

The Missing Piece

On James Frey's "Heroic" Sobriety

As a clinician and writer dealing with addictions, and a sober addict myself, I have followed the furor swirling around James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* with a growing concern: We are so preoccupied with the sideshow that we're missing the main event. Certainly the question of fidelity to truth in memoirs, journalism, etc. is an important subject. Print, broadcast and online commentators bemoan the erosion of the bond of trust between author and reader, and the general degradation of integrity and trustworthiness in public discourse. But these concerns regarding Frey's book surfaced as a by-product of the extraordinary popularity of the book itself, which has enjoyed a level of sales, we are told repeatedly, second only to the most recent Harry Potter episode. The book's enthusiastic reception is emblematic of a social and cultural yearning that is even more pernicious than (though not unrelated to) the growing societal indifference to the distinction between fact and fiction.

Consider these excerpts from the three pages of accolades adorning the paperback itself: "We...admire Frey for his fierceness, his...solitary virtue...and his victory over his furies." (*New York*); "Frey comes on like the world's first recovering-addict hero. . . . (*GQ*) "...Frey's prose is muscular and tough, ideal for conveying...steely determination." (*Entertainment Weekly*); "...could well be seen as the final word on the topic." (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

This is the perennial yearning of every addict; to achieve "victory" through "steely determination" and "solitary virtue" – to become "the world's first recovering-addict hero." Wouldn't it be fabulous if such a stirring and ego-gratifying solution could indeed be "the final word on the topic," sparing us the humbling experience of cultivating surrender and acceptance, as recommended by the twelve-step approaches to addiction which Frey dismisses.

I believe that, to a large extent, Frey's book has sold so well because it speaks to that part of us that fervently wishes to believe that the problem(s) of addiction can be resolved through bravura stands of self sufficiency - - in Frey's case a sort of hybrid cross between John Wayne and John Gotti. I suspect that this image beckons to us so keenly right now because, on some intuitive level, we recognize that we are mired in addiction – not merely as individuals, but throughout our transforming global society. We are addicted to "quick fixes" even more dangerous to us than alcohol and other drugs, encompassing the whole range of our experience – from personal relationships, recreations and entertainments to political and religious convictions. Indeed, many aspects of our government's current foreign and domestic policies exemplify the alarming excesses of willfulness and wholesale denial which characterize late-stage addiction.

Examined from a developmental perspective Frey's melodramatic rendering of his heroic triumph ranges from infantile to adolescent. This makes perfect sense, because we discover as we set foot on the path of sobriety that our prolonged commitment to getting our own way at all costs - the hallmark of addictive

striving - leaves us in a state of profound developmental arrest. We "grow up," haltingly and reluctantly in most cases, as we come to acknowledge, then embrace, and finally, celebrate, those limitations within ourselves which make us uniquely who we are, but also join us in commonality with the rest of humankind; indeed, some would posit, with all of creation. These realizations are often framed in the language of spirituality, but neither this frame nor the language are important. What *is* important is promoting the transformation to a consciousness informed by humility, reverence, and the willingness to accept responsibility.

Whether dealing with my own predispositions toward addiction, or in my work with clients, I find that the hardest thing for us to accept is the truth of our limitedness. I don't mean accepting some egregious and demeaning special handicap, but simply the limitations of the human condition. Addiction teaches us that we can - indeed, that we *must* - find shortcuts to what we imagine will be fulfillment. Sobriety teaches us that fulfillment is a by-product of developing character and maturity – and as well that being unfulfilled to some extent is, paradoxically, an aspect of our wholeness.

Because addiction has become such a central and defining dynamic of contemporary culture, we are dangerously misled when stories such as Frey's come along to feed our fantasies of “mastering” addiction. A succinct summary of the work of sobriety could be: "Surrender control; accept responsibility." Undertaking to realize these principles in our personal and public lives is much more challenging, it turns out, than the teeth-gritting, clenched-fist hero's stand that Frey offers us.

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