

Step One, Part Two—the Obsession of the Mind:

In the last chapter I discussed the first part of Step One from the Big Book perspective—the allergy of the body (the phenomenon of craving) we get when we eat certain foods or indulge in certain eating behaviors. In that chapter I especially emphasized what the Big Book takes for granted—that we find a plan of eating that eliminates those foods and/or eating behaviors which cause our cravings—that we become, in a word, abstinent.

Now it's time to talk about the second part of Step One—the obsession of the mind.

As the Big Book points out, this mental obsession is our real problem.

If our only problem were that we get physical cravings that overwhelm us, there would be a simple solution, when you think about it: just don't eat those foods or indulge in those eating behaviors; everything would be fine. In effect, that's what we did when we went on diets.

Consider this: right now, I eat shrimp and enjoy it. But if I developed an allergy to shrimp, as many people have, and I would suffer a tremendous shock to my system that could kill me, I think I would look at shrimp as a poison. I would avoid it like the plague. I would say to myself, "Well I used to like it, but I sure don't like it now. Why would I eat anything that killed me?"

Yet before OA I ate all kinds of food that I knew perfectly well were killing me!

Our real problem, as the Big Book points out, is that we keep finding excuses to go back to those foods and those eating behaviors:

Why does he behave like this? If hundreds of experiences have shown him that one drink means another debacle with all its attendant suffering and humiliation, why is it he takes that one drink? Why can't he stay on the water wagon? What has become of the common sense and will power that he still sometimes displays with respect to other matters?

Perhaps there never will be a full answer to these questions. Opinions vary considerably as to why the alcoholic reacts differently from normal people. We are not sure why, once a

certain point is reached, little can be done for him. We cannot answer the riddle.

We know that while the alcoholic keeps away from drink, as he may do for months or years, he reacts much like other men. We are equally positive that once he takes any alcohol whatever into his system, something happens, both in the bodily and mental sense, which makes it virtually impossible for him to stop. The experience of any alcoholic will abundantly confirm this.

These observations would be academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body. (pages 22-3 of the Big Book)

Why do we keep going back? What gets us to eat the first bite?

Well, one thing that's obvious is that virtually every diet and every book on losing weight, and many many doctors and dietitians and nutritionists whom we consult, all seem to say that once we have lost our weight we *can* go back to eating ALL the foods we used to eat, but *this* time in *moderation*! It's just a matter of will power, or maybe they phrase it as won't power. They can't imagine why we would eat in large quantities again.

What is their problem? They don't understand that we have a physical problem. They don't understand that, unlike the normal eater, we don't get unease or discomfort when we overeat—rather, we crave more. They simply don't understand our allergy of the body.

So, on the advice of our doctors, or other health-care professionals, the diets in magazines and books, and the weight-loss programs, we lose our weight and then take back our weekly scoop of ice cream, or two cookies, or comfort food. And then the weekly scoop becomes bigger, and then becomes more frequent, and then becomes the hand going to the mouth and we're asking ourselves why we can't stop.

But wait, as the infomercials say, there's more!

Here's my list. I bet you can add to it!

I deserve this because:

- I'm so depressed. What will make me feel better?
- I'm so happy! How can I celebrate?
- I've been very good for a year. A month. A week. An hour.
- I didn't eat the bun . . . the last french fry . . . the second helping.
- I worked so hard making it.
- I feel guilty because I didn't work so hard making it.

I need this because:

- No one loves me.
- How will I fit in otherwise?
- Too many people love me.
- I want to die and overeating will kill me. But it's a nice way to commit suicide. My spouse will not feel guilty when I die.
- Nothing else will remove the hurt, if only for a second.

I must have this because:

- They made it especially for me. How can I refuse?
- It's free!
- I'll never be able to have this food again.
- It will go to waste.
- Everyone is looking at me; how can I refuse?

I can have this because:

- I'm standing up. It doesn't count!
- It's a stone ground whole-grain cinnamon bun made with organic molasses and cold-pressed organic oil! So it's really good for me and doesn't count!

- She's not looking, so it doesn't count.
- I have to taste it in order to see whether it's okay.
- At least people can see what my weakness is.

Ring some bells?

So what are these curious excuses?

Mental, not simply emotional

The Big Book describes them as a mental obsession, not simply an emotional one. Certainly some of these are emotional excuses. But some of them are just plain stupid ones.

We often hear in OA that our problem is physical, emotional, and spiritual. The Big Book doesn't use the word "emotional" to describe our problem. It uses the word "mental". That's because our reasons for returning to the food are often just insane, and sometimes don't depend on how we're feeling at all.

We could have had a normal day, have lost a lot of weight by eliminating ice cream from our diet, and be in a supermarket where they're offering a sample of new flavor of ice cream, and find ourselves eating that sample before we even know what we're doing.

It doesn't do us any good to figure out what was eating us. What does us good is to realize that we keep finding excuses to go back to foods that we know, deep in our hearts, we can't eat without developing cravings.

This is the real problem, as the Big Book points out. There is no answer. "We cannot answer the riddle." We just know that we do it.

The whole of the chapter *More About Alcoholism* (beginning on page 30) describes the mental obsession. It is the same obsession whatever we're addicted to—whether gambling or alcohol or cocaine or food or emotions. It is that excuse we give to ourselves for going back.

