

Bridging a Spiritual Disconnect to Say “No” to Heroin

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Good morning, thank you all for having me. George, thank you for such a nice introduction. When you hear part of my story, you’re going to wonder how he ever said such nice things about me. I want to thank the Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law for hosting such a tremendous event, an event that obviously I have a great interest in: opiate addiction. I want to thank Rachel Barenie for organizing such a tremendous event. I am so glad this epidemic is getting the attention it deserves, because opiate addiction is a different animal.

Opiate addiction is not a disease you can take a day off from. Opiate addiction is a disease in which, every day, the addict wakes up, saying, “What do I have to do today to feed my addiction before I feed myself, before I feed my family, before I go to work? Before I do anything else, I will feed my addiction today.” That is why I am so overcome with gratitude to stand before you today to say that, if I make it to March 23 of this month, it will have been 17 years since I used drugs.

[APPLAUSE]

And that is simply by God’s grace. I came to be in recovery by finally surrendering to my disease, to the hopelessness and the futility

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of the life I was living and to taking direction from good people in recovery, working the Steps, and, most importantly, by continuing all of that by trying to help others. So it is not unusual for me to stand in front of a group of people and talk about my addiction and my recovery. Normally those rooms have a sign on the door, and the last word is “Anonymous,” so this is a little bit different venue. Please forgive me if I am a little nervous. I may ramble a bit. I will try not to. When George asked me to do this, I was so excited. And then I woke up today, and I thought, “What on Earth was I thinking?” I am a practicing attorney, and I dreamed that, one day, I would stand here at my alma mater, talking about a landmark decision that I had won in the Supreme Court. Instead, I am here today to talk about my heroin addiction. I could not be more grateful for the opportunity.

So I want to talk about what happened to me to get me to the point where I would say “yes” to heroin in the first place. I think that is the most important thing. You know, heroin is not a social drug. It is not a recreational drug. It is not something when you are out having drinks with your friends at the bar, you know, and they say, “Hey, let’s go to this place for another drink,” and you say, “no, let’s all go get heroin.” It doesn’t work that way. Something must happen to make the individual susceptible to saying “yes” to such a god-awful drug. I want to talk about what happened to me to get me to that point, a little bit of what it was like when I was in my addiction, what it has been like since, and what it is like today.

I am not a scholar on this topic. All I have is my experience. I do not know whether I was predisposed, if I had an addictive personality, if it was hereditary. But I know that what happened to me to get me to the point of saying “yes” to heroin the first time was a slow process. It was a spiritual disconnect. I believe that addiction is a three-fold disease: spiritual, bodily, and mental. I believe mine started with the spiritual disconnect to get me to a point to where I could say “yes.”

I grew up here in Memphis. When I was 8 years old, I was told that my mother was very ill, and that she was going to die. My mother and I were very close. I was born on my mother’s birthday. I was a mama’s boy, and I am to this day. When I learned this, I did not want to accept it, and I asked people in my family about it. I said, “There has to be something that can be done.” And what good-meaning members of my family told me—and I do not know that this is exactly

what they said—but what I heard was, “If you pray hard enough, God will spare your mother.” That was the message that I got. I do not think they said it in those terms, but that was the message that I got from what they said to me.

I prayed as hard as any 8-year-old little boy could pray for his mother. When I was 9, my mother passed away. I went to those family members, and I went to my preacher, and I said, “What happened? Because I prayed like you told me to.” And again, I do not know that this is what was said, but what I took away from it, and what I heard was, “God needed your mother more than you did.” That was an answer that I did not accept. That, I think, was the start of my disconnect from any belief in God, which led me down a path to where, years later, I could be in a position to say “yes” to heroin.

I started getting in trouble in school, acting out. My father was doing the best he could to raise my sister and me. He just did not have the tools to do it as well as my mother did, so I was left alone a lot. I ran with a rough crowd. And by the time I had started the ninth grade, the school system had just said, “You should go learn a trade. Do something else . . . just don’t come back here.” Eighth grade was the last grade that I completed.

I started working odd jobs at 14. And then, when I was 18, I had this epiphany because I was dating a girl that wanted to get married, and she said, “You really don’t have anything on the ball. You’re going to have to get something going before we get married.” I had this good friend, who is not a drug addict or an alcoholic, and he has been there with me the whole time, and he was an inspiration to me. At this point, I was drinking, I was smoking pot, I was doing drugs like that on a daily basis already at this point. But he encouraged me to go get my GED and to get into school, and I did that. I got my GED. I got into school at Southwest.¹ It was called “State Tech” at the time.

