

The Loss of Substance:

Stories and Notes

On Addiction

By

Michael Erlewine

Any Merit from This Effort
Is Dedicated To the
Enlightenment of
All Sentient Beings, Sooner,
Rather Than, Later,

Published by:

Heart Center Publications 315 Marion Avenue Big
Rapids, Michigan

www.SpiritGrooves.net

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ISBN-13:
978-1517119331

ISBN-10:
1517119332

Introduction

This series of blogs was first published on my Facebook Wall in November of 2010. It addresses some of the more common substance addictions that I have experienced, hopefully in a candid and helpful manner. In my own life, many of these topics only became problems as I grew older. What I could easily shake off at twenty-five years of age is not so easily dismissed later on, like in my fifties and sixties.

I don't have all the answers, but I do seem to have most of the questions and problems, so I thought it might be better to share my thoughts with you than to not talk about them. I hope you agree.

That being said, please accept these notes, comments, and stories in the spirit in which they are offered, one of friendship and shared concern.

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The Loss of Substance: Cigarettes

I am a slow learner when it comes to giving up what is bad for me, slow beyond reason, probably the last of the last when forced to give up a bad habit. I don't do it voluntarily and I don't do it rationally. I give up what is bad for me only when faced with no alternative, like knocking on death's door. And I am not exaggerating here as I am (so I am told) sometimes prone to.

When I look back at the trail of bad habits I have left behind me as I have aged, it does not speak well of me. It is clear that I don't learn by reasoning, by reading, or being told (even by a doctor) that this or that is bad for me. When it comes to my bad habits, only at the last possible moment do I change, and even then I insist on being rational, scientific, using trial and error, and god-knows-what else. I try each habit until the last dog dies. I want to be certain it is bad for me and I leave no stone unturned.

For those who want to paint me a teetotaler, please note my bona fides in this realm of substances. All of the vices I write about are my own, tried by me (and for a long time too), found wanting, and then perhaps discarded. And I give my reasons. I will go over the substances in my life in the next few bogs. Where shall I begin? Let's start with tobacco, my smoking cigarettes.

I started smoking along about the seventh or eighth grade. Why? Because everyone in the very small class at my Catholic school (at least the guys I liked) smoked. I think all of us smoked and some of the girls did too. How I chose Chesterfield cigarettes, I can't remember, maybe simply because they were longer than most others and you got more for your money. I really don't

know, but they are a harsh cigarette, real chokers, and I was married to them. I can still hear the clunk of the pack coming down out of the vending machine when I inserted twenty-five or thirty cents. The machines were the only place we could buy them. We were just kids.

My dad and mom smoked Lucky Strikes and they were even harsher than Chesterfields, but somehow better, if that makes sense. But I was not about to smoke what my parents were smoking. I would decide for myself what to smoke. Actually, I tried all kinds of cigarettes over the years, including filters like Marlboros and Parliaments, straights like English Ovals, Benson & Hedges, and those nasty French Gauloises that almost took your breath away when you inhaled. When I was a “beatnik” I even picked up butts on the street and smoked them. I never liked cigars or pipes.

Eventually I settled down to Camel straights. Now that was a really good cigarette to my taste, and I smoked a lot of them, sometimes up to three packs a day. They were just too good (and too cool) to give up. I was proud I smoked Camels and I loved the package and camel logo.

In the beginning, back in Catholic school, somewhere around the eighth grade (as I mentioned), we smoked in the thickets and swamps next to St. Francis of Assisi Church and School in Ann Arbor. And the nuns knew we smoked, but could never catch us at it. We could see their black and white habits bustling through the thorn bushes from far away and we watched them trying not to get dirty as they fought their way through the thickets. We would simply outrun them every time, disappearing like vapor in the swamps. I don't think we ever got caught smoking there. But the nuns knew who we were, and there were only a few of us in our class of twelve

girls and boys. This was in 1955, the year I graduated from the eighth grade.

I have distinct memories of feeling that full pack of cigarettes in my upper left shirt pocket while walking along the sidewalks and winter streets of Ann Arbor on crisp cold nights. My jacket was usually a bit too thin and the cold penetrated. Often I was all alone.

Back then, on those winter nights, I liked to see my breath in the cold air as I walked and cigarette smoke made it all the more visible, just silent, walking, and smoking, always going somewhere. Usually I had hitchhiked into town from where I lived out on Washtenaw Avenue and still had many blocks of sidewalk to cover to get to a friend's house. The streets in winter, late at night, were so empty, silent, and cold – beautiful in their own way. I was always longing for something or someone. This was when I was in junior high and high school, and not later on when no one would care what I did.

And all of the guys in my eighth-grade class had the same deal. Maybe a couple of them had parents who knew their kids smoked, and didn't care. This made them so much more macho in our eyes than the rest of us. Their parents didn't care. Wow! Mine cared, but they both smoked themselves, so why shouldn't I smoke? Adults did it and I wanted to be an adult. In those days everyone smoked, at home and in all public places, in cars, buses, planes, etc. Ashtrays, smoke, and ash were ubiquitous. No one complained.

Back then we became expert at finding places to have a cigarette. Those old standalone garages next to a friend's house were a favorite, where the smoke mixed with the somewhat faint and delicate smell of oil and

gas fumes from years housing a car. I miss those old garages and their smell.

Or, perhaps it was in the corner of a friend's basement, back behind the furnace, or blowing smoke out of a cracked window from a bedroom. We dared them all and seldom got caught. Back then it was exciting and so grown up to be packing cigarettes, to have matches, and lighters. Lighters were just too cool, and your girlfriend might give you a special lighter on your birthday or at Christmas, gold or chrome-plated lighters that were heavy, yet compact. My initials were engraved in them, "JME." They were special. I wonder what ever happened to mine? But I am waxing too nostalgic here. What about giving these coffin nails up? How did that happen?

I can tell you that it happened slowly. I would guess that I smoked for something like ten or twelve years. And the smoking got heavier when I started to play music professionally in 1965. And of course we smoked more than just cigarettes, but I will get to that in another blog. And smoking was a real habit, something I depended on, especially when I got nervous, and I am nervous by nature, so that tells you the whole story. And like so many of us back then, the first thing I would do when I woke up in the morning was (of course) smoke a cigarette, and on and on.

I tried to quit, many times. I would get maybe a day into the quit, perhaps two, and then something would happen that just flipped me. Whatever it was, it called for a cigarette, and overran my resolution to not smoke and all of this happened in an instant. I just reversed myself, thinking that certainly I have to smoke and of course I will have to quit some other time because whatever just happened was way too important to be trying to quit and deal with at the same time. It needed

my full attention, and that meant smoking again. I don't know how many times I quit and started again, but it was always the same scenario.

I would be quitting and doing sort of OK with it when some life event would interrupt that demanded all of me, and all-of-me back then included the smoking part of me, so there you have it. I was soon back smoking again, just like that, with no regrets and only a little guilt, knowing that I was in fact killing myself in a slow suicide.

