

The Story of a Woman Who Achieved Over a Decade of Abstinence from Crack Cocaine and Rose from the Bottom: In Her Own Voice

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Abstract

This article is based in an e-mail letter I sent to Dr. Barbara Wallace several years ago after coming across an article that she wrote when conducting research for an undergraduate course at Trent University when I was a student there (2009-2012). In response to my e-mail letter, Dr. Wallace invited me to contribute my letter so it would appear within this journal's special theme issue on crack cocaine. The letter contributes to the special theme issue the story of a woman who successfully achieved abstinence from crack cocaine. I included in the letter a sample of my writing when I was a homeless crack addict living on the streets, capturing my voice from the "bottom." My hope for this letter is that somewhere in all that raw truth another soul will find hope, or another person in a place of power will realize their responsibility to keep an open mind and know that miracles can and do happen all the time—especially if nurtured by a system that promotes equality.

Keywords: crack cocaine, recovery, homelessness

After Achieving Abstinence: January 2011 E-Mail Letter to Dr. Barbara Wallace

Dear Dr. Wallace,

I realize that you are very busy but I am a recovered crack addict and I need to thank you for your work on health equality. I came across your article while doing research for a physiological psychology course. I would like to give you some background on my life so that you may understand how important people like you are to people like me. I want you to know that your work does reach the individual and that I am grateful. Your article gave me hope. I have a saying that I use when trying to make people accept that drug addicts, especially crack addicts are worthy of help. "Crack-heads are people too." It's a simple statement but when I say it everyone laughs. They laugh because they recognize the idea that crack-heads are beyond help. Your article talks about needing more specialized care and longer term treatment for crack addicts and I agree.

We are the extremists of the addiction world and need extreme treatments.

I tried smoking my first cigarette when my mom left one burning in the ashtray when I was three. When I was 5 years old, I ate spiked strawberries from a Christmas punch at a family gathering, then stole a glass of the punch and hid so I could drink it. My need to self-medicate continued through my teen years which were spent in group homes, mental health facilities, and emergency wards until I was released from Children's Aid at age 16. I was misdiagnosed and over-medicated with psycho- I

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active drugs for many years, as the system did not recognize child addiction. I ran away a lot. I spent a lot of time living in the streets of Toronto. I did my first line of cocaine when I was 11 and free-based it from a pop can when I was 13. I thought of myself as a drinker and never knew that I would become a crack addict by the time I was 28 years old.

I had many opportunities to take cocaine intravenously but never tried it until I was 27. Once I did this, I knew I would never be a drunk again. In my sick mind, I was pleased that I had finally found something that made me happy. I had never known anything but addiction so this thinking seemed normal. Until then, I made my living growing and selling marijuana. I turned my home into a crack house and became a small time crack dealer instead. I used approximately \$1000.00 worth of crack and powder each night and began to seize on a regular basis. I lost my son and my dogs, and the sheriffs took my rental house. I had stopped paying rent so my landlord broke into my house, saw its state and called the police. I was arrested for operating a “grow house” (cannabis) which didn’t stick, because with a habit like mine, I had let all the plants die. Most of the equipment had been sold for crack—approximately \$10,000 worth—so there wasn’t much to arrest me for. I remember being disappointed that they did not give me food before letting me out of jail. I was 87 pounds. The two female officers who searched me were disgusted. One hated me and the other was simply disgusted by my emaciation.

I found myself on the streets again at 30 years of age with nothing but a bag and a bottle of wine—which I didn’t want because it could do nothing for me anymore. I snuck into an empty boardroom in a community health organization, and after helping myself to the staff fridge I fell asleep under the big table in the center of the room. A gentle man woke me up and took me to the hospital.

A nurse in the crisis ward obviously hated homeless crack-heads, so she woke me up in the middle of the night and made me leave. She told me that the hospital was for sick

people. I sat in the reception area, dazed and lost until another nurse saw me and asked why I wasn’t back on my cot in the hallway. The hateful nurse told her she was discharging me. She was angry and hostile. Thankfully, the nice nurse told her I was not to be discharged and they let me stay until morning.