Then, in 1991, Desert Shield² started. Desert Shield was, if you remember, when the president told Saddam Hussein, “You have until January 15 to get out of Kuwait.” My father was an officer in the Marine Corps, so I kind of came out of this cloud, and I said, “I want

1. See generally SW. TENN. COMM. COLL., <http://www.southwest.tn.edu/> (last visited Dec. 1, 2018).

2. Cf. Jim Garamone, *Marking 20 Years Since Operation Desert Shield*, U.S. DEP’T OF DEFENSE (Aug. 7, 2010), <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=103010>.

to do something with my life. I'm going to join the Marine Corps." So I joined the Marine Corps. I remember my dad was taking me to the airport, and I was so excited. I was telling him, "Dad, I'm going learn to fire a weapon, do the obstacle course." But I looked, and my dad was crying. I said, "Pa, what are you crying for?"

He said, "Son, you're in for a rude awakening."

And I was: 13 weeks at Paris Island. But the Marine Corps did what it was supposed to do. It straightened me out.

I came home to the Reserves, applied to the University of Memphis, and got into school. I was making great grades. I was not drinking or doing any drugs. I was walking the straight-and-narrow. Then, I decided to pledge a fraternity. I went to the fraternity house on a night when they were having a party when I was wanting to become a pledge. I walked in, and my clothes did not look like what everybody else was wearing. My hair was cut way too short. I felt out of place.

I saw a keg in the corner, and I knew immediately: I said to myself, "Drink as much as you can as quickly as you can, and this fear will go away." And that's exactly what happened. I drank as much as I could, as quickly as I could, and the fear went away. That is what drugs and alcohol had always done for me, and that is why I turned to them from a young age. After my mother died, I felt very different. I had a lot of anger. I had a lot of pain. What made those feelings go away was drugs and alcohol. Over the course of a semester, I went from becoming a weekend drinker to a nightly drinker to a morning drinker pretty quickly. Needless to say, I did not do well in school. I flunked out after a few semesters.

I did learn a trade in school because I had lost a lot of money in sports betting. So I decided that I should be the guy that everybody pays their money to instead, so I became a bookie in college. That was how I supported myself for a while. But, of course, I could not manage that money, either, and it was all soon gone. Eventually, players actually win, and they want their bets paid because they have paid you all year. I did not have the money to pay, so I got run out of the booking business.

My life was now in shambles. I had gotten a DUI by then. I could not keep a job. I could not keep a place to live. I was depressed. And I was 25 years old the first time I used heroin.

It was about 12:30 at night at a bar. I was with a girl whom I had met. She had used heroin before, she was experienced with it. I

did not know where to buy it or how much it cost. I did not know how to "do" it. She knew all of these things, and that is how I said "yes." That is how I got to the point of saying "yes." It was years of alcoholism, coupled with a spiritual disconnect. I was at a point where I could say, "yes." And I did.

I spent the next 5 years using heroin daily. At first, it was such a sense of relief. The first times I would do heroin, in the beginning, I would use it, and it would feel like sinking into a warm tub. The fears and all the failures I was facing in life would just drift away. It was all gone. At first, I used it daily but I would only use it once daily. Then, it got to where I would wake up in the morning, and I would need it in the morning. And then it got to where I could not make it to lunch without using again. Pretty soon, I had about a \$120-per-day habit, which is hard to support when you have no visible means of income.

I did not know how to get clean. I did not know what to do, but I knew I could not go on the way I was going. I heard about this thing called a "methadone clinic." I went to the methadone clinic and got signed up there. And I found out that methadone treatment was a poor substitute for addiction. It was just another addiction.

I also heard about medical detox. The most traumatic part, or one of the most traumatic parts of addiction for me, was the physical withdrawals that would occur when I would try to stop. I tried to stop on my own. I woke up several days with a firm resolve that "I will not use today," and that resolve would quickly go away, easily overcome by the pain of physical addiction, physical withdrawals. So I started showing up at treatment centers. I went to treatment once, the first time, and they detoxed me, a 7-day detox. On the seventh day, the doctor sat me down and he asked, "How do you feel?"

I said, "I feel great."

He asked, "Do you feel well enough to go home?"