And when I did manage to quit, I would work it for all it was worth, announcing it to my friends, pointing out their bad smoking habits and my moral superiority and fierce determination by not smoking. Then two days later, there I would be smoking again, with them seeing me smoke. Humiliating, but by that point I never really cared. I was at least feeling normal and myself once again. I didn't make it. Doctors tell me that my lungs still have scars from smoking or pneumonia, perhaps both.

How did I finally quit back on May 12, 1967? As corny as this sounds, I just quit quitting and quit, all in a moment, in a day, in this lifetime. I wish I had some sort of 12-step program to tell you how I did it, but I don't. I can say this:

My quitting was the result of an intense spiritual-like experience that changed me in some very real ways and distracted me from whatever it was that made me smoke in the first place. Suddenly I had a lot more going for me, was much more engaged in life, and had something more to live for than before. Just like that, I popped out of the smoking rut and was free of it. It would be correct to say I was instantly distracted from distractions like smoking, and I never went back. It was like waking up. There was no need to smoke. I had

something more real to focus on, like: my life. I finally had something like one.

I doubt that the above explanation is all that helpful, but the idea, as I look back on it, was that I was busy smoking until something better came along. When something better did come along, I stopped smoking. In other words, the best time to quit a habit like smoking for me was when some powerful event intervened in my life and created a natural gap in time, a separation of past from future, an imprint that I could use (and measure from), a way to step away from the past. These kinds of events happen, so for some of you that still smoke that may be a clue.

Of course, soon after I quit, the sheer hideousness of smoking became all too apparent in the habits of others. Their stained fingers and teeth, the overflowing ashtrays and waves of ash particles that settled everywhere around, the nervous habit of endlessly lighting a cigarette at the least event, the coughing, veils of smoke, the expense, the sheer habit of it all. It was an addiction and I was cured. I consider my giving up smoking (however it came about) as a major personal victory, and though I may sound nostalgic about the time back then, I have never missed the cigarettes. I just had trouble quitting.

Having given up smoking, I am glad to see more and more of the nation go 'smoke free'. Smoking is something everyone has a right to do in their own private space, but second-hand smoke is something we should not be forced to experience. When I grew up, we had no choice whatsoever. Everyone smoked everywhere and all the time. No one questioned it any more than they questioned separate bathrooms for whites and colored. Change did come, but very slowly.

The Loss of Substances: Alcohol

Alcohol was next on my list of bad habits to overcome. And although cigarettes and tobacco are pretty much guaranteed to kill you in the end, alcohol comes damn close and is, in my experience, a lot more destructive emotionally and psychologically. While tobacco is definitely in the process of killing some of my friends slowly, alcohol has been far more destructive to friends and extended family in actuality.

Unlike cigarettes, which had a death grip on me, alcohol has been somewhat kinder overall to me personally. I never really got addicted to alcohol. I was never an alcoholic, although many I knew (and know) are. I liked to drink socially, but I was not one of those people who would drink alone. It never occurred to me. In my case, alcohol was always an excuse to be social, to throw caution to the wind and tell everyone how much I loved them. I was never a mean drunk, just a stupid one, a 'drunk' drunk.

And I was not much into the hard stuff. Sure, back in high school, we used to dare each other to drink a 16 oz. tumbler of straight whiskey all at once, usually in the back of a car, and watch ourselves throw up all over the street. That is what passed for fun back then. For me it was always just wine and beer, and after a while (a wine drunk is tough on you) it was just beer, and I like pilsner. My favorite brands were St. Pauli Girl and Becks. I never went for the dark lagers. Too sweet. I like it bitter and clear.

Back somewhere between the high school hard stuff and the later beer, I had a fling for wine, but I soon got cured of it, and more than once. Very early on, like in 1960, when I was living in Venice West in Santa Monica trying to be a beatnik (I was too late for that), I

remember going to a party along the beach in a little house of a friend or at least someone I had heard of; it was Tamboo, the conga player. I had with me half a gallon of cheap wine. I must have been nineteen years old at the time and far from my home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Back then I thought for sure I was going to be an artist, a painter.

When I came through the door of the house where the party was being held, there were two federal narcotic agents waiting. They were frisking each person as they came in, looking for dope, and they paid no attention to my wine or the fact that I was underage. They didn't even check my ID. I was directed to sit down along a wall with a string of other folks who already had gone through the same routine. So there I sat while the feds continued to welcome each new person as they came in. Needless to say, I was very nervous.

In my nervousness I opened the wine and started to take a sip or two. Well, before I knew it, I had drunk the entire half gallon all by myself. Later, free and outside once again, I puked my guts out for hours. Nothing makes you sicker than a wine drunk, especially sweet wine. I vowed never to drink wine again. As it turned out, I had to repeat that procedure several more times in my life before I really got the message.

As I got a little older, my idea of a good time was to get one of those pretty little bottles of Mateus rosé wine, a loaf of French bread, some good olives, a block of feta cheese, and have a picnic. I believe I did that when I was courting Margaret, my wife. It was great fun.

But for me, alcohol was mostly about beer. Even in the band days, when we were traveling all over playing music, it was beer I was drinking and sometimes too much. However, all in all, I am not a drinker. When that

first flush of alcohol wore off and I had hugged everyone I should hug, instead of trying to go higher, I would usually instead lay off and work it out of my system, drink some water, get some coffee, etc. I knew I could not push the envelope higher and get away with it, and my constitution is too sensitive to withstand heavy drinking. This is one of the few areas in my life where I displayed any common sense.

But social drinking did hang on in my life for many years. Like all my vices, as I began to age I no longer could get away with what I easily shook off as a younger man. I can remember one time at a wedding of a friend and housemate I drank until I was about the last person there. I was asked to leave. Later, at home, I can remember being so terribly cold with a shaking fit that my kind wife had to put me in the bathtub in hot water just to keep me warm and get my body temperature back up. Now that was drunk.

As I aged, I drank less but the hangovers became worse and lasted longer, until it was obvious to even me that this habit was on a down-ward spiral. By that time, the recovery was not worth what little fun remained in the drinking. And this was not just an isolated incident. I put it to the test, many, many times, to make sure that there was no mistake. In the end, there was no mistake. My drinking days were over.

When that was perfectly clear to me, I took Buddhist lay vows which include not ever drinking again, and I never have. Of course, I did not give up anything that I had not already given up and worked out of my system, so where's the sacrifice? There wasn't any. I have never missed drinking, other than perhaps the smell of good beer and I guess I still perk up at the sight of bottles of my favorite brand of beer. The logos are imprinted in my brain.

The bottom line is that I never really was addicted to alcohol, other than perhaps socially. Before I move on to my next vice, I really should say something about those around me who have not been so fortunate. As mentioned, for me alcohol was never a big problem, but for many of my friends and loved ones that was not the case. If I look at all the vices I have seen in my life in those around me, none has been as rampant and destructive as alcohol. "Hells-Keyhole," a play on the word 'alcohol' was what my teacher Andrew McIver called it. I have seen it systematically destroy life after life. We all know this by now, or should.

