



Facing the Abyss
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If you put a frog into a pot of steaming, hot water, he will jump out and escape. But if you put the same amphibian in a pot of cold water and gradually heat it until it boils, he will adjust to the ever increasing temperature until he dies. Our family was that frog when we were living with my drug addicted son, Jacob.

When Jacob was in middle school, we thought he had an almost unlimited potential. He had so many friends that he had a difficult time keeping up with all of them. He was a curious, independent boy with a delightful sense of humor. Sometime during eighth grade, things started to change. He and his crew were caught smoking marijuana at friend's house. He let another boy copy his term paper. He posted inappropriate pictures on a girl's Facebook page. Statements that bent the truth eventually evolved into outright lies. Gradually, his wide circle of friends was whittled down to only those who used drugs.

Jacob attended the same private school where I spent my entire 43 year teaching career. One Sunday, I received a call from a parent who told me that Jacob had sold her daughter drugs on school grounds.

My wife, Robin, and I decided that Jacob would walk into the Dean of Discipline's office on Monday morning where he would confess what he did. I then told the administration that they were not to take into consideration my tenure with the school in deciding the consequences. After several days of deliberation, he was allowed to remain in school if he went to therapy and an outpatient drug program. Jacob was able to sabotage those consequences when he gamed the counsellor and used the program to expand his circle of drug using friends.

Slowly, my son, who we believed had such a bright future, became someone who we did not recognize: a secretive, sullen, manipulative young man. Our family's frog was adjusting to the new temperature.

According to the National Institute of Health, 15½% of eighth graders have tried marijuana. By senior year almost 45% of students have used it. Most of those teenagers who smoke marijuana will either quit as they mature or continue to sporadically use it during their adult years. But 10% of pot smokers have a genetic disposition to become addicted. When a teenager starts using marijuana regularly, it stunts their emotional growth. Jacob's logic became more and more reliant upon a magical thinking which employed an unshakeable confidence that he could overcome any set of circumstances to get what he wanted. My son had the maturity of a 13 years old in a 17-year-old body.

I confided to no one what Robin and I were going through at home because I felt I was a failure as a father. I was too embarrassed to share my inadequacy with friends, colleagues, or even this community. Because I could not see other people who were suffering the same misfortune, I mistakenly concluded I was alone in facing the challenges Jacob presented us. I was an island in what I did not realize was an archipelago. My isolation contributed to my shame of the inability to save my own son after influencing hundreds of students in the classroom.

We tried a variety of strategies to turn him around: father/son weekends, overseas trips with peers, family vacations, dinner conversations, inviting him to concerts, having family members talk to him as well as punishments that included taking away his phone, not allowing him to get his driver's license, and moving his bedroom from the basement to the second floor.

Nothing changed. When I became aware that Jacob's friends were sneaking into our house while we were asleep to use drugs, I realized that our house was like Vietnam: we controlled the day, but Jacob ruled the night. Our family's frog became increasingly uncomfortable when the Dean of Discipline discovered that Jacob had stolen a scale from the school's chemistry lab. Jacob set us up to defend him for some vandalism only to confess at the last minute he was guilty. There was an early morning fight in our front yard that was over a drug deal gone bad. I caught him stealing money from my wallet. By keeping a log of our car's speedometer, I was able to ascertain he was driving our car stoned without insurance during the night. Jake made arrangements for his friends have a party in our vacant house while we were on vacation. He disappeared for the better part of five days over a long weekend. Finally, Robin and I realized that we faced what I called the abyss: we could endure the next year and a half until Jacob left for college OR we could make a decision that was for us, unimaginable: casting our son out of our house to go to a wilderness program and then therapeutic boarding school.

There are times in our lives that we must face the abyss: a decision where we consider the previously unimaginable or are faced with having to let go of a system of beliefs and/or comfort we thought we could rely upon. Many people who go through a divorce must decide whether to tolerate a deteriorating relationship or embrace an unknown future; often amid debilitating accusations by those who loved us. People who suffer in a soul crushing job may agonize for years while considering the abyss. Sometimes the abyss is forced upon us by the death of someone we loved, being fired, a catastrophic injury, an unexpected diagnosis, or by having to move from a place that we called home. To face an abrupt change can be demoralizing and seem to call for more fortitude than we know we possess. Nothing in our past offers any guidance of how to make this decision.

