

Essay

HOW I STOPPED SMOKING (for what it's worth)

2011

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Preface

January, 2011. Here we are, already in the second decade of the new century, new millennium, and I, for one, feel astonished to still be here — and waiting. Waiting for the Apocalypse? Waiting for Ascension? In any case, uneasy, and wondering. When will “it” come? And how will I prepare?

In the midst of sensing ourselves in the eye of a collective and telluric and even cosmic storm, most of us are still dealing with old issues that we know intuitively, we simply must release in order to move forward. Especially now, when time is accelerating so dramatically, events piling like dominos, and security systems of all kinds — personal, interpersonal, social and collective — thinning to the point of dissolution.

As an astrologer, I have been aware of the ongoing geometric pile-up of enormous systemic tensions amongst the planets in our solar system and how they impact Earth. I've known for years that beginning in 2008, civilizational infrastructures would undergo tectonic shifts that could collapse the entire house of cards. (And that's just our local system. Then there's all the talk of the Mayan Calendar, with its unimaginably long cycles, all said to be ending either in October of 2011 or December of 2012.)

My own response to this prior recognition has been to focus on centering myself to the point of being able to maintain continuous internal balance. In order to do this I need to clear my own biological system to the point where the energy of the universe can flow smoothly through without impediment. As I work to shift my own personal frequency, so that all traces of fear are eliminated as they arise, I ask that I be allowed to serve as a vessel of love spreading equally to all.

It is from within this larger, intensely private context of personal work that I feel impelled to tell this story now. I pray that it may assist others still saddled with seemingly intractable addictions and other habit patterns that appear to disconnect us from the inherent flow of love.

At the heart of my tale is the heartening news that there do seem to be moments when light suddenly, inexplicably, cracks through the thick walls of our old, stuck habit patterns. These moments of grace feel miraculous, undeserved; and yet, when we look back, we recognize that we have been, consciously or not, preparing ourselves all along. So much so, that when grace does, suddenly, illuminate, we are poised to follow through with its astonishing promise.

The Scene

October, 1982. I am 39 years old and my life has, slowly, inexorably, ground down to dust.

Everything I've worked for has whirled into the abyss. Three marriages, two children, career as a college professor, several utopian experiments in community — all gone. Vanished. Poof!

Last month, I loaded my little car and moved — to yet another new town, to launch yet another idealistic project with no money, and — tried, yet again, to “stop smoking.”

Each time I try, and fail, the ancient physiological/psychological pattern that grips me tightens. Repeated failure has exposed my essential worthlessness. “You think you can do this? HA! We’ll show you,” snarl the demon dogs of defeat while digging yet more dirt from my already deep grave.

My chronic inability to “quit smoking” has undermined every attempt to jumpstart my life, ignite my original nature, and unfold my unique destiny.

I know all this.

I also know that I *can’t* quit. That I just don’t have it in me to quit. As my brother-in-law, a few months ago, casually pronounced: “You have the personality of a smoker. You won’t quit. You can’t quit. You’ll *never* quit.” He said this as a statement of fact. I took it as a terminal insult. And yet, he was right. I had reached the end of my rope. I had to change, and I couldn’t.

The Shift

And here’s where this narrative suddenly accelerates, blasts through the usual three-dimensional matrix. For when I finally admitted to myself that I, my ego, was powerless in the face of this all-powerful addiction, the universe opened to admit the light. Not obviously, and not all at once. Others would never have known. In fact, from the outside it looked like the exact opposite: all of a sudden I started smoking more than usual! Voraciously. With a vengeance.

And yet, here’s what happened internally: at the precise moment when I fully realized that I *couldn’t* quit, that my ego was just not strong enough to control this horrid habit, I gave up. I stopped struggling and surrendered, handing the responsibility for releasing this addiction to what I called my “Higher Self.”

Looking back, I now recognize that during all those years as a smoker, I was also gradually acknowledging and incorporating this subtle, larger, mysterious aspect of my being within my smoke-ravaged body. In a stealth move, the diaphanous “higher self” had, apparently, burrowed into my body even deeper than the stink of addiction.