I was sent to a detox where I spent the weekend. I got into the Renescent Treatment Center for the following Monday. This was considered a miracle, as it can take months to get into treatment here in Canada. Unfortunately, I was unable to stay and only lasted 10 days of the prescribed 28. While there, though, I was introduced to A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous).

I was back on the street, living in shelters. I kept going to A.A., but found that most of the fine people in the downtown program wanted to keep the homeless drug addicts at arm’s length. I did not understand about calling BEFORE using and was fired by the only sponsor that was willing to take me on. Regardless, I kept going because I saw that people like me could get better—they could change their lives. I was living in one of what was considered the “worst” shelters in Toronto. I called it the “sin-bin.” It was full of addicts, prostitutes, the seriously mentally ill, and trans-folk. I felt very at home there. It is very hard to stay clean in the shelters. Most people are not there to get clean. They are just there to survive and that usually means the opposite of clean and sober. This was one of the most lenient shelters around sobriety. As long as you weren’t aggressive, no one cared what you were on. I could only stay clean and sober for about 11 days at a time, but no more. I found a sponsor from the west end who was ultimately responsible for getting me into another program. She came and got me when I called, bought my cigarettes, picked me up and dropped me off at detoxes regardless of my state. Her brother died of a drug overdose when she was an active alcoholic; she felt that if she could save me, then she could be forgive herself for not helping her brother. I spent 4 more months on the streets of Toronto before I got into another program.

During that four months I lived in Allen

Gardens Park most of the time, as I didn't feel like I could live inside anymore. I was so removed from humanity that it felt bad to be inside with people. I was alienated from everyone, so much so, that they felt it, too; and, I was beginning to get death threats from some of the other people in the area. I was from the west-end and they were calling me a narc. The difference between west end street folk and east end street folk is how many teeth you have left—and I still had all mine. Around this time, I was accepted into Hope Place.

Hope Place was a 12-step based, 24 day treatment center that was filled with the most wonderful women. They were all in recovery themselves and they all had various degrees in Reiki Healing. Most of them had their motorcycle licenses. They told me that 30 days was not enough for me. They told me that if I left treatment in 30 days, then I would surely die. They found me a long term treatment center where I stayed for 6 months. They saved my life with their urgent advice to let the system take care of me until I could take care of myself. And, maybe for the first time in my life, I listened. Your article talks about long term treatment for crack addicts being necessary for hard cases. You are right. Without long-term treatment, I would never have recovered from the obsession and compulsion of crack addiction.

Fast Forward: Over a Decade Abstinent

Fast Forward and I am 10 years off of alcohol and 11 years off of cocaine. I haven't smoked a cigarette for about 8 years now. I have attended Trent University as an undergraduate, going to school for the first time in many years and the first time sober—ever. I have my son back and discovered about 5 years ago that I am a lesbian. I live with my partner, my son, and our dogs. And I still go to meetings. I am a Reiki Master to the 10th degree (lol). *A Course in Miracles* found me while I still lived in the streets; it was my only possession for a number of months. I know Eckhart Tolle and have read countless other life-changing books. I am a manifestor (as we all are), an Indigo Scout,

and did not need to see the “Secret” or “What the Bleep Do We Know Anyway?” to understand why I am here...they were wonderful mainstream confirmations though. I walked the Camino de Santiago in my second year of recovery. I returned to Canada to reclaim my son and motherhood. In recovery, I get to be a mom again for the first time.

I have never fit in with the “real” world and know that I did not come here to buy a house or a car, even though I do own a car now. I am an addict who will probably never touch another drink or drug willingly, because I know that my thoughts become manifest and the hardest or easiest thing to do, depending on your state of mind, is to create your reality one thought at a time. I am the change I want to see in the world—warts and all—and I need to help others become what they will. I am only attached to my story as far as it will help others integrate the new energy and give hope.

