

Hope in the Midst of Addiction

The Milton Coalition collects data about mental health and substance abuse challenges among Milton adolescents. And one tool they use to do this is through surveying both students and parents of students in the Milton schools. 39% of parents in Milton reported that someone in their immediate family is struggling with or has struggled with alcohol or drug abuse. Nearly 40%. And that's in line with what we see across the country. In 2017, more than 20 million Americans reported struggling with substance abuse challenges – and that's just the number that reported. And these rates have worsened during the pandemic. In fact, in June, 2020, 13% of Americans reported starting or increasing the use of a mind altering substance as a form of coping during the pandemic. And one of the things all of the researchers that I read noted is that it's hard to get accurate numbers of people suffering from substance abuse disorder because they estimate that the number of people who struggle with addiction is far higher than those who report struggling with addiction.

And I have a guess as to why – it's one word, "Shame."

Social work professor and TED talk celebrity Brene Brown thinks it's important to pay attention to the difference between shame and guilt.

Guilt says, "I did something bad."

Shame says, "I am bad."

And Brown goes on to say that "shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change." In other words, if I think I'm bad, then I can think I don't deserve help. If I think I'm bad, then I think I don't have the capacity for change. For Brown, leaving shame behind is so profoundly important for anyone's journey of healing. And I think that's especially true about addiction because there is a lot of external shame that is placed on those who struggle with drug and alcohol addiction. Neuro-scientists now know that addiction is a disease that affects our brain, like all mental health disorders. It's a sickness. And yet, in spite of that fact, for most of our history, addiction has been treated like a character defect rather than as a sickness.

So instead of offering treatment, society has offered punishment.

Instead of offering solidarity and support, society has offered shame.

I'll say more about that in a minute, but first, I want us to think a little bit about what we mean by addiction and see if we can define it a little more broadly. For our purposes, what if we move beyond the clinical definition of substance abuse disorder and think of addiction as any behavior that we can't seem to break that harms us or the people we love? Paul gets at this reality in our Scripture:

"I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate."

One way to think of addiction is when our actions and choices are not in line with how we want to act and what we want to choose and, yet, we feel powerless to do or choose anything different. And the shame grows and creates a cycle of destructive actions to cope with the shame and then more shame because of the destructive actions. Precisely because shame is so powerful and so harmful, to find hope in the midst of this kind of cycle, I think, requires creating shame free communities. It's the kind of community that I hope we can become. But I have to warn us – churches don't always have a great reputation in being shame free communities. And because we don't have the best track record, maybe we should look to communities that have this really figured out as our guide, and one of those communities is the AA recovery community.

Today, we are so fortunate to have Mary Riley come and share with us her own journey of addiction and finding recovery and hope through AA.

Mary's Story

My name is Mary and I'm an alcoholic

I used to be afraid that every time I spoke at a podium, or introduced myself in a work meeting, that would come out of my mouth!

While there are still lots of places that's not how I want to introduce myself, after having said it thousands of times in AA meetings, I'm not afraid to say it anymore.

Nor am I ashamed.

I AM an alcoholic.

I'm in recovery.

I didn't grow up in an alcoholic home, although there are many of us who struggle with addiction who did.

I don't know WHY I'm an alcoholic.

But I do know that for some reason at somewhere between maybe 10–11-12 years old, I developed a sense of not being enough.

I don't think anyone told me this. And it's certainly not uncommon for adolescents to feel like they don't fit in, but for me - it was quite heavy.

And it stuck.

While it seems outrageously young to me now - when I had that first drink, and drunk at age 14, those weighty feelings were lifted.

I didn't feel that I was the prettiest, best dancer, most popular when I drank. But there was a relief, some room to breathe, a reprieve from a feeling of inadequacy - just enough to escape.

And escape I did!

Not frequently at the beginning- but it was there, and I knew I had an escape, a way out of feelings that hurt.

I went to college, basically thanks to the rowing coach who helped me get into a school that was maybe just a little out of my reach.

But when I got there and realized my free time – alllllllllll of it would be in the boathouse with other girls, OR that I could spend it drinking with boys, the choice for this girl was clear.

Buh bye rowing.

First loss. And I never even knew it was a loss or what was coming in terms of things I'd give up for the relief I found in drinking.

It came fast from there, the things I gave up, the settling for less – and the acceptance that I was less than.

Over time, I had more of me I gave away, opportunities I never ever took the shot at, settling for less, alienating decent people.

The cycle for me was that what drinking did to me became what I needed to escape from in addition to just the initial feeling of not being enough.

I was Hiding in shame

Living in fear of who I was becoming, knowing that I didn't even like myself.

I was physically sick and endangering myself every moment with my drinking and the dark places it took me to with people I never ever should have been with, I can say with no hesitation that I am lucky to be alive:

It's a miracle that some of the bad things that happened to me were as bad as it got, and that I didn't end up dead.

When I had lost as much of myself as I thought I could lose, and was scared, and lonely and broken and had alienated everyone decent who'd ever been close to me – I somehow thought of AA, and that maybe if I could stop drinking, I could find a way out, a true escape from the feelings I was running from– I went to my first ever meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

It was an evening in October, so it was dark outside and I walked in to the light of the hall; I look back now and know that as a metaphor for AA

I walked in and there was hope, there were happy people who wanted to help me. I joined AA , got involved. I felt safe.

