

HIGHER POWERED REALITY

A Search

Preface

In the mid-fifties I was a young trombonist playing for musicals at the Hanna Theater and Musicarnival, a summer tent theater long since folded. If you've ever wondered (though why should you?) about what pit orchestra players do in the often long spaces between numbers in a musical, they mostly read, and I was no exception.

While others scanned newspapers, paperback fiction, magazines and such I was fascinated by "how to fix yourself" books, things like Eric Berne's *Games People Play*, Thomas A. Harris' *I'm OK, You're OK*, and the like.

My obsession began during those overworked and stressful early years when my wife and I were creating a five-kid family and struggling to make a go of it. As time went on I was increasingly puzzled and distressed by the often-conflicting feelings, thoughts, fears, doubts and other puzzlements I experienced. In spite of my readings and efforts I became more and more self-absorbed, insecure, restless and discontent.

The outward manifestations of these internal problems were that, though I was reasonably functional and successful professionally and at times capable of being a pretty nice guy, I grew increasingly distant in my relationships with others, even those I loved. And amazingly, though I was too often disrespectful, sarcastic, arrogant, intolerant and generally unpleasant with others, my distorted sense of reality allowed me to become self-righteous, to believe that I was generally in the right and a good man.

Many more years of study, psychotherapy and concerted effort brought lots of knowledge but scant improvement. The one hard-earned and discouraging realization I came to was that I was profoundly defective in my ability to see and deal with the real world and the real me. It was small comfort for me to learn that most humans have similar problems in varying degrees.

Defining the Problem

There are innumerable, often conflicting, psychological and philosophical theories regarding how humans handle reality and truth. Two concepts are that we either accept or run from them, the familiar "fight or flight" paradigm.

Walt Whitman said, "I accept reality and dare not question it."

The American publisher Margaret Anderson said, "My greatest enemy is reality. I have fought it successfully for thirty years."

Thoreau said: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth."

Huxley said; "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad."

And then there's that movie line spoken by Jack Nicholson playing a beleaguered military officer involved in a cover-up, "You can't handle the truth."

Other great thinkers and the rest of us mere humans tend to arrive at a workable, mildly self-deceptive position somewhere between these extremes. We learn to read newspaper headlines without becoming suicidal or, considering my present status, I'm able to look in a mirror and see that, while it's not a slim, muscular twenty-five-year-old looking back, it's still not quite an overweight, wrinkled, seventy-two-year-old relic, either.

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A pivotal experience for me came several years ago, after four or five years of sobriety, while waiting for a counseling session to begin. I scanned the bookshelf of my friend and Cleveland Clinic alcoholic counselor, Dr. Joe Janesch and spotted an intriguing title by Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*. Joe let me borrow it with the caution that the last person to whom he loaned it had become distressed on finishing it and promptly got drunk!

Becker's primary thesis is that our human minds are constantly, repeat constantly, caught in a deep-seated conflict between two powerful, opposed ideas, He states that we humans, unlike other animals, know rationally that we are going to die, the ultimate reality. He asserts, however, that at some extremely deep subconscious level we are quite incapable of accepting this nasty piece of truth and this is the ultimate denial.

Becker suggests that dare-devils, soldiers, people who play with guns or refuse to use seatbelts or motorcycle helmets, and really many of us, consciously or unconsciously, repeatedly commit acts that are, in varying degrees of seriousness, unhealthy, unsafe, even self-destructive.

Becker concludes, then, that our human minds are somehow almost hard-wired with the irrational belief that everyone else will die...but not us. He states further that this ongoing internal conflict has a powerful lifelong influence on all our thoughts and behaviors, everything we feel, think, decide or do.

Becker is not very encouraging about the chances for many of us to solve or even improve on the condition he describes. He suggests that only a few will be blessed with what he calls grace, his term for a state of serenity that allows one to stay in reality while managing to lessen or possibly even eliminate the effects of the problem he's outlined.