What We Need to Recover

When I read your article and your defense for cocaine addicts against Rawson's “lack of hope” for people like me, and your recognition that long term treatment is the necessary component in recovery for hard core crack addicts, I knew that I needed to contact you and tell you that you are right. When I looked at your website and your PowerPoint Keynote Lecture, I knew that out of the dozens of research articles I have read for various courses, yours was energetically special, aligned with my thinking, and I needed to follow up with this note.

Not only do crack-heads need long term in-patient care, but they need regular exercise and good food along with esteem building therapy. They need to be around people who have recovered and they need all this spoon fed to them until they can begin to work on themselves. As indicated in your article, long binges in the streets stop us from remembering what it is like to fall asleep naturally. We don't remember what it's like to eat normally. In fact, a street name for crack is “food.” “You want some food?” All

of our normal associations become lost. A spoon is no longer just a spoon and a pop can has meanings the depth of which can only be understood by us. We need spiritual counseling also. We need to learn to meditate and how to do yoga and what each yogic pose means on a psychological level as well as spiritual so that we can understand power and wellness in each synapse. We need to understand that the power of wellness resides within “US”—in our thoughts and then in our deeds. We need education about addiction—what it does and how it effects our brains, and why we are compelled to continue to kill ourselves, particularly in a part of the world that bursts with abundance. We need a safe place to do this with caring staff who have “been there.” Most of all, we need a system that supports this. I suspect that will need to be done carefully, almost furtively, because the current infrastructure loves a success story as long as it doesn’t change the status quo—which is why I pursued an education. I can stand comfortably on a street corner shouting what I know, but in that context who will listen? I feel I can do more than that. I think I am a bridge.

Do I See Myself as a Special Case?

I see oppression everywhere and my undergraduate education has given me the words to talk about what I have always known. The system saved my life. But, I am also the product of a system that not only allows but condones through its laws and lack of funding the oppression of its members—women, minorities, and the very workers who make the system run. I have searched high and low for other crack-heads who lived as I did and who are now fully recovered and there are precious few. I am told that I am a special case, but I believe we are all special cases and that as a whole, we have the same needs for health.

So I guess this letter has a multi-fold purpose. I write to thank-you for your work—for your compassion and help—for your hope. I write to offer my service to you in any way you deem fit. Any suggestions you may have about which direction you feel

will make me an instrument of change will be seriously considered.

What follows is a short sample of my writing that reflects my experience of being a homeless addict. Warning—its kinda nuts, lol, but it is an echo of the looping voice that used to rule my experience.

My Prior Voice from the Bottom As a Homeless Addict

I’ve got a monkey on my back man, and it’s the damndest thing. He used to belong to an organ grinder, a street guy who wore a yellow sombrero. This grinder, he fixed me up good with his great tunes, his good jazz then he up and died and left me with his damn monkey. The monkey wears the sombrero now. He occasionally places it upon my head, making me feel the fool, making me be the change in his sombrero, the money in his sock. Damn monkey. He sits right between my shoulder blades, right where I can’t reach him, and he does his little dance. He chatters quietly in my ear, reminding me of all the things I have yet to do. He warns me of the quiet wolf who waits at my heel. Ferociously quiet that wolf, with teeth bared ready to teach me my hard lessons about owning that damn monkey. I bet that organ grinder went to hell, right where he belongs, the cheap bastard.

So here I am, me and my monkey, livin’ in the street again. I don’t HAVE to live out here. I’m in Canada after all, with its shelters and food banks and donation rooms where I can get the fanciest clothes. Even embroidered jeans are available to the likes of me and my monkey. It makes me laugh to think of it.

Anyway, about living out here, it’s right where I belong. Free from the things that all those common folk need to do. Like workin’ and washin’ and buyin’ and workin’ again just so they can do more buyin’. Have they ever looked at themselves in the mirror? Miss Clairol eyes looking back, vacuous with dark circles under ‘em. Zombie eyes. Walkin’ dead. Runnin’ and runnin’ for an illusion. Where they runnin’ to anyway?

