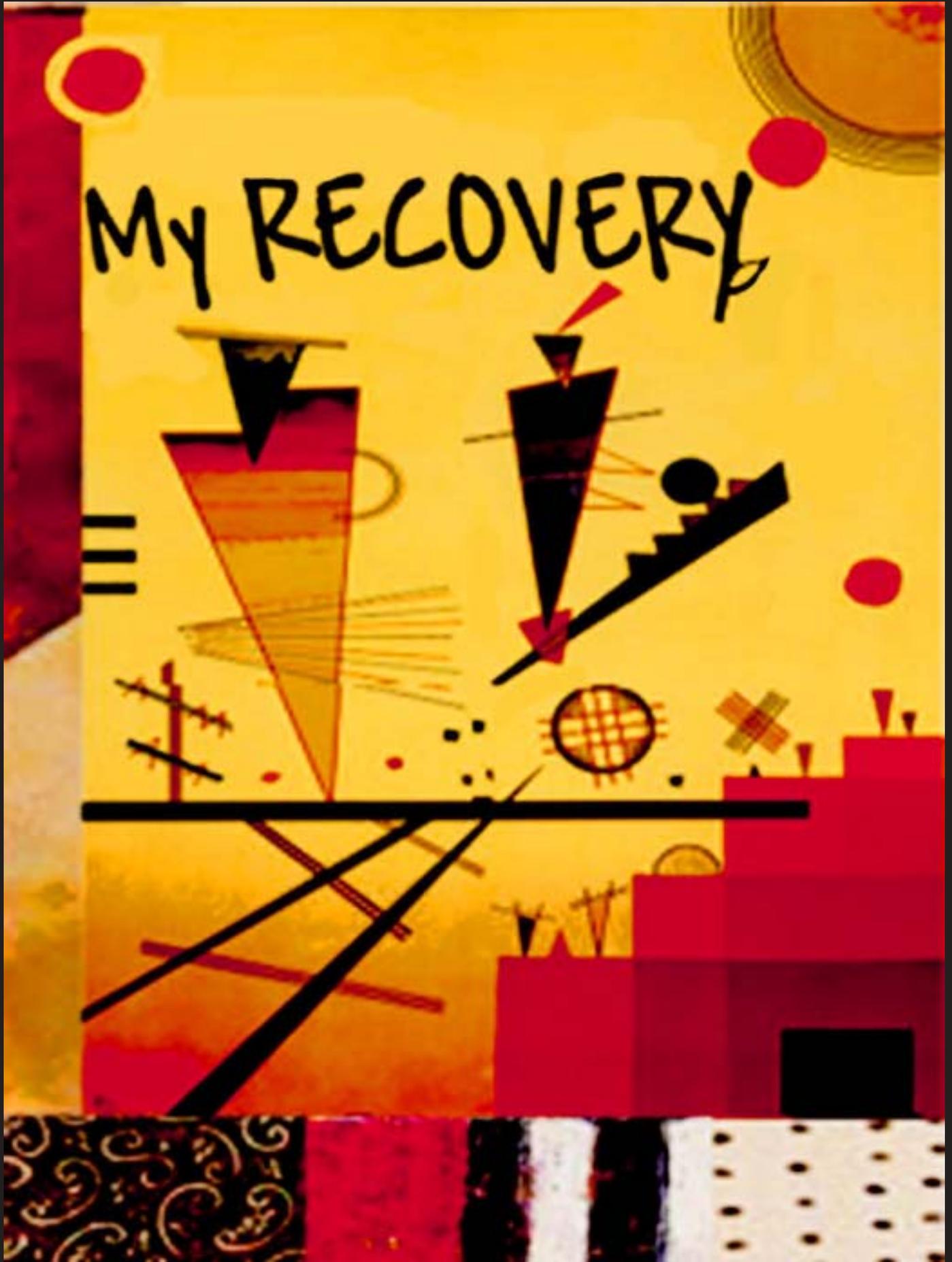


MY RECOVERY



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Today

I fill my life with extraordinary & rewarding activities. Each and every day, I try to bring compassion, gratitude, and service to my fellow humans. In December, I married the love of my life. Just five months ago, I celebrated two years of stone cold clean & mf sober. Less than a month later, I completed the final steps to adopt my daughter. Since she came to our home in May of 2008, I have raised her as my own; on May 7th of this year the court proclaimed it legally so.

