stated, "I would endeavor to instill hope instead of despair in those who have temporarily lost certain powers and privileges. Some of these people dare not hope any more for fear of being disappointed. May they and their families be helped with thoughts that will bring action, comfort, and a new sense of self-worth."¹

Hope and faith are the substance from which all action springs. If you cannot instill hope in those who are struggling with addiction, you cannot motivate the kind of action that is necessary—the "blood, sweat, and tears" type of labor they will need to overcome addiction. Thus, hope and faith are embedded within and drench the narrative of therapy. Conviction of conscience and hope for recovery—these are the first things I have learned are needed for recovery.

The second conviction I have gained is closely related to the truth that addiction "goeth not out but by prayer and fasting": it also goeth not out but by the unfailing support and sustaining influence of loving others committed to stand beside us through both repentance and recovery. Richard G. Scott has taught: "Some transgressions are so powerful that it is unlikely that you will begin to overcome them without another's help."² Ultimately, those humiliated by addiction humbly affirm, "In

recovering from my addiction, I stand on the shoulders of giants." Successful recovery is most often sponsored in and prevails through close and committed relationships.

The third conviction tendered to me by experience is that as one progresses in recovery, *feeling* and *agency*, which together are the essence of our sense of being truly "alive," can be spiritually redeemed, after an individual does all that he or she is capable of doing. While addiction, in process of time, truly places one past the point of feeling and places agency in jeopardy,³ spiritually anchored recovery can bring a miraculous redemption of both. Again, Richard G. Scott has stated, "In time, with the strength that comes from continued use of agency to live truth, you will be healed through the Savior... See your...[spiritual or religious leader]. Begin now and don't stop until you...receive [the Savior's]... healing power in your life. Otherwise, the cure will be incomplete"⁴ The three convictions—regarding the essential elements, processes, and outcomes of recovery from addiction—provide a focus and direction for family counsel and support, ecclesiastical help, and professional therapy.

STEPPING STONES TO RECOVERY

As the work for recovery gets underway, my clients and I seek to ensure that these essential elements are in place. The first stepping stone to recovery is, thus, desire (based on a conviction of conscience) and hope for change. For some, magnifying and sustaining their desire means

lessening their guilt and bringing it into proper repentance perspective. The scriptures of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints put the suffering and guilt associated with repentance into perspective, in the account of Alma chastening his son Corianton and reminding him finally to "only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance" (Alma 42:29). If guilt is excessive, it undermines spiritual, emotional, and psychological strength, as well as other resources for change. Thus, for some, strengthening desire involves bringing their conviction of conscience down to repentance perspective, scope, and size.

For others, bringing about the proper desire requires harrowing up feelings that have long since been buried and left for dead—desensitized through the experience of addiction. For these, sparking recovery requires that they be taught the consequences of addiction—a more keen awareness of the destructiveness and devastation of addiction, for themselves personally and spiritually, and for their relationships and loved ones. Respectful exploration and interviewing by a therapist, expression of tender feelings by a spouse, and inspired correction by an ecclesiastical leader can all help magnify awareness of the "consequences of [addiction]".