Or perhaps the Self had been present all along; and perhaps my conscious confession that I had no way out of the abyss of my despicable addiction was the price of admission. For the abyss, it turned out, was *not* the abyss! For it was not endless; I did *not* fall forever. To my utter astonishment, by consciously letting myself be totally sucked into my smoking habit — with no further attempts to curb it and no time wasted in denial or guilt — I ended up landing on, or in, the Self.

And the Self knew the future; knew that even though “I” — my ego — was still addicted, when that part of me was ready, it *would* let smoking go. And that moreover, releasing it would be easy.

So that’s where my ruminations ended on that day when I first confessed, and then surrendered, to what seemed, at first, to be a terrifying void. Unbeknownst to me, I had landed in this Self that knew the future. The Self that knew the ego would wake up, that it was only a matter of time. Indeed, the awakening process had already ignited, given that my awareness, in the act of *knowing*, absorbed the ego as a mere point within the seemingly boundless space of its being. This larger, deeper Self didn’t have to be told, or to check with others. External validation, that game played by the ego in the drama of 3-D illusion, was irrelevant. The Self just *knew*, with a serene, quiet assurance, that all was well.

From that moment on, I, that is, the Self, knew that the job of letting go of cigarettes wasn’t up to me, my ego. That this was a job only the Self could accomplish. So ego-I didn’t have to worry about it anymore, or hate myself anymore. I could smoke as much as I liked, for as long as I liked, while awaiting the miracle, when releasing cigarettes would be easy, a piece of cake, like falling off a log.

I didn't know how long I would have to wait. It might be three days, or three weeks or three years, or three lifetimes — and it didn't matter because, in any case, at some point the larger me *knew* that the smaller me would jettison this foul habit as way too small for the being that was unfolding, the person I was becoming.

Though validation was neither sought nor required, had I been more in touch with the culture at large I would have realized that in my own intensely private, personal process I had stumbled upon the first two steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: 1) admit that you are powerless, and 2) give the problem to a higher power. At the time I was not familiar with this organization's credo.

I had also stumbled upon the truth of Einstein's famous maxim: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Or, in the language I dressed it in later: "We cannot solve a problem until we put that problem in a larger context — where the problem is not solved but dissolved." The Higher Self, in my lingo, was that larger context. I would hand over my addiction to this larger being and know that when the larger "I" had fully prepared the smaller "ego," then the ego-self would easily release the addiction as a garment that no longer fit. How that would happen, I had no idea. From my ego's jaded, weary, thoroughly cynical perspective, it would clearly take a miracle, something so radical and shocking as to cleave my life in two.

Meanwhile, I would smoke as much as my ego-self wanted — hell, even more than usual. Rather than trying to hold myself on a tight rein, I would let go of all constraints and all the guilt, and just indulge. So I did.

Meanwhile, and simultaneously, from that moment on, the mysterious event that had propelled this narrative through the 3-D veil continued its work of preparing little ego-me. At first, the process was so subtle that I hardly noticed it. Over the next weeks it gradually strengthened. Without consciously deciding to do so, I began to visualize myself as a snake shedding its skin. Over and over again, conjuring and holding this image, of being a snake, about to shed its skin.

Two months went by. At Christmastime, I traveled to Ketchum, Idaho for the usual strained visit with family. (I had been the first of eight children, the perfect, model child — until I turned 26, when I rebelled against my doctor father's Catholic ideology and morphed into the black sheep.)

Picture this: Ann, curled into a tense ball on the couch in the parental living room, pretending to read a book. Internally she is counting the days until she can leave. Not smoking in the house (her father forbade it), hasn't helped her contentious mood.

Shift Again

But then, again, for the second time, this narrative bursts through three-dimensional constraints to materialize an encounter so unexpected and remarkable that it shocked me further into aliveness. Even then I knew: this was the miracle I had been waiting for, the sudden, unexpected event that would cleave reality in two and set me on an entirely new course.

