

HOW I STOPPED SMOKING WITHOUT QUITTING

It was pretty bad. About 3 packs of unfiltered Pall Malls a day. Not something I bragged about at the time, and certainly not something I'm proud of today. Just the unvarnished truth. I was so hooked

[altogether now: "How hooked WERE you?"] I was so hooked that my first cigarette of the day was lit up before I swiveled my feet over the side of the bed to get up. I was so hooked that I had an open pack in each room of the house so that I didn't have to go too far for the next cigarette I was going to light up. I was so hooked that the last cigarette of the day was the one I smoked in bed just before falling asleep.

I smoked at home, I smoked at work, I smoked in the car. I smoked before each meal, I smoked after each meal. I smoked before, during, and after every phone call I made, and every phone call that came to me. I smoked at meetings, I smoked on breaks. I smoked when tense, I smoked when relaxed.

I began smoking in college because it was "cool", and God forbid anyone, especially I, think of me as uncool. Although truth be told, it was very difficult to start, because the smoke burned my throat when I inhaled, and made me cough in a most uncool way. So I practiced smoking, in those early days, in private, until I could inhale without coughing. That made me feel very grown-up. The older I got, the more mature I thought I got, and the more I smoked.

Gradually my consumption increased until I reached the three-pack-a-day level. I don't know when I got hooked, but I stayed in denial of addiction by insisting, to myself as well as others, that I smoked because I liked it. The implication, never tested, was that I could quit anytime.

I did take a vacation from smoking once, but it was not exactly voluntary. The first, though unrecognized, sign that I was pregnant was my sudden and inexplicable aversion to the smell of cigarette smoke, a condition I resented because it robbed me of an important diversionary activity. As soon as the pregnancy was verified, however, I refrained from trying to override my body's natural self-protective aversion to smoke, and did not smoke for the remaining months. I am embarrassed to admit that I took it up again as soon after delivery as possible, smoking through the four and a half months of nursing my baby.

I had begun smoking as a sophomore in college, in 1945, at age 18, when the great FDR was at the end of both his long presidency and of his life. Now here it was 1964, JFK had come and gone too soon, I was 37, in my prime, well-started on my career, with a daughter entering her teens, and I'd been smoking for

nearly two decades. I was up to 3 packs of unfiltered Pall Malls a day. I bought my cigarettes by the carton, which cost at the time, if memory serves, about \$2.59 for a carton of 10 packs, a bargain over 28 cents a pack. [To put this in context, my annual salary was about \$8200, my rent for a whole house \$125/month until I bought my first house in Lake Geneva, a cute little 2-story, 3-bedroom cottage with separate garage on half-acre for \$13,200.]

That's when the U. S. Surgeon-General's report on Smoking and Cancer came out. Indeed, it was the first persuasive evidence in our lifetime to link lung cancer with smoking.

Because smoking was so popular in our culture and considered, still, to be "cool", or rather, now "glamorous" and "sophisticated", the report made a sizeable stir in the news media and over office watercoolers where workers took their smoke breaks. And of course, denial was rampant in the land. After all, the primary mass medium was the motion picture, and all the really glamorous stars had been smoking, on and off screen, for at least three decades now.

Considering myself both reasonably literate and reasonably intelligent, I took the report seriously, as did many others at the time. But, unreasonably [in retrospect], I had no idea what to do about it, despite the report's recommendation that users quit. Why, no one quits smoking any more than they quit eating! [Remember, this was before the time of wafer-thin media stars; remember how curvy Marilyn Monroe was?] Quit smoking? What would one do with their hands? How could one be sociable at all, let alone cool? What on earth could possibly substitute for the sexiness of a guy lighting a gal's cigarette while exchanging that look?

But I had to admit, when I was alone, lighting up, sometimes I was very scared. I knew that, even for those smoke-drenched times, three packs a day was a lot; thirty cigarettes per sixteen-waking-hour-day was a lot of nicotine and tar wallpapering my alveoli.

One day, flying in the face of my ambivalence and hesitation, I visited my doctor, Hank Mol. A handsome, personable, and very popular small-town, down-home-type physician, he was easy to talk to about even the most embarrassing personal subjects.

Cough, cough, hack, cough, I began, "what is this?"

"Well, let's check it out," he said with his usual affability. And, consistent with standard office care at the time, he looked down my throat, listened to my deep

breathing with his stethoscope, measured my lung capacity with a breathalyzer sort of thing, and even X-rayed my chest, and declared that my lungs seemed healthy enough.