Over the years I have had many, many alcoholic friends who are trying to get free of the stuff. Nothing is quite so dispiriting as to phone a dear friend and hear them struggle to control their speech so you don't know they have been drinking again. Of course you know right off. They have fallen off the wagon once more and are in deep trouble, even to the point of asking for money to survive. Still others can't bring themselves to ask for help and have not even admitted to themselves that they have a problem and are sick. I have known many who would not admit to having a problem, yet they drink every day. They were, in their own eyes, "in control."

Although I don't care for the overly-religious tone of Alcoholics Anonymous, it really does work. I have seen it do wonders for friends of mine, some who find themselves going to meetings even two or three times a day! I have never been to a meeting myself, but many people I know have and it has literally saved their lives. I have had friends die of drug overdoses, hang themselves, etc., but nothing I have seen so systematically destroy lives, marriages, and families as alcohol. It is an almost perfect killing machine and I

don't need to go on and on about it. We all should know about alcohol.

I do have one more comment to make on the effects of alcohol that I have observed through my own practice of using it, one that is not commonly known. This effect can be a little subtle, but check it out for yourself when you have the chance. Alcohol affects us psychologically and emotionally, and not just physically and probably does as much damage mentally and spiritually as bodily. Here is how:

A day to a day and a half after drinking alcohol, I notice a very clear psychological change. It does not appear the morning after (when all the physical symptoms show up), but later on and more subtly. I become more emotional and vulnerable to the loss of confidence and self-assurance. Perhaps this is the 'depression' that is often associated with alcohol that we read about. It is similar to being prone to getting a cold when your resistance is down, when your immune system is impacted somehow.

The result is I tend to feel bad about myself, to take offense more easily, and to get a little paranoid and defensive. Of course this does go away in another day or so, unless I drink again, in which case the effect compounds into a syndrome and I really have trouble with getting out of it and feeling self-confident. Those who drink regularly gradually lose their sense of self confidence and can't regain it easily. This IMO is the plight of the alcoholic, a downward recursive syndrome that destroys confidence and eventually life itself. Check this out for yourself and see if I am right or is it just me?

The Loss of Substances: Drugs

I don't consider myself much of an expert on drug addiction, because I never did drugs all that much, prescription or otherwise. I took a few 'bennies' (Benzedrine) back in the late 1950s, some Dexedrine in the early sixties, and a bit of Methedrine in the later 1960s during the band (performing music) days. And sure, I smoked pot from time to time back then, and 'yes' to Peyote, a bit of Opium, even LSD and other hallucinogens, but nothing that I later had to shake off, unless it was the aftereffects of LSD. That did take some time, and I will address this later on. For now, I will start with pot.

Marijuana

Back in the late 1950s, when I so desperately wanted to be part of the then-fading Beat movement, aside from alcohol, it was all about speed and pot. Sure, there were hard drugs back then, like heroin, but I never had any. However, friends of mine and people I knew died from them, for sure. And I can remember sitting around watching addicts with their elaborate paraphernalia cook the stuff up and inject it into their veins, while I stood by spellbound, a rapt observer.

And yes, following the direction of the Beat poets, we would sometimes drive from town to town hitting drug stores for the brands of cough syrup or inhalers that had a little bit of codeine or speed in them. You could only buy one at a store (something like that), but if you made enough stops, traveled far enough, you had enough you could get high on, although the aftereffects were literally nauseating, at least with the inhalers. We threw up. Back then we would try anything.

Just out of high school (which I never finished), I took Peyote in the little basement room where I lived, the one where every spring and fall (when the rains came) a little river would run right down the middle of the floor. I chewed the Peyote buds, threw it all up, and went on to see tigers leaping in my mind and all kinds of other marvelous apparitions. So, this was what the term ‘mind-altering substances’ was all about, I thought. At the time I was reading everything by Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the Beat poets, plus hitchhiking back and forth to New York City with friends like Bob Dylan and other players.

Later, in 1967 I recall watching Eric Clapton and Cream shoot up speed in the green room before playing at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco for their first U.S. Gig. My band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, opened for Cream in August of 1967. While a performing musician, I saw a fair amount of that kind of drug thing, but never shot up myself. So much for speed; pot was a different thing.

I once had a whole pound of marijuana hidden under the floorboards in the attic of the place where I lived, and I worried a lot about its being there, that is: until we smoked every last fiber of it. And it was not even very good pot, probably nothing like I hear and read they have available today. It did a little something to us and we were happy about that. Back then, my generation wanted so much to find its way out of our ultra-straight upbringing into whatever was cool and relaxed. I would drive into downtown Detroit late nights and catch jazz greats like Cannonball Adderley playing at clubs like the Minor Key. Things like that.

In the late 1950s, as a high-schooler in Ann Arbor, I hung around whatever was bohemian, including the “Promethean,” a one-horse Beat coffee shop in Ann

Arbor where they served mulled cider, regular coffee, and listened to Shelley Berman records. We would sit around, smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, and talk about serious things. The only movies we watched back then were the dark, serious European flicks like Ingmar Bergman films. The Promethean did not last long.

We soon graduated to the private houses and apartments in Ann Arbor, where jazz was being played weekend nights and marijuana was being smoked. Because we were just kids, we were seldom offered any of that precious weed, but we used to snort the ashes from the butts of joints in the ashtrays for a kick. Now that is dedication!

Pot has never been my thing. In truth, I get a little paranoid on it, but that is not my main complaint. For me, in my experience, it was pretty much a waste of time. Many years ago I had hopes that pot might enhance my creativity. But when I rather thoroughly checked it out, smoking it and then trying to play music, paint canvas, or write a poem or something meaningful, in every case the next day when I took a look at whatever I had done the night before, it was worthless, like a bad joke -- humiliating.

What I thought was so creative when I was high on pot (and doing it) was trivial and laughable come morning. The creativity was all in my imagination; it literally went up in smoke. In other words, pot was not a high point for me and I never become that attached to it. But I did get really fucked up on it from time to time, pot and hashish.

I can remember one time during the band days. We were playing at a teen club in upstate Michigan somewhere. Dressed out in suits and ties, we were also stoned out of our mind. This was when Iggy Pop was playing drums for us. I can remember looking across the

stage at my brother Dan (who was playing lead guitar, while I played rhythm) and the two of our eyes meeting, glued together in the moment. Neither of us had the remotest idea of what chord came next in the song we were playing. We were freaked, but always, somehow, at the last instant, we would find that chord. You get the idea. That was pot, an extravagant diversion or distraction.

In time, marijuana was for me just not worth bothering with. I did not get out of it as much as I had to put into it, so I just let it go. Yet I have known (and still know) so many good friends that can't live without it, friends who use it every day and every night even today. In fact the first thing some do each morning is roll a day's worth of joints and line them up all in a row. I have watched them do it.

And I have also seen these same friends smoke and wax eloquent, at least to their own mind. I can't follow them half the time and am not interested in much of what they say when stoned. It sounds to me just like they are stoned. It is odd to see sixty-something year olds wanting to get away from it all by smoking marijuana. Many have more or less smoked their lives away and never did what they set out to do. It would be one thing if they were happy, but many are not, although some seem to be. Most still mean to do what they once hoped to do if given time, but it would seem to me a little too late at this point for that scenario to play out happily.