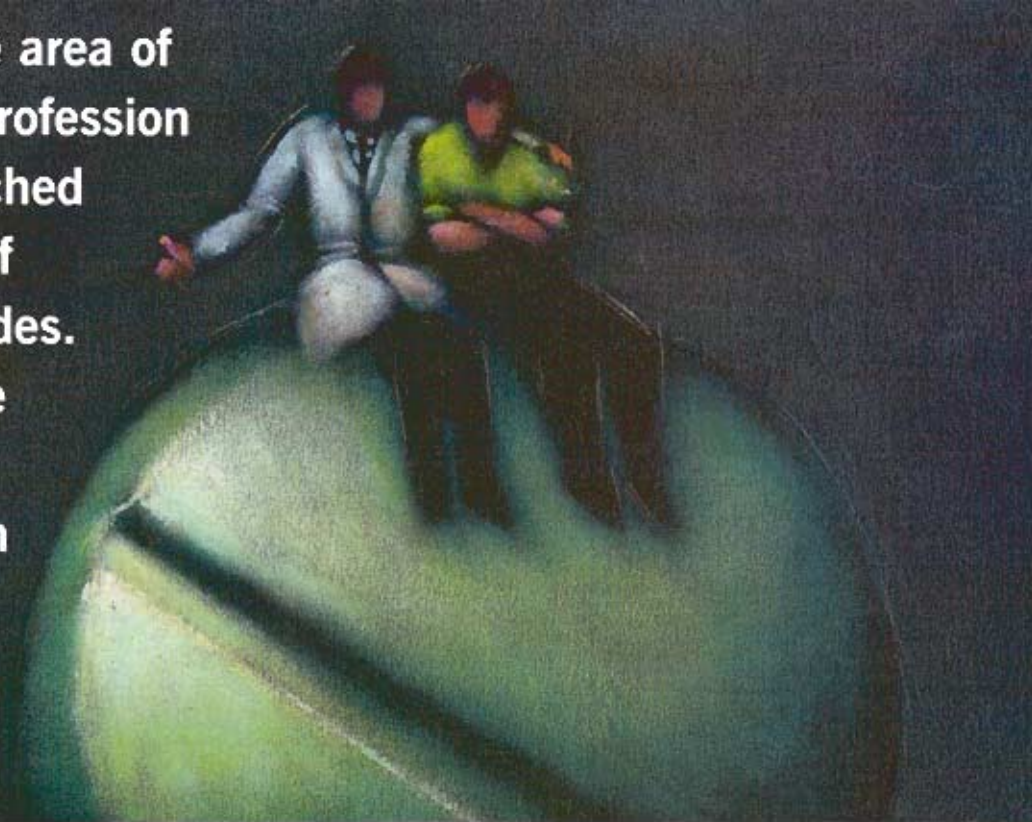
Once desire is in place, we have the fuel required for recovery, and for therapy to proceed. The second stepping stone of recovery is the organization of key relationships to sponsor recovery. Again, addiction "goeth

not out but by prayer and fasting", and with help—divine and mortal. If there is one beautiful flower that can bloom among the thorns of addiction, it is the nobility manifest in covenant relationships as one soul—in pure, Christlike love—consecrates his or her heart, might, mind and strength to saving another. They are literally saviors on mount Zion. Equally poignant and promising is when the suffering soul humbles himself and confesses openly that he will not and cannot make it through this life, or out of this addiction, alone. He surrenders the *Invictus* pride, "I am the captain of my soul," which once made him bold enough to try his luck with addictive self-indulgence.

Addiction humbles and teaches addicts that they must rely on others in order to recover. They reach out to a loving spouse who learns compassion and understanding, and who can assist them in critical ways. When relationships are organized to sponsor recovery, the addict's potential to overcome is magnified exponentially. In therapy, there are various steps to inviting, encouraging, organizing, and then supporting relationships in sponsoring recovery, which includes helping the spouse and family members with their pain and heartache. Successful therapy embraces the entire family, for they are all afflicted, not just the addicted person.

The third dimension of therapy for recovery is getting down to the work of learning principles, practices, and skills for recovery from addiction. Once desire or motivation is sufficient to fuel

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recovery work, and relationships are organized to sponsor recovery, then it's time to gain the understanding and implement that practices that steer one's life toward recovery. While from time to time we may check up on the other two dimensions, once they have been set in place, this effort consumes the bulk of our time and attention in therapy.

PROGRESSIVE AWAKENING IN RECOVERY

In my experience, each individual's and couple's story of recovery from addiction has added a brush stroke to what is now a panoramic picture of that journey. That picture reveals recovery to be a progressive awakening—both of humility and to relationships. In order to gauge how much attention needs to be devoted to the desire, relationships, and skills that have been discussed, I find it beneficial to assess how far each person has

progressed in their awakening. The story that has emerged from clients' lives depicts a journey which follows a path of humility, along which they discover relationships and grace that heal.

"I'M NOT LIKE THEM"

When persons first enter into and entertain addiction, attitudes are anchored in pride: "I know and understand that substance abuse overwhelms and overcomes others. I've seen them. But I will not become one of them. I am stronger than they are." Or, "I can have this indulgence and still hold it [my marriage, my family, my life] together." In that pride, the temptation to addictive behavior is powerful and persuasive. Perhaps that pride is mingled with curiosity, but pride is an essential component to addictive behavior, else who would take the risk?