My father walked up to me with the current issue of the *Journal of American Medical Association*. He handed it to me, opened to a certain page, and said, in a voice unlike his own, "Here. You might want to read this." Rather than with his usual judgmental tone, my father had approached me seriously but casually; as if I were an equal, a colleague who would appreciate what he had to share.

The article claimed that the process of making cigarettes was radioactive! If this first-ever sensing of camaraderie with my father had already softened my habitual contentiousness, now I was galvanized. For if what the author claimed was true, then continuing to smoke cigarettes would make a mockery of my work as an anti-nuclear peace activist! Instantly, my perspective shifted. I could not tolerate hypocrisy. Either I would no longer smoke, or I would stop being an activist.

It's hard to describe how liberated I felt in that moment. All of a sudden, I had been yanked from sodden darkness into brilliant light, all senses switched on, heart thrumming and eager. Immediately, I knew exactly what I would do.

A good friend of mine and her husband owned a beautiful home on the north rim of the Snake River canyon, two hours away. The house was for sale, and empty. She had offered to let me stay there anytime. I arranged to be there until driving to Sun Valley for a previously scheduled weekend date.

During those five days I would fast on fresh vegetable and fruit juices, take long walks down into the magical canyon, soak in the luxurious hot tub, write in my beloved journal, and listen to soul-stirring music.

I'll never forget the ritual of smoking that last cigarette, sitting on the beautiful couch in the floor-to-ceiling windowed living room while absorbing surround-sound stereo and watching a pair of eagles swoop over the canyon rim.

And that was it. That truly was it. I haven't touched a cigarette since.

I followed that last cigarette with the blessed five-day interlude of fasting, walking, soaking, writing, listening, and, just as I had known in advance, releasing cigarettes was easy. A piece of cake. Like falling off a log. For the first time I wasn't even tempted to furtively scour wastebaskets and street curbs for butts; nor did I need to talk myself out of hopping in the car and going to the 7-Eleven for one more pack. Reality had cleaved in two. That was before. This was after. I was done.

Or was I?

Oops! Should I cancel my Sun Valley date? The man smoked. Of course he smoked. All my friends smoked. That's the outer environment I had attracted to mirror my inner state. Would I be able to spend an entire weekend with a man who still smoked and not smoke myself?

I decided I would keep the date. For if not now, when? I would have to learn how to hold this inner transformation. Indeed, this was the crucial test. Which would hold value no matter what the external environment, the new me, or the old? Which would prove more uncomfortable, to profoundly disappoint my Self or to create a temporary disruption in the atmosphere with my date? I was about to find out.

The third shift

Sitting down to dinner at the restaurant that Friday evening, we ordered drinks; graciously, he pulled out a cigarette pack and offered me one. That moment when he reached across the table was the third time this narrative suddenly burst through the usual 3-D dynamics. For not only did I refuse, but I surprised myself for doing so with a grace equal to his offer. Moreover, I did not judge him for smoking.

From that moment on, I intuitively *knew* that if I did judge him, or anyone for smoking, then I myself would start smoking again. Moreover, I *knew* that I would be required to continue living in an environment where people smoked for one full year, and not judge them for it. At the end of that year, my circumstances would change. Either those around me would also release smoking or I would find myself in an entirely new situation.

And that's exactly what happened. All my housemates smoked, and I lived among them, not smoking, and letting go of judgment each time it came up. Moreover, I noticed that judgment was gradually transforming into compassion. As a former smoker myself, I knew that my judgments were nothing compared to theirs against themselves. That like me, they were secretly riddled with guilt and self-hatred.

At the end of that year I was invited to move into a rural yurt community, where no one smoked.

An unusual twist

Meanwhile, it turned out that my higher self had to intervene one more time to help me thread my way through that year's 3-D cauldron. And this is the part of the story which, quite frankly, I find brilliant! Nor have I seen any other account of redemption from addiction which mentions the technique that my higher Self utilized to assist the shift.