I reluctantly came to accept Becker's premise, though it forced a quantum addition to the challenges I faced as a recovering alcoholic, one of those who, with few exceptions, are especially addicted to reality avoidance.

The Solutions

Which brings me to the central issue of this paper: I wish to share, with as much honesty and modesty of which I may be capable, some personal experiences and observations that have helped me deal with my reality problems in an improved manner.

1. *Common sense*. My favorite story illustrating this occurred after playing for a Wittenberg College alumni dance with Vince Pattie's sextet, a popular Cleveland dance band of the 50's and 60's. The bass player, drummer and I went to some friends' hospitality suite for drinks after a particularly hot and sweaty night. We literally chugged tumblers of straight scotch with scant ice and then drove home, the bass player Harry DiMarco and I together, laughing, silly and, remarkably, safely.

The drummer, Bob Valyo, an otherwise very bright guy who was at that time in the midst of working on his Ph.D. en route to a stellar career as a college professor, reported the next time we were together that he had gone straight home, treated himself to a bowl of cereal then promptly threw up all over his kitchen. He maintained forever after, in spite of all attempts to persuade him otherwise, that he had somehow got into a bad batch of Rice Krispies.

I often recall this anecdote to help me see things for what they are, not as I would have them, and I try to act accordingly.

2. *Priorities.* Bert Lahr, the grisly old vaudevillian who played the Cowardly Lion in the film *The Wizard of Oz*, gave me a memorable lesson in priorities when I was the new kid in the Hanna Theater pit orchestra in the mid-fifties.

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The producers had chosen Cleveland for a pre-Broadway trial of a new musical featuring Lahr called *Foxie*. They likely came to regret their choice since it was a particularly bitter Cleveland winter.

We rehearsed in the chilly Hanna ladies lounge correcting and fine-tuning the new score by Eddie Sauter, an innovative arranger/orchestrator. After several weeks, the chorus and supporting actors joined us. In a few days their numbers were adjusted and became lots of fun.

There was great anticipation for the big day when Lahr was to rehearse with us. He arrived with a grand flourish and, having prepared for Cleveland weather, brushed off the snow he'd gathered and slowly with mock elegance removed a twelve-foot muffler, fur hat and full-length raccoon skin coat. He greeted everyone with warmth and good spirits, which, unfortunately didn't last very long!

Sauter had punctuated the entire score with his signature style, clever, interesting musical colors and flashy accents from individual orchestra players. It made for a fun score to play and he had outdone himself on the first Lahr number, a "Tea-for-Two"-like soft-shoe comic piece.

The conductor started, Bert sang the first phrase and the piccolo peeped a response. He sang the second phrase, another ornament arose from the orchestra, and he began to frown. On hearing a few more similar episodes, Bert icily stopped the conductor.

"Maestro," he admonished, "I've got a question. Who's gonna' be funny in this show, me or the damned orchestra? Let's take it from the top 'cause we're gonna' circle some of this stuff," meaning, in pit parlance, eliminate the offending passages.

It was my misfortune to have many of these solos. As Lahr ruthlessly ordered the cuts I became increasingly nervous, scared really. I wanted to hide!

Finally noticing my discomfort, Lahr took pity on me, gave me a mock withering glare then, with a broad show-biz wink, broke everyone up with the mock command, "As for you, young fella, circle your chair!"

Lahr knew what was important. He helped me understand the old cliché "Don't sweat the small things and almost everything's small."

3. *Focus*. My third reality coping tool has to do with the mental and emotional tunnel vision that comes with absorption in the activity at hand. As with most of us, there were times when my career and family obligations took almost complete control of my time, consciousness and attention.

My prime example of focus came, however, during a five-year period twenty or so years ago. A serious lung disease confined me to months in my basement studio tethered to an oxygen line, drastically impaired my physical energy and reduced my ability to concentrate to the barest essentials. In this state I gave little more than passing thought to the trivialities that plagued much of my consciousness when healthy.

