**TERMINALLY UNIQUE: A PHYSICIAN’S RECOVERY JOURNEY**

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hat’s why we like each other”, my friend said. “We’re both terminally unique.”

I had never encountered that phrase. I soon discovered that it was found in AA 12 Step literature. According to the program’s traditional thought, “terminally unique” is not a good thing. The phrase is often applied to educated professionals who question the orthodoxy of the program (doctors are the worst, they say), or believe that their intelligence places them above the people whose addictions have cost them everything (doctors again). “Terminally unique” also means that one believes that they are the exception to the rule, or that the rules do not apply to them (oh, those doctors).

Twelve Step programs will tell you that believing you are terminally unique is all ego, and as such, a hindrance to sobriety. Ego was thinking the 12 Steps didn’t apply to me; that I didn’t need AA’s help to stay sober. An alcoholic’s idea that their “uniqueness” exempts them from some part of the Twelve Steps leads inevitably to relapse and death. It is unsurprising that many physicians, and many other health care professionals, may feel uncomfortable or unwanted in 12 Step programs.

I certainly did.

I didn’t believe I was better than them; I knew I was much worse. My guilt and shame over never being good enough, especially as a physician, crushed me until even drinking didn’t relieve the pain any longer. But no, I was told very early in recovery, that belief was ego, too.

So was my atheism, my unwillingness to turn my life and will over to a god. The default position in the literature was a male deity I did not accept. Begging god to keep me sober or otherwise direct my life seemed absurd. I felt trapped between what I believed and what I was told was the only way to stay sober. I couldn’t think about anything else, nor decide what action to take.

I would learn, when I was asked to not speak at a meeting, that in my local 12 Step community discussion of adjunctive or alternative paths of recovery were not allowed, as were any specific references to Buddha, Allah, etc.

AA was founded based in Christianity, and there is resistance in many areas of the country to simple changes such as replacing the Lord’s Prayer with the Responsibility Declaration. Some members believe that the Big Book and 12 Steps should never be changed; others think non-Christians should replace god with higher power, even though that still requires belief in a supernatural force. There are those that hold that belief in the Christian god is essential. And some think having a standard approach makes it easier to get and stay sober. For me, Chapter 4 in the Big Book, “We Agnostics” was condescending, as was telling me to “get down on my knees and pray.” The word god was ubiquitous, and many meetings focused on belief in God as essential to sobriety.

Then I met my terminally unique friend.

He invited me to help establish a weekly meeting based on Refuge Recovery. I had no knowledge, either as a physician or alcoholic, that something like this existed. Refuge Recovery is described on their website (refugerecovery.org) as a “recovery society grounded in the belief that Buddhist principles and practices create a strong foundation for a path to freedom from addiction." The Refuge Recovery program is an approach to recovery that understands "All individuals have the power and potential to free themselves from the suffering that is caused by addiction." Patricia Dobkin, in her essay “Mindfulness and Compassion as Antidotes to Physician Addiction”[1], describes in detail the design of this Buddhist approach to recovery. She notes that by incorporating the 12 Steps into the non-theistic Eightfold Path, Noah Levine [2] laid out a clear path to a better life.

Replacing the concept of original sin, the Christian belief that we are born in sin and require redemption, is that of a Buddha nature, the belief that every being is born with a heart full of compassion and lovingkindness that can be uncovered, made all the difference to me. This was an approach I could welcome into my life. Dharma (teaching) books and discussions of Buddhism inspired me, and the relationship between meditation and neuroplasticity, described by Robert Wright in *Why Buddhism is True* [3], appealed to my scientific brain, and I found compassionate advice in the Dharma talks and works of Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, among others. I began a traditional meditation practice and understood how mindfulness could be applied to daily life.

I got sober with the help of AA, and will be forever grateful. My friend and I both attend traditional meetings. Today, I sometimes slip out of an AA meeting when the topic becomes religious; I do not attend meetings when my beliefs are not respected. Our service is to provide an adjunct to traditional AA, for those who suffer from various addictions. Recently, I began to host a zoom meeting of AA Agnostica, (aagagnostica.org) the “approved” option in AA, which is based on a secular version of the 12 Steps. Atheists and Christians are equally welcome, as well as everyone else.

When dealing with addiction, it is important to assess many aspects other than physical health, although this remains essential as well. This is consistent with whole person care including an assessment of the entire person: their living situation, job, social support system and beliefs. Referral to Alcoholics Anonymous should not be automatic; there are alternative programs that may be a better fit for the person, particularly after several months of AA. As physicians, we must educate ourselves about these programs in order to better care for patients.

I rarely think about alcohol anymore as I begin to see the causes and conditions that brought addiction into my life. My recovery is not focused on avoiding a substance, but on training my mind in the Eightfold Path. I am sometimes aware of the unreliability of my thinking; I am beginning to see the reduction of behaviours that brought suffering to others and me. I can walk this path with joy, even though I often stumble or take a wrong fork.

I like to think of a terminal as waystation during travel. At a terminal, the journey does not have to end – it can begin a new with all options available to me. A destination may never be reached, but I will progress all the same.

My friend’s version of the term “terminally unique” is a sincere compliment. My individuality will never change even as I grow and approach life differently. I am on my own journey, a seeker of knowledge of self and of the world using my constantly changing mind.

I am terminally unique.■

**referenceS**

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2. Levine N. Refuge Recovery: a Buddhist path to recovering from addiction. San Francisco: Harper One; 2014.
3. Wright R. Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 2017.