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IN MEMORY OF STEVEN



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REFLECTIONS ON 24 YEARS

By Dr. Anita Gadhia-Smith

I became addicted to alcohol and drugs at the age of twelve when I first began using substances. The first time that I got drunk, I woke up in the hospital after injuring my head at home and bleeding all over the living room furniture. After several years of drinking small amounts of wine with my family in restaurants, I had decided to get really drunk. I raided my mother's liquor cabinet when she went out to go to the grocery store. When I woke up in the hospital after my blackout, my first concern was not about being hospitalized; it was about whether I had ruined my new shirt. My next thought was that I couldn't wait to drink again. I didn't care about the stitches in my head; I had tasted escape from reality and loved it. For the next fifteen years, my addiction to oblivion ruled my life - my body, mind, spirit, and all of my choices.

I started using alcohol and marijuana on a daily basis, and then later went on to use pills, cocaine, hallucinogens, and opiates. I had been a straight arrow little girl. I loved school and got good grades. I never thought that I would end up shooting heroin one day. As I continued to lower my standards because of my addiction, what I had once thought of as unacceptable became the norm. From the start, I thought that I just wanted to feel better. I had come out of a very painful childhood stemming from the divorce of my parents. I was an only child who was a "lost child." Both of my parents were immersed in their own dramas, and I was basically on my own. I had no clue about how to cope with my life, my feelings, or my family situation. I felt frightened and alone in the universe, and substances took the painful feelings away and made me feel like I was okay.

After spending my entire childhood in a private Quaker Friends school, using drugs and alcohol daily but still making good grades, I attended Johns Hopkins University. During this time, my addiction progressed, and I began to approach my bottom. I was reaching a point where I couldn't enjoy anything anymore. When I tried to control my using, I couldn't enjoy it, and when I enjoyed using, I couldn't control it. The first ten years of using drugs and alcohol had been fun, but then it started to turn on me, and there was nothing I could do to make it work anymore. I was afraid to live and afraid to die. After a few more years of trying to manage my addiction by myself, I finally gave up at the age of twenty-seven and sought help. I decided to seek help by attending twelve-step meetings, and my life started to transform.

My journey into sobriety began on March 5, 1990. When I got into recovery, I soon found hope about being able to live life, but had no idea how much work was ahead of me. I thought that if I stopped using drugs and alcohol, everything would just fall into place. Not so. I have had to work in my recovery in ways that I never imagined. I spent the first few years just learning the basics about how to be a human being again - how to live, eat, sleep, talk to people, and work - sober. It was terrifying and exciting. I remember feeling anxious all the time, but I knew that I was heading in the right direction. Gradually, I began to address the underlying issues that had been buried inside of me for many years. These issues emerged very slowly, and I have been able to face them as they have come to the surface. The inner work has led to an internal transformation, which for me has been necessary for a sustained, evolving, and vibrant recovery.

After agonizing about finding my purpose in life for the first few years of my recovery, I decided to face my fears and go back to graduate school for the third time. I had gone to graduate school twice during my addiction, but was unable to complete my education because I simply could not show up and do the work that was required. I was terrified that I was not good enough or competent to do the work. However, this time was

different, because I was sober. I went back to school in recovery for my masters and doctoral degrees, and got straight A's in both programs. During graduate school, I met my husband and got married. I was able to enter into my profession as a psychotherapist, and have subsequently been in private practice for over fifteen years.

My greatest challenges have served to make me useful to others in the world. Through consistent and diligent recovery work, I have grown by leaps and bounds over the past twenty-four years. The journey has had many peaks and valleys, and has been rich and beautiful. I would not trade it for any other life. My mistakes have been transformed into powerful life lessons in recovery, and my successes have been building blocks for further growth. At the age of fifty-one, I feel at peace with the fact that I have been truly living my life fully for the past twenty-four years, instead of just talking about living it and watching it pass me by. I have had the opportunity to be of service in the world each and every day. Today my life has meaning and purpose. I am grateful to my mentors and fellows both in and outside of recovery who have led me every step of the way. Ever since I got into recovery, I have experienced a grace that I did not even know existed. This has carried me through the rough times and strengthened me from the inside in order to prepare for the next level. We all have a unique light to shine in the world; recovery allows us to find our true selves, build a meaningful life, and be what we were meant to be all along. The horizon keeps expanding.



Dr Anita Gadhia- Smith is a psychotherapist in Washington, D.C. specializing in addictions, recovery, and relationship issues. She is the author of four successful self- help books, including the bestseller "FROM ADDICTION TO RECOVERY: A THERAPIST'S PERSONAL JOURNEY." (www.fromaddictiontorecovery.com). She has spoken regularly on television and in film about addiction, and has lectured all over the world. She has served as a consultant to the United States Congress in parity legislation for substance abuse treatment. Visit her website at www.practicaltherapy.net.