I did manage, however, to focus on one project that came my way, actually something of a generous favor offered to me.

Jerry Goldsmith was the corporate curator for fishes at Sea World, a gifted designer and builder of beautiful aquariums for all their parks. We had become friends working on other projects. He surprised me with a call asking me to prepare a score to serve as background music for a new aquarium at the San Diego park.

The result was, incidentally, that of all the music I created in my career, for commercials, shows and exhibits, the one piece that people noticed enough to take time to get my address and send fan mail to me. Even some Disney people did a competitive checkout tour of the park, liked my work and sought me out. Sadly, they weren't willing to pay very well!

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My limited personal resources forced a narrow focus on me, the only means by which I could summon what was required to write the music and lyrics, perform and record everything in my electronic studio, work with the singer, then mix and ship the finished master tapes. I should add that there immediately followed a trip to the hospital for yet more frantic attempts by my doctors to keep me alive.

Be assured that I generally do not advocate getting sick as a solution to reality issues.

4. *Some Rules of the Road*. With varying degrees of attention, practice and success I've tried the more conventional formulas; religion, meditation, therapy, diversions like hobbies, physical activities and learning new skills and reading.

Religion: Though never religious I've had, at times, an envy of those for whom a religious faith provides a sense of connection with a Being that guides and supports them. I've tried, including taking several courses in Judaism, but the true depth and beauty of religions' promises have thus far eluded me.

Meditation: There is a wonderful group practicing Buddhist Vipassana Mindfulness Meditation that meets Tuesday nights at the Shaker Heights Unitarian Church. I met with them for a six-month period a few years ago. Once again, what was clearly a profoundly beneficial practice for many did not prove to be as helpful for me. A totally silent weekend retreat in Columbus, Ohio proved to be, as you might guess, a test that I admit to failing.

These meditation experiences likely provided me with some long-term benefits of which I am consciously unaware.

Therapy: The same can be said of the value I obtained from therapy work: First there were several years spent with a very capable west side psychologist, Warren Cooperman. Then, after getting sober, sessions centered around my alcohol dependency with Joe Janesch at the Clinic, followed by work with an east side psychologist, Nate Bender, devoted largely to relationship issues. These men helped me unearth, label and chew on some serious problems but I can be a very slow learner at times.

Diversions: I've had a life-long insatiable curiosity about almost anything having to do with how things work. My enduring affair with photography has led me most recently into digital picture taking and computer dark room techniques. At other times I've been in and out of model airplanes, acoustics and sound recording with the past two decades devoted heavily to computers and electronic music production. There have been numerous lesser obsessions.

My recreations needs have been slight or, more accurately, ignored. My occasional urge to exercise has been well controlled, limited to occasional bouts of walking and, after heart surgery a couple of years ago, directed physical rehabilitation.

Along this line and in spite of a life long aversion to practicing, I've made a recent attempt to restore my trombone playing skills, to get my chops back after a twenty-year hiatus. I've enjoyed some modest success!

All these activities have, in their turn, given me temporary periods of release from my scurrying gray matter demons.

Reading and study: My reading adventures have been many and varied, almost entirely non-fiction and devoted to different aspects of the human condition.

My favored authors don't teach or preach but rather relate their personal experiences, feelings and views about life's puzzlements. The most helpful ones are those that draw me into their space, those who permit me to metaphorically walk with them as they share their personal journey.

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The range has included: Catholic intellectuals, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton and Matthew Kelty; shrinks, M. Scott Peck, Sheldon Kopp, Viktor Frankl and Martin Seligman; male issue advocates, Sam Keen, Joe Campbell, John Stoltenberg and Robert Bly; "love yourself" advisors, Melody Beattie, Harold Kushner and Marianne Williamson; and some varied more mystical approaches; Deepak Chopra, Emmet Fox, and Kahlil Gibran; and on and on ad confuseum.

Once again I can't state with any specificity the effect of my readings with but two important exceptions; the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* and a little book, Ruiz' *Four Agreements*.

