

Overcoming Adversity: Clear After Midnight
by Gary Thraillkill

Overcoming adversity. To me that means ongoing, not past tense. I appreciate being allowed this opportunity and I am flattered that Chris liked the title of my in process book enough to call this series by the same name - *Clear After Midnight*.

I also sorta feel guilty talking about *my* adversity. All of us here have our own experience, and to each of us those challenges are our own. So, I back away from holding out my experience as special; it's just my experience.

The other day I was ready to complain to the clerk where I often get coffee about the fact that my flavor was "out of order", but that somehow did not matter when the clerk pre-empted my complaint by telling me her husband lost his job and they were losing their home.

I could tell you all the academic/professional credentials I drag around, but they are not the things that let you know who I am. So, just the important stuff...

I am a recovering alcoholic. I am a recovered Southern Baptist.

I am no longer a Christian - though I do believe Jesus was probably an incredible man who struggled with his own adversity and was able to give up enough of himself and his will to demonstrate what that degree of surrender to God's love can accomplish. I mostly think what religion has done to him is sad.

I also believe that religion, per se, is basically toxic and divisive and self serving. I think sometimes if we could abolish religion, we might all get along.

I am probably too cynical, too arrogant, too ego-driven, and too self-centered. And those may be my good qualities.

I grew up gay in a homophobic, heterosexist fundamental world that taught me without question that God did not love queers, would not love them, and that we were all going to hell if we did not get "fixed". However, they

offered no successful ways to do that, get “fixed” that is. The healing basically depended on me: “if I were truly willing, God would heal me”, therefore, if I did not get healed, it must be my fault.

I learned early to “look good” to cover the excruciating turmoil inside. In fact, I may look fairly calm and cool up here now, but something entirely different is going on inside. “Terror” comes to mind, but I will do my best to not let you see that.

The thing that caused the most distress for me was not the alienation from all my peers and society in general. It was my alienation from God. From my earliest memory I knew three things: I was different. I wanted God to love me. God would not love me because of that difference. That was my world.

I got “saved” when I was six. Went into the water a condemned sinner, came out the same way, only wet.

I surrendered to the ministry when I was nine - largely the result of guilt from having been sexually abused. I did not know I was sexually abused; I thought a grown man had shown me unconditional love. Go figure. I had been taught sex was dirty, filthy, awful, sinful, disgusting, and you only did it with the one person you loved the most. I also believed God had to love ministers, so if I became a minister, God would have to love me. But somehow, I don’t think God was convinced.

I walked the aisle of a Southern Baptist Church till there was a path on the floor. I even “got saved” again when I was twelve, but like a bad vaccination, that one did not take either.

In high school I began my church shopping, looking somewhere else for a God that would love me, or at least fix me so then love me.

Over the years I went from Pentecostal, to Methodist, to Episcopal, to Disciples of Christ, to Catholic, and so on. I used to call myself an Epistacathalopianist. My priest friend, who was my first long time lover, said that was spelled n-o-t-h-i-n-g.

In undergrad school I learned to drink. I believe the intoxicating impact of alcohol probably saved my life, and maybe the lives of others as well. I very well might have killed my self or someone else without alcohol’s numbing

effect.

Undergrad school was an amazing contradiction. I drank to intoxication often. I was a regular at the Baptist Student Union for Vespers. And never the twain met. I also learned the labyrinth of underground where folks like me went to meet other lost souls to engage in that anonymous and tragic dance of coming apart.

I confessed my condition to my hometown college educated, seminary trained Southern Baptist minister. He had me start seeing the new young doctor in town. The two of them determined it would be a good idea if I submitted myself as a voluntary patient at the state mental hospital in Little Rock to get "fixed". Ah, finally a solution! I went.

Words would be useless to tell you what that experience was like. I won't try. After two weeks they (the doctors during staffing) told me they could not help, though they agreed homosexuality was a significant mental illness. That's when suicide began to start making sense.

I finished college - crammed four years into five - and took a job traveling the east coast. Drinking was pretty much out of control. I lost myself every night in a different bar fabricating the same invention of myself attempting to connect with another human being and at best only making contact with another body. I was rapidly going insane.

I quit that job to go to seminary, to finally do my atonement. I failed getting admitted. I moved to California. Suicide started making more and more sense.

I tried one last time to get fixed. Through a series of circumstances I ended up at a Faith at Work conference in Gatlinburg, TN, and placed myself in the hands of a truly spiritual and God-loving woman. She had assembled a group of spiritual gurus who devoted themselves to my healing. They laid on hands, prayed for the demons to depart, did the exorcism and intervention and worked into a near frenzy. I passed out. Then my friend told me I was healed. I was elated. I went back to my room and had sex with the Episcopal priest with whom my friend had me room. I knew the truth then.

I flew back to California and began the process of divorcing God. God stayed wherever God stayed; I went back to hell.

I moved to North Carolina because I was engaged to a girl I had met in Gatlinburg; she was from New Jersey and a student at Queens College. As the other female relationships I had attempted, this one, fortunately ended fairly soon after I moved here. After that, I began a 7½ year relationship with a Catholic priest. That was pretty dysfunctional, to say the least, but my drinking escalated, and I got my first two DWI's while we were together.

One night, while I was drunk, I met a man who was different from any other. I told him that night that I was afraid I was in love with him. Twenty-nine years later, I have absolutely no doubts.

Phil lived with my alcoholic drinking for eight years before a judge in Maryland invited me to enter the rooms of recovery twice a week for two years or to go to jail for six months. After some lengthy deliberation, I opted for recovery. Not necessarily a comfortable place for someone who has divorced God.

At first, when I still believed the God of recovery was the same peeping-tom-with-a-baseball-bat I had met in all the religions I had pursued, I one last time committed to becoming heterosexual if that's what it took to get well. If that God required I give up Phil, then so be it. But I had to get well.

