

THE LOSS OF SUBSTANCE: REFINED SUGAR

November 26, 2010

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In this short series, I have gone over the most obvious candidates for addiction, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and caffeine, so some of you may want to stop here. The next blogs will be concerned with substances that are not currently recognized by most as possibly detrimental, like sugar. In other words, we are moving out of the past into present struggles with substances, so take note.

Now sugar is a much more touchy area with me, as I am sure it is for many of you as well. I almost didn't go there in these discussions because it might offend those who have never considered it a problem, but I really must. For one, it is only a matter of months since I gave up sugar completely after a lifetime of enough or more than enough of it. The candy that I grew up on would choke a horse: M&Ms, Kit Kat, Hershey's, Three Musketeers, Snickers, Crunch, Clark Bars, Mr. Goodbar, Reese's Peanut-Butter Cups, Jujubes, Baby Ruths, Dots, Butterfingers, Heath, Oh Henry!, PayDay, Milky Way, Good & Plenty, Gum Drops, Spearmint Slices, Necco Wafers, PEZ, Charleston Chew, Chunky, Raisinets, and scores of others. How about Tootsie Rolls? Of course I ate them all.

And then there were the Twinkies, fruit pies, donuts, Hostess cupcakes, Fudge, Licorice, Jelly Beans, hard candy, toffees, lemon drops, and so on.

And I have not even gotten to homemade pies, cakes, and my most favorite of all: ice cream. Aside from all kinds of ice cream and cones, what about ice-cream sandwiches, banana splits, Klondikes, strawberry and hot-fudge sundaes, Drumsticks, Ben & Jerry's, Häagen-Dazs, etc. And Creamsicles, Fudgesicles, and all kinds of other popsicles. I could fill up this whole blog with the names of sugar treats that we all would recognize and probably have eaten more than our share of. I am not even going to touch the use of sugar as an additive like corn syrup in soft drinks, which seems to be ubiquitous. I like sugar too.

In fact I like sugar so much that I never even considered giving it up until the last year or so. It was way too much fun and what would life be without it? Less fun for sure. But in the last years I have begun to notice that whenever I eat sugar, whenever that sugar rush recedes, I don't feel as good as I did before I ate it. Remember, getting old becomes a process of just maintaining the status quo. There is no hope of feeling like you used to 'were' 25 years ago, but rather one of just feeling decent or even pretty good. "Pretty good" is good enough at my age.

I can remember the nights as I was growing up when my father passed through the room with a huge bowl of ice cream hidden behind his back so we could not see it. Of course we all saw it.

I am no different and ought to have been ashamed of what I was putting through my system or at least how it made me feel (even years ago) which was usually lousy and certainly worse than before I ate it, but I put up with it. Mere threats of physical damnation never make me pay heed. I have to actually administer physical abuse to myself before I give up anything. No kind of admonition or warning takes hold. It goes in one ear and right out the other.

It is only when confronted with physical pain or visible deterioration of the quality of life that I am moved to change even a tiny bit, and even then it is a tossup. Otherwise, it is business as usual.

for me. It was not enough that diabetes was a main cause in the death of my father or that various members of my extended family have come down with that disease. Those facts failed to move me one inch, although they did get my attention, however fleetingly. I have to say this:

All of this concern about developing increased awareness, whether through meditation or by other means, should not be ignored. It is not a passing fad. It is only by increased awareness that I have been able to give up any of my vices before they trumped me, and even then I got a good beating. I have to see it damaging me to believe it, to stop doing it -- plain and simple.

When my awareness increased to the point of my being able to actually witness a decrease in my health and feeling of well-being after a sugar attack, then and only then was I willing to take action, and not before. Otherwise, I don't tend to know what is good for me and I seem to like it that way.

When I began to take sugar and then feel the worse for it, that is when I started my famous-to-me testing of it. Sure enough, I soon found that every time I ate sugar in any significant quantity, I would feel weaker or get a little 'glandy', and so forth. It would go away after a while, but it sent a message.

And of course I have to give enormous credit to my wonderful wife Margaret who has patiently and gently pointed this sugar-thing out to me for years now. When words on her part fail to move me, a simple look can sometimes do it. In an instant I become my father shepherding the hidden bowl of ice cream through the room. But until recently, I usually made a point of laughing it off and totally ignoring her. Margaret stopped eating sugar in any real way years ago, and I just watched and ignored whatever she pointed out.

Then one day not many months ago I just decided to stop eating sugar and even forego the sugar snacking through the day, the endless cookies (and what-have-you) that fuel the sugar habit. I went cold turkey and have not looked back. Well, maybe I peeked back a bit, but I now limit my sugar intake to the occasional bit of honey or maple syrup, which is only a better kind of sugar. And my fruit (and in winter: dried fruit) intake has gone way up.

One thing I can report is that my health is much stronger and far more stable now. For some reason sugar weakens me, breaks down my immune system, and leaves me feeling worse for wear. I have put it to the test for a long time and found this true. I can live without sugar just fine; in fact, I already am better for it. Those periods of physical weakness when I had to stabilize after a sugar rush are completely gone. I am on solid ground with no dips. Temporary destabilization after eating sugar is similar (physically) to the psychological and emotional destabilization that one gets from alcohol. The world has not even begun to properly assess the effects of sugar on our lives, so this post may not reach many.

It brings to mind the poet Wordsworth's line "Trailing clouds of glory do we come" into this world. Well, my line might better read "Trailing clouds of substances do I leave" this world. It seems as I look back that I have left a telltale trail of all the vices I have dropped, one by one, as I can't get away from it any more and my physical constitution demands it of me. Indeed, I am a slow learner.

Tomorrow I will look at an even more radical kind of addiction, a moral addiction, that of eating meat.

