

Me, My Health, and My Problem.

Just like wealth, mental health is self-perpetuating.

The double espresso does not last long enough to warrant sitting down, but there is a newspaper in there with a Saturday crossword waiting. *Milk? Sugar? Are you sure?* I do not drink coffee for the taste. At pubs and restaurants, I decline the offer of lemon or lime in my soda water and every time am met with surprise. Sugar: calories I don't need. Milk: makes me fart. It was the same when I was drinking, and today's got me wondering what that says about me, myself, and my problem.

I'm 158 days clean and sober, and I put the change in my attitude towards myself down to surviving a near-death experience. Something happened. I was introduced to the huge distance between my *self* and my *perception of myself*. There was, it seemed, a serious possibility that all the reasons for which I pitied myself, and all the material and tangible parts of life that I thought defined my *problem*, were all but symptoms of an underlying issue: I had no will to thrive, no will to succeed, and no will to live, because I had absolutely no *self-esteem*. I had grandiose expectations that by staying knocked out more often than not I'd come into some amount of money somehow, but no real inclination that I had the ability or mettle or worthiness to legitimately succeed. I lived off stolen groceries for years, the system seemed to work just fine.

The self-esteem paradox is a sad and ironic reality for many suffering from mental health issues, alcoholism, and addiction: valuing ourselves and our lives actually requires us to already have some self-esteem. You need to have a little, or to be shown a skerrick, to be able to capitalise on it. For a brief moment, immediately after that near-death experience, I valued my life. The gratitude was a passing thought, I don't even know if lasted longer than the time it took for my eyes to blink and un-crust as I stood. But like a spark to dry leaves on a long-strayed-from trail, something began smoking right there by the train tracks I picked myself up from. I had knocked myself out not knowing the trains had stopped for the night, and woken up shortly before the first of the morning.

I spent another couple of months behaving in the only way I knew how, but it was worse than it had ever been. Prison cells and self-published poems about ex-girlfriends,

punch-ons and piss buckets. I no longer wanted to be dead, and no amount of drink and drugs could squash the reality check I'd accidentally given myself.

Three humans sit next to me at the shared, long table in the cafe. One bemoans her aching arms, one opens a bag to show off the latest smoothie brand she's onto, and the third compliments the not-present yoga instructor of the class they've come directly from on her clothes. One asks another where she bought her bag, one shows the others the *insta* belonging to a type of seed or nut she buys online which is *apparently like a superfood or something*, and one repeatedly says the words *you've just got to, like, be the best you, you know?*

I know that this is what people are like now; I know that Baudrillard's Sacramental Order can be purchased from The Apple Store, printed as a bumper sticker, wedged into a bookshelf, or uploaded to social media. I've spent the last decade watching, *apart from* and not *a part of*. I've been stewing in the distance between myself and normies instead of wondering why I can't just be happy, and why I can't just stop drinking and using. It's hard to hold my giggles in as they chirp on, and just as hard not to wonder why I can't have a little of what they're experiencing. I can explain away their happiness as hinging on commodity fetishisation, and I can undress their personalities one by one with a degree of certainty that only a deluded and egotistical loner has.

But, very recently, being a negative creep has started to come less naturally. My old thought patterns are tethered to a non-active alcoholism and addiction, and they put sentences together in my head that sit like ill-fitting clothes. As one of them orders a Kale and Hemp Smoothie because *cancer people use marijuana which is the same as hemp plants to cure their cancer now*, I'm stuck wondering who I am and how I have become so dismissive of a way of thought that up until so recently was absolutely and unshakeably self-defining. I've always been *edgy*, as my friends Jordy and Gilmz would say. But they never saw me drinking gin from a hidden cranny in a bathroom at 4am, they never were on the receiving end of a poisonous verbal undressing, they were never lied to and cheated on and stolen from by me. They just thought the way I'd rip on modern humans was fun to listen to, they probably had no idea it came from a place of malevolence and self-hate.

My mother is an oncologist, and I was brought up with the understanding that medicine exists as a way to improve a patient's **quality of life**. The fact of the matter is that the three people next to me **seem** really, really happy. Their medicine is not just a range of props and knick knacks, it is a state of mind. They each have what I can only presume is a foundational

layer of self-esteem from which a healthy outlook and life is set upon. They don't need to lie on train tracks to value tomorrow. These people have a belief that they are deserving of pleasure and satisfaction! They pursue good health and the affectations and worn signposts that accompany it, and this is as a result of having a self-esteem; a self-esteem that grows as it is fed, just like any anything. You could argue that their self-esteem, their electric happiness, and their activewear, have a symbiotic relationship no different to the relationship between my low-self esteem, self-pity, and penchant for poisoning myself.