In my case, pot was just a waste of time, pleasant at best, nerve-wracking at worst. I have no moral judgment against using it, but in my observation it seems to me that the folks I know who dote on pot seem no the wiser for it and worse, have become mostly transmitters with no receivers. In other words, they can talk, but they no

longer listen. They are effectively 'gone' when it comes to a two-way conversation, which is the definition of conversation. This then to me is sad.

If I have learned anything from using marijuana, it is that my mind, just as I have it at birth, is already creative. For me, pot only confused and stained an otherwise clear mental sky. I much prefer my natural mind just as it is these days and I realize that most drugs cannot in anyway enhance the mind any more than you can salt the salt. Enough said. We all have our opinions.

Now LSD is a whole different story and here I 'am' very vulnerable. Let me preface my remarks by pointing out that LSD in my opinion was a generational thing, something that had its place in time and, although I am sure they still make it, I doubt that the experience could be quite the same today as it was in the early 1960s. And before I jump into LSD, let me say a few words about prescription drugs.

If illegal drugs are the tip of the iceberg, then prescription drugs make up the rest of it. For all the hullabaloo about pot and LSD, almost nothing is said or written about the effects of prescription drugs, although they are ubiquitous. This is gradually changing, I know. I am not one for any kind of prescription drugs if they can be avoided, and seldom take even aspirin or ibuprofen. Tylenol in more than a single dose makes me sick and so do things like Vicodin. I can't use them.

When I see the endless cabinets of pills and drugs that many people use, I cannot help but feel compassion for these folks. Drug after drug, day after day, pill after pill, these drugs may relieve symptoms or be even more useful than that, but I also imagine that they (layer on layer) obscure the crystal-like clarity of the mind we were born with, that same mind that is the one key to

fulfilling our deepest wishes. Drugs, for all their value, can cloud, obscure, and put on hold any opportunity to wake up. Some of you reading this with more experience with prescription drugs than I have should tell this story. That being said, back to my own account. Of the drugs I have had, the only ones that I must honestly say actually led to greater understanding of myself are the hallucinogens, in particular LSD.

LSD

I have tried several kinds of hallucinogens, including soaking and chewing up Morning Glory seeds (the 'Heavenly Blue' variety), letting them do their thing in my stomach, then throwing it all up, and lastly, getting high. I did that, but not too often for obvious reasons.

I would really need an entire blog or two to go into detail about LSD, its effects, and its residue in the mind stream. Suffice it to say here that of all the drugs I have experimented with (not really that many), LSD is the only one that made me think, that actually expanded my mental horizons in any permanent way. I only took it a few times, and had only two of those trips that were worthwhile in my opinion, but they were doozies. I will try to explain.

First, a few words about the advent of LSD back in the early 1960s. Before any of us ever tried LSD, we had heard about it. Like all new highs and drugs, coming events cast their shadows, and the shadow of LSD was formidable and scary. Everyone agreed that it was not simply another "high" but, as science has documented, it was a "mind-altering" drug.

That alone gave us pause, because we had no idea of what "mind-altering" meant in this context. We thought pot and any old other drugs were already mind-altering, so this brought us up short... but only for a while. We

didn't really know what the mind itself was, much less what it would be if you altered it. You get the idea.

And sure enough, LSD was mind-altering, and for many of us not just for a day or part of a day, but for all time and for a reason. And here I am pointing out a very important concept, so please, those of you interested, take note. LSD was not powerful just because it was a chemical concoction that somehow altered the mind, which it did appear to, but mostly because none of us back then knew anything about what the mind was in the first place, and this fact is key. It is said that the great Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche took acid and reported that nothing happened. That should tell us something right there. He certainly knew the mind.

It has taken me some thirty-five years of practicing meditation to know enough about the mind itself to get under and beyond the imprint left by LSD way back then, because LSD imprints deep! But I have done that and can report from my own experience that the mind cannot be altered by drugs or anything else, not in its essence or truth. However, experiences can dig deeper than we can otherwise reach in our day-to-day life experience, and unless we can get back to and beyond (get our arms around) where the drugs imprinted, we may never know the difference, and live with life-experience boundaries set by drugs, rather than know the true nature of the mind itself.

This is indeed sad, even tragic. Therefore, at least in my case, no amount of psychologizing solved the disturbance that LSD wrought on how I saw the world. These drugs can change our perception and radically, but they cannot change the nature of our mind. However, to know that we have to actually know the true nature of our mind, and meditation is the only method I

have found that can do that. I have pointed something important out here, but this topic deserves more discussion. For now I will return to the effects of LSD.

What LSD did back then was to remove the separation of subject and object in my mind, at least temporarily. It let me clearly see that what I saw out there in the world is a direct reflection of my biases and prejudices in here within my own psychology and mind and that, as I change my mind, what I see out there in the 'real' world changes accordingly. That is the good or wonderful part of LSD, and that is a huge lesson.

The bad part or downside of LSD is that the experience can be so disruptive and unsettling that it can take years to reestablish any kind of mental stability, not because you become crazy, but because the concept of a "Self" you once had is so shattered by the LSD experience (and rightly so) that it takes that long to reassemble itself again. Let me very briefly clarify, if I can, and this is not simple.

As the Buddhists point out, what we call our "Self" has (according to them) no true or permanent existence. This is not to say there is no self or that you ever can somehow lose your self. That is a pure misunderstanding of the teachings. The self will always be there, if only as a narrator and the organizer of our lives, the little voice that tells "you have a dentist appointment tomorrow."

What is not so understood IMO is that the self is not a permanent thing, but rather a composite, a collection of things we have gathered around us over time (like a warm blanket) to make us feel like we really are someone--another habit. Actually, what we call our self changes yearly, monthly, and daily as we forget about this thing or other and identify with some new thing. The

idea of a permanent self is a convenient illusion, a comfort blanket that seemingly promises continuity and (by inference) some sort of personal immortality, as in: the immortality of our particular persona. Even a cursory look at our history will show how much the idea of our self changes over time.

What was central to our self image when a kid (a new bike) might well be totally different later in life (a new wife or husband), and so on. The self remains, but what we consider important to our self image (the image itself) is more like a kaleidoscope, ever changing. We could have ten blogs on this.

My point here is that LSD (and other hallucinogens) shatters the self into a million pieces, forcing us to face the actual reality of our true nature, which we may perhaps glimpse when it shatters. However, this self-shattering experience is so profound that it takes us days, months, and years to put our Humpty-Dumpty self back together again, if only to cover up our sudden emptiness. In my own case, it took years to stabilize myself after LSD, which is not something most folks can afford. And lastly, an airtight self image (like most of us try to maintain) is not something that is even helpful. Humpty Dumpty, no matter how carefully rearranged, is still: Humpty Dumpty. I could go on. There is more out there than that.

In summary, while most drugs I have known are at best a pleasant waste of time, and some are addictive and vicious, only the mind-expanding hallucinogens gave me anything I would consider at all valuable in the long term, and even the useful effects of LSD and its kin are better (and more safely) today attained through the various forms of meditation, the true mind-expanding practice. But, as mentioned, this is just my opinion, just me. You will have your own story and objects may

appear larger in your rearview mirror than they in fact are.<G> Knowing what I know now, I would never consider using drugs of any kind, but rather concentrate on learning to know and use my mind.