In our case, Jacob hadn't been involved with the legal system yet, he hadn't hurt himself or anyone else physically, he hadn't stolen heirlooms from our house to sell, and he hadn't hit either Robin or me. But we had no hope that anything was going to improve and were fairly certain it was going to get worse. The abyss of sending him away was frightening: we would spend his college money and part of our retirement savings, send him to people whom we had never met with no guarantee that he would choose to become sober. Furthermore, Jacob had made it clear that if we sent him away, that we would never see him again. It was a threat that we took seriously. It was the most difficult, heart wrenching decision we have ever made. In part, because I wanted to be able to tell myself I had tried everything possible, we hired two men to come to our house at 3:30 in the morning on February 25th, 2012. In a surreal moment, I led them to his bedroom, woke him up, introduced the men to him, and told him they were going to take him to a wilderness program in Utah. I then told Jacob that I loved him, he responded by quietly saying, "You're a real son of a bitch, dad." As Robin and I left the house, I wondered if those would be the last words I heard from my son. Robin had an epiphany later that day when she said: "he's never coming back home, is he?" I replied, "No, he isn't."

Unknown to us, the weekend before, Jacob had experienced the event that is terrifying for those who suffer from substance abuse: he was no longer able to get high from marijuana; no matter how much he used. When an addict reaches that dead end, they only have two choices: they can either quit or they can move on to another, more addictive drug. Given the present heroin epidemic, it was fortunate that we sent him when we did.

I wish I could tell you that Jacob immediately got better. We received a letter from him two weeks later promising he would do ANYTHING we required if we would bring him back home. I considered his offer for about 15 seconds before realizing that our decision was a one-way street; there was no turning back. He responded with a ten-page profanity filled letter accusing us of everything his considerable imagination could summon. After nine weeks of therapy while camping out in the Utah desert, he graduated from wilderness. We were to pick him up from a place so remote that they used satellite phone. Jacob made Robin and me dinner, showing his new skills by starting a fire with a spindle and bow, and after dinner pitching a tarp under which the three of us were to sleep. I knew that I was going to have trouble sleeping because of the cold and the hundreds of invisible pebbles that were on the ground. But my insomnia became complete when I discovered that my sleeping bag only zipped up half way and Jake warned me to watch out for scorpions during the night. The next day we took him to a therapeutic boarding school near Tombstone, Arizona. After seeing our son again for thirty hours, it was a poignant moment when we said goodbye to Jake and left him at his new school.

We had prepared for our first parent weekend by formulating statements of what emotions we felt as a result of Jacob's actions. He prepared a similar list of what he felt towards us. One at a time, I, and then Robin, were to sit face to face, knees touching, tell Jacob how we felt, and then listen to what he had to say to us. We, and two other families, were sequestered in a room with a therapist that each of the addicted boys shared. I kept waiting for the other families to be excused so we could have what I anticipated would be an emotional, intimate, and heated encounter. I was horrified when I gradually realized that the other families were not going to be dismissed; we were going to air our shit in front of

everyone. It was a stroke of genius. We found that there was almost a universal story of how these intelligent, personable young men had lost their way.

It was the same weekend that I came to the conclusion that my work of raising my son had come to an end. No matter how much I wanted Jacob to lead a sober life, I was now powerless to influence him. As almost all parents ultimately discover, our children have the right, even the duty, to live life in their own way; whether we approve or not. Despite being told that this program had a 75% success rate, Jacob has observed that only a handful of his peers have remained sober after two years.

After about a year of therapy, Jacob made the commitment to lead a sober life. To my amazement, he seems to genuinely enjoy our company. His last words in every phone conversation we have is "I love you." He has become a sponsor of other young men struggling with addiction. Jacob celebrated 4 years of sobriety last February. He is 21 now; a paramedic going to school on scholarship to become a physician's assistant. And once again, I can envision his seemingly unlimited future. And yet, I know that Jacob has a disease that he will constantly struggle with for the rest of his life. When I consider that Phillip Seymour Hoffman had over twenty years of sobriety before dying of a drug overdose, I know that we must never be overconfident that Jacob's addiction is a part of his history. Our family's frog must constantly monitor the temperature . . .one day at a time.