

ATTRACTION NOT PROMOTION

The power of narratives used in twelve step speakers' meetings can frequently break through insurmountable denial of substance abuse. The narrative retelling of life experiences can be powerfully attracting and reassuring to newcomers as well as the speakers themselves. The "drunkalogues" can teach recovering participants that the "rotten personalities" that emerged during drinking and drugging can and do change.

By Ted Ernst

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There is probably nothing that better illustrates the power of narratives than storytelling, and some of the best examples are the stories that are told in twelve step speakers' meetings, variously known as "speaking," "qualifying," or "giving the lead." Guidelines are minimal but precise: tell "What it used to be like, what happened, and what it is like now. These are also the same guidelines for visiting and "sharing the message" with a practicing alcoholic or addict, hence "attraction not promotion."

The power is in the hearer's response and can often break through otherwise insurmountable denial. "Yeh, that's what happened to me, too" (comparing in) rather than "That hasn't happened to me...yet" (comparing out). It is in hearing others that newcomers learn that they are not terminally unique, nor crazy, nor unforgivably bad, and they are told, "If you didn't hear your story tonight, keep coming back." I know a recovering alcoholic who began sobriety in his mid-fifties, but finally heard his own story a few years later out of the mouths of a nurse in her sixties, whose drinking and perilous detoxification were similar to his own and from a fifteen year old young woman whose use of prescrip-

tion uppers exactly paralleled his own. It is in these stories, too, that newcomers begin to recognize the emotional and intellectual augmentation in their own past lives. The extremely exaggerated emotional and thinking responses that have been brought about by minds augmented by mood-altering chemicals that have been both bizarre and destructive.

One of the saving/healing graces of such stories is that they are often wildly improbably and/or humorous...I one heard a speaker recount nearly being arrested for piracy for attempting to "borrow" a sailboat in the Annapolis tow harbor only to have a teenage newcomer share with him that he had actually been arrested there for stealing a rowboat, both incidents part of drinking episodes. I once heard a speaker describe hiding empty bottles in closets throughout a seminar dormitory. A newcomer shared with him that he had heard the same story among a group of old testament scholars around the campfire at an archeological dig in Israel. I have heard of an entire trainload of coal being stolen in Germany and sold to locals a few miles down the track, and of a young women crawling on hands and knees through an airline terminal pushing a suitcase. While



many are funny, the point of these examples is that newcomers learn that they are no worse or no better than others like themselves and thereby may begin to bond to sobriety and to "stick with the winners."

Narrative retelling of life experiences can be powerfully attracting and reassuring to newcomers as well as to the speakers themselves. "What it's like now" often speaks of the forgiveness of self and others that can occur when clean and sober. These narratives are often referred to as "Dunkalogues." But they teach recovering participants that the "rotten" personalities that emerged during active drinking and drugging can and do change, that the deterioration that has been the source of shame and guilt can be repaired, and these narratives often include instructive accounts of amends that have been made. They may be powerfully cathartic and healing for the speaker and hearer, with the seed of forgiving self and others.

Usually, sponsors or local groups require a certain time in sobriety before "telling your story" but this varies. The instructions remain the same: "What it used to be like, what happened and what it's like now. If the speaker has done the fifth step (shared a "searching and fearless moral inventory with themselves, with God, and with another person), speaking often brings up "memory bubbles" and speaking becomes an appendix or addition to that inventory.

For many it is a way of sharing that may attract another to sobriety. Speakers experience

again the unconditional acceptance of these groups. Speaking is the classic example of "sharing the message," as the twelfth step indicates. Speakers are often anxious beforehand; seldom afterwards. It may well be that twelve step groups have produced more successful public speakers than any other method.

It is an ultimate experience in "storytelling," almost always a new experience no matter how often repeated, and groups seldom mind at all when they hear a story a second time or oftener. Although "drunkalog" stories may focus almost too much on "what it used to be like, the gold...attraction for newcomers is more often in the "what it's like now" portion, that is the outcome...the rewards... of sobriety, no matter how difficult to achieve. One often hears, speakers say that in the beginning they "wanted what you people had," which they very likely heard at a speakers meeting, as well as saw and experienced in the fellowship. Meetings, they learn, are the fellowship; the steps are the program, and occasionally speakers will include how they worked the steps as part of their stories. □

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