It is not surprising that our drinking careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could drink like other people. The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. The persistence of this illusion is aston-

ishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity or death. (Page 30)

In that chapter the Big Book describes four addicts who return to their addiction. One of them has not had a drink for 25 years, and thinks that a long period of sobriety enables him to drink like normal people. One of them has a bad day, and persuades himself that whiskey won't hurt him if taken with milk. One of them keeps going back to jaywalking even though he has suffered tremendous physical damage, and can't explain himself at all. And one of them has a great day, and finds himself thinking that it would be nice to have cocktails with his dinner.

There was always the curious mental phenomenon that parallel with our sound reasoning there inevitably ran some insanely trivial excuse for taking the first drink. Our sound reasoning failed to hold us in check. The insane idea won out. Next day we would ask ourselves, in all earnestness and sincerity, how it could have happened.

In some circumstances we have gone out deliberately to get drunk, feeling ourselves justified by nervousness, anger, worry, depression, jealousy or the like. But even in this type of beginning we are obliged to admit that our justification for a spree was insanely insufficient in the light of what always happened. We now see that when we began to drink deliberately, instead of casually, there was little serious or effective thought during the period of premeditation of what the terrific [horrible] consequences might be. (Page 37)

Yes, says the Big Book, sometimes we have felt justified by extreme emotions. But we've also had trivial excuses.

That fits my experience well. I can be on a diet and have thoughts like, "That looks good, but I can't eat it. I won't eat it. It's not good for me. I'm doing so well on my diet." But I'll simultaneously have other thoughts like, "It's only a bit, you've never had that taste before, you can have just one." And then the second thought just overpowers the first, and I'm back again. I've become a yo-yo dieter.

The Mental Obsession:

The Big Book's characterization of this is as a mental obsession. An obsession is a thought that overpowers all other thought. It is an obsession over which we have no mental defence. We can't stop

ourselves from thinking. You try it. I'll pay you \$5,000.00 if you don't think of the word "rhinoceros" for 20 seconds! Did you win the bet? I doubt it. We can't control our thinking. And we can't control the mental obsession.

We have two lines of thought running parallel to each other, just like the proverbial good and bad angels perched on our two shoulders. The "good" thought is, "I can't eat this stuff, it'll make me fat, I won't eat it, I want to be thin." The "bad" thought is, "Ah, come on. It's okay, because . . . [fill in the rationalization!]." Then suddenly a click occurs, and the bad thought just overpowers the good thought, and we begin again.

The Double Whammy:

The *first part* of our addiction is that we are powerless over food—we get uncontrollable physical cravings when we eat certain foods or indulge in certain eating behaviors. This is the **allergy of the body**.

The *second part* is that we can't manage our lives in relation to our powerlessness over food—we get mental obsessions that send us back to those foods and those eating behaviors that we know will cause us the uncontrollable cravings. This is the **obsession of the mind**.

We have what Dr. Silkworth called the "double whammy". We can't stop once we've started; and we can't stop from starting again. We're doomed.

That is Step One—the realization that we are doomed. And we're not doomed because of our allergy of the body, but because of our mental obsession. And we begin to realize that the only solution that will ever work with us is something that gets rid of our mental obsession. And we know we can't do it by ourselves, because we can't stop the thinking that keeps sending us back.

Note that Step One as written on the wall is *not* "We admitted that we were powerless over food AND that our life had become unmanageable." It's "We admitted that we were powerless over food—that our lives had become unmanageable."

That means that we have to admit that our life had become unmanageable *in relation to our powerlessness over food*. If someone had tried to convince me when I joined the program that my whole life was unmanageable, I would have left the program. My life was fine (or apparently fine) except for the food. But Step One doesn't require us to accept anything but our powerlessness over food!

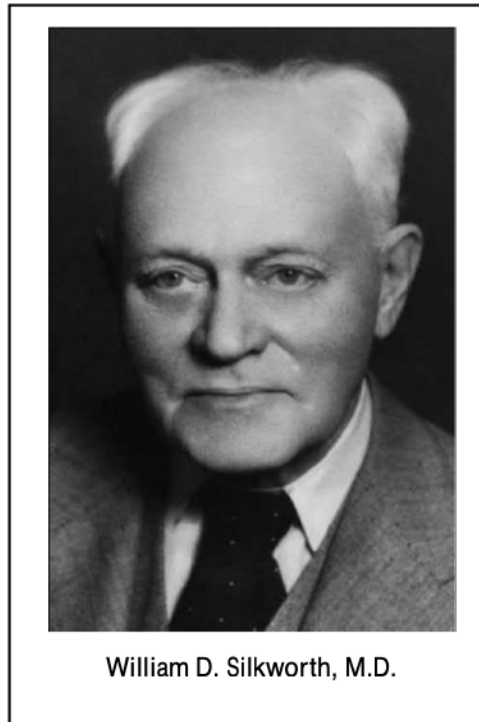
Maybe now we will be ready for Step Two. If Step One is the problem of powerlessness, then Step Two is the solution of power!

Questions:

Here are questions for you:

- What excuses have you used to go back to compulsive eating?
- Have any of your reasons for going back to compulsive eating ever ever ever turned out to be reasonable?
- Have you ever gone back to compulsive eating before you even realized you were doing it?
- Does your experience show that you have been capable, on your own, of ultimately resisting an excuse to go back to compulsive eating?
- Does your experience show that you have returned to compulsive eating only because you've felt emotionally justified, or have you had trivial excuses as well?


Are you now convinced that in yourself there is no solution to the double whammy? This is crucial. Do you still think there's a chance? Or do you know that you are doomed?



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