

Beyond Addiction: The will to change

by William_Moyers

It seems as if people will do just about anything to garner attention, fame or fortune. But those weren't Aron Lee Ralston's goals when he sawed off his hand with a makeshift multi-tool after becoming pinned by a boulder in the backcountry of Utah six years ago. All he wanted to do was live.

His true grit has made him a celebrity, a best-selling author and a motivational speaker. In *The New York Times* recently, Ralston said the experience has changed him. "It was a blessing in a way," he said. "It made me think about the way I was living."

Ralston's case is a prime example of the opportunity that comes from adversity. By cutting off his hand, he changed his whole life. Courage can't be quantified. Ralston deserves everything he's got today.

But his story is not unique, though it isn't often that people resort to chopping off limbs to free themselves of what otherwise might kill them. I know scores of people who, like Ralston, faced adversity and were desperate to live — who were pinned down by circumstances unforeseen and unjustified, who made it because they had the courage to cut off those parts of themselves that held them back from the freedom of life.

They're called addicts and alcoholics who have embraced recovery. And like Ralston, they survive day after day only because at the moment of their deepest crises, at the bottom, they discovered the strength to reach deep into themselves to tap a superhuman ability to make tough choices. By giving away parts of themselves, they've been restored. They survive.

But you won't read about them in the newspaper or online. They don't garner five-figure fees for speeches or write books that are bought by millions of people. Heck, rarely do they even seek public attention. Yet I believe it is time for people in recovery to stand up and speak out and for the public to pay attention.

Ralston made a conscious choice to hike in the Utah wilderness alone without telling anybody where he was. And while a few critics call him a "heedless fool" for not weighing the life-threatening risks of his deliberate choices, to most of us he is a genuine hero, somebody we admire.

Addicts and alcoholics made conscious choices, too — to drink or take drugs, usually without telling anybody. Their critics call them "bad" or "evil" or "weak-willed" and wage a "war on drugs" against them. Nobody admires them or calls them heroes.

Why? Because while Ralston was ready to tell his story — even admitting his foolishness — people in recovery remain invisible or silently anonymous or in the shadows of addiction's stigma, preferring to share their stories only among themselves, usually in 12-step meetings. The result is that the public cannot grasp the indiscriminate power of addiction or what it takes in terms of sacrifice, personal responsibility and hard work on the parts of addicts and alcoholics to make recovery a reality by changing their entire lives. How can people admire or be inspired by what they can't see?

Every day in this country, addicts and alcoholics make decisions to cut off essential components of their existences: the alcohol or other drugs that defined their lives. Like Ralston, they don't do it to become heroes or make money or sell books. They do it simply because they want to live. What they give up in those moments comes back to them in what they gain from the rest of their lives. It is a lesson too many others who struggle with addiction have yet to realize because nobody has told them.

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