The exception to this scenario is the victimization of the inno-

cent—young children exposed and habituated to illicit substances or pornography before they are ever aware of the dangers. Tobacco is not the only product marketed to the innocent in order to create lifelong consumers. The reality of evil designs and vile victimization of conspiring men calls to mind Jesus Christ's warning to "whosoever shall offend one of [these] little ones" (KJB-Mark 9:42), and it summons protective parents to fight for the freedom of our children with vigilance, energy, and unwavering moral clarity.

"ALL WE CAN DO"

To continue our story, though, whether addiction captures the innocent or the unwise, after a period of time consequences accumulate and one realizes that, "Indeed, the laws of life apply to me too; I cannot escape this." They then attain their first awakening to humility—the point at

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which they think, "I must either quit or I will die—spiritually and perhaps otherwise." But, usually, their humility is only awakened to the last part of the equation for recovery—"it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 25:23)—and for the protection of pride, they emphasize, "I got into this problem, and I can get out of it myself. I'll use my discipline, my will, my power, and I will overcome this." And the unconscious intention is, "I won't be ashamed, or lose my reputation in anyone's eyes. I'll maintain my self-image. I won't risk repercussions at home or elsewhere. I'll tell no one. I can recover and it will all go away, quietly." Clearly, they have only begun to awaken to humility; and in protecting themselves from consequences, they remove themselves from the chastening experience that mentors repentance, as well as from uplifting, strengthening relationships.

"I Can't Do This Alone"

After a while—"after all [they] can do"—though they make remarkable progress in recovery, most continue to relapse periodically. And their appetite is unabated. Soon, they awaken to further humility and acknowledge, "I can't beat this problem on my own. And I can't hold on to my pride." About half the clients who come into my office with problems around addictive behavior have not reached this point. They come alone, and they need to be persuaded to bring their partner or another significant loved one to participate with them. The prognosis is so much

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better once they do. Ever and always, recovery is strengthened by the sackcloth humility to face up to consequences, whatever they may be, and to own the shame of it before those who matter most: God, religious leaders, and one's companion. Recovery is strengthened when one is humble, and then willing to pay the price to enlist the power to repent.

Not only do relationships strengthen recovery, but relationships are strengthened by recovery. Relationships can help sponsor recovery in powerful ways. Relationships are also sponsored by recovery. "No man is an island, intire of itself; every man is a peece of the continent, a part of the maine" (John Donne) and thus, when the bells of addiction toll, they toll for the whole family. Any soul who struggles with addictive behavior is surrounded by others who are each affected in various ways by that addiction.

When I'm working with religious couples, I urge them to see their ecclesiastical leaders together, as husband and wife. The spouses of addicts have suffered in ways that you cannot know unless you speak with them. Spouses are as much in need of recovery and healing as their partners. Thus, an addicted person's further awakening to humility not only blesses him or herself, but enlarges the healing of the spouse and family as well.

Eventually, addicts learn to maximize their relationships to assist in their recovery. Partners can help with accountability. Discerning partners can red flag any first steps toward relapse: "You know, I've noticed that you've been driving by that one place in town a little more frequently lately. I'm worried. Is that good for you? Are you flirting with temptation? Are you walking the edge?" Partners can engage in dialogue that helps the

addicts be circumspect and honest about their behavior. Partners can help battle euphoric recall of the addictive experience with a cooperative review of the litany of painful, destructive consequences. This includes assisting in the restoration or re-sensitization of feeling. Partners help encourage and sustain protective behaviors, too. Partners assist immeasurably by helping their recovering companions *envision* and remember the better, blessed life they are trekking toward. In these and other ways partners put their own shoulder to the wheel of recovery, help check any backsliding, and sustain forward momentum. With that support, the prognosis and trajectory of recovery improves significantly.

"BY GRACE... WE ARE SAVED, AFTER ALL WE CAN DO"

Still, recovering persons and their spouses find that, although they now attain significant periods of sobriety, or may even be completely abstinent, *desire* or *appetite* remains a torment. One client who stood in my office long ago literally backed into a corner and said, "I'd rather die than spend the rest of my life living with this torment." This awakening—to the chronicity of the natural man, and of appetite that has been etched deeply into the neurophysiology of the brain and the psychology of one's life—leads to the final awakening to humility. They reach out again for help, only this time it is with arms folded and knees bent. The recovering individuals and their companions pray now not for abstinence alone, but for transformation. Again and again in

therapy, they quote that litany of scriptures upon which they anchor their hope, and which fuels their searching. The final awakening to humility leads individuals and couples to seek newness of life through a power and grace greater than themselves.