Even after I began treatment and cleaned up in 2007, I never expected to get married, never expected to have any children - these were not things I sought in my life. But one of the true blessings I found through recovery was being able to engage in all possibilities when the moments present themselves. And so I found myself willing to engage the possibility of this beautiful, compassionate, awesome woman as my wife. I was able to do so with an open heart and a clear conscience, filled with the deep and abiding conviction that continuing on my journey of recovery enables me to be an outstanding husband and father; that being an outstanding husband & father requires a deep and abiding commitment from me to ever improve in my own health and rejection of addictive behaviors. Indeed, the very responsibility, accountability, and love of my family cause me enormous motivation in addition to bringing me stalwart support in my daily struggle. These days, the struggle has evolved instead to a glorious, grateful & joyous grasp of life: the happy alongside the sad, the bitter with the sweet, successes as well as setbacks, pleasure alongside pain. Occasionally "struggle days" arise, but a strong foundation of recovery tools -combined with an exceptional support structure of loved ones- allow me to persevere, to overcome, and to embrace that very mundane which is woven inextricably within the truly extraordinary.

For many years, at least since I was 18, I plunged myself into (and became plagued by) problematic use of drugs and alcohol. When all's said and done, alcohol has always been my true drug of choice, but my recreational experiments and abuses ran the gamut - there was virtually no drug I wouldn't try, haven't tried. But, by the time I reached the end of the line, it was alcohol alone that had become a desperate, daily, physiological requirement for me; it no longer provided me with any pleasure whatsoever. In those last days, from the time I awoke (often mid-afternoon or evening) I struggled to hold out for as long as I could until I took my first swig to "repair" the awful damage of my hangover from the previous day. Some days I couldn't hold out for even an hour. Most days I needed to start by forcibly gulping down at least a drink or two to soften the withdrawal symptoms. I would still feel wretched, but a little more manageable. The bulk of my time was spent in deep dread, despair- even mild terror: I felt raw, vulnerable, frayed and almost too emotionally paralyzed to cope. These were the last months of active addiction for me, and even thinking or speaking of it today brings me an irrefutably palpable, visceral revulsion. I knew without question, for most of the last two years, that my addiction had long ceased to be anything over which I might triumph alone. I needed help, enormously needed; yet still I hesitated.



The first time I ever got really drunk, at 14 years old, I naively believed dixie cups to be the equivalent of shot glasses. In a fit of baseless boastfulness, I described my great ability to toss back shots without so much as a grimace, my "tolerance". My best friend Andres, another 14-year-old genius, lined up four dixie cups in front of me, filled them with a horrid concoction of the most potent bottles in his father's liquor cabinet. Without food, without chaser, without any remote grasp of what I was doing, I knocked them down in swift succession. That's the pure alcohol volume equivalent to a full bottle of soda, in less than a minute. I was 14; I weighed just over 100 pounds. My "tolerance" left me to this day with no recollection of that night. The only reason I did not die was because my friend didn't follow my lead, and because, somehow, I managed to survive what must have been acute alcohol poisoning. The next day he told me he had to roll me over frequently throughout the night; I was passed out on my back: unconscious, vomiting repeatedly, and choking. Anyone in his right mind might very well

swear off drinking forever after such an event, but not me. Despite that experience, I dabbled in binge drinking throughout high school whenever I had an infrequent chance of not getting caught by my strict authoritarian parents. During college and into my adult life, I continued to drink excessively, often in binges, but interspersed with short periods of relative moderation.

When I was 28, after some particularly unsettling alcohol-related mishaps, I even "took 6 months off" just to prove that I was not an addict: to prove that I could willfully stop whenever I chose. On the night I decided to get off the wagon, I wound up in jail for a couple days. The crime was not serious, and the charges were dismissed, but yet again I overlooked any lesson to be learned. Alcohol continued to play a leading role in most of the troublingly tumultuous events in my life. Yet, all along, I managed to rein it in just sufficiently enough to cling to my "career" as an Internet lackey and writer, as well as some mea-

sure of habitable life.

