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Autobiographical life story.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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1. Childhood

By the end of my addiction, I couldn't function. My reliance on drugs and alcohol had become terminal. I was drinking several litres of beer, more than a litre of whiskey, and taking up to 100 pain killers a day. And there were other drugs, too.

It's a long, complicated, and often bleak story. But all this use had taken a devastating toll: I had unmanageable anxiety and depression and had been sectioned in a mental hospital; I'd destroyed my marriage, and put my children and other people in danger. I'm very lucky I escaped alive and able to talk about it.

For more than 15 years, I'd been drinking and taking drugs to escape what looked – from the outside at least – like a perfectly normal life. But by the end I could no longer tell myself that my drug use was just about “relaxing,” or even “hard living” or partying. It looked much more like dying; and it looked like that because I was. I remember at this point asking myself whether I wanted to commit suicide, because that was what I was doing. It could be days, months, or maybe even a year or so, but if I didn't change, I was going to die. That became very clear.

Like so many, my journey to this point began in childhood. In many ways, I don't fit most of the stereotypes of addicts we see in popular culture. I had a privileged, very middle-class upbringing in a wealthier part of Sydney, Australia. My parents did the best they could by me, and we weren't the kind of family that argued – there weren't screaming matches and divorces and physical fights between siblings. We had our own issues, of course, like all families do; in our case, a long history of alcoholism and addiction lay just below the surface, running through generations like a curse. But from the outside, things looked normal, even ideal.

But I was severely bullied as a child, both at school and by other kids in my neighbourhood. I was beaten and threatened and cut and sometimes even held down and burned. It was terrifying. I was sometimes so scared for my life that I didn't want to leave the house. I literally thought I was going to be killed. A boy from another school once said he was going to kill me, and I really believed him. As a result, I was often very lonely, anxious, and dreadfully afraid. I developed very severe obsessive-compulsive disorder – I used to wash my hands until they bled, and had all kinds of elaborate counting routines and private rituals to make the world seem “safe” to me.

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2. Alcohol and Drugs

Compared to my peers, my first experience of alcohol was pretty late. I remember drinking in a park with some school friends when I was 17. After getting over the taste – I was stunned how bad it was – I felt euphoric in a way that I only later realised is not typical of everyone’s experience. Getting drunk gave me an amazing sense of coming home somehow; of being at peace, maybe for the first time in my life. While drunk, the anxiety and fear that had been constants in my life for as long as I could remember just melted away. It was like magic.

I was about 24 when I realised my drug and alcohol use was unusual. I was studying at university, and a lot of people I knew were stopping drinking and using drugs, were starting to “grow up”. But my own use went the other way; it really rocketed. I’d suffered a relationship breakdown, and I now believe that the trauma caused by the bullying and some other things I experienced as a child were also beginning to manifest themselves.

I started drinking to excess and using more and different kinds of drugs to block out the emotional pain and depression. Within a couple of years things were spiralling out of control. I increasingly found sober life intolerable and was drinking and smoking pot whenever I could. I’d begun to find it very difficult to live in my own skin, even for short amounts of time.

I drank and used heavily for more than 15 years. There were periods when I would abstain. I even stopped drinking for a couple of years, but when I did my drug use went up. Then I’d stop drugs and start drinking again. So, there was no time during that period when I was genuinely clean. I’d just switch substances, as if that were a solution to my problem!

I would write, collapse, then get up and start writing again. As long as things were delivered on time and the work was ok, no questions were asked.

3. My Professional Life

Despite this, I was able to maintain my professional life as writer, journalist, and academic. Most of those around me professionally weren't aware of what was going on. At that time, drug use among authors was normalised. And I often worked at home, away from other people, so I would write, collapse, then get up and start writing again. As long as things were delivered on time and the work was ok, no questions were asked.

It wasn't that my behaviour was unaffected by my addiction – people would sometimes say I was weird, out of control, or wild. I did some very dangerous things: I got arrested driving under the influence a couple of times – I'm ashamed to recollect the amount of drink driving I did – and narrowly escaped arrest for other things. I'm amazed I was never involved in an accident that hurt myself or other people.

