

Recently in our meeting, there has been some questioning and some pretty heated discussion about the exact meaning of the sobriety imperative. These discussions have been difficult and threatening for me, because I feel very strongly that a firm commitment to sobriety is essential both to my own recovery and to the strength of our fellowship. But naturally, being a sexaholic, my own participation in these discussions has been marked by all my defects of choice: fear, the need to control the meeting, and a desire to assert the authority of the fellowship that includes more than a little of my desire to assert my authority and my ego.

Still, I believe that there is something positive in my concern that SA, locally and nationwide, continue to be based on a firm commitment to sobriety as it is defined in the Big Booklet. And so I want to send away my defects of character as they have come out in our discussions, and to claim what is positive in my own struggles over the sobriety issue, by simply stating why I feel as strongly as I do about it.

I have heard it said that the only message that we can carry is the message of ourselves, our own struggles and recovery. And that is where I need to start, with my own experiences before and after beginning the process of recovery from my sexual addiction. Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I am a single woman, an alcoholic and a sexaholic. By the mercy of God, I have not found it necessary to take a drink for four years, or to resort to sex with myself or others for two years. Today I am very comfortable in my AA program and increasingly comfortable in my SA program. Not only that -- I am a happy woman today, even though I'm far, far from well. But it was not always like that.

When I first came to SA, I would have told you that my most serious problem, the problem that finally brought me to my knees, was my uncontrollable obsessiveness. I was so preoccupied with romantic/sexual obsessions that I felt that I was on the verge of losing control of my actions, bringing those fantasies into reality in some awful way. The fear and guilt were unspeakable. But even worse than all of that was the despair, because all of this was happening to me sober. I think that I was very close to picking up a drink during that time, and for me, that would very likely have been the end.

My sponsor~~s~~ and my friends in AA were as puzzled as I was about what was happening to me. "Work your steps on it," they'd say, when I could bring myself to share something of what was going on inside me. And I tried! But not even the steps seemed to work on this.

I tried to surrender my obsessions and fantasies, but the more I fought them (of course, I wasn't really surrendering them as I've since learned to do) the stronger they became. And so there I was, two years sober from alcohol, about to be driven back to the bottle by a sex problem that at that point was almost entirely within my own head.

Except for one little thing. When I first learned about the program of SA (several months before I came in), I was informed that sexual sobriety as SA understands it includes freedom from sex with self. And immediately, something in me said "No way!" Because as it happens, I had been a very, very compulsive masturbator since I was about 16. And for all those years, through all the anguish over obsessions and bad relationships and periodic sex binges with partners, it never once occurred to me that masturbation might have something to do with all these other problems. When that possibility was first presented to me, I didn't want to hear it. I could have accepted the prospect of never having sex with a partner again -- but not the prospect of never masturbating again.

But eventually, I hurt so badly that I was willing to try anything to escape from the pain. The night of my first meeting, I was surprised by a feeling of relief that I didn't have to masturbate any more. That night I put it down, and by the mercy of God, I have not had to resort again since, so far until today. To my surprise, that horrible feeling that I was about to lose control of my actions went away almost immediately, and has never come back since. And then I was able to begin the long, slow, often painful process of recovery through working the steps and trying to relate to others without a fog of lust. And guess what? -- This time, the steps worked!

You see, I could not work the steps on my sexual addiction until I came to SA, because I could never take the first one. I honestly didn't know what to surrender, because all I could see was that I was powerless over one part of my disease, the fantasies and obsessions. I never realized that I am utterly powerless over lust in all its forms, so that any act of lust will get me drunk, sooner or later. And I never would have known that, if the SA statement of sobriety hadn't told me that at the beginning. Or at least I can say that for me, no recovery would have been possible until I figured out that for me, sexual sobriety has to include freedom from sex of any kind (except with a husband -- for me, a moot point). Maybe I could have figured that out on my own eventually. But just then, I was running out of time.

And the longer I stay sober, the more clearly I see that a firm commitment to sobriety is going to be necessary for me just as long as I continue to be powerless over lust. In my experience, lust is so cunning, baffling, and powerful that it makes alcohol look downright simple. It slips into the most innocent friendships and the most beautiful Significant Relationships, blinding me to my own motives and my own sexaholic desire to take my life from another human being -- to take and take, no matter how "loving" I'm being. I have been through some real battles over the lust that hides down deep there. But I am convinced of this much -- had I not been sober, and committed to stay sober, through these struggles, there wouldn't even have been a battle.

I don't say that because I think that I would necessarily have acted out with any of the people who (in my own mind) were caught up in my disease -- although of course, I may well have. But in any case, my commitment to sobriety was working a change in attitude in me that made lustful relationships more and more uncomfortable, and therefore easier to recognize for what they were. By committing myself to sobriety before God every morning, I tell myself that sex is optional for me. And if sex is optional, then so are all the other things that I associate with sex in my sick mind -- romance, the sense that I have to be in a Special Relationship, the automatic tendency to view people in terms of what I can take, rather than what I can give. In short, if sex is optional, then so is the attempt to make another human being the source of my life. And it's a good thing, because when I find myself getting uncomfortable, it usually turns out that that is what I am trying to do in some way.

But does sex have to mean all those things, even for a sexaholic? Well, no -- our collective experience tells us that sex between husband and wife can be clean and natural and lust-free. Given that, the next question that naturally arises is, "If sex within marriage can be lust-free, why can't we also enjoy healthy sex within the context of a healthy, serious relationship?" Or, "Why is marriage different?"