This is the final expression of humility—when those working to overcome addiction can reach out fully and completely for grace in recovery. They go before their higher power, their maker, and they say, in humble prayer, "I will give away all my sins for this change of heart. I will hold nothing back, no token of my transgression, no piece of my pride." I remember one young man preparing to serve as a missionary who went to his ecclesiastical leader with that kind of humility. He confessed to a serious addiction he had recovered from. The leader excused himself from the office and said, "I need to go talk to someone else about this." While he was alone in the office, that young man "had the keenest moment of soul reflection I've ever had in my life. I knew that serious consequences could result. Even though I had, at some level, long since repented of this sin, I felt the need to come clean; and I was, at that point in time, willing to do whatever was necessary to recover completely and forever from that addictive behavior." This young man's humility is the type that sponsors recovery and opens the windows of heaven for access to grace. As with this young man, it is important for each addicted person (1) to reach the point of complete humility where they can access grace for recovery, (2) to fully

maximize their relationships to assist them, and (3) to be willing to do all that they can do.

This, then, is the panoramic journey of recovery, an awakening to deep humility and a reaching out for relationships—mortal and divine—that sustain, heal, and transform. Notably, this awakening serves not only recovery from addiction, but the whole of one's life. Never again need one "go it alone." A single thread is so easily broken, but woven together into covenant relationships, the fabric of our lives does not rend. Perhaps that is why those who recover are so committed both to receive, and to give, assistance. If there is one way that the weakness of addiction can, through repentance and recovery, resolve into one's strength, surely it is this. They know and live by the saving power of relationships, and they sustain the humility that flows there from. No *Invictus* pride remains.

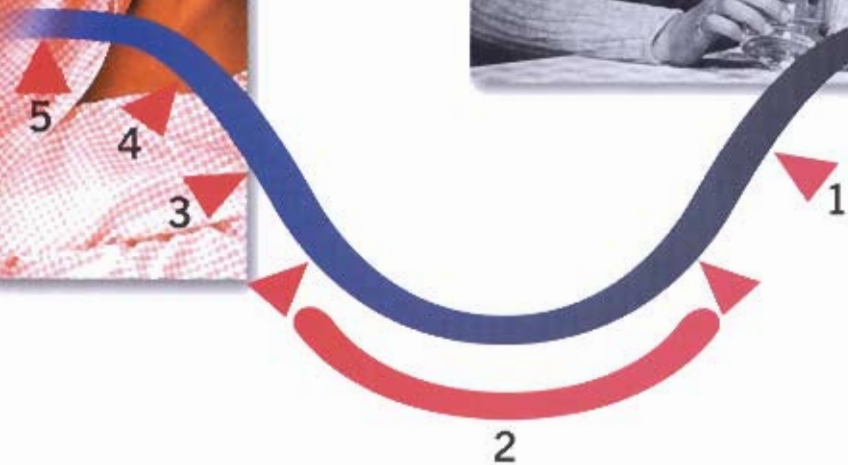
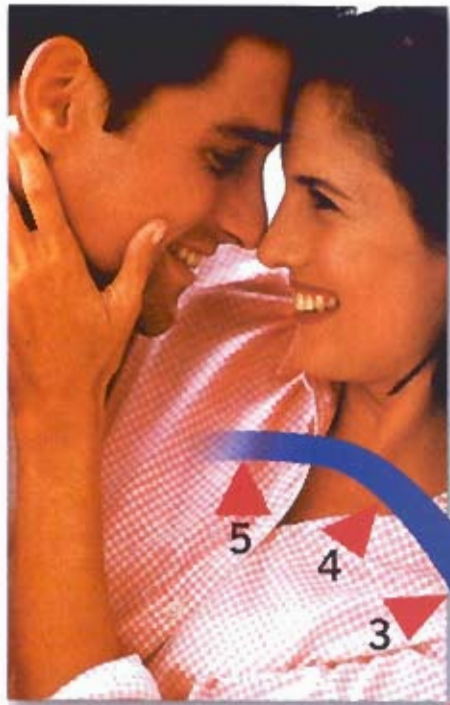
THE ADDICTION ROLLER COASTER

Until one completes this journey of humility, the experience of addiction remains a roller-coaster ride of relapses followed by brief stints of pseudo-recovery, only to be followed once again by back-





THE ADDICTION ROLLER COASTER



sliding and relapse. The graphic above represents the addiction roller coaster.

