

"A Reluctant Lover of Clarity"

Reverend Alison Hyder

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Opening words: adapted from Mark Doty

...We are the elements of the world's consciousness of itself, and thus we are necessary: replaceable and irreplaceable at once. Someone will take our places, but then again there will never be anyone like us, no one who will see quite this way.

We are a sudden flowering of seeing, among millions of such blossomings. Like the innumerable tiny stars on the branching stalk of the sea lavender: it takes how many - a thousand? - to construct this violet sheen, this little shaking cloud of flowers.

Reading: by Eileen Myles - from "Coming Clear" *Out Magazine*

Let's face it. Nobody really bothers to get sober who wasn't a pretty bad drunk or addict, one who didn't have very far to go. Then you stop, and what you discover is a whole world. Everything, it's all out there waiting for you, in a way it never was before.

Yet who am I now? I wondered. It was suggested to me that there are water poets and there are wine poets, and so I began to toy with the idea of becoming a water poet - a reluctant lover of clarity.

What being sober comes to mean is days and days of life, doing all sorts of tedious things that no upstanding addict ever wanted to live to do - flossing, for instance. Since I am now committed to having teeth for the rest of my life, every night I stand in front of the mirror, watching my face grow older and older. I turned 40 in sobriety, and pretty soon, not this year but not far off, I turn 50. So I'm discovering that, in a way, sobriety is nothing - it's just life. And now that I'm not fucked up, I still fuck up a lot. I make mistakes, and then I want to die. It's horrible getting older and not being perfect. It's really what made me drink, I think, the pressure of time and imperfection and the body, which always wants to have sex, or run away, or do something to wreck things, because it's so hard, or even so glorious, bearing the enormous burden of being alive.

Sermon: "A Reluctant Lover of Clarity" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Author Steven Covey, who wrote *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells a story that happened when his two sons were young. They'd spent the day together, running around, eating hot dogs, and ended the day with a movie. In the middle of the film, the youngest boy fell asleep. When the show was over, Covey carried the child to the car, draping his coat over him to keep him warm. Later, while preparing both boys for bed, he noticed that his youngest son was unusually quiet. Covey tucked him in, but his efforts to draw the boy out all failed. Suddenly, the boy turned his face to the wall and tears popped up in his eyes. "What's the matter, honey?" Covey asked. And after a moment of silence, the child quavered out, "If I fell asleep, would you cover me with your coat?"

We all take that same vulnerability with us into adulthood. Each of us - even the most secure - fears that we aren't as good as others, that we won't get the warm coat of love and acceptance that we need. Even when we are surrounded by caring and appreciative people there are still fragile places in our soul where doubts linger and worries abide. But many of us grew up without that basic feeling of acceptance. There was no one tucking us in, no warmth. Our parents were alcoholics or ill, or just so wounded and fragile that they were incapable of love. We suffered losses that made us fearful and withdrawn. For gays and lesbians and

transgendered people, the internal pressures, the direction of our yearnings - too frightening and strange to be articulated - reinforced a feeling of shame and guilt. We were sure people would hate us if they ever found out who we really are.

"Nearly one out of three gay men is an alcoholic," David Crawford wrote in 1990, "and we're at least privately aware that we tend to be compulsively "hooked" in many other ways." [*Easing the Ache: Gay Men Recovering from Compulsive Behavior* p 2]. Estimates of alcoholism among lesbians are about as high. Reacting to the culture's messages of loathing and fear, many attempt to blot themselves out, slowly, daily, through addictions to drugs or alcohol or sex. The compulsion is so all-encompassing, so total, that it distracts from any other thoughts or feelings.

David Crawford, in his excellent book *Easing the Ache: Gay Men Recovering from Compulsive Behavior*, talks about food and sex addictions as well as chemical addictions to drugs and alcohol, giving anecdotes as well as theories. They all share common aspects. He says,

The feeling that there is a struggle between absolute Good and absolute Evil is rampant, as well as the ultimate sense that one is evil - somehow lacking in the "decency" that everyone else seems to have. I don't know a compulsive person, and especially a compulsive gay man, who hasn't felt it. We are afflicted by such a heavy dose of shame: its roots seem endless. The very notion of looking for those roots is horrifying... we'd rather do anything than really face what we're sure is the terrible truth about ourselves. "The only thing I could depend on," Matthew [a compulsive public masturbator] says, "was my penis. That was the only part of me I could depend on to give me relief. Everything [and everyone] else was frighteningly unpredictable - everything else was unsatisfying, risky, imperfect. I felt totally cut off from people; I felt like only half a person at my job; I felt like a hypocrite at church. The only thing I knew how to do perfectly was masturbate. It was the only way I knew of blocking out how terrible I felt about myself.