And I said, "Absolutely." The reason I felt well enough to go home was because I had made arrangements in treatment.

See, I went to treatment because I did not have any place to live, a job, any money, or anybody who would really even talk to me. But in treatment, my job said they would hire me back (because I was in treatment), my sister said, "you can come live with me," and my dad said, "I'm going to give you a little money to help you get back on your feet." So, yes, I was ready to leave treatment.

And I left treatment. I remember sitting in front of that doctor before I left, and he said, “what are you going to do when you leave?” And I said, “I’m going to go home, I’m going to call my sponsor, and I’m going to go to a meeting.” That was what I told him, but I did none of those things.

I went home, I waited until my sister fell asleep, I took her car, and I used heroin. The insanity of it was that I said, “I am just going to use this one time.” That would become a pattern in my life. “I will use just this one time, just to get some relief.” So I used, and, by the next day, the sickness had started all over. My employer decided, “whatever was supposed to happen to you in treatment did not happen, we’re going to send you back.” So I went back to treatment, and this time I stayed for 4 days. I got out, and, a month later, I was back there again. My job said, “whatever you’re going to do in life, you’re not going to do it here.”

The third time in treatment, I was sitting in front of that doctor with a blanket wrapped around me, freezing cold and sweating, sick to my stomach. He looked at me and asked, “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Detox me,” I said.

“That’s the easy part,” he said. “What are you going to do after that?”

I said, “I don’t know.”

“Why do you think you keep coming back here?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Then he said, “Maybe it’s because you suffer from a disease that’s cunning, baffling and powerful.” He was the first person to tell me that I had a disease.

See, another thing that comes with addiction is that, when you do not know that you suffer from this disease, your symptoms aggravate other people, right? Cancer patients—we do not get mad at cancer patients because we have to drive them to chemo, or heart patients because they have to take medicine, right? But drug addicts steal. Drug addicts hurt those around them, so their symptoms are harder to deal with. With that comes shame, because I never wanted to hurt the people I love. I did not want to embarrass the people I worked for. I did not want to be homeless or beg for food and a place to sleep. These are not things that I aspired to do, yet here I was, doing these things. I had all this guilt and shame. And this Doctor told me

that it was not because I was a bad person, or because I had no morals. It was because I had a disease and a compulsion. Like I said at the beginning, that compulsion would tell me every day, “you’re going to feed me before you do anything else, and you’ll do whatever it takes to feed me before you do anything else.” For years, I thought there was no way out. It is insanity, the insane decision, time and time again, that, “if I use today, it will be different today.”

I wound up going through seven treatment centers. I actually overdosed at the fifth one. That is hard to do, but I managed to do it. The treatment center told me that they would not accept me until I was showing visible signs of withdrawal, and I had drugs on me that I planned to use before I went into treatment. So I waited it out. In one of the most gutsy displays of self-control I have ever had in my life, I actually sat there with drugs in my pocket and allowed myself to get sick. Once I got sick, they admitted me, and I went upstairs and used. I woke up 3 days later in ICU.

The seventh treatment center was a place in Memphis called “Harbor House.”³ I called, and they told me I could come in. They said, “Just so you know, we have no medical detox. We have a place for you to lay and ‘kick,’⁴ but you will get nothing here.” Apparently, that was exactly what I needed, so I went to Harbor House on March 22, 2001.

I showed up, and they let me in. By noon, I was deeply regretting my situation. But I had a new set of circumstances, and that was that I was out of ideas. I could not come up with a way to leave that treatment center, and I had left treatment before with nothing. I left one treatment center with sixty cents in my pocket—no place to go, no one to talk to, and I was high within two hours. But I had none of that this time. I had given up. That was my start.

3. See generally HARBOR HOUSE, <http://www.harborhousememphis.org/> (last visited Dec. 1, 2018).

4. “Kicking” is a slang term that refers to attempting to quit using heroin “cold turkey,” without a sedative or use of other tapering substance, often resulting in severe withdrawal symptoms. *The Distinction of Going Cold Turkey over Tapering Off Drugs*, SUNRISE HOUSE, <https://sunrisehouse.com/detox-process/cold-turkey-tapering-off-drugs/> (last visited Dec. 1, 2018); *Kicking*, URBAN DICTIONARY, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=kicking> (last visited Dec. 1, 2018).