The Loss of Substances: Caffeine

Now caffeine was much more of a problem for me. I really liked coffee. Still do. Notice the past tense? I liked its smell. I liked its taste, and I liked the get-up-and-go that it offered. I have had a long and happy love affair with the bean. For sure, I was addicted to it, and many times. Way back in the day, when I lived in just one room on no money, it was a hot plate and the jar of instant coffee, and all the time. Instant coffee back then was really terrible tasting, but comforting. I have no idea how it is today.

Then I learned to boil water, drop some coffee grounds in, turn off the flame, and cover it. My teacher Andrew McIver taught me how to do that. And anywhere and all-the-time 'percolation', of course. Remember the old percolators that mom and dad used? In my life they have been gradually replaced with glass containers, plastic funnels, and filter papers. And let's not forget the coffee grinders. Pre-ground coffee went out of my life about the time I got married. Since then, I grind my own, so to speak. And did we drink coffee?

Sitting in the Michigan Union and drinking cup after cup of coffee is about all we did back in the early 1960s. Maybe we had a couple of donuts or a grilled pecan roll (with butter) on the side too. That was very close to heaven. Much later, in my mid-thirties and on into my forties, it was all about the beans and espresso machines. I think I have two of these machines kicking around somewhere. I imagine they still work. And when I had a restaurant (what a blog that story would make!) I bought a \$6000 espresso machine that could do about anything but talk.

For me it was never straight espresso that captivated, but cappuccino, and finally café Wien, Viennese-style

coffee, dark and black or with just a little cream. No sugar. So where did I go wrong with coffee? How is it that today I never, ever drink it? There is a reason and reasons.

The most obvious reason (but not the most important) is my particular constitution. I am naturally speedy. I usually need to slow down, not speed up. Coffee gets me moving and I don't just mean around the town. It sends me to the bathroom, sometimes in an urgent condition, especially if I am already upset about something. But I was able to (mostly) live with that, for the sake of the coffee, of course.

And then there is the fact that as I got older I could not sleep if I drank coffee. Oh yes, I would lie down and try to sleep, but it seemed that I was ever in a kind of coffee trance, suspended somewhere between sleep and awake. Early on, who cared? But in later years, the line between wake and sleep, which was already getting somewhat tenuous, drifted toward awake and not sleep. Bummer. And it was not just regular coffee, but even decaf coffee has too much caffeine for me, not to mention chocolate. But those were minor obstacles only.

A subtle yet more important factor (and finally the deciding factor) that ended the reign of coffee in my life was this: I tend to make my living not by doing physical things and work, but rather by using my mind, and often making a living depends upon what I write, design, or program. I am an author, musician, designer, programmer, etc. I exist on my wits and creativity, for the most part. Remember I don't even have a high-school diploma as a safety net if I fall. What I found out was that coffee (at least in my system) was like white noise on a radio, a buzz or burst of energy that was so loud that it drowned out whatever natural creativity I

happened to have going for me at the time. Yes, coffee kept me at it and gave me what seemed at the time like added energy, but for what result?

Creative energy can be very subtle, kind of percolating (pun intended) up from somewhere deep in there until it gets to my attention, to where I can realize it and use it to make whatever I am doing better or smoother, as in: more creative. And this was not an isolated observation. Since I dearly, dearly loved my coffee, I tested it out (as I do all my vices) many, many times with always the same result. If I really, really needed whatever I was writing to be at my best, coffee made it much more difficult to impossible. It veiled everything in a hazy drone or buzz. In fact, many days when I gave in and had coffee, I would just give up writing or programming for that day and have to clean my office or whatever. Anything else would require a redo the following day because it was uninspired.

Eventually I had to make a choice as to which I loved more, that comforting and delicious daily coffee or my innate creativity. In the end, the creativity barely won out, because without creativity life is 'really' not much fun for me. And you can bet that I tried every possible kind of ersatz coffee, things like Pero, chicory, dandelion, Cafix, herbal teas, and whatever else was hot and wet! I like the dandelion coffees, but they gave me headaches.

And trying to give up coffee will prove to almost anyone that we can be addicted to caffeine. Every time I would go off coffee, I would get massive headaches and my whole life would stall out until I went back on the stuff or stayed off cold-turkey. Caffeine is a drug and is addictive. Period.

I sometimes marvel at the amount of caffeinated tea that Buddhists drink, in particular the Tibetans, cup after cup, and all day long. And I joke about all the caffeine they must ingest. Is it any wonder that the extant Buddhist literature is greater by a factor of five than any other religions? Could it be the caffeine that writes all those books and texts? In the style of Bill Maher: “I kid the Buddhists.”

Along the way I found out that I don't really like hot beverages. My system already runs hot; my hands are always warm. I need cooling, not heating. If I can't have coffee, I don't want any other hot liquids in my system. OK, once and a while I might have a cup of that Cafix with a little milk in it, but that's it.

Ultimately, I gave up coffee because I discovered that my mind was so clear and perfect (just as it is) that I did not want to buzz it up with all that coffee noise. In the end, I just wanted my mind to keep being as it naturally is. It has been many years since I have had coffee and even chocolate is enough to put a buzz on that I find annoying. It is just not worth it. That is the bottom line.

Once every two years or so I will drink a couple of tablespoons of some visitor's coffee, just to see if things have changed, but no. I can feel the noise rise and start to drown out the kinder, gentler parts of me, and my family knows we all need that part of me. Still, I miss my coffee and my epitaph might read “The man who loved coffee” or some such thing. But this man loves the thin layer of creativity even more.

The Loss of Substances: Refined Sugar

In this short series I have gone over the most obvious candidates for addiction: tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and caffeine, so some of you may want to stop here. The next blogs will be concerned with substances that are not currently recognized by most as possibly detrimental, like sugar. In other words, we are moving out of the past into present struggles with substances, so take note.

Now sugar is a much more touchy area with me, as I am sure it is for many of you as well. I almost didn't go there in these discussions because it might offend those who have never considered it a problem, but I really must. For one, it is only a matter of some years since I gave up sugar completely after a lifetime of enough or more than enough of it. The candy that I grew up on would choke a horse: M&Ms, Kit Kat, Hershey's, Three Musketeers, Snickers, Crunch, Clark Bars, Mr. Goodbar, Reeses Peanut-Butter Cups, Jujubes, Baby Ruths, Dots, Butterfingers, Heath, Oh Henry!, PayDay, Milky Way, Good & Plenty, Gum Drops, Spearmint Slices, Necco Wafers, PEZ, Charleston Chew, Chunky, Raisinets, and scores of others. How about Tootsie Rolls? Of course I ate them all.

