

21 Years Clean & Sober: My Gratitude as an Addictions Counsellor

I am feeling very grateful about my life today as I write this. That hasn't always been the case, so it is quite easy for me to be aware of the difference. And even though I work hard on my inner development on a daily basis, even though I know I deserve to feel good, I sometimes feel as if I've been given an amazing gift ~ because I was given a second chance at life.

Next month, in July 2008, I will be celebrating 21 years clean and sober. When I mentioned this to a friend, she quipped "Oh, you will be coming of age!"

And I was instantly aware of how right she was.

The Beginning Of My Journey

My own recovery from many addictive behaviours started 21 years ago this month when, after 15 years of chronic illness and drug abuse, I became depressed and even had thoughts of suicide.

What I know today is that most people who are suicidal do not really want to die. Rather, they don't want to continue living the way they have been and often do not see any other way out. That is what was true for me 21 years ago ~ and after many years of being alone with my pain, I reached out for help.

The first phone call I made was to the Vancouver Crisis Line. A wonderfully compassionate soul there referred me to SAFER, which is a suicide prevention counselling centre. From there I made the decision to voluntarily sign myself into the hospital, where I could begin to get the help I needed. While there, I met a couple of other patients who were also trying to become clean from their drug abuse, and I started going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings with them.

And that was the beginning of my recovery.

It wasn't pretty. I was in very bad shape in every possible way ~ physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. There was a lot of work I needed to do on myself. Thankfully, at that time I wasn't aware of all the personal recovery work I was in for, or I may not have continued.

How glad I am today that I continued! All the hard work was so worthwhile, and some of it was even fun. I gradually learned that all I had to do was take it one day at a time, and I have now accumulated almost 21 years of those one-day-at-a-time days.

Different Choices Today

I had been a counsellor before my recovery from addiction began, but I needed to take some time off to focus solely on myself. When I had the required three years clean and sober that an addict

needs to be able to work in the counselling field, I became an Addictions Counsellor in the Downtown Eastside in a wonderful agency called Watari. I stayed there for 16 years, working with amazingly courageous clients and very dedicated staff. During that time I also had a small private practice, and this past year I made the shift into full-time private practice.

I work predominantly with people with addictive behaviours, as well as with their families and loved ones. Every time I sit with addicts and listen to their stories, I am honoured by the trust they place in me. I am also reminded again of my own story. I am reminded that it isn't all that wonderful "out there," or you wouldn't be here talking with me, wanting to change the unhealthy ways you've developed for being in the world. Each time you share the truth of your painful experiences with me, I remember why I choose to be a recovering addict, rather than an addict in active addiction. Thank you for your honesty.

My Gratitude

Many thanks to all of you who are wanting to do your inner work. I am awed by the ways that you courageously face great hardships and continuously fight for your own integrity and self-respect. I know that some days are harder than other days, but I also know that *most* of my days were harder when I was in my addiction ~ and that the pay-offs for being clean and sober far surpass those of being high. The "price tag" of sobriety is far less steep as well.

I've been told that what separates me from other Addiction Therapists is my own personal experience with addiction. In addition to my professional credentials and my many years of work experience, I have "been there" and I can understand what you are going through, at all the various levels of your recovery process. I do not judge you or tell you what I think you "should" do, because I understand and respect that you are completely at choice in your life at every moment, as we all are.

I so very much enjoy working with people who want to change the way they are living, whether the problems stem from substance misuse, an eating disorder, a problematic relationship, troubles with money, or any other behaviour they might be using so that they won't have to feel those very painful feelings that are deep inside. What I know today is that the life I used to live, 21 years ago, was far more painful than anything I have gone through after making the choice to no longer use those self-destructive behaviours. It is definitely true that "my worst day clean has been far better than my best day using," to paraphrase a saying from 12-Step programs.

For any of you who are currently thinking about making the choice to become healthier, I really want to encourage you to be on that wonderful, self-respectful path. The journey of self-discovery will be the most awesome "trip" you'll ever take!

Thank you for being on my journey with me. I wish you all health and happiness, one day at a time.