

**Knocking on the Wrong Door**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
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**Readings**

Matthew 7:7-11

Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

The second reading consists of a few sentences from a 1987 interview with Jungian analyst and writer Marion Woodman, and then two sentences from the conclusion of a 1961 letter from Carl Jung to Bill Wilson, one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous:

From Marion Woodman:

I think that many addicts are profoundly religious people. They have immense energy, and they are not satisfied with the world as it is. They think it is a dreadfully cruel, ruthless place, and they want meaning in their lives... they want a god. Now, they'd never say that, but they want something bigger than the bread-and-butter world. If that's all there is, it's meaningless. If life is nothing more than driven work, for example, it is not worth living. The alcohol takes them out of the mundane world, temporarily – and then, of course, ultimately it takes them into unconsciousness.

From Carl Jung:

“Alcohol” in Latin is *spiritus*, and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*.

**Sermon**

Near the beginning of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous we read the story of Bill W..

He came of age at the time of World War I, began drinking as a soldier, and kept drinking upon his return.

He sought and made a fortune on Wall Street... and kept drinking. He wrote:

For the next few years, fortune threw money and applause my way. I had arrived. My judgment and ideas were followed by many to the tune of paper millions. The great boom of the late twenties was seething and swelling. Drink was taking an important and exhilarating part in my life. There was loud talk in the jazz places uptown. Everyone spent in thousands and chattered in millions. Scoffers could scoff and be damned. I made a host of fair-weather friends. My drinking assumed more serious proportions, continuing all day and almost every night. The remonstrances of my friends terminated in a row and I became a lone wolf. There were many unhappy scenes...

Then he lost his fortune in the crash. And kept drinking.

Bill W.'s story is long, including unsuccessful attempts to give up drinking, even as his life spiraled downward, each failure marked by increasing "remorse, horror, and hopelessness..."

There were unsuccessful medical treatments and hospitalizations. Deepening despair. And continued drinking.

Until finally, after years, a friend called, former drinking buddy – sober. How? He had given himself over to "God" – to a power higher than himself, and invited Bill – who had given up on Christianity a long time before – to do the same, understanding God in whatever way he chose.

Bill could see that his friend "was much more than inwardly reorganized. He was on a different footing. His roots grasped a new soil." And the invitation to understand "higher power" in whatever way he chose led to a breakthrough spiritual experience of connection, union, transcendence... that changed his life... and changed the life of millions of others.

For as some of you will have recognized, this was the beginning not only of Bill W.'s life of sobriety, it was the beginning of AA., which he helped to found and which now helps uncounted others find a new life without alcohol.

Here's another story. From another time:

Noah Levine, the son of the Buddhist teacher and writer Stephen Levine, found his way to alcohol and drugs as a teenager in the punk scene during the 1990s.

Age seventeen and he finds himself in a padded cell, "bruised and bloody." He wants nothing more than to die, to "kill the body that has done nothing but crave more of the substances that make me lie, steal, and fight every moment of my existence. There is no shelter, no refuge, no hope for redemption."

The words of the opening chapter of his book *dharma punx*, are vivid as he describes his rage in that cell, his despair: "Seventeen years old and dying.... Curled up into the fetal position, holding on to what's left of the once innocent child who took birth all those years ago, now as before, ready to do it all over again. Just let me die."

The next several chapters of Noah Levine's book recount the path to that padded cell.

But in this first chapter he also gives away the beginning of his path to recovery:

In my cell I think about what my father said about meditation. How is that hippy s\_\_\_ going to help me now? Suicide still seems like the only solution. I need to shut up my head; I can't deal with the torture any longer.

With no means of destruction I lie on the hard plastic bed and stare at the graffiti-covered walls. With nothing else to do and nowhere else to turn, I try to pay attention to my breath.

This turned out to be the beginning of Levine's journey toward a new life. It was not all smooth going, not by any means. But as he deepened his meditation and prayer practice, and as he began the long process of making amends to all those he had hurt along the way, he changed:

I began to be a little nicer, even to people I didn't like very much. It became less and less important to be cool and tough, and more and more important to be kind and honest...

And:

I began to notice that other people started treating me differently too. The whole world seemed more friendly...

And at the end of the book:

Everything that I'd been searching for that kept getting me locked up I'd found through this simple practice of mindfulness meditation.

So: Two stories from two very different times in our history, two very different men. But with deep common threads.

Put simply, it seems to me that both Bill Wilson and Noah Levine discovered two things.

First, that they had been knocking on wrong doors as they sought what, actually, all human beings seek: relief from pain, and happiness!

And, second, they each discovered a door to knock that offered exactly that – relief from pain, and happiness, contentment, well-being, even transcendence... call it what you will. Not just a paper sobriety of not drinking or not doing drugs, but a sobriety of kindness, compassion, community, and appreciation of everyday life.