At position one, a person in full-binge relapse is beginning to experience an accumulation of destructive, painful consequences. Increasingly weighed down with despondency, despair, and various feelings associated with the unraveling of his or her life, the gravity of consequences begins to pull the person away from further addictive behavior. Addictive momentum dissipates and potential energy for recovery develops.

But that potential energy is based upon the negative punishing consequences of addiction, rather than upon the motivations that will bring about lasting change. Nevertheless, at that

point the addict says, "I must either quit or die." The momentum that comes from consequences drives the individuals away from their addictive behavior. They gather momentum with great rapidity, and that momentum encourages them in such a way that the addict exclaims, "I've made it! I have no more desire to engage in my addictive behavior. It really is gone. Finally, this is for real!" For the moment, they indeed have no desire to relapse. Aversion drives recovery. They are at position two.

Nevertheless, as life continues and they steer clear of their addiction, they begin to scale the ascending slope of recovery. Back again in "normal" life, one of two things happens: They either forget, or they grow proud.

For some, the challenges and difficulties of everyday life begin to pile up on them and—not having developed that newness of life yet, not having entirely altered their lifestyle—they don't have the healthy coping strategies to manage positively, or spiritually, life's stresses, challenges, adversity, and afflictions. Thus, they begin to feel "nostalgic" for the escape and pleasure of addiction. Temptations resume. Their brain cues them: "You know that when you are discouraged or depressed, one of the best options is addiction. Right? At least, you have taught me so in the past."

As the brain serves up these suggestions for addictive behavior, another critical thing has happened by the time they reach point three. They have forgotten.

The human brain is a wonderful thing. Our spirits are a wonderful thing. Each helps us forget painful experiences. But this can be a disservice if it is the truth of our experience—such as addiction—that we forget. It is all too easy to remember only the high, the pleasure, the fantasy self, the numbing, the escape, the euphoria. Because of this, one of the things we do in therapy is teach people to build a “Pandora’s Box”—a litany of the destructive consequences of addiction, how they felt the “last time”—that they can use to review the negative consequences of addiction.

For others, it is not a pileup of life’s difficulties, but of prosperity, that tempts relapse. Metaphorically, they assure themselves “I have ‘money’ in the bank. I can draw down on my personal, spiritual, and relationship accounts just a little bit, and there will be no harm.” Spinning lies for themselves, they make their way to relapse.

So either challenges or ease can be equally predictive of relapse, in the absence of a clear and keen remembrance of the consequences of addiction or a clear picture of the cycle of addiction and how it works. For all too many, it becomes a sickening cycle of relapse and pseudo-recovery, cycling and recycling the pain and destruction of addic-

tion, and taking an increasing toll on family relationships. Clearly, reliance on aversion to negative consequences and punishment to drive recovery only takes a person so far, as the explanation of the roller coaster makes clear.

THE MEASURE OF GUILTY AND SHAME

Similarly, those battling addiction cannot punish their way to recovery. (Nor will the punishments others try to heap upon them!) I remember a client who came in not long ago and deprecated himself beyond measure, as though a heavy enough punishment could compel him to forever give up his addictive behavior. Ironically, all too often when I see excessive guilt and shame in therapy, the result is just the opposite: not recovery, but relapse. A focus on punishment breaks down spiritual reserves of divine worth and dignity to the point where persons lose motivation and energy for change.

We need to understand that guilt and shame are to our spirits and our psyche as pain is to our bodies. The purpose of pain is protection. When you touch a hot stove, pain causes you to immediately withdraw your hand. This prevents further injury. That is the purpose and function of pain. Similarly, the purpose and function of guilt is

repentance—not punishment, not vengeance, not retribution. Once a person has sufficient guilt to motivate repentance, they need no more heaped upon them—by a spouse, by parents, or by themselves. Any more than that will just weaken and debilitate a person emotionally and spiritually. Those assisting in a person’s recovery should monitor carefully the appropriate measure of guilt and shame in that person’s life. Some people do need harrowing, but many, many others need encouragement. You can’t punish your way past position three. You can’t punish your way to enduring repentance or recovery.

