

MOMENT OF CLARITY

Alcoholism is often described as a three-fold disease – mental, physical, and spiritual. The mental aspect of the disease of alcoholism is characterized by denial and delusion thoughts. Family members and friends are often amazed that, despite severe consequences such as arrests, divorces and physical deterioration, the alcoholic continues to drink. The defense mechanisms of denial and delusional thinking are so powerful that the active alcoholic cannot comprehend the reality of their situation. There is a saying in 12-step rooms that in order to seek recovery, the alcoholic has to come to believe that “the pain of using is greater than the thought of not using”.

A common thread that I hear in every recovering alcoholic’s story is his or her “Moment of Clarity”. This was a moment, usually during times of extreme confusion and deep despair, when a thought came to them, from out of the blue, and propelled them towards recovery. It is paradoxical that these moments of clarity occur during the moments of deep depression and despair. This state of awareness may occur during the alcoholic’s “hitting bottom” in their disease process.

In “Alcoholics Anonymous” (the AA Big Book) founder, Bill Wilson described this experience as a “spiritual awakening”. He wrote that there was a sudden, dramatic moment when he was “bathed in light and seized by an ecstasy beyond words”. He described a powerful experience that resulted in his never taking another drink. This is often referred to as Bill’s “white light” moment, when he experienced the presence of a power great than himself. He described a very powerful and dramatic “a-ha” moment.

But for most alcoholics, this “a-ha” moment comes as a moment of clarity, a moment when through the haze of alcohol and the deeply ingrained denial there appears a clear thought that they want to stop using and find a way to get sober.

Based on my clinical work in alcoholism and personal experience, these individual usually entered Alcoholics Anonymous or other 12-step programs to begin their recovery

In 2009 Christopher Kennedy Lawford wrote “Moments of Clarity”, which chronicles the life-changing experiences of people who could not stop drinking or taking drugs on their own. Most of them are celebrities.

Following are some examples of “moments of clarity” that I have had the privilege of listening to over the years from recovering alcoholics.

Clara was from a middle class alcoholic family, held a degree in education and was living on the streets of a major city in her early twenties. She moved to another state but her disease traveled with her. She voluntarily admitted herself to an in-patient rehabilitation center, but did not consider herself a “real alcoholic”. The rehab took her to an open AA meeting with her fellow patients. She had no plans on quitting alcohol and drugs and had not heard anything she could relate to during the first few weeks of in-patient treatment. As the speaker, an “old man” started speaking she thought that he was hilarious. She said that although she couldn’t stop laughing, she couldn’t stop crying either. “It hit me that I was going to have to stop using drugs and alcohol for the rest of my life. Although I had willingly admitted myself into rehab, that thought (complete abstinence) never crossed my mind.” She

has remained clean and sober for 12 years.

Jerry grew up in a privileged family, had a college degree, one divorce and was a failed stand-up comedian by his early thirties. He described his moment of clarity. "I was on a train that had reached the end of the line, late at night at the Miami airport. I had all of my clothes and belongings in a black hefty bag. I called my brother and asked him if I could stay at his home. But he refused to let me stay at his house because he did not want his children to be scared of my condition. He did agree to put me up in a cheap hotel for one night. It was in that hotel room that I finally realized I am sick and tired of living like this. Although I saw myself as an agnostic, I got on my knees and asked for help. Something clicked inside my brain and that gave me the courage to pick up the phone and called AA." He has maintained his sobriety for ten years.

Since the early days of alcohol treatment we in the field have seen our share of miracles. But that moment of clarity, when the alcoholic has a glimpse of reality, is a very personal moment that can set them on the path of recovery. It is a moment when their denial is broken and they experience an ego-shattering blow to their self-image and realize: "This is not who I am, not who I want to be.

** I use the term alcoholism to be synonymous with addiction in this paper.*