

**ALCOHOLIC ILIAD/
RECOVERY ODYSSEY**

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RECOVERY ODYSSEY**

**Utilizing Myth as Addiction Metaphors
in Family Therapy**

Jeff Sandoz



BrownWalker Press
Boca Raton

*Alcoholic Iliad/Recovery Odyssey:
Utilizing Myth as Addiction Metaphors in Family Therapy*

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BrownWalker Press
Boca Raton, Florida • USA
2009

ISBN-10: 1-59942-511-4 (*paper*)
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-511-5 (*paper*)

ISBN-10: 1-59942-512-2 (*ebook*)
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-512-2 (*ebook*)

www.brownwalker.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sandoz, Jeff.

Alcoholic Iliad/recovery odyssey : utilizing myth as addiction metaphors in family therapy / Jeff Sandoz.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-511-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59942-511-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Alcoholism--Psychological aspects. 2. Alcoholism--Treatment. 3. Metaphor--Psychological aspects. 4. Psychoanalysis and literature. I. Title.

HV5045.S26 2009

616.86'106--dc22

2009034875



This book is dedicated to my father—
William Charles Sandoz—
in gratitude for his
great gift of storytelling.

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FOREWORD



In this book Jeff Sandoz continues a tradition of allegorical interpretation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, which dates back more than two millennia. However, the unique and (at least as far as I am aware) entirely original contribution that he makes is that of recognizing in these classical works the essential psychological and spiritual dynamics of addiction.

Of course, some of the language of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has found its way into everyday speech. Thus, for example, to say that the addict finds herself “between Scylla and Charybdis” might not be considered a very remarkable use of metaphor. Indeed, one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous employed just this metaphor in describing his own experience of being caught between the physical ill effects of alcoholic withdrawal and the mental ill effects of continued alcoholic drinking.¹ What is original and exciting about the book that Sandoz has now provided us with is rather that it provides an extended allegorical interpretation which draws almost the entire classical mythology of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into the service of elaborating the alcoholic process. Thus, for example, we find two whole chapters here on the Scylla and Charybdis myth, in which we are given an extended account of the Scylla of unobtainable goals and the Charybdis of fear and self pity, the origins of these dynamics in incomplete differentiation of the self, and the therapeutic effect of the Twelve Step programme of AA (especially the 4th and 5th steps) as a means of bringing about the spiritual experience that is necessary to

¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1976, 3rd Edition, AA World Services, New York, p175

break the power of these destructive forces and enable a safe course to be plotted on the journey of recovery. The author then proceeds, in Chapter 15, to employ the *Aeneid* as a similar tool for understanding the processes in which Adult Children of Alcoholics find themselves immersed, and in particular the challenge of finding a balance between duty and passion.

I think that the allegorical method of this book is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it will enable counsellors to communicate more effectively, and counselees, addicts and families to understand more readily, some subtle and at times complex psychological dynamics. It does this in such a way as to avoid over-intellectualisation and employs visual and affective tools which provide a more “three-dimensional” account of addiction. Not only this, but it communicates these dynamics by means of a narrative format which is actually a lot of fun and which draws the reader on. The textual narrative is also supported by some very helpful charts and diagrams.

Secondly, however, the classical mythology underlying the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* taps into fundamental archetypal structures which are of deep psychological significance. In a sense, this is the level at which it might be argued that this analysis of the psychodynamics of addiction is not actually allegorical at all. It is, rather, tapping into an ancient account of the same human psychological processes as were understood several millennia before the concept of addiction was ever named or described. It is, therefore, simply another account of the same story set on a different stage. This also provides a reminder that the processes described here are by no means unique to addiction—they are issues with which many (and in some cases all) people must struggle at some time or another in life. This is, therefore, a book in which everyone can expect to find something of interest and personal relevance.

This book emphasises the psychological processes of addiction, but does not neglect the biological or family dimensions. Most importantly of all, it does not neglect the spiritual dimension of addiction, but rather sees a spiritual conversion brought about by working the 12 Steps as being a tried and tested pathway to recovery. This is undertaken without being in any way particular to, or in conflict with, any particular faith tradition. It would, I imagine, be as accessible to the agnostic, or even the atheist, who recognises a spiritual dimension to their life as to a member of any of the world’s major faith traditions. However, it is also helpfully anchored by an appendix which gives a practical example of how to begin each day with a

reflection upon the spiritual principles of AA. This appendix is also an important reminder that this book is not only based upon many years of professional counselling experience and academic research, but also upon personal experience of recovery through engagement with the Twelve Step programme of AA.

This book deserves to be widely read by counsellors, people engaged in a process of recovery from addiction and families of addicts.

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PREFACE



For most of my life I have been seeking insights. Initially I wanted insight into my father's behavior. Later I looked for insight into my own behavior and still later I wanted insight into the behaviors of others. As an individual and as a professional in the area of Substance Abuse I have gained insight from many distinguished individuals: Bill Wilson, for one; Mark Keller and Selden Bacon at Rutgers; Dan Anderson, Ernie Kurtz and Ernie Larson from Hazelden; also from textbooks and from individual lectures, presentations and from my own students and clients.

Now comes, Dr. Jeff Sandoz who has been a friend and colleague for many years. Jeff has studied alcohol problems and their effects on individuals and families and our culture throughout most of his adult life. He has shared his knowledge in the area of addiction and the wisdom of his years as a clinician, researcher and university professor. Jeff's background and interests are similar to my own and his journeys of discovery have paralleled mine. He has been served well by the combined effect of his personal recovery from the disease and his guidance of others through the transformative process. (For more information on the transformative process, please refer to his other book entitled *Exploring the Spiritual Experience in the 12 Step Recovery Program of Alcoholics Anonymous—Spiritus Contra Spiritum*).