And where is my damn lighter? Where my little bic lighter? This little bic has a sunflower decal on it. It's real pretty. I doctored it myself you know, the lighter that is. I consider myself a lighter technician. My monkey, the little bastard, learned me to be a lighter technician and that makes me smile. Wonder if they have some sort of certificate FOR THAT in some damn college somewhere! Makes me smile real hard. You know what you can do with a real hot lighter? That organ grinder, he showed me how to work his jazz with a hot lighter. More than you can do with a college certificate.

I study the sunflower. Ever wonder how those things grow so big so fast? Must be the hormones they feed the cows makin' 'em do that, makin' 'em grow so fast. But still, they lift their sunny sunflower faces up to the sky and absorb all that wonderful light, all that vitamin D, kinda gives me hope you know? I hope that one day, I will lift my face like that and feel all that heat and sun-love and then maybe I will be different. Not different like I already am, different from everyone else, but different than I am already. Know what I mean?

Maybe I will like to live inside, in a sunny room and leave this damn monkey on someone else's back. This pursuit of sunflowers is getting me down. Hey buddy! Got a lighter? No? Got a dollar so I can get me a light? What does it take to get some light around here!

Huh, guess he is not gonna give me a lighter, let alone take my damn monkey and its stupid yellow sombrero. Couldn't even get that guy to slow down, like I'm contagious or something. He got too much pride anyway. Pride and prejudice. He don't like my jail-walk attitude, my dirty, embroidered, donation room jeans, my yellow hair, my steel blue eyes. He don't like what he see in me; he sees himself in me and that scares him wild. Wild sunflowers. Maybe one day he will own a monkey, and then he will know how it feels. And it DOES feel man, it feels like hell.

Did you know that you can get fancy embroidered jeans out here but NO

UNDERWEAR? Underwear is real hard to come by. I wonder if he knows that I'm not wearing any underwear. Now THAT makes me laugh too.

Here comes one of them man-whores. I wonder if SHE got a light. I KNOW she aint got no underwear. This man-whore. She just hopped outa one of them smart cars.

They sure look stupid for a car that's so smart. Can't fit no monkey in a sombrero in there. Not with a whore too anyway. I got no prejudice. This one is always nice to me. She has great legs but can't afford the hormones to make them smooth. A little bristly in the face too some days, after a long day of in and outa them smart cars with the walking dead peeps in 'em. She got no pride. She shares my monkey with me every once in a while, takes him off my back while I sleep out here. But she always gives him back. Damn whore. Stupid boy. Friggin' monkey.

You ever see them purple wig ladies? They meet in groups and they do all kinds of stuff together. I've never seen 'em myself but I'm told they exist. I bet they are just some urban legend used to scare little kids. The only requirement to join them is you have to wear a purple wig and be old. I'm almost old. I think about a million years old today. I don't know if I will ever get as old as them. I prob'ly gonna die out here. Canada is damn cold. I bet hell is cold, not hot. Ask the organ grinder, he should know.

Anyway, I bet them purple wigs are just crazy enough to let me into their club. I bet they got lighters. They seem like they have lots of light. I bet they have great stories too. I got some great stories. Ones that will raise the hair on the backs of your arms, hormones or not.

By the way, know how to make a hormone? DON'T PAY HIM! Ha! Makes me laugh EVERY TIME!

Uh oh, here comes that nasty wolf again, nippin' at my heals, chasin' away the laughter. He keeps trying to herd me; he wants me to fall down soon so he can feast on my bones. Maybe I will let him. Maybe I will surrender my bones and he can eat my

spirit just like he wants. Monkey tellin' me to run. Run fast!