This latter is an example of the "do this, don't do that" genre that I've generally avoided but this one has given me four simple behavior rules I've accepted and made some progress in implementing.

Don Miguel Ruiz came from a rural Mexican family of mystic healers. He, instead of following in the family tradition, became a surgeon. After being in a terrible auto accident he began an intensive practice of self-inquiry and resumed study of his ancient Toltec mystic heritage.

These are neither new nor very sophisticated ideas Ruiz presents but they are appealingly sound, direct and practical. Taken verbatim from inside the book cover, they are:

1. *Be impeccable with your word. Speak with integrity. Say only what you mean. Avoid using the word to speak against yourself or to gossip about others. Use the power of your word in the direction of truth and love.*
2. *Don't take anything personally. Nothing others do is because of you. What others say and do is a projection of their own reality, their own dream. When you are immune to the opinions and actions of others, you won't be the victim of needless suffering.*
3. *Don't make assumptions. Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want.*
4. *Always do your best. Your best is going to change from moment to moment; it will be different when you are healthy as opposed to sick. Under any circumstance, simply do your best, and you will avoid self-judgment, self-abuse, and regret.*

These simple directives have given me some insights into dealing with social relationships in a much-improved manner, thus avoiding some of the gaffes and resulting emotional speed bumps that have been an ongoing problem for me. Should you need to know more, read the book.

With respect to the AA Big Book: studying it and being a member of the program it serves to guide has had a life-altering effect on helping me get and stay sober and learn to deal with reality minus the delusional influence that too much booze held over me for many years:

Written and first published in 1939, it is 164 pages of suggestions for recovery followed by another 400 or so pages of personal stories contributed by members. No author credit is given but its direction and likely most of the writing was by the co-founder and intellectual guiding force of AA, Bill Wilson.

Wilson, later designated by a major news magazine as “the great social architect” of the 20th century, was a World War I veteran who achieved considerable success as a New York stockbroker in the 1920's. He became destitute after the crash of '29, crippled mentally and physically by his addiction to alcohol, and totally dependent on the support of his wife, Lois.

Through an almost miraculous set of coincidences and after he experienced what he called a “spiritual awakening” he came upon the beginnings of recovery ideas by which he and eventually millions of alcoholics worldwide could be freed from their addiction.

Wilson had been sober a very short time when a chance connection led to his meeting with a hopelessly drunken Akron, Ohio proctologist, Dr. Bob Smith. They continued meeting and together brought forth the idea that, though innumerable so-called alcoholic cures had been tried throughout the history of mankind, two critical ideas were missing in all of them:

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1. They came to believe that alcoholism is a disease rather than, as had been the generally accepted dogma, a lack of will power. This idea alone served to explain the fact that preaching, scolding or punishing alcoholics rarely works, whether by well-intentioned friends or family members, religious folk, mental health professionals or the police and courts.

2. They recognized that when a recovering alcoholic reaches out and honestly shares both his drinking and sober history with one still suffering, there is a chance that he may be helpful but, of equal significance, he will help himself stay sober. This was the missing magic.

Much has been said about the rather simple, perhaps even naïve sounding AA 12-step program that Wilson and Dr. Smith founded. There is certainly little here that's new or groundbreaking. The essence is that one admit to ones powerlessness over their disease, sincerely appeal for help from a Higher Power of ones own choice, try to honestly admit ones sins and character flaws, make amends to those one has harmed, strive to behave and improve spiritually and, most important of all, try to help other alcoholics.

Permit me to relate a few things that have helped convince me, an inherently skeptical hardhead, of the gentleness yet legitimacy and power of the AA experience.

First and foremost for me was that AA is a non-exclusive spiritual program rather than an exclusive sectarian religious one. All are welcome, including heathen like me, though all are urged to appeal for help from a Higher Power with which they can be comfortable.