And then there were the Twinkies, fruit pies, donuts, Hostess cupcakes, fudge, licorice, jelly beans, hard candy, toffees, lemon drops, and so on. And I have not even gotten to homemade pies, cakes, and my most favorite of all: ice cream. Aside from all kinds of ice cream and cones, what about ice-cream sandwiches, banana splits, Klondikes, strawberry and hot-fudge

sundaes, Drumsticks, Ben & Jerrys, Häagen-Dazs, etc. And Creamsicles, Fudgesicles, and all kinds of other popsicles. I could fill up this whole blog with the names of sugar treats that we all would recognize and probably have eaten more than our share of. I am not even going to touch on the use of sugar as an additive like corn syrup in soft drinks, which seems to be ubiquitous. I like sugar too.

In fact I like sugar so much that I never even considered giving it up until some years ago. It was way too much fun and what would life be without it? Less fun for sure. But in the last years I have begun to notice that whenever I eat sugar, whenever that sugar rush recedes, I don't feel as good as I did before I ate it. Remember, getting old becomes a process of just maintaining the status quo. There is no hope of feeling like you used to 'were' 25 years ago, but rather one of just feeling decent or even pretty good. "Pretty good" is good enough at my age.

I can remember the nights as I was growing up when my father passed through the room with a huge bowl of ice cream hidden behind his back so we could not see it. Of course we all saw it.

I am no different and ought to have been ashamed of what I was putting through my system or at least how it made me feel (even years ago) which was usually lousy and certainly worse than before I ate it, but I put up with it. Mere threats of physical damnation never make me pay heed. I have to actually administer physical abuse to myself before I give up anything. No kind of admonition or warning takes hold. It goes in one ear and right out the other.

It is only when confronted with physical pain or visible deterioration of the quality of life that I am moved to

change even a tiny bit, and even then it is a tossup. Otherwise, it is business as usual for me. It was not enough that diabetes was a main cause in the death of my father or that various members of my extended family have come down with that disease. Those facts failed to move me one inch, although they did get my attention, however fleetingly. I have to say this:

All of this concern about developing increased awareness, whether through mediation or by other means, should not be ignored. It is not a passing fad. It is only by increased awareness that I have been able to give up any of my vices before they trumped me, and even then I got a good beating. I have to see it damaging me to believe it, to stop doing it plain and simple.

When my awareness increased to the point of my being able to actually witness a decrease in my health and feeling of well-being after a sugar attack, then and only then was I willing to take action, and not before. Otherwise, I don't tend to know what is good for me and I seem to like it that way.

When I began to take sugar and then feel the worse for it, that is when I started my famous-to-me testing of it. Sure enough, I soon found that every time I ate sugar in any significant quantity, I would feel weaker or get a little 'glandy', and so forth. It would go away after a while, but it sent a message.

And of course I have to give enormous credit to my wonderful wife Margaret who has patiently and gently pointed this sugar-thing out to me for years now. When words on her part fail to move me, a simple look can sometimes do it. In an instant I become my father shepherding the hidden bowl of ice cream through the room. But until recently, I usually made a point of

laughing it off and totally ignoring her. Margaret stopped eating sugar in any real way years ago, and I just watched and ignored whatever she pointed out.

Then one day not many years ago I just decided to stop eating sugar and even forego the sugar snacking through the day, the endless cookies (and what-have-you) that fuel the sugar habit. I went cold turkey and have not looked back. Well, maybe I peeked back a bit, but I now limit my sugar intake to the occasional bit of honey or maple syrup, which is only a better kind of sugar. And my fruit (and in winter: dried fruit) intake has gone way up.

One thing I can report is that my health is much stronger and far more stable now. For some reason sugar weakens me, breaks down my immune system, and leaves me feeling worse for wear. I have put it to the test for a long time and found this true. I can live without sugar just fine; in fact, I already am better for it. Those periods of physical weakness when I had to stabilize after a sugar rush are completely gone. I am on solid ground with no dips.

Temporary destabilization after eating sugar is similar (physically) to the psychological and emotional destabilization that one gets from alcohol. The world has not even begun to properly assess the effects of sugar on our lives, so this post may not reach many.

It brings to mind the poet Wordsworth's line "Trailing clouds of glory do we come" into this world. Well, my line might better read "Trailing clouds of substances do I leave" this world. It seems as I look back that I have left a telltale trail of all the vices I have dropped, one by one, as I can't get away with it any more and my physical constitution demands it of me. Indeed, I am a slow learner.

The Loss of Substances: Eating Meat

For many, even the discussion of why or why not to eat meat is like talking about religion or politics. When I speak of giving up meat, I really am on more sketchy ground, for society as a whole (or even in all its parts) does not yet recognize meat as something to give up. And meat is not addictive chemically (although most meat is full of chemicals and other stuff), but rather is a habit, something we picked up eons ago. And the reasons for giving it up are not so much physical as moral. Who ever heard of an addiction that perhaps should be given up for moral reasons? Think again folks; we have many of them. Just look at Washington and the folks there we should give up for moral reasons!

I was raised eating meat with never a thought to giving it up or that it should be given up, so I am not throwing stones in a glass house here. I still struggle a little with eating meat, although for great stretches of my life I have gone vegetarian, only to fall back into eating meat once again. Go figure. I might go ten or fifteen years eating vegies and then in the blink of an eye just eat a hot dog. I have done that and can't fully trust myself when it comes to meat, although I believe the worst is over. And here is a good story about that.

The first time I travelled to Tibet my family and I were all vegetarians and had been so for years. We were not roasting, broiling, boiling, frying, or otherwise cooking meat, and we struggled to cut out fish when we could. As for poultry, we had long ago declared chicken a vegetable, and one that we did not eat, mostly because of the way chickens are forced with antibiotics, treated, and raised. Anyway, I digress.

When we got to the mountains and highplains of Tibet, one thing we found is that they not only had no trees,

but they had damn few vegetables either. They have meat, dairy, and grain. That was about it. All of the Tibetans ate meat because that was what was there, mainly thanks to their yaks. It was yak meat, yak fur, yak tents, yak milk, yak yogurt, yak butter, yak cheese, and so on – yakety yak.

It made it really hard for us, because we would eat no meat and, as mentioned, vegetables were scarce to nonexistent. To make it worse, when we did manage to explain to Tibetans that we were vegetarians, we then became subject to whatever their misinformed idea of a vegetarian was. And they had no idea what vegetarian food should taste like. And this is true even in this country as well.

When we visit places or friends where they know we are vegetarian, we don't get wonderfully cooked veggie food, but rather some tortured idea of what it might be like to eat vegetarian, often boiled, watery, and overcooked olive-drab vegetables, good only to be tossed out – like the legendary hospital food. Meat eaters have no idea of what vegetarians actually eat. Anyway, back to my Tibet story.

Somehow we managed to make it all the way through our Tibet pilgrimage without eating meat, and to do that we ate some pretty terrible things, when wonderful meat dishes (like the Tibetan meat dumplings called 'momos') were sitting there before us steaming and waiting to be eaten. No such luck. We ate some of the worst food I have ever eaten instead, mostly breads made with bad oils that had some weak sugar mixed in them. After awhile even seeing them made us nauseous. We existed on bananas and hard-boiled eggs. There were always the hard-boiled eggs.