But how bad could it really be if I'm also writing books, winning a scholarship to do a PhD or winning some national award? People assumed that because of my achievements, everything must have been going well. They tolerated or excused what they sometimes saw as extreme and eccentric behaviour, which I doubt would have been the case if I had been unemployed or accomplishing things society considers to be important. It allowed the crisis to be prolonged and the addiction to have an even bigger impact on me and those I loved. In some senses, the longer I kept the external achievements up, the greater the destruction the addiction wrought.

I very rarely remember anyone asking me if I was ok. One Christmas, though, while visiting my family, I got into an argument with my brothers and then passed out under the table. When I got home hours later, my dad called: "Chris, your mother's quite worried about you". I made excuses, saying I was under a lot of pressure with various deadlines.

In any case, I think I would have been extremely difficult to help. Addicts are well-versed in deflection, and I could handle myself pretty well in debate. I could have very curt responses to people who I thought were being condescending or somehow interfering with my life. Addictions are hard to challenge, especially from the outside. I always had an answer for everything.

My professional life was hanging together, but my personal life really started to fall apart. I walked out on my wife, and a week or two later was arrested drink-driving. I became suicidal and was sectioned. Eventually, I had to stop working as well. Work was the last thing to go.

I think being sectioned was as a turning point in how I was perceived by other people. I think they thought, we know he's had a bit of trouble, he's a bit eccentric – but now he's in a psychiatric institution? But even when it became plain to others that I had serious problems, I myself lacked the self-awareness and insight to seek help for the alcohol and drugs. I kept thinking I could just moderate my use. I could do everything myself, or so I thought. I thought wrong.

One of the worst moments chills me to recollect. I was looking after my children, who were about five and seven years old at the time, while my ex-wife was away. I put the children to bed and went out to score drugs. When I returned to the house, to my horror, they weren't in their beds; they were nowhere to be seen. Believing they had been abducted, I called the police. But they hadn't been kidnapped at all – I'd forgotten that I'd put them to bed at my house, but gone back to my ex-wife's place after scoring. The police (along with my ex-wife and sister-in-law) eventually figured this out and tracked them down to my place, smashed down the door and took them to safety.

My recovery didn't truly begin until I had the absolute realisation that, at base, I really didn't know how to recover.

4. Rehab

I went into rehab for the first time not long after this incident. I was abstinent for about a year, but things got out of hand again after I took some painkillers at a dentist's instruction. My recovery didn't truly begin until I had the absolute realisation that, at base, I really didn't know how to recover.

For many years I thought I knew what my problems were, and how to solve them: I was taking drugs and drinking, and I needed to stop. I was sad and needed to be treated for depression. And so on. But at a certain point I realised I was completely lost. And through that admission of complete ignorance I started to be able to listen to people and take advice. From then on, things opened up for me and I took my recovery seriously. That doesn't mean it was easy – it wasn't. But suddenly there was some sense that things could be different, that I didn't have to live how I was living.

I booked into a private rehab in Sydney and it was only when I got there that I realised that I was based on 12 Step principles. At first, this disappointed and upset me enormously; I'd made up my mind that I wasn't interested. I'd been to a few groups and thought it was horrible, pseudo-religious rubbish. But I swallowed my pride, turned up regularly, and participated fully. It's not for everyone. But the truth is that it saved my life – and there's a lot to it that's not immediately apparent.

In the early stages, at least for me, recovery was difficult and very painful. But it was still less painful than maintaining my addiction. Maybe that's one of the signs that you're ready to recover: that the pain of addiction seems larger than the pain of recovery. And there was growing hope that things could be different.

I began to learn how to experience and live through my own emotional pain. For me, recovery is at least in part about being able to experience negative emotions and move on through them. I'd been blocking these out with drugs and alcohol for most of my adult life – so I had to learn how to feel my emotions from scratch. In this way, it was like I was finally growing up – taking responsibility for my own decisions and gaining the capacity to relate to others with honesty and respect.