This is not a question that I can answer directly from my own experience, since I've never been married. But I can say that whatever the reasons, marriage just is different, at least for us. Over and over, I've seen sexaholics try to maintain committed, sexually active relationships, and usually, it just doesn't work. Or let me put it this way -- it never seems to get better. Sometimes, especially for people who were not yet in that much pain anyway, it stays the same. They don't seem to get worse, but they don't get any

better, either. More often, they find that this time it's different, all right -- it's worse, sometimes tragically so.

And the special significance of marriage makes sense to me, even though I've never been married, when I compare what my Special Relationships were not, and could not be, with what marriage is. Even looking at it from the outside, I can see that marriage is a public institution that changes the partners' lives in all sorts of legal and social lives. It provides a structure for their relationship, and it offers a guarantee of some stability, even in this era of rising divorce rates. And it is open to new life, to children; in fact, that is one of the essential points of the institution.

When I compare that to my own Special Relationships (SRs, for short) as a single person, here's what I see: My SRs are a part of my private life, even though I may tell people about them -- they don't affect my public identity. They lack the supportive structure that only an institution that's "bigger than both of us" could provide, and therefore they depend solely on whatever resources my partner and I could muster between us. Naturally, they weren't very permanent. If either of us chose to do so, we could just take a walk when things got uncomfortable. And they were not open to new life in any real way. Whatever the rationale or the feel of a particular SR, they were always romantic, in the sense that their point was to fulfill a need or a desire in me and in my partner -- nothing more.

Now no doubt, normal people can handle those sorts of SRs. But long and bitter experience has convinced me that they're deadly for me. They're private, not a part of my public identity -- that makes it all too easy for me to keep them in the dark, where my disease lives. Even if I don't keep the fact of the relationship a secret, it is all too easy for me to make it whatever I want it to be in my mind. My SRs have no structure, no real permanency, nothing to support them except what my partner and I bring to them out of our own inner resources. Need I say more? Can you imagine a better recipe for disaster for a sexaholic and her friend -- or more often, two sexaholics (in my experience, we find each other all too often)? This, in my opinion, is why nonsober members so often talk endlessly about the dynamics of their relationships. And my SRs focus on me and my partner exclusively; they aren't open to new life that could be a focus of shared, outward-directed concern. But self-centeredness, dependency, and the need to make others my god were my problems to begin with. This sort of self-oriented relationship just pours gasoline on that fire for me, no matter how good

my intentions are, or how "unselfish" I am.

When questions about sobriety have been raised in our group, there has never been any question about dispensing with some criterion for sobriety altogether. Our discussions have centered around the proper interpretation of the sobriety imperative: Is it masturbation if you stimulate yourself but stop before orgasm? Does heavy petting count as having sex? And --a perennial favorite--can a homosexual relationship be a marriage under some circumstances?

I now realize that when we first began to discuss these questions at some length, I made the great mistake of turning them into authority issues. That's not what they are at all--they're reality issues. What matters is not what I say, or you say, or our group says, or what the person directly involved says about what sobriety is in a given case--what matters, what is finally a life and death issue for us, is what sobriety really is in that case. Certainly, honest confusions about the meaning of sobriety in borderline cases are very possible--I've been there myself more than once. At the same time, from what I have seen and heard, people who play games with the meaning of sobriety do not usually stay sober, even in terms of the boundaries that they have set for themselves.

Actually, our statement of sobriety puts it very well. "These conclusions were forced upon us in the crucible of our own experiences and recovery. We have no other options." That's all. This is the message of our experience, not a rule that we made up out of our prejudices. Not everyone wants or needs to hear it, but I hope that we will continue to carry it for those who (like me) would have died without it.

This brings me to my final point. "The specialized nature of Sexaholics Anonymous can best be understood in terms of what we call the sexaholic." I am not saying at all that everyone who has sex problems needs the particular message that we have to offer. No doubt, there are people with sex problems who are able to solve their problems, or to tolerate them, without getting sober in our sense. But I am not one of those people, and from what I can see, I'm not unique. Hardly! SA is a very specialized fellowship. It exists to offer life and hope to all those who, like me, "have no other options." My concern is that if we try to accommodate those who still do have other options, by weakening our commitment to sobriety, then we will lose our ability to help those desperate souls who, like me, are true over-the-line sexaholics. And that would be a tragedy.

There are some people who have heavy drinkers, and

have lots of problems with alcohol, who nonetheless never loose control of their drinking as I did. And for these people, there is such a thing as cutting back and drinking in moderation, forever after as far as I know. I am not one of those people. And while I have no desire to reject them as people, I don't want them as members of AA. Can you imagine the plight of the poor newcomer who is really, truly an alcoholic, who walks through the doors of AA and begins hearing from members that maybe someday he will be able to drink again? He might well drink himself to death before discovering that whatever might be true for others, he cannot drink successfully. Heaven knows, enough do as it is. And how could any of us find the strength and support that comes from sharing a common purpose? -- But we don't have this problem because in AA, we're clear about who we are and what we have to offer. Those who don't need or want what we have to offer -- a way to stop drinking -- just don't come back. Why should they?

As I see it, SA as a fellowship is going to have to arrive at the same clarity about its distinctive common purpose if it is to continue to offer a way out for the man or woman who is suffering as we have suffered. There is no need to take on an attitude of pride and exclusiveness in order to do so. To the contrary -- the clearer we are about our common purpose, the more we will have the humility to see that we're not for everyone. There is only one thing that we have to offer as a group, that troubled people cannot find elsewhere -- sobriety, as we understand it. But for my sake, for all our sakes, and above all for the sake of the sexaholic who still suffers, I pray that we will continue to offer what we have.

J.P. Nashville

There are some people who have heavy drinks, and