They are administering actions and substances that seem to be having a positive effect, and so their self-esteem grows. They look healthy, they sound bubbly, and their conversation is soaked with a contagious and obsessive tilt toward compulsively signposted self-improvement. And for the first time in my life, it doesn't piss me off. I'm genuinely interested, eavesdropping over an empty coffee cup and a glass of water.

In a past life their conversation didn't just irk me, it made me angry. It made me angry because I never had what they had, and I couldn't wrap my head around the idea of self-love. In my alcoholism and in my addiction I had dismissed the concept of self-esteem entirely as one of many dubious luxuries afforded to simpletons.

Well who's laughing now?

Having spent the last decade of my own life actively drowning, something inside me knew that my ways were not designed to self-improve. They existed merely as a coping mechanism. The sick set ourselves aside, biding our time and squeezing highs from crumbs. From a dusty shelf you might typically leave something to pickle and turn we glare downward, watching the rest of the world below go about its business. And as we watch, we sour.

One of many reasons that our statistical chances of recovery and abstinence are so dismal — once we have passed that threshold only an addict or alcoholic understands — is that we don't just poison our bodies. **Enter the unholy trinity of alcoholism and drug addiction: low self-esteem, self-pity, and self-medication.** Thinking unhealthily, left un-checked, is just as poisonous as the substance itself.

My experience leads me to believe that substances are not a problem for those of us who have a healthy self-esteem. Why do you think some of our friends can use and drink recreationally and we cannot? We crossed a threshold at a time when our thinking was sick, and re-crossing that line by breaking our abstinence trips our thinking back into the old groove it associates with self-pity, self-hate, and self-destruction. We can no longer drink or

use in moderation because to use or drink at all is to undo the rewiring of our brain necessary for us to have developed the very self-esteem that keeps us happy and healthy and sober!

As I eavesdrop I realise that it is the trinity's first two incarnations that I am really dealing with through in my recovery: **low self-esteem and self-pity**. The actual need to self-medicate is only the by-product of internal circumstances and learned thought-patterns, thought-patterns that left un-learnt or un-treated will surely see me ruining more relationships and waking up in more Cop-shops.

Our brains learn to justify our behaviour, often before ever touching a substance. Independently of the reasons we end up addicts, which are as varied as are the Kale smoothie flavours on offer here at this fine cafe, we cannot continue to use while simultaneously having a healthy self-esteem. The self-esteem must be destroyed for addiction to thrive. It's the antithetical process I see embodied by these happy healthy folk sitting beside me. I realise I'm not sober today so that I can begrudgingly analyse them from across a table, I'm sober with the hope that with enough work and dedication to following the suggestions of those who have done this before me I will have a solid chance at getting some of whatever these three spandex smile-machines might have.

Having opened my little jar, having dragged myself out limp and pickled, and having spent a while airing out, sobering up, and letting a little soul and sanity creep back into my body, I must confess to be embarrassed by how wrong I have been about pretty much everything. When you're mentally ill it follows that the conclusions you come to are a product of that illness. But when you're mentally ill, even when you know you're not quite right, you can always seem to rationalise and justify the poison you put into your body and the poison that comes out of your mouth. I had dismissed the health-bots of my generation as, well, health-bots. Droids. Self-obsessed. Narcissists. Simpletons. Fashionistas.

I was wrong to do that.

At the centre of our ability to be healthy is our self-esteem. We can't be healthy if we don't have a genuine belief that we deserve it. I can tell you right now that as I learn to un-hate myself, as I go about my recovery using a range of processes and forms of therapy (one of which you might find right at the front of a phone book), I feel the desire to escape reality fade.

I would be lying if I told you that I don't sometimes fantasise about abandoning the bit of self-love I've built up these past months; that I wouldn't mind blowing down the card

house and sleeping in its destroyed foundations just for a day or two. But the thought of going back to that relentless negativity is gut-wrenching, too. The thought of hating humans like the ones beside me now, instead of being happy for their happiness and keen on getting some for myself — and, the thought of never waking back up from that malevolent doze again — is more than enough to keep me clean and sober.

When you hear the old adage *you have to have money to make money*, you might try applying it to your health.

What makes early sobriety such a treacherous time is the irony in that only *with* sobriety can we *value* and understand sobriety. Only in valuing sobriety can we be healthy. We must be healthy to get healthy, and until we are clean, until we are sober, we haven't got a hope.