Wow, that was a close one. Rotten wolf almost got me that time, almost made me fall so he could eat my soul. I felt the shakin' coming, my whole body vibrating, the beautiful terrible, like a death rattle. I'm not sure what does that. Maybe the cold. Made me drop my cola. I call it cola but it's really just the can. No real use for cola, I just dump it out most days. I go to the grocery store to the cola section and take me one of the cheap ones just in case I get caught. I don't know if it will make a difference, cheap or not cuz stealin' is all the same, big or small, but I take the cheap ones anyway. Sometimes I wonder if it's the cola can make me shake like that. Sometimes I wonder if the wolf really only wants the cola and not me after all. But I will never give it to him. Its MINE. He can eat me if he wants to, he aint gonna get it.

Here comes the Skittles Lady. I don't mind her much but I always take her skittles. I like to throw them to the pigeons down Allan Gardens Park. Maybe that wolf will eat them instead, the pigeons that is. The Skittles Lady talks too much. She talks about living out here and how there is another way. I hang around and pretend to listen until she gives me my pigeon skittles. She gave me a blanket last week, but I don't know where it got to now. I wish she would give me some underwear or maybe a lighter. I really could use some light today. I've thought about the Skittle Lady's chatter, about there bein' another way, but I've stood on every corner looking and I aint NEVER seen another way outa here. If you look at the skittle pigeons, most of them have lost all their toes. I think they musta froze clear off. Even they can't find another way, and they can fly! No wonder the wolf won't eat 'em. Im easier pickins. More toes.

Bob Barker is on "Price is Right" in the window of that shop down there. They don't mind if I come in for that show, long as I'm quiet and leave right after. Can't never let 'em see me with my can of un-cola neither. Bob says, "Spay and neuter your pets." Shoulda neutered him too I think but then

maybe he wouldn't want to give away all that fancy stuff. Same stuff the zombies are workin' their fool-asses off for. Like to see 'em try to fit all that crap into their stupid smart cars as if they can take it all with them. That makes me laugh, seein' 'em all buried in their stupid smart cars. If I came to the planet earth to get me a smart car full of Bob Barker's stuff, then I guess I'm just not fulfillin' my point of bein' here. Wish someone would tell me the point of bein' here. Its mean and its cold and the pigeons have no toes. If I get like them, busy chasin' cars, how will I know my purpose?

Anyway, me and my monkey, we real tired now. We just gonna lay down right here in the street and wait for the sunflowers to show us the way to the light. We don't need no stupid Skittle Lady blanket anyhow.

Conclusion: A Subsequent E-Mail to Dr. Wallace

If I had realized that it may be published, I think I may have gone over it a few more times before sending it off. I'm glad I didn't know, because intent changes things, and I just wanted you to know that your work helps the world. What I put out into the world is very important to me in terms of sharing experience and ultimately helping someone, anyone, somewhere, feel not alone. I have worked with the parents of addicts and it is heartbreaking to tell them that they may have to watch their child die. I have worked with addicts themselves and urged them to believe that anything is possible. I have worked with many others in my Reiki practice on multiple issues and the bottom line is always the same. I simply do what was done for me: I try to love them back to health by having no judgments and no agenda of my own other than creating the emotional space or the mind-shift that needs to happen to allow change to occur.

I think only the bravest souls come here to learn and grow. I used to think I was being punished, lol. I felt that I must have done something terribly wrong on my own planet for Them to want to send me to the Insane Asylum of the Universe, lol. I dont

believe that anymore; well, I still think we are in an insane asylum, but I'm here voluntarily. :) My hope for this letter is that somewhere in all that raw truth another soul will find hope, or another person in a place of power will realize their responsibility to keep an open mind and know that miracles can and do happen all the time--especially if nurtured by a system that promotes equality.

P.S. At present, I am a ThetaHealing Certificate of Science, Master Instructor, Reiki Master, P.S.W. I am currently studying for a joint Honours degree in Women's Studies and Psychology at Trent University In Peterborough, Canada. To learn more about me and my work, please go to my website at:

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