And the funny part of this story is that when I finally got to our home back here in Michigan, about the first thing I did was to go to the local restaurant (where we were known vegetarians), order a Porterhouse steak, sit in a back corner, and eat it all up, while the waitresses marveled at the event and pointed me out from a distance. And I did this for three nights in a row! Needless to say that event marked a distinct falling off the eat-no-meat wagon back into eating meat, and it went on from there for years. If only I would have made that move before we went to Tibet, our trip would have been so much different. Go figure.

The hypocrisy in all of this is that as a naturalist and lover of animals I could never kill one. I carry bugs outside when I find them and check my shower each morning to be certain no spider has set up shop in there. If they have, I make sure they get safely out. I don't smack mosquitoes, but gently brush them off as the Tibetans do. At the same time, for years I have had no trouble filling up my shopping cart with whatever meat strikes my fancy. Now I draw the line when it comes to live lobsters, but that only shows up my greater failings more clearly.

And I have loved eating all kinds of meat, fowl, and fish. I am not so in love with steaks and filet mignon type meat as I am with flank and skirt steak roasted on the grill and cut against the bias. I also like good hot dogs and the 'worst' kind of sausage, like bratwurst, knockwurst, and weisswurst. Italian sausage, embedded in paella with chicken and seafood is a favorite.

When I am off meat and a practicing vegetarian, then I sometimes tend to get at times a wee bit evangelical about it. In fact, my own arrogance about being a vegetarian has propelled me back into meat eating more than once, just to purify my uppity-ness. I can

remember one time in New York ordering spaghetti without meat, just marinara sauce. When the dinner came I could see little flecks of meat in it and called the waiter on it. His reply: "No sir, we took the meatballs out." I have been known (as mentioned earlier), after years of being a strict vegetarian, to randomly or suddenly pick up a hot dog and eat it. What does that say about me?

And yet if you ask me, I don't believe in killing any animal for any reason. There you have a brief and ugly glimpse of my moral dilemma with eating meat. Right now I am not eating meat, mostly thanks to the suggestion from His Holiness the Karmapa (like the Dalai Lama, but from another lineage) that we consider not killing animals and eating them. It was not a demand, but only a suggestion, but one from someone I met in Tibet (when he was eating meat) whom I respect enough to shame me into doing what my own conscience has told me all along. Right now I am vegetarian, but I am not perfect. I have lapses.

I have been known (when my family is off on some excursion) to have meat parties with the dogs, who very much appreciate this kind of occasion. I go to the store, buy some flank steak, grill it, slice it up, and eat it. Well, actually, I sit down with the dogs and we share it.

I give one piece to each of them and then eat a few myself, and on it goes. I am not proud of this, but am just watching myself do this. If challenged, I would not do it. If everyone else were home, I would not do it. However, if left to my own devices, I sometimes do it and like doing it.

In a similar way, if I am a guest at someone's house and they serve meat, I eat it and am glad for the opportunity. There are others in my home who don't share my

proclivity for “found’ meat dinners. I am trying to not do this kind of thing, because it is hypocritical and if suddenly called before my maker (use your own words here), I would come down on the side of not eating meat. But this is how it is for me, very much still in midstream.

Therefore when I write about giving up meat, I am on sketchy ground. I debated back and forth whether to even include this blog at all, since the outcome is in question and my hypocrisy so blatant. It is a struggle I still am in the middle of, although I have turned the corner once again. And, as mentioned at the beginning of this blog, not eating meat is a moral dilemma more than physical. However, it is true that much of the meat (and most of the chicken, and now the fish) is filled with so many chemicals, antibiotics, and other cumulative crap that you’re doing yourself a favor not to eat it, even if you have nothing against killing animals.

And if you have never been to a slaughter-house, you are missing an essential motive for not eating meat. It is beyond description horrendous and I will leave it at that.

So, the bottom line for me is that I do believe that all animals are sentient beings like me. They just want to be happy and don’t like to suffer. Morally I am not a person who can condone killing and eating them. Practically, I am not so mature, but I am working on it.

The Loss of Substances: Overeating

In this last blog for this series, I really am on virgin territory. I eat too much and am too attached to food. Period! When I was young, I ate to live and was very skinny. Now I live to eat and am not very skinny. I don't like it, but I have not been moved (properly) to do anything about it yet. Yes, I have tried to lose weight from time to time, but somehow shortly after beginning a diet of any kind it seems that the events of my life somehow manage to distract me and I wake up later and find that I am eating as much as ever, if not more. It is like bad Shamata meditation, I can't keep my focus.

Sometimes I limit myself to a certain size bowl, but before long I have found ways to cram, pile, and stack food in that little bowl that would fill three bowls, and I am right back to where I started. That is how clever I am when threatened with less food. It seems that somehow I always manage to eat more than enough. To me enough is "more than enough."

I know I am not alone in this and that misery loves company, but that is not a great comfort. Who wants to be miserable? And I am not grossly overweight, at least not yet, but I am gaining on it, not losing it. There is a problem here. And unlike the other blogs in this series where I somehow manage to get a handle on my vices, in this case I have none and hope that one of you reading this will startle me awake about all this overeating.

We can probably all agree 'why' we do it. At my age food is one of the few things I look forward to. I am not about to go out and climb a mountain or run a fast mile. I already am tired of the business part of making a

living. I work too much as it is, and when work is done, then what? Sure, I might watch a movie or more likely these days 'part of a movie'. It does not much matter what I watch anymore, as long as I watch a little something. And then there is food.

And I am not even a very good cook or, for that matter, very particular about what food I eat. I am interested in finding foods that I like to eat, but not in cooking or perfecting recipes, per se. In a world of professed gourmets, I am (at least I admit it) the lonely gourmand. I like food and lots of it, please. It is not that I am not creative or busy; I am both. I can't seem to remember how I handled this back in the day, for I was busy and creative then too. I really do believe it is as simple as back then I ate to live, and now at least part of me lives to eat. I look forward to eating, as opposed to an eat-and-run approach.

I like to eat a lot. I want a big bowl of pasta, not just enough to live on. And I want to eat for some time, not just for a minute or two. I know I am not alone because where I live all one has to do is go to the local grocery store to see really big people. I am not that big... yet. I am not saying 'you' can't be big and be fine; I am saying I am too big for my frame. It makes me uncomfortable.

Please don't get the idea that I eat junk food or fast food or processed food. Not at all. Back in 1972 I designed the company logo for Eden Foods, one of the pioneers in organic and whole foods and perhaps the last private organic food company not already been acquired by aggregators. I studied and learned macrobiotics and use the principles today. I know what and how to eat.

Thanks to my wife Margaret, we don't eat processed food or food with bad additives in it. Sometimes I do. We eat, as much as possible, fresh and unprocessed foods,

organic if they are available, simple or basic foods, foods like Lundgren short-grain brown rice, all kinds of beans, fresh veggies, and so on. The quality of the food I eat is not an issue. The issue is quantity. I like to eat a lot of whatever is being served. I live in fear of the dinner invite where the hosts serve miniscule portions. I want to cut and run out of their house when that happens. In other words, when it comes to eating food I am not a reasonable man. And I know better, at least my mind tells me so, but my stomach and appetites won't listen.