Now, I don't want to oversimplify. Addictions of all kinds, certainly including addiction to alcohol and other drugs, are complex. Each alcoholic, each addict, is a unique individual with a unique story of how he or she became addicted and how they found their way to sobriety.

Alcohol and other drugs can be a form of escape – albeit always only temporary escape – from suffering, from terrible circumstances of one kind or another. Addiction can begin, as we know these days it does for increasing numbers, with pain-killers to treat real and serious physical pain. Addiction can begin in a hundred, a thousand ways.

And some are simply more prone to addiction than others, metabolize the alcohol or other substance in ways that lead more easily to addiction for some than for others.

Yes, complex – and we can talk about some of that complexity during our conversation at noon in the parish house parlor.

But in my words here I simply want to emphasize that those of us who become addicted and those of us who not, share the same basic humanity; share, this means, a so-natural desire to avoid pain, share a desire to be happy, share a desire for meaning and purpose, share what also seems to be an innate desire for at least occasional experiences of transcendence, even ecstasy.

With all this in mind then, one way of putting this, as Old Shipper and therapist Rich Elliott has put it to me, is that an addict is at least sometimes a spiritual seeker knocking on the wrong door.

In the readings we heard this same thought, just put a little differently, which led Carl Jung to suggest that the basic “treatment” for an alcoholic is *spiritus contra spiritum* – in other words a spiritual life or spiritual experience to take the place of finding that flush of ecstasy and pleasure or at least relief from pain through spirits, alcohol... or other drugs.

Indeed, all the world’s spiritual traditions, at their mystical heart, name the deepest human desire as a desire for what can variously be named transcendence or awakening or enlightenment or union with god or ecstasy, higher states of consciousness.

Problem is (big problem) that mind-changing substances can give us a *taste* of such an experience... but actually closer to an *illusion* of such an experience. Only a taste, illusory at that – and for all too many addictive and that means destructive.

Another story: As many of you probably know, a group of professors at Harvard, along with others, were involved in some of the early experiments with psychedelic drugs, in particular LSD (which at the time was legal). Many recounted experiences that seemed to closely mirror accounts from the world’s religious traditions of spiritual or mystical experiences. So they wanted more! Who wouldn’t?

Well, some spiraled into continued use that ruined their lives. Others, like Ram Dass and Huston Smith, realized soon enough that there were spiritual paths that could provide the same experience, and even deeper, transformative meaning – without the devastating side-effects of continued drug use.

Jesus said, as we heard in the first reading, to ask and you shall receive... knock and the door shall be opened for you. But ask for what and knock on what door? Well, not too many verses earlier we are told that Jesus encouraged us to:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

What did he mean?

Well, I find that one of the most frequently quoted passages from the ancient Hindu *Upanishads* nicely illuminates Jesus’ words:

You are what your deep, driving desire is.  
As your desire is, so is your will.  
As your will is, so is your deed.  
As your deed is, so is your destiny.  
(*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, IV.4.5)

Again the question of “desire”. And I hear this passage as a clarion call to be attentive to what it is I find myself desiring... and then to ask if there is some deeper desire behind that desire... and then yet again if there is some yet deeper desire behind that one...

Where does this process take me? One way of putting it is, as I’ve been saying, that I (like everyone) desire to be happy. And no less a personage than the Dalai Lama says as much – all beings desire to be happy; I am in good company!

The question remains, wherein lies the deepest or most enduring happiness?

Elsewhere in the *Upanishads*, the question is asked this way: Do we seek passing pleasure or enduring happiness?

You see, there is nothing inherently wrong with pleasure – pleasure of family, social connections, intimate relationships, good food, literature, music, and so on. Yet we know sometimes from terrible experience that some pleasures can become destructive, even addictive – unhealthy relationships, unrestrained greed, too much food... substance abuse.

So... enduring happiness? One more level of “deep driving desire”: Meaning and transcendence. The meaning and sense of transcendence that comes from a life lived for purposes beyond individual ego satisfaction.

The meaning and transcendence found at those times when the boundary between me and thee softens, reminding us that we are deeply connected to one another and to life.

Meaning and transcendence which can come through the simple practice of *kindness*, the simple practice of *meditative attention*, the simple practice of *prayer*... for others, the simple practice of *mutual support* within a family, a circle of friends, a 12-step group... or a church.

All *this* is the treasure in heaven by whatever name – the heaven that is here and now once we pay attention – to the flower in bloom, to the deer by the side of the path, to the call of the cardinal or song sparrow, to one another, to opportunities to help and support one another, to open our hearts to one another.

I expect we have all knocked on wrong doors, some of us far more destructively to our spirit and our lives than others.

But the right doors, doors which will open to meaning, to transcendence, to connection, to community, to love... are there for the knocking.

And – very important – we can and must help one another to the thresholds of those doors (as Bill Wilson’s friend helped him; as Noah Levine’s father helped him). For the path to the door is often not an easy one, not at all. But walking together, supporting one another... then it is possible, then much is possible.

New life, abundant life, awaits.

So may it be. Amen.