All this, then, begs the question, “So, how do people get out of addiction? How do they exit this sickening roller-coaster ride of addictive or other carnal behavior?”

ENVISIONING ENDURING RECOVERY

Part of the answer comes in finding a compelling vision that lifts one’s gaze and behavior beyond the dire consequences of addiction to the better life beyond. Compelling vision replaces a limited view of present circumstances. Real and enduring recovery comes not from looking over one’s shoulder with a tunnel-vision focus of “Don’t relapse,

While addiction, in process of time, truly places one past the point of feeling and places agency in jeopardy, spiritually anchored recovery can bring a miraculous redemption of both.

don't relapse, don't relapse!" (Indeed, ironically, sometimes the more addicts focus on not relapsing, the more they do relapse, because the addiction, and discouragement, is on their minds constantly.)

FOCUSING ON REDEEMING VIRTUES

Maintaining a focus on redeeming virtues is another important intervention at position four. Along with compelling vision, people whose recovery succeeds over the long haul sustain a positive awareness of their own redeeming virtues. Spouses play a vital role in this. I have seen this often in therapy. When the recovering spouse is feeling downtrodden and discouraged, I will turn the spouse and say, "You're still with your partner. Why is that?" And the spouse will say something like, "Because I love him (or her). He may be struggling with addiction, but he has many good qualities." "What are they?" I ask.

What follows have been some of the most spiritual, moving experiences I've had in therapy. "Michael tries really hard to be a good parent and loves our children, and I know that. He goes to church sometimes and supports

me taking the kids every time and works hard around the house. He provides for us. He's compassionate. He has so many good qualities." So often, the recovering spouse begins to weep. How grateful they are that someone sees more than their addiction. How it helps them to do likewise. How doing so renews the resolve needed for recovery!

BUILD ON YOUR GOOD FOUNDATION

Closely related to building redeeming virtues upon these positive actions. Those dealing with addiction must pursue recovery beyond position five by identifying a positive, protective activity, lives and steadfastly surrender any of them in the face of relapse. Clients are encouraged to cleave to every positive influence they qualify for. They must not let feelings of unworthiness keep them from church, from praying, from seeking strength in the scriptures, from serving and cherishing their spouse, from the laughter and love of their children. They must access every single positive influence they can

qualify for and hold onto those with tenacious, pit-bull determination. Building from the positive is a great resource for recovery.

Recently, I had the opportunity to apply this concept of building from the positive in the life of another young man who was planning on serving a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of

I believe our loving Heavenly Father, too, mercifully communes with us more in terms of who we can become than the life we are currently living. At the will of the Father, Christ came into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. The Holy Ghost enters our hearts with similar purpose, I believe. Chastening comes mercifully, as needed, but sustaining vision is constant. Our Father in Heaven, conveying His celestial vision in His communion with us, unites our vision to His. Our hearts are encouraged, our hopes uplifted, our strength increased, our resolve renewed. We return to the work of lifting our lives-through repentance--to the stature of God's redemptive

accomplishes this. Thus, I encourage young men to identify and continue the positive things in their lives they are currently qualified for, and build from these the strength and power to overcome the problem and qualify

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for service. I tell them to continue dating. Continue in school. Continue to work. Ask Church leaders for an appropriate opportunity to serve. Serve within your home. Such positive experiences can build dignity and esteem, energy, strength, and resolve for progress toward the goal on the near horizon—missionary service—and toward enduring recovery. A focus on one's compelling vision, on redeeming virtues, and on the *good* in one's life is the foundation upon which the energy and vitality of recovery are built.

One might say, quite literally, that the admonition of Paul—to

think upon those things that are pure, lovely, of good report, or virtuous—is what empowers the recovering individual, marriage, and family, up, over, and out of the roller coaster of addiction (see Philippians 4:8). Significantly, humbly reaching out, finally and fully, for God's grace in recovery, opens our minds and hearts to receive a confirming witness of his love. And it is that love which enables us to replace our downcast perspective with the heavenward gaze that inspires, strengthens, and saves. *mf*

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- ⁴ Scott, p. 62
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