I don't really snack during the day much anymore. I have given up that as a bad bet, but I make up for it with huge portions a dinner time. I tend to eat only two meals a day, breakfast about lunch time or just before (earlier if I am going anywhere or something is happening), and in late afternoon. I don't eat sugar, so deserts for me are usually fresh and dried fruit, and I seek out the sweetness of baked yams and the like. Giving up sugar was a big step and a very rewarding one in terms of shoring up my bodily health. The problem comes down to portion control.

The Yearning for Fat

Before I close this section I should say something about fat intake. There are some of us, and I am one, whose bodies have gotten an idea that we need a certain amount of fat in whatever we eat or we cannot rest, that is: we cannot stop eating. My wife has pointed out to me many times that given a choice of foods, I will always select the ones with the highest fat content, and it is not as simple as tossing me a pound of lard and closing the door. I just naturally seek out foods that are laced with fat. I seldom to never go for foods with a zero fat content. That would be like eating nothing for me.

If it is high in fat than I will be satisfied and stop eating; If it has low to no fat in it, I will keep eating until I find some fat. It could be the fat in certain foods or regular milk instead of low-fat milk, and of course (in the past) ice cream, the richer the better. And perhaps my main source of fat is fat-rich oils and foods cooked or containing oil. I am an oily type by nature. My skin is oily, which makes me tan easily but also probably takes a lot of oil and fat to nourish. Just as some people crave sugar, I seem to crave (quite unconsciously) oil and fat. Once I get some in my system, my hunger goes away. I probably am the only person out there who when they eat bagels with cream cheese butters the bagel first. Butter is the new sugar for fat eaters like me. Sometimes I just go out in the kitchen and eat a slice of cheese, just because I know it will stop the fat intake syndrome. So for me I have the twin problems of eating too much and seeking out fat-rich foods. Perhaps one of you out there can post an idea here on how to control portions or better deal with the fat intake problem. These are problems I still struggle with.

There you have it. I have shared this series of substance blogs with you; now it is your turn. Overeating is my last substance vice (that I know of). Help me turn the corner on it.

Loss of Substance: Summary

Well there you have a quick tour of my vices, and I am sure I am not alone in having them. When I am sometimes asked “What is the key to beating these vices,” I always have the same answer: ever greater awareness.

If I can manage to develop increasing aware-ness of myself and my surroundings, the rest all falls into place. Awareness allows me to see where and who I am, what is good for me and what is not, aside from what my ingrained habits dictate. I am a stubborn cuss. No preacher or teacher, no amount of proselytizing is going to force me to do anything unless I check it out personally and find it is in my best interests. The one thing I have found teachers good for is showing me how (methods) to become more aware of who I am and what is happening around me.

In every case when I struggled with a bad habit, whether it was cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, caffeine, or what-have-you, it is increased awareness that allows me to determine that it is in my best interests to move away from that habit. And I don't mean in my best interests, intellectually or rationally. I mean in my real-time practical best interests. And it is not often easy and usually involves somewhat of a battle. It has taken most of my life to get this far. That sounds like a Yogi Berra quote. That is how hard it is for me to get around to the point at times.

Awareness is IMO the single most important key to handling bad habits. And how do we become more aware? There are many ways, one of the most common being when something almost catastrophic happens in

our life or in the life of someone we love. We wake up, if only for a moment, a day or two, or a short time. In that natural gap or “timeout” from our distractions we can sometimes better see the path or way to go on. Being brought up short by a sudden event can cause us to retreat from our endless aggrandizing distractions.

In my experience, the preferred method to awareness is some kind of mind-training, call it meditation, mind practice, or whatever you like. I don’t mean lighting a candle, burning some incense, and turning out the lights. Unfortunately, in this country we have the one word “meditation” to cover a host of kinds of mind practice. I refer here to practices that make you more aware, like being here now, not some soothing blue-light reverie.

And here is where you might want to allow me (please) to get a little enthusiastic, if only because awareness training has been so important in my life. If it sounds too preachy, at least you can understand where I am coming from and why I might want to point what works for me out to you.

In my experience, learning to meditate the way the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists meditate really works. It takes time and patience, but what that is worthwhile doesn’t? You have to keep at it and results don’t come easily or soon, but they do come and they do work. I have found nothing else even close to giving the returns that an investment in mind training offers, and I have searched.

I came from the 1950s where life was about our crew cut haircuts, pedal pushers, saddle shoes, and coonskin caps. And I came to life in the 1960s where my heart was fixed or imprinted with the values of that time. Change often is slow. As a Sixties child, I worked with

my generation on so many things that only now (forty years later) are becoming more accepted, things like having our babies at home or in a loving home-like atmosphere, home schooling our kids and helping them find their passions before turning them loose, working to pioneer the foods we eat and what is in them, promoting whole and organic foods, preventative medicine, protecting our environment, and much more. None of these changes came quickly.

While the conservative nature of those in power back then made it difficult to impossible for alternative-culture types like me to come

in the front door, my generation freely walked into the back door of the future to pioneer the Internet and all manner of sharing information. It was our secret door. No one else knew of its existence. That door was wide open because we created it ourselves, a day at a time. No one would do it for us. Isn't this always the case? Others can only point out methods how to become more aware. We have to become more aware by ourselves.

In my own case, aside from being an astrologer, I became an archivist of popular culture, working to share popular music and film with everyone, which is what the sites I created (AllMusic.com, AllMovie.com, ClassicPosters.com, and others) were all about. When I built and directed them, there was not a single commercial ad or product to buy on them. For me it was all about celebrating the music and films we are part of. All-Music Guide is the largest music database of reviews, sidemen, and albums that has ever existed.

And sites like Facebook prove their worth by bringing us together in meaningful ways, ways that were all but impossible before the Internet. For example, I learned to use a library early on and am highly skilled in searching

out subjects. Today the Internet makes the whole world our library and almost everyone has full access to it. What only someone like me, trained in using a library tools, used to be able to do back then, today anyone can do. The search capabilities of the Internet are the most democratic and equalizing event I have ever witnessed. And the future?

If you trust me at all, trust that learning to use and train the mind is to the future today what the Internet and computers were to the future yesterday. This is the uncharted territory for a modern and future world, the “new land.” Meditation and mind training (which may seem foreign and strange just now) will be the coin of the realm tomorrow. It will be then what having a college degree is today, something almost everyone is expected to have. The future, like the proverbial sunken city of Atlantis, is already rising into view for those who have the awareness to see it and we can learn how to put it to use. I can see the future and it belongs to those who are more aware.

Mind training is not about learning to use your mind to learn geometry or to get a degree, but rather learning to use the mind to know itself, turning the mind not outward at the world, but inward, with the mind itself as the object ‘and’ the mind also as the subject looking, in other words: beyond any elaboration, thought, and duality. This is not mysticism, kooky, or other-worldly. It is a technique that has been taught for centuries, unfortunately not anywhere near where we now live. Its result is enhanced awareness, and that awareness is IMO the key to direction in life. The difference in awareness between one person or another may be small, but it also may well be all the difference in the world. Developing that awareness is the theme of this blog.

Thanks for listening!

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November 28, 2010

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