Some studies indicate that addicts have a lower tolerance for pain than other people. Compulsive behaviors are usually an attempt to deaden feelings and control sensations by creating an artificial mood - one that seems under your own control. You *know* what getting drunk will feel like. The taste of a Ring Ding never varies, whether the first or the fifteenth. Even the nightly ritual of finding a good vein or throwing up becomes predictable and therefore easy. Only the body feels. Only the body exists.

Our culture tells us that that is all that we are: bodies, with hungers to fill, needs to slake, comforts to buy. Advertising continually reinforces our discontent by telling us that we are too fat, our hair is all wrong, we have a big nose, bad skin. We stink - in oh, so many ways! Everyone is pressured to conform and compete, to measure up - yes, even handsome straight white men. And this emphasis on the physical is dangerous on a lot of levels. It encourages us to judge everything by superficial qualities. It breeds a relentless feeling of inadequacy. It encourages conformity. And - I think most dangerously of all - it creates a notion that perfection is possible: that if only we keep working hard enough - buy the right clothes, diet continually, have good genes, get a facelift, work out, wear the right expression of worldly boredom - we will be perfect. And everyone will love us.

Women and gay men in particular fall into this trap. Society defines us by our bodily functions. And not only that - we perpetuate it with our obsessions and stereotypes. I don't need to tell those of you here this weekend how fixated gay men are on image, on what is hot and what is not, on categories and definitions. Here you are, promoting yourselves as a type, just to demonstrate your legitimacy. Are you a Bear, a leather man, a bottom? Are you a Chelsea boy, gym rat, a queen? Maybe you're a baby dyke, a lipstick lesbian, a mother, a fox. If not, where do you fit in? Who validates your life? Are you sure you exist??

Maybe you don't. Maybe you don't really exist. There's nothing in there. That's the basic fear that we all live with. And that is what fuels so many physical compulsions. You can taste food - so you must be real. You can feel that orgasmic high - you're alive. That's the one fact you can hold onto. Inside there's just a deadening sense of emptiness and inadequacy and uncertainty.

Yet there is only one certainty, and it's the one truth that's hardest to live with: you will never be perfect.

At the time in our lives when our bodies were at their most ideal - young and toned and healthy - we were filled with self-doubt and impatience. Everything was immediate, crucial. We were brash, naïve, and self-absorbed. We had to be, to survive adolescence! With age comes increasing wisdom and depth and confusion

and sorrow and love and crow's feet and corns and gravity. Our moments of beauty and insight come as a gift of grace, *because* of our imperfections. Because we've experienced enough grief to appreciate them.

There's a fable about the bishop (sometimes it's a professor) who goes to visit a well-known sage in order to learn wisdom. The visitor talks on and on, trying to impress the sage with learning and erudition. Finally, they take a break for tea. The sage takes the pot and pours, and keeps pouring as the tea overflows the cup. "Stop!" cried the bishop. "Why do you keep pouring when the cup is already full?!" The wise one answers: "To show you that your mind is like that cup - so full of fixed ideas and facts and judgments that nothing more can get in. If you empty your mind of old notions, maybe we can make some progress."

To experience the delight of tea, the refreshment of new experiences and relationships, we have to be incomplete and imperfect. We have to have room within us, empty places inside where we experience longing and loneliness and sorrow. We have to have cracks that others can fill, and soft places that are pliable and humble, and something weird and different that makes us stick out some. We need to have a lot of questions, and only *some* of the answers.

"Perfection is terrible," wrote Sylvia Plath ["The Munich Mannequins," 1963] "it cannot have children." Perfection is sterile and cold and self-contained. It cannot be touched or changed. Things just bounce off its cold, polished surface. No new life can grow there.

But of course, that is what compulsive behavior is all about - filling up your days, your brain with such a surface life of planned behaviors and distractions that no other possibilities can penetrate through. You don't allow for mistakes. You can't feel pain or uncertainty. You focus only on the familiar stimulation you have learned so well to create. So you can't really feel love - not your own for yourself (as if that were possible); not others' love for you. It's too dangerous.

Compulsions and addictions keep us separate from other people - from the inevitable rejection we expect and fear. We're so full of self-loathing that we're convinced that other people will despise us. So we never give them the chance to get close. We can't admit to ourselves the possibility that they could care. And so we behave as if they don't care, as if our actions have no consequences, no bearing on anyone else. The more hurtful and outrageous and dangerously we act, the more we deny our impact. It's too scary to believe that anything we do matters.