On occasion throughout my adult life, during periods of particularly dismal depression or outrageously disproportionate and wild anger, I sought the services of mental health professionals. On each occasion, I had decided upon my own diagnosis prior to meeting with the doctor, and presented to that person my symptoms in the context that I'd read about them - mainly "I'm depressed, here's how I experience it, and it often contributes to disastrous drinking which then exacerbates my depression. The two feed upon each other, ravenously."

I first visited a therapist in 1995. In the week previous, I had punched through a storefront plate glass window. I came within a hair's breadth of losing my right hand to an enormous dangling shard of glass. In my flight from the police, I nearly bled to death from the severed major artery in my wrist. As a means of pacifying the court and convincing them to drop any serious

charges, I sought anger management counseling. I lasted 3 sessions with him before deciding I was "all better".

In 1999, I saw a psychologist for several months, some of it during my self-imposed six month sobriety stint. It seemed helpful at first, as did the sobriety, in alleviating a lot of my depression symptoms. At the time I believed myself to be autonomously able to heal myself as I saw fit. I was strong and competent, full of hearty ego and willful pride. Again, I decided after a short time that she'd given me as much help as she was capable, and my sessions ceased.

In 2003, I saw a psychiatrist for the first time, having acknowledged to myself before meeting with her that I might need to be open to a medicinal solution to my mental quandary. My depression symptoms had become more severe, and I felt as if I was floundering. She wanted to prescribe Lexapro, trazodone, and Wellbutrin, but as

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a precondition she insisted that I cease drinking. For two weeks, I did just that. When I began to feel better, I continued taking the medication, and returned to drinking, assured in my notion that a lack of depression would enable me to drink in moderation. In no time at all, I was drinking to great excess again. Within months I stopped seeing the psychiatrist, and self-tapered off the medications.

The two years that followed comprised a dismal series of failed companies, botched consulting assignments, intermittent unemployment, numerous geographic moves and personal economic disaster. It was during this period that I became an Every Single Day drinker permanently, beyond recall. Somehow I managed to land another executive position at yet another startup here in San Diego. As soon as my health insurance was established, I began seeing another psychiatrist, determined to have yet another go at returning stability and mental health to my life. That became perhaps the worst cocktail of all - multiple antidepressants, tried in various combinations, trazodone abuse mixed with excessive daily alcohol consumption. I even tried

acamprasote, which was supposed to help me crave less alcohol and taper down entirely. When that didn't work, I went all the way to disulfiram -Antabuse- in an attempt to shed the drinking habit I could not seem to let go of my own free will. After a week of cautious abstinence, I began tapering off the Antabuse in the hopes that I was "all-better" now. That wasn't really why. Really I just figured I wouldn't be able to have "just a couple drinks" while taking it. Two days later I had a few drinks. Some of the Antabuse remained in my system, and I experienced one of the most horrific 3-hour periods of my life. Some people vomit when they combine alcohol with Antabuse. I became flushed, hallucinatory and paranoid. I felt as if I might physically explode. I could sense each person that

walked past gaping and leering into my turgid soul, passing terminal judgment upon me, plotting my demise. It was the last time I made that mistake - I was done with Antabuse, and done with my psychiatrist.

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Six months later, in the haze of a bender, in the midst of a thunderous downpour, I passed out face down in a deep mud puddle beneath a dumpster, a mere

20 feet shy of the front door to my apartment building. Fortunately, someone saw my plight and called an ambulance. I remember none of this. My first memory is being jolted awake in the ambulance, a shot of adrenaline, choking up dumpster runoff. They told me I hadn't been breathing. When we reached the hospital, I snarled at the doctor, asked him if I was legally bound to remain in the hospital. He said I was not, so I stumbled out into the dark of night, with no idea where I was. Miraculously, I found my way home. The next day I awoke to searing pain and agitation; I began drinking anew.



A week later, sitting woozy on a curb, lights flashing in my face, I heard paramedic from the same ambulance say to me: "Wait a second didn't I just see you last week?" But I lacked the emergency status for a second hospitalization. Instead, I was handcuffed and dropped at detox. The next day, I drank again.