I started feeling that maybe I was enough.

And my life got better.

It's not always perfect, because life isn't perfect - but I am better.

Like our church, so much of my program is focused on faith in a higher power. For me, that's God.

Like our church, so much of our program is based on service - knowing that I have a purpose and a reason for being, to not only help another alcoholic, but to be open to whatever my higher power has for me to do.

That's a long way from where I was when I thought I wasn't enough.

I know I'm enough now, because like we learn in our church; I am a child of God, who believed in me all along when I didn't believe in myself.

Addiction is a family disease; it permeates and hurts everyone around us, and especially those who love us and are broken hearted and angry and scared by what it does to their loved one.

But recovery is a family impacting way of life too - it introduces hope.

I'm speaking today because I want to share this message:

whether you are struggling with addiction yourself, or love someone who is, there is hope.

And you might feel shame when you feel alone with this, but you're NOT alone.

Addiction is an epidemic.

Not everyone find their way out. But there is a way out, and I see it in me and hundreds of people I'm in recovery with.

If you don't know the song ' You'll Never walk alone'', listen to that - Mom swears it to be the anthem of AA.

And if you want to talk, I'm here to prove to you you're not alone, I'm with you.

Last, There is no shame in any of this; I'm proud to extend a hand from recovery to you, and to say, "I'm Mary. I'm an alcoholic".

There are so many powerful thoughts and words in Mary's testimony but what stands out so much to me is that the feeling of not being enough – the feeling of shame – strongly led to her turning to alcohol, and then the shame of using alcohol kept her in that place. I love that the first thing you told us, Mary, about walking into that first meeting was, "I started feeling that maybe I was enough." And you were welcomed and received by a community that reinforced that message – you believe that you are enough so much so that today you can use the word, "proud," -- "I'm proud to extend a hand from recovery to you."

Let me share two stories from two different groups that I think really illustrate the power of creating shame-free communities. The first is a dangerous gathering if there ever was one – a group of preachers.

It's common in many denominations to form clergy cohorts to meet regularly, to pray together, to study together, and to hold each other accountable to living out the faith we proclaim. It's a great idea and, at times, provides meaningful community and support. But it also has one key problem.

In these groups, it's common to ask the group to help hold you accountable for something in your own life that you'd like to work on. And do you know what the two most common themes are...at least in groups I've been in:

"Hold me accountable for taking my day off."

"Hold me accountable for exercising regularly."

Now I don't mean to dismiss those accountability points. Overwork is a huge problem among clergy as it is with many people. And certainly part of that includes not prioritizing time for exercise and personal health. But what's striking to me is that is almost all I ever heard in those meetings. I've been a pastor for nearly 20 years and I'll tell you what I've never heard,

"I drink too much."

"I feel like I'm an awful parent."

"I'm not being faithful to my spouse."

I'm not criticizing the participants in that group for not sharing vulnerably. I don't share my deepest places of shame in those groups either. Rather, I'm suggesting that these gatherings – and I think by extension church groups in general – haven't done a great job at creating shame free communities that makes that kind of sharing possible.

But let me tell you about one time when two churches did create that kind of environment – almost by accident. As I've told you before, my first church I served was almost entirely African American and it was located in a community that had high rates of poverty and high rates of substance abuse challenges. We developed a close relationship with a downtown church that was mostly white, mostly affluent. And one of the things we did is form a group from both churches

to have open, honest conversations about race where we confronted our own racial biases and explored how we might work together for racial justice – similar in some ways to what Courageous Conversations does here.

As a part of that work, we went on an overnight retreat together and in our very first session, we asked the group a question that was simply meant to be a get to know you question – “tell us something interesting about you.” Well, the first person to go was someone who had been a part of an AA community for years and, instead of saying something like, “I can whistle Happy Birthday backwards,” she shared about her struggle with addiction and her recovery journey like Mary did today. She shared without embarrassment or shame. Like Mary, she was proud to tell her story.

And then another person who was a part of the same AA community did the same thing.

And when it was the next person’s turn to share, there was a period of silence. I’m guessing this was somebody who had planned to just share some funny or silly anecdote. But after hearing the first two people share so vulnerably, so authentically, he, with tears in his eyes and his voice breaking said,

“I was such a terrible father. I never paid my kids any attention. I didn’t tell them I love them. I worked all the time. They are grown now and I’m so scared I’ve lost them forever.”

And then, person after person shared what, deep down, they really needed to share – all because some veterans of AA had modelled for us what a shame-free space looks like. I’m not suggesting that anyone needs to feel compelled to share things they are not ready to share or not comfortable sharing or don’t feel safe sharing. Rather, what I am suggesting is for that kind of sharing to be possible, we have to create spaces where people can share without feeling judged. That is what AA does so well and what, I think, the church could really learn from the recovery community.

Friends, this series is about how we can find hope in the midst of really difficult challenges, like addiction and how we, as a church, can offer hope. I think that work may start with the realization that we all struggle with something. We all have places in our lives that are not what we would like for them to be. And if we are going to be a community that makes the recovery journey possible, it starts with being a community where shame has no place.

So hear the good news once again that Mary shared with us:

“I began to realize that I was enough.”

It is the exact same as the good news of our faith:

You are the Image of God and nothing can ever change that. You are enough because you are you. Amen.