

Ginaya's Interview with Nicholas Coutis

March 7, 2018

Peace in the love of God

GGM: Please describe your childhood?

NC: I was born in New Hampshire to married parents, but they divorced shortly after I was born. I grew up mostly with my single working mom, and saw my dad two weekends a month. That was tough for me, but I was a pretty well adjusted kid up until middle school. I was a bright kid interested in music and computers, reading a lot and writing. But some tough stuff happened when I was about 11, and I started to realize a feeling of incompleteness and inadequacy. I was lonely and I remember being struck by a feeling of disconnect and isolation. Later I recognized this as the beginning of a long era of serious depression. My mom struggled with this too, and this was a dark period of my life. My mother was going through a divorce with her second husband and I felt left behind. This was the first time I realized I didn't have the emotional tools to deal with the issues around me and in my mind. I didn't have a strong foundation, and when the storm came I had nothing to stand on. I moved from New Hampshire to Rhode Island in 2000, and at 13 I smoked weed for the first time.

GGM: How and when did addiction begin manifesting, at what age?

NC: I recognize now my pattern of bad coping mechanisms expressed itself before substance abuse. I smoked weed the first time at 13, and within months I had a serious pill problem. But I had faked an illness a year or two before, and manipulated situations for attention, and I see these as patterns of addictive behavior that foreshadowed the substance addiction that followed. Both manipulation and addiction share the use of short-cut 'solutions' to difficult emotional tangles that succeed at first, but bring with them rapidly diminishing returns that reinforce antisocial and destructive behaviors.

GGM: How did your addiction progress from there?

NC: Marijuana and alcohol were tougher for me to get my hands on in High School than pills. Alcohol took weeks of planning and saving to find an adult to procure and pot cost a lot of money and I had to trust dealers. But every kid I knew it seemed had a prescription for Adderall or Ritalin (or different formulations thereof) and it was easy for me to obtain large amounts of amphetamine-type prescription stimulants from other kids as a 14 year old high school freshman. I could get Vicodin or Percocet pills too, and I was off and running. By 17 I was very seriously addicted to these pills and, though I graduated high school, it was hard for me to hold on to anything. By 20 I had quit the pills but picked up drinking alcohol and even dextromethorphan cough syrup heavily in my 20s, after some brief success in community college my addiction dragged me down through my twenties, especially the bath salt drugs that were widely available over the counter in 2010-12.

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GGM: Can you describe your path towards recovery?

NC: Depression and addiction brought me to my knees, and I had struggled with suicidal thoughts and several attempts. By the time of my last suicide attempt in 2014, I was 27 and had spent years in and out of short-term recovery programs in Rhode Island and elsewhere, dozens of individual hospitalizations in psychiatric hospitals and wards in the Providence area, and had been kicked out of several sober houses. I was unable to maintain sobriety for any appreciable length of time, and I hated myself so thoroughly it was painful to be in my right mind. I was living at a sober house and not working, getting high but trying not to get found out, but still going to NA meetings just to hear some hope. But I had also convinced myself I was one of those constitutionally incapable of rigorous honesty, and hence condemned to a lonely death. In the darkness of depression, that was an acceptable condemnation. If I weren't simply incapable of recovery, I also had an extensive list of frightening-sounding, serious, and often conflicting psychiatric diagnoses. Every doctor had their own opinion of what was wrong with me, and which medications I would have to take for the rest of my life. The only thing that seemed clear was that by either standard I was 'made wrong' or was bad by nature. I was a failed and unfixable, irredeemable mistake, and I deserved a lonely death. From this mindset fixed in hopelessness, a friend brought me to Teen Challenge of Dorchester, MA, for an interview. The friend who brought me told me to either take the bed they offered or he would leave me at a homeless shelter in Boston. That was the beginning of a three year journey that brings me to today.

GGM: What has helped you maintain your sobriety?

NC: Teen Challenge was an exceptionally difficult, highly disciplined, hardworking program that taught me first to open myself up to the love of God, and then to start working out the emotional, psychological and spiritual chains that kept me from being able to live a free life. Letting go of drugs proved to be tough; I got sober in Teen Challenge but relapsed while out on a fundraising job. But rather than being kicked out to "keep digging until I hit my real bottom" as I had heard many times in secular programs and sober housing, and was taught the real meaning and value of mercy. I got another chance, and fell to my knees in the first true act of repentance I had ever known. It was the second week of August 2015 (I forget the date) and I will never lose sight of the value of what had taken place. I began to see my mind and my thoughts change; I started talking to my brothers in the program about what was going on in my head. I embraced accountability and transparency. I started to really read my bible, especially the wisdom literature in Proverbs and the New Testament. I learned to apply myself to discipline, and learn from my own and others' mistakes; to surrender my pride and do the hard thing for the short term, in order to find the long-term reward of real freedom and peace. I seek God first, His peace and the humble life of work and service he calls me

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to. I surround myself with people in recovery and who dedicate their lives to seeking out and serving the lost and dispossessed. I have been saved from death I have much to share. Remember it was just over three years ago I last attempted to take my own life; it was not the medication or the doctors that helped me (I no longer take psychiatric meds, nor see a psychiatrist) and it was not Teen Challenge that saved me. The difference between then and now is instead of trying to fill myself up with things to make myself feel better, I find my peace in the love of God.

GGM: What advice would you give to someone just beginning their steps towards recovery?

NC: Your comfort is not important. Your happiness, especially in treatment, in the beginning, is entirely secondly to the long-term goal of fixing that pattern of behavior that brought you to the depths of addiction. Be willing to fight as you have never fought for anything, because your enemy is in your head and in your heart. Resentment and insecurity, pride and ego, wanting to be comfortable and happy, all of these things will conspire to destroy the progress you make. Never, ever, ever lose your perspective: this is about life and death every single day- remain grateful, remain teachable. Complacency is death - you either move forward or fall away. Your heart and your mind will deceive you; listen to others, especially those who question your assumptions and hold you accountable. Find God; He loves us and wants to restore us and teach us how to live whole and pleasing and meaningful lives. Once you've found some healing, find someone to give what you've got.