In July 2006, when the company I worked for went bankrupt, I wallowed in my own misery, and began drinking more heavily than ever. With no job to go to, I could sleep later and start drinking earlier. I looked halfheartedly for a new job, even had some interviews; for many of these interviews, I was partly drunk or acutely hung-over. No offers came, and my unemployment \$\$ ran out. I was about to lose my apartment, I had no job, and I could



think of nothing but my addiction, and where my next drink would come from. I was drinking ruthlessly, compulsively, in a way that would swiftly hasten death.

After a January blackout disaster, where I awoke with my bed covered in blood, a huge gash running the length of my scalp, unable to turn my head any direction due to excruciating muscle stiffening, a definite concussion, with no recollection of the incident that had caused the injuries, and no health insurance to get medical attention, I finally reached acceptance that I needed to get help if I wanted to live, to conquer my alcoholic desperation. I knew also, that my mental illness had reached an abysmal low - I lashed out at even those people who had stood by me despite my erratic behavior and addiction, people who would do anything to help me; I felt little aside from despair, fear, and rage.

I began researching programs that might assist me in my recovery. It was important to me to find the right one, but taking time to research and apply also gave me a last few months to drink without remorse. I knew I needed a program that would treat my mental illness as well as my addiction. I had no money and no insurance. I needed a program that would take me anyway. I didn't want to move, but I resigned myself to the possibility: if outpatient treatment was insufficient, I would have to move to an inpatient setting.

I finally found the UCSD COD Program, which seemed to embody every aspect of treatment I sought. It was an evidence-based research program, it applied individualized treatment plans, it was county-funded (so they would take me even though I was broke) and best of all, it was outpatient and just two miles from my apartment, so I could walk or bike there. It's also a harm reduction program. I liked that, because to me that meant I didn't have to stop drinking; it just meant I had to reduce my consumption. I was excited that they would be able

to teach me to drink in moderation, to help me get well and still be able to drink. I said as much to my care coordinator, when we first met - she asked me my goals in the pro-

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gram, and I said: "I want to learn to drink in moderation". She worked with me to set up a schedule of group meetings and individual therapy sessions with that goal in mind. For a week or two, I improved a bit. Then I went on a 5day blackout bender. I felt completely

beaten down - I couldn't even get it together enough to handle a modest recovery plan. On the night of 18 April 2007, unable to take the edge off my hangover, even by choking down a couple drinks, with my stomach, mind, and spirit in the depths of turmoil, I poured every last drop of alcohol I had down the sink. I went to my meeting with my care coordinator the next day, threw myself at her mercy, and said, "I need to stop drinking completely." "We both knew that when you first came here," she said, "you just had to reach that conclusion fully for your-

self and acknowledge it to me."

I felt horrible, a dark, evil person of malevolently low character. I couldn't do anything right, and I'd just spent the worst five days taking myself lower and becoming more worthless. She said: "You must have done at least one worthwhile thing during those 5 days; what was it?" For several minutes, I couldn't think of a single thing. Finally I realized: "Last night I poured out every last drop of booze." "That's amazing, Seth!" she said. "Hold onto that, keep reminding yourself of that, focus on what an enormous step you took." I haven't had a drink since, but the real work was only beginning.

We began an assessment of my support resources in recovery. I am fortunate enough to have a ferociously compassionate and loyal group of friends and family who have stood by me and loved me dearly despite my illness, despite my increas



ingly erratic and destructive behavior, despite my addictive selfishness. She brought them into the process. We sat together and structured a relapse prevention plan - an actual long and thorough checklist of things to do, places to go, people to call or run to if I feel in danger of taking a drink or a drug. We joked that if I make it all the way through the list and I still felt compelled to drink, then perhaps it would be fate. I haven't yet felt the need to resort to my checklist. I hope I never do. But I have it. It's long. It contains a huge number of people who I think would drop just about anything to come shepherd me through my time of trial if I felt like relapsing. I'm certain I could never make it through that checklist and still be in danger of taking a drink or drug.

There came a time after I'd been sober for many months when the acute depression returned. I'd been attending most of my groups, my therapy sessions - I'd been engaging the COD Program heavily, making a tremendous amount of progress, and my bleak outlook from my drinking days had been replaced with a cautious optimism. I didn't feel "happy" per se, but I was content; I felt as if my life had become more manageable.