I had a wonderful counselor in Harbor House who was a recovering heroin addict, and he was very encouraging. They had speakers come in, kind of like I am doing today, they had speakers come in every day and talk about their struggles. I started to believe that, *if that person can do it, why can't I do it?* And at some point, it became, *if that person can do it, I can do it.*

I started working the Steps. I took a written fearless and moral inventory. I admitted my faults to my sponsor. Then, in what I think was the most critical step, I started making amends to those people that I harmed. I sat in front of family members and apologized. I paid back the money I had taken. I did everything I could in my power on that list to make amends to all the people that I had harmed when I had written that list. And my life took a tremendous turn.

I started doing exceptionally well. I was in the car business, and I became a manager. I went to Boston to run some dealerships for somebody that I knew from Memphis who had bought a lot of dealerships. I was single, sober, clean, and living in this wonderful city and running these beautiful stores. But I got homesick, so I came home. I got a job with a great organization here, and I was doing well. I met the girl of my dreams shortly after, and we got married. We fell in love, got married, and got pregnant, as I like to say. Those three things happened, not necessarily in that order.

[LAUGHTER]

But all of those things happened, and I was sponsoring several people, helping other people get sober and clean. It was a tremendous part of my life. The prejudices I had developed against God were removed by working the Steps. I had built this new relationship with my Creator, and I know that was what was keeping me sober.

I always wondered what could happen to make me, as we say, “go back out” and use again. My sponsor used to tell me, “there is nothing *out there* that can *make* you do it, it's *in here*. It's always an internal decision.” Unfortunately, I had the experience of finding out that nothing *out there* can make an addict use, because I have experienced the worst pain in my life, sober and clean, and I did not think of using then.

My wife and I had been married, and she was pregnant. We found out that she was pregnant with twins, and that they were boys.

So, guys, you know you are going to have twin boys, right? It is very exciting, I was very excited. Then, in early July 2005, she went into labor at 23 weeks. We took her to the hospital, and the doctor told me, "Your wife is four centimeters dilated—she's going to give birth to these twins tonight, and they're not going to survive."

And I thought, "You don't know my God."

I was so brazen to think that. The old definition of "God" that I had as a child, that He was a wish granter, came back into my head. I thought that, because I had done so well, and because I was helping so many people, losing my twin boys would not happen to me.

The doctors were able to hold off labor for about nine days, and then my wife gave birth to our twins, Ethan Joseph and Evan James. Evan lived for 19 days in the NICU unit, and Ethan lived 25 days. One of the decisions that I was able to make in sobriety—and I was clean, and I am so grateful that I was able to make this decision—on Ethan's twenty-fourth day of life, we were standing in the NICU unit, talking to a very caring doctor who was trying to tell me what we were not going to accept: Ethan was not going to survive. I pulled her aside and I said, "You're going to tell me in no uncertain terms"—

Let me go back just a minute. When our twins were in the NICU unit, they had separated them, and I thought they should be together. I was too afraid to tell the doctors to put them together, so I did not say anything. I do not know what difference that would have made, but I wanted to tell them to do it, and I did not.

So, now, we are standing with this doctor, and she tells me that Ethan is not going to make it. I said, "You're going to have to tell me, because I'm not strong enough to do it alone."

She said, "Let's wait the night." We came in the next morning, and she said "It's time."

And I was able to say, "Unhook him from everything, and hand him to me," and I was able to hold him. Because I was I was not off somewhere using drugs, I was able to be there with my wife, and I was able to experience that. Not once did I think about using drugs during that whole ordeal. It did not come to me. That is how strong God's grace was.

But I have had to spend some time since then developing a new relationship with God, because I slipped back into this relationship of, "Well, if I do good, God will do good for me, and I will not experience these terrible things if I just do this." I can tell you today that this is

not my definition of “God” anymore. God never failed me during those times; what failed me was my definition of “God.” So I have spent some time doing some things to rebuild that.

Now, throughout sobriety and throughout being clean, I have had the privilege of working with a lot of young men, and a lot of older men, and seeing a lot of them recreate their lives. If any of you know somebody who is suffering from addiction, or, God forbid, if any of you are ever faced with addiction, I want you to know two things that I never knew back then.

Number one is, you do not have to use again, you never have to use again. There is a way out.

And number two is, you are not alone. There are people in this community that want to help, and all you have to do is pick up the phone and someone will help you. There are people that want to help you.