This technique stemmed from an understanding that I had begun to integrate around this same time — that of the “inner child,” as elucidated in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller's extraordinary book about the psychological and spiritual consequences of strict, even cruel German child-rearing methods. This book introduced me to the idea that a part of me, the inner child, whom I named “Orphan Annie,” did not get her oral needs met at the appropriate age. (On the day my father left for World War II, my mother weaned me from the breast to a cup. I was nine months old.) The book helped me to recognize that my craving for cigarettes was an unconscious — and consistently, desperately unsatisfying — substitute for that original unmet need.

Recognizing the source of the craving didn't stop it, but it did help me to understand that the part of me that was addicted was this inner child. And that in order to truly let go of this vicious habit I would need to find something to distract her for a while. Otherwise she would eventually rebel, insist on getting her way and march right back to cigarettes. It was important that Orphan Annie not feel bereft and ignored; to keep her from feeling abandoned, I would reward her for her sacrifice.

I would allow her to develop another addiction, and keep it for a full year, a habit that would be a welcome substitute for cigarettes and yet (hopefully!) not as addictive. Further, the second addiction couldn't cost any more than the original one, since at the time I was living on very little money.

So here's what I came up with: twice a week I would reward my inner child for "good behavior" by taking her out to breakfast, spending the same amount of money that I had spent on pack-a-day cigarettes on a sweet roll. I would allow the new addiction, to sugar. I knew it wouldn't be that difficult to let go of, since I did so after each Christmas holiday. So now, I would allow the addiction to sugar until the end of the first full year post-cigarettes.

The experiment worked. At the end of that year I easily released the sugar habit.

Looking Back

I still view the release of cigarettes as the biggest accomplishment of my entire life; for it set the foundation. By letting that addiction go I released the continuous undermining of my own self-esteem that had prevented me from unfolding the wonders of my original nature and expanding into oneness with all that is.

Yet the year-long release of cigarettes was just the beginning. I knew I would need to begin to uncover the emotional roots that had crystallized into the physical addiction. And in order to do that, I would have to go back to the beginning, and begin again. I would have to do that "inner child" work mentioned above, to "face, embrace and erase" the deep emotional patterns that had structured my so-called life into a tight little locked box with no key.

Being a perennial optimist, I thought the inner child work might take me six months. Instead, it took seven years — and even now, 30 years later, once in a while I detect traces, tendrils, of fear and constriction that I have had to learn to breathe my way through.

How I did all that is a story for another time. Suffice it to say that I did *not* go into therapy. I did it myself, with the help of my journal, my dreams, a heightened alertness to the presence of synchronicities, periodic co-counseling with a few close female

friends, and my overall commitment to waking up in the present moment, over and over again, to a larger awareness.

Meanwhile, I now recognize that once an addict, always an addict. The structure of my personality in this life is that of an addict. So I have a choice: I can choose “good” (life-maintaining or enhancing) addictions or I can choose “bad” (life-denying or destroying) ones.

I spend two hours in what I call “physical culture” each day: one hour walking with my little dog, and another hour doing a combination of yoga, chi kung and tai chi. I indulge and encourage these “addictions,” plus one more: the continuous strong and prayerful intention to practice awareness of the present moment: the *now*, as it opens into space, the quantum field holding endless potential.

As a result of consistent work over the decades, I can truly say that I feel stronger, more flexible, attuned and integrated, than at any time in my long life. Life truly does get better and better, as our awareness widens to encompass more and more of the loving generosity of being.

Luckily, I am one of many who have pioneered this work to clear the body/mind/spirit of life-denying addictions. As a result, the template for releasing what no longer serves us is in place; this makes it much easier for others to do the same work. It helps to know that the mysterious subtle, sacred realms that lie just on the other side of our usual third-dimensional experience of life can be called upon to aid us at any moment.

Just ask, and ye shall receive.