But in the rooms, I started to get it. I started to understand a God who was about love, not condemnation.

That was over twenty-one years ago. The journey has been challenging at least. Early in that process I committed to myself and to God that I would do whatever it took to get well. God has offered me many opportunities to put up or shut up. God has also provided the grace to meet those challenges as well. So, far....

In that process of healing, I have been able to recover from my own homophobia and to honor and affirm who I am as a gay man.

Today, I live a life that surpasses my wildest dreams. In fact, the way I get to live was never even on the radar when I projected what I wanted in life. I have been allowed to share the last 29 years with my lover and my best friend. We are privileged with so many opportunities, have so many incredible friends of the heart, enjoy good health, and probably comment daily to each

other about how profoundly blessed we are.

I believe the essence of recovery is allowing God to remove those things that separate me from God. So, the journey has been painful. It has involved a lot of work in the recovery program with a mentor who truly loves me more than caring whether or not I like him. It has involved a lot of work with therapists as well.

I heard a sermon several years ago, at the MCC Church here in Charlotte that may have been the best I have ever heard. It was an Easter sermon, and basically it urged us as wounded gay men and lesbian women to get out of the graveyard, to leave the tombs of our suffering, to join the celebration of resurrection. "Quit hugging the tombstones" was how it struck me. My attitude was to feel pity for "those people", who unlike me, were not getting it and getting on with their lives.

But a few years ago, I hit a spiritual wall. After all the work, after all the pain, after all the evidence of God's grace abundantly present in my life, when someone/some-thing hits that specific trigger, I can go immediately to that place of excruciating pain, that place of less-than-ness, that place of devastating worthlessness that separates me from God's grace.

For some time now, I have known, at least in my head, that I am invited to the party. God has chosen to love me totally, completely, absolutely, and unconditionally. And there is nothing I can do to alter that; that is God's choice, God's decision. The only choice I have is whether or not to enter into the relationship that God offers me ...here, ...now.

Yet that "thing", that un-worthy-ness, that has excluded me from fully participating in that celebration has remained. For several months I have been on this particular journey to discover exactly what that next piece is that stands between me and God's grace.

I spent over a year in a men's group, working as hard as I could. After all the effort, I realized that still, at the core of my being, was that shame, that pain, that had defined who and what I was from the beginning. And I was not happy.

I had always believed healing meant the removal of that pain and shame. I shared this with the men's group and they were supportive and affirming, but

provided no insights.

I shared it with my sponsor and he said this to me: “And that, Gary, is the point from which you can stand on the brink, look into that abyss, and tell another man it is not hopeless.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I told him, “Holy _____, you just changed my life.” The realization that those things from which I had felt victimized for so long could actually be gifts with which I could communicate with other suffering individuals was a paradigm shift. However, I was wrong in believing that that revelation was an epiphany. It was instead a new beginning, a new starting point.

Meeting Chris has been a part of that new challenge, a part of this piece of the journey. He has troubled the waters of my beliefs and shared things with me to which I have responded with anger, with gratitude, and with hope. I long ago quit believing in co-incidences, so I have embraced the opportunity of Chris’s friendship and that has led to this.

So, here’s sorta’, kinda’ where I am coming to with this soul searching: the thing to which I cling that separates me from God’s grace IS the shame, IS the pain at the core of my being. *Believing that woundedness is the “unique and special” aspect of who I am is **not** the result of having been the victim of that abuse, but is the result of my clinging to it as that which makes me special.*
Expletive deleted!

I did not know I would be able to articulate it that well. The sense of that reality is almost overwhelming, frightening, and paralyzing. That’s the fear that says if I allow God to “take away, take control of, alter, transform,” that aspect of my being, then there may well be no *being* left, no me left. Or at least no “special” me left, and (expletive deleted), I want to be special!

Am I on the right track here? God, I hope not! But... yeah, God, I think I probably am. And if I am, here’s a new question: How do I become willing to commence to begin to start to believe, that if I become entirely ready to allow God to remove this character defect, there will be any of me left on the other side? And is that the point, that there will be *less of me* on the other side - less of me and more of God? And how is that a good thing when it is all about me? I’m not real happy about this.

The making of Gary may be like Michelangelo said about carving the statue of David: He said he just chiseled away all the marble that was not part of David, and that's what was left. I am thinking maybe that's God's way.

God just chisels away all the parts of me that are not reflections of God's grace, so when, and *if*, God ever gets finished, all that's left is that reflection. Boy, there's the struggle... am I willing to give me, *the great almighty me*, away so that God's reflection can become visible? Is that the crucifixion to which I am called? Am I willing to state, "not my will, but yours" after I have begged the bargain of taking this death to myself away if at all possible. For me, it gets personal, and very uncomfortable.

For all the years that I have believed, deceived, myself that my desire was to have the shame of self healed, the truth is, I have made it my treasure, my sense of who I am and have held it tight. That shame, that pain has become the thing that separates me from God - not the fact of its existence, but the fact of my honoring it, embracing it, worshipping it, as who I am. I am a tombstone hugger.

That being true, what do I have to offer to you?

I guess more than anything else, what I have to offer you is my vulnerability. What I have to offer you is that view of the less than pretty continuing process of the ways I am being challenged to allow God to love me.

I am willing to give this treasure, this idol, this false god over to God, to do whatever it is that God will do with it. I am certain, this is not the end of the process. There will be more revealed, more healing offered, more vulnerability exposed.

I welcome and curse that vulnerability, and recognize it will always be there. And as long as that vulnerability is there, I will be always aware of my need for God.

Thank you for being witness to this part of my journey, this part of my gift. My prayer is that there might be something here that can have a healing impact on your life as well.