I didn't want to die anymore - I wanted to live, and I certainly didn't want to drink. But unexpectedly, I felt the optimism slipping away, and then I fell into an all-too-familiar trough of deep misery. It was terrible. I couldn't get out of bed. I began to slip from my program of healthy activities. I missed groups, classes, meetings, even sessions with my care coordinator, which were usually the high point of my week. It so happened to coincide with the time span wherein we periodically evaluated and updated my recovery plan. I felt as if I were falling off, slipping back into unnerving despair, isolation, and paralyzing dread. The confidence I'd begun to rebuild in myself, in my rejuvenated character, crumbled away in a precipitous instant. I felt overwhelmed and drowning. The smallest activities or tasks took on an insurmountable quality of their, with catastrophic consequences of failure. I felt immobilized, as if there were nothing I could do to combat

this enormous burden that had collapsed upon me again. But I managed to pull myself together sufficiently to get to our meeting and plead with my care coordinator for more help. She delivered.

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She gave me the opportunity to interview with the entire clinical team at the program, including two of the founding doctors, a number of psychiatrists in residence, the entire team of care coordinators, and other psychologists. I went into the meeting with a completely open mind, ready to answer their questions with the most thorough and acute honesty I possessed. I abandoned all predetermined self-diag-

nosis and refused to mimic any symptoms. It felt amazing to be that directly engaged, not only with my own counselor, but also with an entire room of trained psychiatric and psychology professionals.

I had mentioned to my care coordinator prior to the meeting, that I was willing to take any suggestions or help they could give me, even if it meant taking medication for my mental illness, a move I had resisted throughout my sobriety. Apparently, after a period of dis-

ussion & analysis, they arrived at a consensus in that room: instead of the depression diagnosis from my the brief mental illness forays I'd made before sobriety, they recognized my symptoms as Bipolar II (hypo- "small" manias instead of hypermanias). It was as if the sun suddenly burst from behind a cloud: it all made sense. I understood the cyclical nature of my depression, instead of finding it inexplicable; I now realized how I could go through periods of relative contentment. The interview process had helped me trace back even through my drinking days the cyclical nature of the mental and emotional phases through which I passed. It is widely known that prolonged alcohol abuse particularly aggravates bipolar symptoms. The intersection of the two provokes a quintessential recipe for disaster.

They prescribed medication for me which I have taken ever since. It didn't make me feel different,

just a more stable, tempered version of myself. Periods of heightened agitation have been reduced dramatically, and deep depressions have become virtually nonexistent for me. The medication just somehow made getting out of bed that little bit easier to the point where I could do it consistently, regardless of underlying mood, even though it remains difficult from time to time. It helped to make me just that little bit more able to engage in the behavior-changing remedies that I learned in DBT & CBT; it helped me become just that little bit more open to perceiving the possibilities and opportunities in the world, where before I dwelled on the daunting hurdles.

Where I once described my life as miserable punctuated by [joyous] moments, I now feel genuinely happy in a way I never believed possible.

Life still brings its ups and downs to me, but the more I continue to actively pursue those methods and behaviors suggested in my recovery program, the more I continue to practice the techniques and healthy behaviors I have learned and integrated into my life, the more satisfied and confident I become in my recovery.

Ever vigilant, ever persevering, I recognize that everything for which I am grateful in my life must be cherished. My recovery builds upon the consistent reinvigoration of those principles and practices that enable me to combat the dangers posed by any slip back into my addiction or mental illness. Where once I spent my time in bars and places of ill-repute, I fill my days now with healthy, rewarding activities (hikes, meetings, recovery volunteering, writing, parenting, husbanding, and countless others) that countermand drinking temptations.

Where once I wallowed in loneliness and isolation, I am now enveloped by the loving admiration of my wife & daughter. They bring forth from me great love and joy unlooked-for; they reveal to me inner capacities heretofore unknown.

I recovered from addiction that I might live; I strive, uninterrupted, to make the living worthwhile.



Although I understand why some people prefer to remain anonymous, for me recovery and my limited ability to describe it feels like a gift -and duty- to report. Not only insofar as it may help others in recovery, but also as a way for me to say to anyone "normal" who wants to listen: this is my story, and I hope it provides insight, but I refuse to hide, I am not anonymous, I reject any stigma, and there are so many other who can recover if they are so empowered.

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Best,
-.Seth



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