Then the traditions, adopted here in Cleveland in 1950, struck me as an extraordinary set of guidelines for the governance of AA. They made it quite resistant to the all-too-common human ego tendency to fight for position, prestige or money.

The essential points of the traditions are summed up in the AA preamble:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

There are no dues or fees for AA membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.

AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither opposes or endorses any causes.

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety.

What also appealed to me was that there is no evangelism, proselytizing, advertising or promotion, and the policy of anonymity is strongly encouraged with respect to the media. Also, there are no paid officers or staff and thus, no politicking or scuffling for position or power.

One might wish that governments, religions and other organizations could adopt these gentle, almost utopian guidelines.

I had another doubt erased on visiting a small roadside cemetery in Vermont.

I grew up in Marion, Ohio where there is an imposing, very expensive monument to one of our country's worst presidents, Warren G. Harding. It was quite surprising, then, and reassuring for my wife and me to have to do some serious searching to find the graves of Bill Wilson and his wife Lois. Simple flat markers and a small American flag for his military service were the indistinguishable signs marking the resting-place of a truly remarkable man. Though Wilson was and remains a hero to many and to me, this lack of pretense was, in my mind, further verification of the enduring AA philosophy of absolute equality, anonymity and the AA doctrine of placing principles before personalities.

I have had many other instances of what in AA are called spiritual awakenings, times at which I experienced thoughts and feelings that were new to me and hard to explain by existential means alone. I

have often felt there was something at work here in AA that transcended the rituals, readings and the members' participation...something more!

Which, finally, brings me back to the seminal point of this paper:

Any improvement in my ability to deal with reality has been based on a steady, ongoing commitment to my particular brand of thinking and behavior modification, working at all of the above ideas. Not in the least coincidentally, however, I began to learn of and enjoy these benefits only after becoming a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Over time I've come to believe that when people join together, in AA or whenever and wherever, with a generous, honest and open manner, a Higher Power joins them. I don't try to visualize or anthropomorphise this Being nor am I concerned that this thesis can't be proven rationally. It's quite enough for me to believe that He, She or It just shows up.

All of the preceding may or may not provide me with a shot at Becker's idea of grace or answers to the issues River and Nancy outlined. What is important is that these things have allowed me, really for the first time in my life, a chance to deal with my emotional isolation; to listen to others, to respect others, to accept others and to enjoy others.

When I do so I find my demons get some well-earned rest and I slowly come to accept and deal with reality; to listen to myself, to respect myself, to accept myself, to enjoy myself and to even suffer occasional spontaneous attacks of generosity and kindness. At times!

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The Four Agreements, A Toltec Wisdom Book / Don Miguel Ruiz, M.D. / Paperback / Amber-Allen Publishing, San Rafael, California / 1997

Alcoholics Anonymous, Third Edition / Alcoholics Anonymous World Services / 1939, 1955, 1976 (Forth Edition, 2002)

Selected Readings

Genesee Diary, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, *Thomas Merton - Contemplative Critic*, *Seeds of Hope*, *Mornings with Henri J.M. Nouwen*, *Beyond The Mirror* / Henri J.M. Nouwen

Seven Story Mountain, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *No Man Is An Island* / Thomas Merton

The Road Less Traveled, *A World Waiting to be Born*, *Further Along The Road Less Traveled*, *People of the Lie* / M. Scott Peck. M.D.

If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him / Sheldon B. Kopp

Man's Search For Meaning / Viktor E. Frankl

Learned Optimism, *What You Can Change & What You Can't* / Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D.

Fire In The Belly, *Your Mythic Journey*, *Inward Bound* / Sam Keen

The Power of Myth / Joseph Campbell

The End of Manhood / John Stoltenberg

Iron John, The Sibling Society / Robert Bly
Codependent No More, Choices / Melody Beattie
When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough / Rabbi Harold Kushner
A Return to Love / Marianne Williamson
The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success / Deepak Chopra
The Prophet / Kahlil Gibran
The Sermon on the Mount / Emmet Fox

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