I was surprised to find myself disappointed with his diagnosis! Cough, cough, hack, hack, "well, then, what is this?" I asked, my voice betraying my impatience.

"Are you a smoker?"

"Yes!" I was surprised by the eagerness in my voice.

"Well, then, that's what it is. It's from smoking."

"Are you telling me to quit?" I insisted.

"Oh." He suddenly seemed very somber. He was known as a man of integrity, trustable. "Well," he said, measuring his words, "I would not tell you to do something I can't do myself."

I could not believe what I was hearing. My eyes locked on his face, searching for any hint of levity, but there was none. I saw instead volumes of revelation on that face: knowledge of the Surgeon-General's report, self-knowledge, humility, honesty. Finally I left without a word.

I was filled with confusion all the drive home; respect for him, anger at him, anger at myself, disappointment, frustration, deep gratitude for his honesty, embarrassment. It took a couple days to sort all this out.

Finally, I was left with the realization that I had gone to him for the directive to stop smoking, and he had not given to me.

And why had I needed to have it from him? Why could I not just give myself that instruction to quit smoking?

Because, I had to admit [using his honesty as my model], I did not want to tell myself to quit.

Why not? Because, to be honest, I did not believe I could quit. The rock-bottom truth I had dared not even think before, was that I really knew I was terribly, terribly hooked, so hooked, addicted [there, I said it], that I could not quit no matter how hard I tried. So I would rather disappoint his directive to quit than disappoint my own. After all, I don't live with him. But to live every day with my own self-disappointment was something devoutly to be avoided.

There is something profound that happens when we face our strongest denials, admit to our deepest fears, uncover the secrets we keep from ourselves. Though we expect to be bathed in shame, that is not what actually happens. Regardless of whether we are religious or spiritual or not, what actually happens is that we feel sacred somehow, we are in the presence of grace, we are lighter and bigger, we like ourselves more, we are simultaneously humble and holy. Better yet, all the confusion and frustration and anger and disappointment just vanished, like a puff of smoke.

That's when I was first able to just simply problem-solve. Here, these were the facts; now what could I do?

Honesty about one thing makes honesty about other things amazingly easy. What were the facts?:

Honestly, I was scared about continuing to smoke.
Honestly, I was addicted and did not believe I could quit.
Honestly, I do not like to fail at what I try.
Honestly, I did not want to ask myself to quit, and then fail.
Honestly, I wanted to do something about the smoking.
Honestly, I wanted to do this on my own, not wanting it to be contaminated by, or to contaminate, any relationship.

What could I do that would make a difference? What could I do, at which I could not fail? What could I do that would not depend on anyone else? What could I do that would make me feel, and be, successful? And then one day it came to me:

I could simply wait as long as I could to light the next cigarette.
That's all. Simple as that. The next cigarette I was going to smoke anyway. Wait. Five seconds' wait was a win. Any wait was a win. Wait. Wait and win. Waiting was winning.

There were milestones almost daily.
The first time I could wait until getting out of bed to light the first cigarette.
The first time I could wait until after breakfast to light the first cigarette.
The first time I could wait through an entire meal before lighting up.
The first time I could get through a whole phone call before lighting up.
And so on and so on.

It became a game: how long could I wait this time? [Parenthetically, lighting up and smoking was never a "lose", because I knew I was so addicted that I could

not quit, and was not asking myself to quit.] I was just cutting back, but without setting external or pre-set goals, because I could fail to meet those. But just waiting to light the next one....that I could always win. And so I did. I was winning many times a day, every day! It was actually great fun!

Then one day, when I had waited through an entire staff meeting without a cigarette, someone asked if I had quit. This was a crisis! A crisis of conscience, a crisis of honesty, a crisis of commitment. First, I had not quit, so I could honestly say no. But I did not want to explain what I was doing, because this was a private and personal project, and I did not want to be accountable to anyone else about my smoking or lack of it. I heard myself saying, "No. Just waiting for the next one." That turned out to become my stock answer to this day, because it was, and is, the truth.

The day arrived, in an amazingly short time, when my first cigarette of the day was the one I smoked just before lunch, and I have been waiting to light the next one ever since. After almost forty years at this writing, I am still waiting. I am still hooked. I still believe that if I smoke that next one, I am winning because I waited so long. I have never said that I quit; that is too final, so that I can flunk. I haven't quit smoking; I'm just seeing how long I can wait to light the next one. And I'm doing great!