

## **Me too: reflections on my summer in rehab**

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October 8, 2017

Grace, mercy and peace to you from the One who, above all else, desires your deepest well-being, and the deepest well-being of every created thing.

Hi. I'm Louise, and I am (among many other things) a compulsive overeater.

I spent 62 days of my summer at the Breathe Life Healing Center in Los Angeles, seeking help for my addiction to overeating.

I shared the summer with 30-or-so other people who came with a variety of addictions—to alcohol, to Adderall, to cocaine, to heroin, to crystal meth

Within the Breathe community, I lived in a small household with other folks also suffering from disordered eating - overeating, anorexia, bulimia.

We all arrived lost and broken people, in search of healing.

In Twelve-step meetings, which are the heart and soul of many recovery communities, when Joe introduces himself at a new AA meeting—"Hi, I'm Joe and I am an alcoholic"—everyone says to him, "Hi, Joe, welcome! "

When Judy stands up to share in an OA meeting, and says "Hi, I'm Judy, and I am a restricting bulimic," everyone says to her, "Hi Judy!"

The addiction/recovery community is a Me, too, place. When we say Hi, Joe, or Hi, Judy we say, I see you. You are welcome here. I acknowledge your struggle. I identify with you.

I miss this ritual of connection in my regular world. So let's try this again.

Hi, I'm Louise, and I am a compulsive overeater. ("Hi Louise!")

I've been sober, free of compulsive eating for 111 days. Or maybe 110. Things got kind of shaky last night when I was still writing at 11:45.

Addiction behaviors—using narcotics, alcohol, food, gambling, sex, shopping, exercise, computer games, overworking, violence, power, anger, or high-risk activities—addiction behaviors are adaptive behaviors coping strategies in the presence of overwhelming, difficult, painful circumstances and uncomfortable feelings.

It's no surprise that addictions have a large presence in marginalized communities, be they Native American, African American, Latino, or LGBTQ, where people face daily assaults on their basic humanity.

While nowadays doctors are being blamed for overprescribing opioid medicines, we need to remember that the opioid crisis mushroomed in the years since 2008, when the US economy bottomed out. Opioids have taken particular hold among poor and formerly middle class people who look at the new economic reality and understandably feel fear and hopelessness about their future.

We know that people who have had Adverse Childhood Experiences such as physical, emotional or sexual abuse are very much more likely to develop addictions than those who have not.

We living creatures have a powerful need to protect ourselves against our vulnerability, protect ourselves against what feels unbearable in ourselves or in the world around us.

I say - Be Slow to Condemn That Need.

Ziva, a warm and very funny Israeli woman who shared her story at an Overeater's Anonymous meeting in July, spoke of her gratefulness to her addiction, which began early in her life. My compulsive eating kept me alive, she said, in my difficult childhood and youth.

Yes! Praise be!

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And yet we know this: Every addictive support—however necessary—is still a sad and sorry substitute for being able to live a truly free and satisfying life.

When addiction is driving our bus, we travel into increasingly miserable self-imposed exile. The air in the bus is a suffocation of shame, fear, envy, bitterness, anger, sadness, helplessness, and despair.

While we might see people in other buses on the Highway to Exile, each bus carries just one person, and each one person feels profoundly, existentially ALONE. There is no happy ending to this bus ride.

The good news is that we don't need to stay on the bus!  
The challenging news is that getting off the bus requires a brave, brave bold, bold step from us.

Shortly after I got home from LA, a friend sent me a Thought for the Day which said, "You can't cross a chasm in two small leaps." This is right. Chasm . . . biiiiiiig leap.

The decision to step—or leap— off the addiction bus starts with admitting that our lives have become unmanageable, which is the first of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Here's Paul in Romans 7, sounding very much like a desperate addict as he writes:

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, and then I act another way, doing things I absolutely despise.

I need something more than the law! For if I know the law, but still can't keep it, and the power of [my addiction] keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help!

I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. Something has gone wrong within me and gets the better of me every time.

In January I took part in a therapy retreat weekend with Kathleen Murphy, who is a guru in the world of psychodrama, and is the clinical director and co-founder of the Breathe Life Healing Center. Between sessions on Saturday of that retreat, I said to Kathleen, "I am eating myself to death. I don't know what to do."

And Kathleen said, "You should consider coming to Breathe for residential treatment."

And my so-weary self said, "Pfff. Like that's going to happen."

But my spirit was listening. There was hope for me, even if the form it was offered in seemed way unlikely.

By the beginning of May, I was pretty much drowning in depression and anxiety, and soothing myself heedlessly with food. I said to myself, "Friend, if nothing changes here, nothing will change."

I called Jeff, an admissions counselor at Breathe Life and said, "Tell me what it would take for me to come to treatment. I can't go on living this way."

And this was Step Two, which in the 12-step tradition says "We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

Doors opened — I was offered a generous scholarship which covered a large chunk of the expenses of residential living. CMCL and Everence provided funds to cover the cost of my flights to and from California. I was granted leave from my job. I assembled a team to care for my house and my dog Sadi—Team Sadie. A friend offered to collect mail and pay my bills. My mother wrote out a really big check to cover the rest of the expenses of the summer. My community here coalesced around me with promises of prayer and support.

On Sunday afternoon, June 18th, my airplane touched down at LAX. I had taken the leap.

My Uber to the Breathe campus was a Black Lincoln with tinted windows and leather seats. The driver was taciturn behind his sunglasses, and texted while he drove. I texted several friends back home and said, “I may have been picked up by the Mafia.” I also texted Jeff, the admissions guy who sent a smiley face and said, “Welcome to Hollywood.” I was delivered to Jovenita Canyon Drive. The locked gates of the Breathe campus swung open, and then closed, and I was in rehab.

Several weeks ago, Susan asked the children to imagine what the children of Israel might have been thinking as they got to the edge of the Red Sea with Pharoah’s murderous army galloping closer and closer toward them. What might they need now? A boat, someone suggested.

I loved that answer, especially because during the summer I had come to regard my rehab community at Breathe as a lifeboat.

Walking through the gates of an addiction rehab, stepping into a lifeboat, these are both acts of surrender.

Which is what Step Three of the 12 steps is about: We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

So having turned myself over, God, in the form of a mentor named Patty, invited me into an office, and asked me also to turn over my credit cards, my cash, my ID and my phone, and then took me to the room where I’d be staying. There she sifted through all of my belongings looking for anything I wasn’t allowed to have. The only things she confiscated were my Tic Tacs and my deodorant.

Who knew —I didn't—that deodorant has alcohol in it, and that an addicted person might be so desperate that they would ingest deodorant, or hand sanitizer or even hair conditioner for the traces of alcohol in them. My deodorant went into a locked box. I would need to ask to use it each morning.

Then I set about figuring out how to live in a lifeboat community.

Here's an interesting aspect of rehab life. Every piece of mail I received had to be opened in the presence of a staff person, just in case someone had sent me money or other contraband. I actually set records at Breathe—nobody could remember anyone who had gotten as many cards and letters as I did. And . . . every one of those cards and letters were peered into by mentors. It became a joke with us. "Here's a letter from my 90-year-old mother. Think she sent me drugs this time?"

At one level, the rehab lifeboat is a place of respite, of rest. You leave televisions and radios and computers outside the gates along with all your customary connections.

About a month in, I realized that the giant knot of anxiety I'd been carrying since the Republican convention had relaxed.

At another level, the lifeboat is a place of sustenance and support. Friendships form quickly. We're on the open ocean together, and we need each other to get through this.

At yet another level, the rehab lifeboat is where we address what Paul names: Something has gone wrong within us, and gets the better of us every time.

People with addictions all have damaged instincts of one kind or another. We don't trust easily. We've needed to figure out our own ways to feel safe in the world.

For one person, feeling safe means to be invisible, to not use up space.

For another, feeling safe means monitoring her environment like a Border Collie on perpetual duty, watching for threats, herding everyone and trying to manage their behavior.

For another, feeling safe means filling up every particle of shared space with TALK, creating a barrier nobody can get through.

For another, feeling safe means getting out of the room, going it alone.

For another, feeling safe requires overpowering everyone, dominating, being loud.

For another showing gentleness and willingness to be on this healing team feel like death.

For each one, feeling safe means hiding our vulnerability.

The lifeboat is often a messy, loud, uncomfortable place, where strong personalities bump against each other. Conflicts rise quickly. We see ourselves acting in appalling ways. Some people can't take it, and they jump off. Some people disappear into themselves. Some people throw shrill tantrums about how stupid the Breathe staff are, and how inadequate the program is.

One day at clinic, Kathleen Murphy said, living in rehab is living in a laboratory. Everyone here is a mirror for each other. Every trigger from another person is information for you about how you live in the world. Every uncomfortable experience is something to learn from.

With a mentor or a therapist or a process group around every corner, life in the laboratory, the rehab, the lifeboat, is a rare and precious opportunity— everyone is supported as we learn to be vulnerable, to take stock of the way we've been living, and start to imagine changes.

The work of the lifeboat community is this —to make and hold safe space for each other, as we practice trying out new ways to live and interact, loving each other until we can love ourselves.

There's no sinking this lifeboat, because it's the property of the Great Loving Heart, the one who, above all else, desires the deep well-being of everyone who agrees to get on it.

If I bring you anything from my summer in rehab, it is the wish that we could live more deliberately together, acknowledge our struggles more, make more safe space for each other's vulnerability.

I want to live all my days in the lifeboat, feeling that I belong with my whole authentic and imperfect self, inviting others who feel lost to come into this vessel where authentic and imperfect selves are welcome, where we are all moving toward the wholeness God intends for us.

And all God's people, or at least the ones who wanted to, said, [holding up sign] "ME TOO!"