I want to close with this. My dream was always to be a lawyer. It was all I ever wanted to be. After I failed out of school, I said to myself, “That’s just one of those dreams I’ll never get to do.” I married this wonderful woman, and she went back and finished her undergraduate degree. I remember sitting at her graduation, watching, and thinking, “That’s so wonderful, I wish I could have done that.” And then one of my best friends went back to law school, and I watched her graduate from law school, and I thought, “That’s so wonderful, I wish I could have done that.” Then, my wife got her master’s degree, same thing. The reason I could not go back to school was because, now, I had a family, right? I was making a good living, I was kind of stuck. 2008 fixed all of that, right? The economy, I had no excuses after 2008.

So I went back to the University of Memphis and re-applied. I did not know how many credits I had, or whether they would let me back in. They said, “You have to go to Southwest and finish this algebra course before we can accept you.”

I said, “That’s fine, I’ll do that.” I asked, “how many credits do I have?”

The admissions counselor said, “You have 44.”

I said, “That’s great, I didn’t think I had that many.”

He said, “The problem is that you’ve attempted 120.”

I wondered, “How am I ever going to get my GPA up high enough to get into law school?”

And then someone told me, “You can do an addendum to your law school application.” So that was what I did. I wrote an addendum that said, “I know my GPA’s not very high, but look at my grades from Spring 2009 forward, and I think that will give you a better indication of who I am today.”

I was waitlisted to get into the Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law. I would call Dean McClellan⁵ and say, “If you let me in, I will make you proud.”

And she would say, “We’ll let you know, we’ll let you know.”

The day finally came that she called me and said, “This is the call you’ve been waiting for,” and she let me into law school. Listen, I used to drive by the law school while my application was pending and just look at the building.

[LAUGHTER]

I wanted to get into law school so badly. I wanted to be a lawyer, and, because I got clean, I am a lawyer today. I have a beautiful family. I would be remiss to not tell you that, since we lost Evan and Ethan, my wife and I have had two wonderful boys who are healthy and buck wild. I have been blessed with these two boys.

And I have been blessed with a wonderful career at the absolute greatest law firm there could be for me. When I was doing my applications for OCIs⁶ and submitting my résumé, a girl I studied with in law school looked at mine, and she saw that I said at the bottom that I was in recovery.

She asked, “Are you sure you want to say that?”

And I asked, “Why wouldn’t I?”

She said, “Well, you know, there is stigma about addiction, and people could get the wrong impression.”

And I said, “Listen, any law firm that does not accept me for who I am, I would not want to work for anyway.”

5. Sue Ann McClellan, Ed.D., Assistant Dean for Admissions, Recruitment, and Scholarships. Cecil C. Humphreys Sch. of Law, *Administration & Staff*, UNIV. OF MEM., <https://www.memphis.edu/law/about/lawadministration.php> (last visited Dec. 1, 2018).

6. Cecil C. Humphreys Sch. of Law Career Servs. Office, Cecil C. Humphreys Sch. of Law, *On Campus Interviews*, UNIV. OF MEM., <https://www.memphis.edu/law/career-services/oci.php> (last visited Dec. 1, 2018).

I submitted my résumé, and an attorney emailed me two days later, one with whom I did not interview. I did not know she worked there, but we knew each other from being in recovery, and she welcomed me immediately. So I have had no problems with stigma about my addiction.

Every day that I walk into court, and a bailiff says, “Good morning, counselor,” I feel my chest stick out. I love doing what I do. We do a lot of important work, but the most important work for me is when I am in criminal court arguing on behalf of drug addicts. I have clients who have committed crimes that they otherwise would not have committed if they were not trying to feed an addiction. I have found that judges listen, because they know what people are going through.

The greatest accomplishment I have had as a lawyer was arguing for a suspended sentence to put a client into treatment instead of jail. The judge did not fully grant it, but he did not deny it either. He said, “I’m going to let him spend 90 more days in jail, and, if he’s done these things between now then, I’ll let him out into treatment.” And the judge granted that. My client did what he was supposed to do, he has been to treatment, and he is doing well.

I wake up every day and remind myself, through prayer, of who and what I am. I know two things to be certain: that I never have to use again, and that, if I do use, I have no expectation that it will be different than it was before. All the things I have been blessed with, all that has been created, will be taken away from me.

Thank you all for having me.

[STANDING OVATION]