

TROUBLE'S BLESSINGS

Good morning. For those of you like me that began in the world of work in the 80's, I'm sure that you can remember how we were bombarded by slogans and aphorisms in our Franklin Planners. I saw so many and forgot many more. But one did catch my eye and I have had it on my desk ever since.

The 19th century poet James Russell Lowell said the following: *"Whatever you are sure of, be sure of this: that you are dreadfully like other people."* I agree with that sentiment, though I would change the word dreadfully to: wonderfully, or blessedly, or thankfully. Just as I feel that people are more alike than we are different, so too are our stories. The specifics vary, of course. Not everyone here today is a parent, for example. But everyone here has loved ones in whom we invest our hopes. Everyone knows what such love is about. We are also all in the process of learning that – despite our strongest desires - much of what happens in our lives and to our loved ones are not within our control.

One of the challenges in my life is that I am the mother of a chemically dependent son. In her book Codependent No More, Melody Beattie says– *"Perhaps the most painful loss many codependents face is the loss of our dreams, the hopeful and sometimes idealistic expectations for the future that most people have. This loss can be the most difficult to accept. As we looked at our child in the hospital nursery, we had certain hopes for him or her. Those hopes didn't include our child having a problem with alcohol or other drugs. Our dreams didn't include this."*

My dreams for my son did not include chemical dependency. It is just a fact, one of many, a part of the tapestry of my life. It is a part of my life that I can't change. Yet I have come to believe that there are blessings associated with this situation, blessings that I may not have learned otherwise. As many of you well know, the best of blessings do not always come easily.

One of the reasons that I am speaking today is that I am confident that there are many in this church that are touched by chemical dependency. The first blessing I received was the discovery that our family was not alone.

We were not alone and in fact we were in good company. As I mentioned, I belong to an Al Anon group that is composed of parents of chemically dependant children; these children range in age from 13 to 53. The people I have met in this Al Anon group are some of the finest individuals you could hope to meet. Some are recovering alcoholics and addicts themselves. Many of the members had survived an alcoholic or abusive childhood and had committed themselves to providing a better environment for their children. And so they had and yet the specter of chemical dependency was passed on to their children despite their best efforts to provide a far better upbringing than what they themselves had received.

It may come as a surprise for you to hear that one of the things that we share within our Al Anon group is laughter. During one meeting I gave a talk about the blessings associated with being the parent of a CD child. I presented three points in seriousness – the same I will share with you -but followed with a David Letterman style reading of five facetious blessings (Reason Number Three: “What the hell was that big Ego doing for you anyway?”) At the end of the talk a new member spoke first. She said: “This is my first Al Anon meeting and I am SO glad that we are laughing.” Make no mistake: we do our share of crying, but there is laughter too.

I have identified three particular blessings that have come from dealing with our son’s addiction.

One of the blessings of any trouble or extreme challenge is that it teaches you to live in the present moment. When our son told us that he is an addicted to a dangerous drug, time slowed down until it virtually stopped. My first goal was to survive that day. The next morning I woke up and asked myself if perhaps I had only dreamed what he had told me.

The subsequent days brought little relief, but they did pass.

On the fourth day I called my friend and we took our wild and crazy dogs for a walk. I noticed that I could see both the sun and the moon at the same time in the sky that late afternoon, and that my dog looked like she was smiling. I listened to the voice of my beloved friend who shares a similar challenge. I knew that I could bear the pain that I felt – that it was here now but someday will pass - and that I would be alright somehow, even if I couldn't explain yet just exactly what that would mean.

Happiness is not always possible. But serenity is possible, however tenuous our hold on it may be.

I have also come to appreciate many blessings that I had previously taken for granted. For instance, my 27-year old daughter is my “Normie” as we say in Al Anon. She is completely independent, goal-oriented, communicative, responsible, engaged fully with life and living a happy and full existence. She is not perfect but I appreciate her in ways that I may not have had I not had also had a child who is struggling.

I am blessed.

For me, the most significant learning of all is that my son's chemical dependency has taught me about compassion. Anne Lamott, in her book Plan B, Further Thoughts on Faith tells the story of a rabbi who told his congregation that if they studied the Torah, it would put scripture ON their hearts. One of them asked “*Why ON our hearts, and not in them?*” *The rabbi answered, “Only God can put scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it ON your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.”*

When my heart breaks – and it has from time to time – it is not scripture that falls into my heart so much as it is compassion. Simply put, I stop my tendency to judge and compare

in those times. Instead I see that my fellow humans are vulnerable beings, like myself, and that suffering will visit them in some guise at some time.

One Sunday not too long ago I came to the service with a lump in my throat. After many months of steady improvement and resolve on the part of my son, I feared that he was starting a backward slide. I was having a hard time handling the bitter disappointment. To be honest, I came to church only because I had committed to making the coffee! The responsive reading that morning was the beautiful “Impassioned Clay” by Ralph N. Helvesen. It said- *“We have religion when we have done all that we can, and then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life that is larger than ourselves.”* I was struck by how the message in that reading is so similar to the powerful and beautiful Serenity Prayer.

As it turns out, my son was not back-sliding but experiencing a difficulty that is not unique to only the chemically dependent. What I found comforting about that particular incident is that I could return to the sources of strength that I had found in the past. They were still there, they work. And I had another source of strength to turn to: this congregation.

I would like to close by reading a passage that I had written for a class that I took at St. Mary’s College last fall. We were studying Freud and were asked to recall if we had ever had a dream that had special significance to us. There was no hesitation for me as I recalled a dream that I had on the last full day that I was in Ireland in 2006. I was on the trip of a lifetime, not aware that my son was in extreme danger and that an addiction that he had successfully hidden from us had spun out of control. I was to find out within the next 48-hours, however. In recalling that time in my life, I wrote the following -

On the day before my return flight from Ireland, I had told my friend Patty that I needed a nap after our usual hearty Irish breakfast. She went golfing and I retired to my room over-looking the Shannon River valley. I fell asleep quickly and dreamt that I was in an open car that was following a long flat-bed truck. All of a sudden I noticed that the

truck was in reverse and headed my way. I put my car in reverse as well but soon came up against a stone wall and couldn't move back any further. I could see that there would be a collision. I heard a voice say, "Yes, this is happening. A crash is coming. But you can breath. You can keep breathing. You don't have to die."

I woke up as the dream debris and smoke started to swirl around me. My heart was pounding and I sat on the edge of the little bed and looked out at the Shannon River until my breathing returned to normal. I didn't know the significance of the dream yet but I knew that it had both meaning and a message. And so it did.

Meanwhile: I'm still breathing, so is Jeff, and so is my husband. Life is odd, mysterious, and frighteningly out of control, but it is good.

My life is indeed good and my heart is full of hope for my son. In the meantime, his illness has taught me to have strengths that I perhaps would not have had otherwise: an increased ability to live in the present moment, a heightened sense of appreciation for all the good in my life, and most importantly it has helped me to have a more compassionate heart. Edgar Allan Poe said *"Never to suffer would never to have been blessed."* For me, those words are true.

I count this congregation as one of my many blessings and I hold you dear. Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts.