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Affluence, Addiction, and Recovery

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America has a long fascination with the rise and fall (and resurrection) of some of her most affluent and celebrated citizens. The roles of addiction and recovery in such falls and resurrections are an enduring theme in American cultural history. Famed personalities galvanized nineteenth century temperance audiences and that process continued with twentieth century writers (Willie Seabrook, Elmore Leonard, Stephen King), singers and musicians (Billie Holiday, Dorothy Dandridge, Grace Slick, Elton John, Eric Clapton), actors (Lillian Roth, Mercedes McCambridge, Jason Robards, Samuel Jackson), comedians (Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams), sports figures (Don Newcombe, Bob Welch, Brett Favre), prominent professionals (Dr. LeClair Bissell, Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick, Dr. Marv Seppala), political leaders (Harold Hughes, Wilbur Mills, Paul Wellstone, Jim Ramstad, Patrick Kennedy), business leaders (Peter Jaquith, James Abernathy, Walter Yetnikoff), scientists (astronaut Buzz Aldrin), and media personalities (Rush Limbaugh). At present, the public is regularly greeted with announcements of celebrities entering or re-entering “rehab” following highly publicized

indiscretions. And of course, there is the new generation of “high end” treatment programs that cater to the “rich and famous.”

These modern addiction and recovery narratives are also family narratives. The last seven presidents of the United States experienced addiction within their immediate families: Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush (George H.W.), Clinton, Bush (George W.), and Obama. Both 2008 presidential candidates talked candidly about the alcohol problems of their fathers. The published accounts of Betty Ford, Joan Kennedy, Billy Carter, Kitty Dukakis, Terry McGovern, and, most recently, Christopher Kennedy Lawford offer convincing testimony on addiction’s reach into the most politically prominent families in America.

A series of recent works have disclosed the details of these narratives. Beyond the innumerable personal/family biographies are a series of “trade books” that brought many addiction/recovery stories of prominent people to public light. These include Wholey’s *The Courage to Change* (1984) and Stromberg & Merrill’s *The Harder They Fall* (2005). Texts written for professional helpers in this area include

Bissell and Haberman's classic treatise *Alcoholism in the Professions* (1984) and Stimmel's *Alcoholism and Drug Abuse in the Affluent* (1984). Two new texts have been added to this body of literature.

The first of these new sources is Gary Stromberg and Jane Merrill's *Second Chances: Top Executives Share Their Stories of Addiction and Recovery* (2009, New York, McGraw Hill, 216 pages, \$15.95). *Second Chances* contains the personal addiction and recovery narratives of sixteen prominent individuals—mostly from the business world. Three of the narratives are of individuals whose names are well known to many in the addictions field: William Cope Moyers, Johnny Allem, and Dr. Marv Sepalla. Each narrative is preceded by a brief biography prepared by the editors. The strength of this book is in the narratives themselves. This is not a book of studies; it is a book of stories, and the stories contain some striking themes. The stories vividly illustrate the incredible diversity of personalities and personal circumstances from which addiction can flow. Equally diverse are the experiences that sparked recovery initiation. The varied styles of recovery maintenance are also depicted. But most striking in these stories is the degree to which people recovering from addiction can get better than well. What the *Second Chance* stories portray are lives of people for whom addiction recovery was far more than the removal of alcohol and drugs from an otherwise unchanged life. These are stories of people who transcended their addictions and went on to achieve lives of deep meaning and social contribution, not in spite of their addiction, but from the strength they drew from their recovery experiences. Anything this book lacks in broad conclusions about affluent recovery is more than made up for by the inspiration that can be drawn from it. It is hoped that a future book will similarly profile such transformative change in the lives of people completely lacking privilege and resources. Those stories of long-term recovery rarely come to public or professional attention, and are needed to confirm that those profiled in *Second Chances* are not the morally

enlightened exceptions to the cultural adage, "Once an addict, always an addict" that continues to wound people across social classes.

The second new resource is Sarah Allen Benton's *Understanding the High-Functioning Alcoholic* (2009, Westport, CT, Praeger, 205 pages, \$39.95). Benton mixes highlights of scientific studies, professional case studies, and excerpted journal accounts of her own addiction and recovery to illuminate the oft-hidden phenomenon of people whose dependence upon alcohol is masked by an exceptionally high degree of professional and social competence. Benton's well-written text contains 10 chapters—six depicting the addiction processes of high-functioning individuals and four describing their subsequent recovery processes. Separating Benton's text from others is the excerpts from her journals that depict, over a prolonged period of time, her own addiction and recovery journey. At times far more riveting and revealing than the general information she reviews, these excerpts offer deep insights into patterns of addiction and recovery that are rarely exposed. Of the two books reviewed, this one is particularly recommended for those involved in the treatment of affluent individuals and their family members.

The primary barrier that addicted high-functioning individuals encounter is a public/professional image of the addict that looks nothing like their own lives. Books like *Second Chances* and *Understanding the High-Functioning Alcoholic* do service by challenging such caricatures and revealing the true extent to which addiction and recovery are issues for all—regardless of privilege or the lack of it.

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