The major life events of recovery and helping others have not only instilled wisdom, but have also added immeasurable depth to his character. Specifically his comparison of Joseph Campbell's 'Path of the Hero' to the process of addiction and recovery is no mere academic reference; for Jeff Sandoz it is a living experience which resounds from the depths of his being. He has a firm understanding of

the addiction and recovery process at a level that is rarely seen in counselors, researchers and professors.

In my reading of this manuscript, I realized, at once, the value of this book in a practical sense. **The focus of the book is on the use of metaphor within addiction and recovery counseling;** a therapeutic technique which promotes greater clarity in the understanding of one's behavior while enabling one to connect to a larger whole.

The central core of the book involves the telling of the story of one who undergoes a transforming life event and wishes to share that experience with others. Those who adhere to various 12 Step groups have an implicit understanding of this, as members of their fellowship share their own stories. This book offers chapter by chapter, a treasure trove of metaphorical images which will not only assist the counselor, but also the client throughout the various stages of recovery. In the world today **alcohol has become a modern Trojan horse;** for some it may represent a pleasurable diversion often associated with celebration, but once having entered one's proximity it can be for others a ticking time bomb awaiting detonation!

The author's connecting of the ideas of Julian Jaynes with idol gods and the misuse of alcohol for unmet spiritual needs is masterful. His replacing the 'command voices' of alcoholism with the 'voice of recovery' is sheer genius. His further elaboration of the two main voices of the gods, Poseidon and Hades, is rather astute. Counselors will find great familiarity with the characteristics of those mythological gods and the processes operating within their clients. His elaboration on the similarity of behaviors of characters in Greek mythology with modern day alcoholics is, pardon my pun, *classical*. The use of Murray Bowen's theory to highlight family patterns of individuation, a modern parallel to Agamemnon's deceit and sacrifice of Iphigenia, is illuminating. Devotees of the 12 Step programs will take great delight in recognizing "the 12 Steps" imbedded within the "12 Labors" of Heracles. By the author's own admission the chapters devoted to Scylla and Charybdis reveal the core experience of the alcoholic. I found these chapters to be fascinating and offering the most perceptive insights of the book.

Professionals in the field have much to gain in understanding the dynamics operating within those chapters. Patterns of behaviors are clearly delineated within the families of addicts and much of these processes are repeated time and again—especially those dynamics leading to the death of Odysseus. However, the most revealing as-

pects are mentioned in the last few chapters dealing with the individual, the family and Adult Children of Alcoholics, respectively.

In reading this book I was reminded time and time again of the importance of storytelling, which is an integral part of recovery and an essential element in Alcoholics Anonymous. These stories speak essential truths about human nature and are passed on through a narrative format. As metaphors, these myths tell stories of addiction and recovery or “What I used to be like, what happened and what I am like now.”

This book, drawn primarily from the imagery of the two great epics of the Homeric tradition, tells the story of a desperate man engaged in a long-lasting war and his seemingly never-ending struggle to return home. In this book, these images are re-drawn with the experience of one who understands the addiction struggle and the path that leads homeward. It is my fervent hope that this healing narrative will help others find peace and sobriety through their own odyssey of recovery.

Godspeed!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



There are numerous individuals whom I owe a debt of thanks and gratitude. First of all, I wish to thank both my mother, Jane, and my former student, Alan Zaunbrecher for the tedious task of proofreading and editing of the manuscript. Similarly, I wish to thank my UK friend, Reverend Professor Chris Cook for his enthusiastic support and Mike Quinn for his encouragement and assistance. Finally, I owe much to my family, especially my wife, Lucia. Without her constant support this publication would not have been possible.

Also I wish to thank the publishers who granted permission to quote and use their copyrighted material. Additional thanks go to those who have graciously allowed me to reprint their materials such as *The Jaynesian: Newsletter of the Julian Jaynes Society*, *Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association*, *Context: Journal of the American College of Counselors*, and *Journal of Ministry in the Addictions and Recovery* (Haworth Press). The brief excerpts from the books *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* are reprinted with permission of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. (AAWS). Permission to reprint these excerpts does not mean that AAWS has reviewed or approved the contents of this publication, or that AAWS necessarily agrees with the views expressed herein. A.A. is a program of recovery from alcoholism *only*—use of these excerpts in connection with programs and activities which are patterned after A.A., but which address other problems, or in any other non A.A. context, does not imply otherwise. Additional permission for brief quotations was granted from *Canadian Psychology*, the Penguin Group, HarperCollins and John P. Wiley & Sons.

INTRODUCTION



Process

Linda Verlee Williams (1983) described a metaphor as a process which connects two unrelated things. This process of learning does not advance in small increments, but instead captures the entire field in one fell swoop. Exactly how does this technique of learning occur? Gordon and Poze (1980) believed that learning of this type involves connecting the right hemisphere of the brain with the left. The right hemisphere operates differently than does the left. The right hemisphere's mode is with images while the left utilizes verbal language. In reading this book it would be helpful to understand some of the key points distinguishing left brain activity from that of the right include the following:

Left Brain

Language (verbal)
Logic
Detail Oriented
Linear/Sequential Learning
Analysis
Slow

Right Brain

Images (visual)
Emotions
Pattern Recognition
Simultaneous/Parallel Learning
Synthesis
Sudden

The process of combining storytelling with the use of both metaphors and analogies helps to unite the hemispheres and promote greater understanding. Specifically, metaphors offer a vehicle for transporting new information from the right hemisphere to the older more familiar concepts within the left hemisphere and then passed on to the frontal lobe for a final synthesis of the information.