At the same time, I began looking after myself, which addicts tend not to do: eating well, sleeping, and connecting with other people in recovery. This, along with therapy to explore my emotional “issues,” was integral to my recovery.

5. Life Today

The beauty of my life today is, I think, its relative normality! I've got a really good relationship with my ex-wife and a fantastic, deep relationship with my children. I have a wonderful new partner. I'm productive, and have written and published more than I ever did while I was drinking and using drugs. I've got money in the bank for the first time in my life. I used to be down to my last \$10 every day. Now simple, everyday things like buying a pair of shoes (or even socks!), going for a swim, or going out for dinner give me great pleasure. This never used to be possible, because I spent all my time and money getting and using drugs.

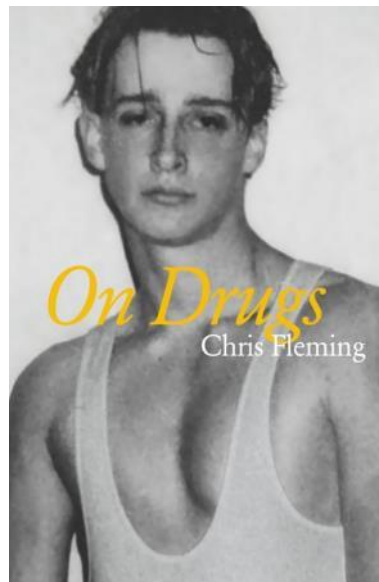
I used to think this kind of "normal" existence was boring, a sell-out – or something like that. But normal life really is a beautiful thing; and getting and using drugs now seems to me to be the most boring, monotonous kind of existence conceivable. Is there anything more predictable than an addiction? Is there anything more tedious? Anything more repetitive? If there is, I can't think of it.

Things whose supposed tedium would once have horrified me – watching a movie, going for walk, enjoying a cup of tea – to me present some of the most magical moments these days. Of course, not everything about a normal life is pleasurable; as well as being filled with joy and love, there's boredom, frustration and occasional anxiety. That's simply the admission price of being human being, alive and sensitive to the world around. But it's a much richer existence, a much more creative existence, than my life ever was on drugs and alcohol.

Having On Drugs (Giramondo, 2019), my book about my addiction, come out into the world – making public what had been private – was terrifying, but I'm pleased I've done it. When I decided to write a book about my experience, I initially wanted to use writing as a way of processing the experience, of thinking through and trying to understand my life and my addiction. On another level, I was also trying to distance myself from my addiction – to put it in the past tense, so to speak. But as I wrote the book my motivations changed – or perhaps just broadened. My desire to write began to reflect a desire to show that addiction has different faces, different presentations.

Addicts include people with jobs and families, who are reasonable, intelligent and decent. Addicts don't always look like they come from Central Casting.

The range of images of addiction portrayed in popular culture is very limited. But the addiction I've experienced in myself and seen in those around me rarely looks like what we see at the movies. Addicts include people with jobs and families, who are reasonable, intelligent and decent. Addicts don't always look like they come from Central Casting. It's seems odd to me – and a real pity – that the portrayal of addicts and addiction is so often so narrow. I wanted to broaden that a bit, to take part in a public discussion about this stuff because I believe it's incredibly



important that we rethink as a society what addiction is, what it looks like, and who it impacts.

In the depths of the worst of my addiction, I always thought that there was no hope of recovery, and there was no use in turning to others for help. But the fact is that recovery is possible, and help is out there – and it changed my life. Recovery, like life itself, isn't for the faint-hearted; but it's worth it. If you're prepared to put in the work, if you really want recovery, to do what it takes, I'd really encourage you seek it. Look around. Give up the thought that you know everything already. Things really can be different to how they seem now. The world is much bigger, much more interesting, much richer, than the addict can imagine. It's there for the taking.