"Nobody really bothers to get sober," Eileen Myles states, "who didn't have very far to go." You have to hit a certain level of disgust or desperation to realize your compulsion isn't effective any more, that it's sucking more and more of your energy and creativity and self-respect. But the pain is still there. Myles suggests that there are wine poets - poets who write through confusion and a swirl of impressions, maudlin or self-contained and disdainful, depending on the false courage of the bottle to inspire them. Then there are water poets, committed to seeing the mundane and the ugly, observing the world clearly and honestly. Wanting the truth, however nervous they feel. Trying to see through the surface to the depths below, "a reluctant lover of clarity," of truth in all its complexity and boring detail. Feeling their connection to the world as a gift, not a threat.

Spirituality is about the connections between all the forces of life and love. It is about recognizing our interdependency with other living creatures, whether the piping plover or the Peruvian businessman. For many, it also means feeling that there is some larger encompassing force, whether Gods, or nature, or the cumulative energy of human love. That is why spirituality is a facet of most twelve-step programs like AA and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous. Being fully in the world requires us to have relationships with other unpredictable and faulty and funny beings, even if we never speak to them. We can start with just the feeling in our hearts, meditating on a concept - like "love" or "trust" or "courage." Eventually, we may work up enough hope (or desperation) to reach out.

It takes a lot of courage to believe that you deserve a decent life. You may have to rewrite entire chapters of your life, question all of your memories and assumptions, all the lies you've built into a life. Being sober - being human - is about admitting to doubt. It is living every day with all the painful uncertainties and questions of our existence. We are not in control of our lives. We don't know when and how we will die. We can't ensure that others will love us, or even how they will see us. It's enough of a struggle just to like ourselves - especially once our eyes are opened. We acted out every rejection we ever felt and created a monster. But there is hope.

David Crawford explains,

The lesson that recovering compulsive people have taught me is that the very ache I try to escape from through compulsive behavior is the ache I need to feel; that ache, if I pay enough attention to it, if I follow its dictates without fear and with an open heart and mind, can be my truest guide. It can lead me to a deeper and more lasting satisfaction than I've been able to find in booze, drugs, sex, or food. The tragedy of compulsive behavior isn't that it's an unspeakable sin or moral failing: it's that it prevents us from going the full distance we need to go to reach the answer we are really after. This is a crucial point because it takes away all guilt, all moral condemnation, all the shame we feel about acting out. When we learn to see ourselves compassionately enough to realize that what we are expressing in [our] behavior is an urgent craving to find peace - then we can begin to focus on truly finding that peace. When we're honest with ourselves, we see we can't find it in the places where we've been looking. So the obvious answer is to look elsewhere.... We grow up hating our cravings... which is exactly the opposite of what will help us. It seems that instead, if we learn to love our cravings - trust that being "hungry" is not a sin but an indication that we do need something - we've got a chance of finding out what will truly satisfy us.

All your life you've despised yourself for your flaws, for your needs and vulnerability. You didn't see how necessary you are, how unique. The word "perfect" did not originally mean what we think it does. It did not mean flawless, or unimprovable or exact. Instead, its original meaning in Hebrew was "whole," or "complete." There's a big difference there. We reach perfection as we become more connected to our full selves, and are able to integrate more and more of who we are, rage and fear and longing and brutality and sensitivity and all. Of course, that is not to say that we have to act on all of these feelings. Just learn to accept them as the price of being human, as a key to our true needs and desires.

Isn't that a relief? You can make mistakes and still be authentic and whole. Not slick and packaged and faultless. But perfect. If only you could see your beauty.

Closing Words: Rumi: "The Many Wines"

*God has given us a dark wine so potent that,
drinking it, we leave the two worlds.*

*God has put into the form of hashish a power
to deliver the taster from self-consciousness.*

*God has made sleep so that
it erases every thought.*

*God made Majnun love Layla so much that
just her dog would cause confusion in him.*

*There are thousands of wines
that can take over our minds.*

*Don't think all ecstasies
are the same!*

*Jesus was lost in his love for God.
His donkey was drunk with barley.*

*Drink from the presence of saints,
not from those other jars.*

Every object, every being,

is a jar full of delight.

*Be a connoisseur,
and taste with caution.*

*Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,*

*the ones unadulterated with fear,
or some urgency about "what's needed."*

*Drink the wine that moves you
as a camel moves when it's been untied,
and is just ambling about.*