



Photo: Lore Caldwell

# walk a mile in my shoes

**JOE SCHOOLCRAFT** has a caseload under which some therapists would crumple and cry 'uncle', according to one grateful client. Joe's skill and empathy came the hard way: drugs, alcohol, a gun to his own head in despair. An understanding boss got him into a residential substance abuse treatment program. He's been repaying the kindness ever since.

I've always been a helper. A few years ago I found an old report card of mine from kindergarten. The teacher's comment was "Joe loves to help others." For a number of years after I dropped out of college in the early 1970s I floated from job to job and place to place depending on where my alcoholism, addictions and search for happiness took me. But most of the work I've done throughout my adult life has been in the helping professions. I worked in state hospitals and residential facilities for emotionally disturbed and delinquent children and adolescents, as well as facilities for mentally ill adults.

There was considerable alcohol use by my father and older siblings in our working class family. The usual unwritten, unspoken rules in my family were, "Don't talk! Don't trust! Don't feel!" I began drinking at a very early age (11 or 12 years old). I believed it made me feel safe. I was pretty much of a loner, had few friends, and never felt like I fit in. I was always seeking but could never find that happiness that I knew must be out there.

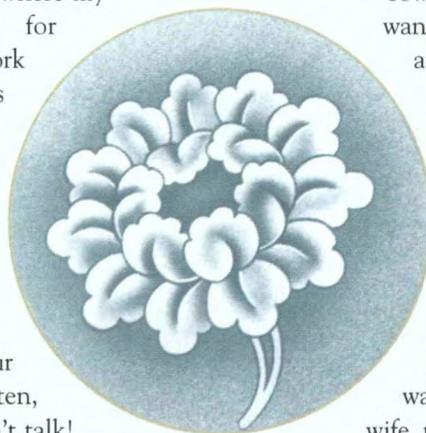
I started with drugs in the 1960s when in high school, which helped fill that void for a while. My tolerance to chemicals grew quickly, where by the time I was a senior in high school I was using on a daily basis. When I left home to go to college my usage only grew with the extra freedom I had being away from my family.

I stumbled through the next 10 or 15 years lonely and depressed. I never wanted to kill myself or die, just to find some sense of happiness and fit in somewhere. I went through one marriage that was a miserable failure. Then tried another, which was not really all that much better. My wife and I were friends but also more drinking and drugging buddies than anything else.

Toward the end of my substance use I did want to die or at least have the pain go away. I ended up with a loaded gun in my hand pointed at my head. I hated who and what I was, and what I was doing with my life. I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror without a great deal of self-hatred. However, I never blamed myself or the drugs or alcohol. I saw most of my problems as fate rather than my past negative karma ripening. The problem was always someone, something else – my wife, my stepdaughters, my boss, the job, the neighbors, the bills, the weather, whatever excuse

I could make. I was drinking up to two cases of beer a day as well as using a tremendous amount of drugs. I was arrested for assault, wound up in jail, not able to go back home, and threatened with the loss of my job. I was sleeping on a friend's back porch and still using. I ended up talking to my employer who almost immediately got me into a residential substance abuse treatment program.

Many people say that recovery, for them, is a second opportunity at life. I slowly began to see recovery for me as a gradual rebirth from being a *preta* in the hungry ghost



realm to the human realm. I know I still have one foot firmly planted as preta because I still have an addictive personality and a great deal of the three poisons to overcome: anger, attachment, and ignorance.

When I entered that treatment program for my substance use I knew immediately I wanted to go back to school and become a therapist. One and a half years later I was back in school and working toward that goal. The next seven years were spent working full time, taking care of my son, William, (his mother and I were now divorced) and working on my undergraduate and Master's degree in Mental Health and substance abuse counseling.

For the last four years I've worked at White Mountain Mental Health, a community mental health center, in Littleton, New Hampshire. It's been a wonderful opportunity and experience beyond words for me to work with a marvelous Clinical Supervisor and clinical staff. I was initially hired to coordinate an intensive outpatient program (IOP) for chemically dependent adults, many of whom had a diagnosis of mental illness as well. The program ran three hours per night, three nights a week, for a minimum of eight weeks. And it also included a family component, which met one of those evenings. I did this for three years as well as saw individual clients with substance abuse and or mental health issues. Currently, most of my work is with a somewhat broader range of individual clients, including adolescents, with the same types of issues.

When I was about five years old, our minister came into our Congregationalist Sunday school class and asked us what we were learning and what we wanted to learn about. I spoke up rather quickly and said I wanted to learn about the Buddha. I vaguely remember being in a great deal of trouble for this. I'm not totally sure where this came from because in the mid 1950s there weren't that many people in the United States who were aware of the Dharma, and especially not in my family. So, I guess I believe, I was reborn a Buddhist and have always been a Buddhist. (Is this a case for reincarnation?)

I spent a lot of time reading Dharma books and studying the Dharma on my own over the years and always considered

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myself a Buddhist. I've always been attracted to the writings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism. I floundered with my spirituality and Buddhism throughout my life of addictions. Once I became clean and sober and started to attend 12-Step meetings (after I got out of treatment), I saw an immediate connection for me with the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous and the Dharma. Owning responsibility for our actions – karma.

The first formal classes or teachings I took were about seven years ago when my friend Peter Baker, the director of Milarepa Center in Vermont, invited my son and me to a Summer Kids' Camp weekend. I felt at home immediately with the people at Milarepa Center and took an instant liking to Geshe Tsulga.

Subsequently I took Refuge with him and several years later asked him to be my teacher. I also find Ven. Robina Courtin to be very clear and easy to understand in her teachings. She helps put the Dharma into everyday terms that anyone, even a new student to the Dharma, can comprehend very easily. I often find myself quoting Geshe Tsulga or Ven. Robina to many of my clients who are searching for a way out of their suffering and pain.

Next to the Dharma and my son William, my work gives me my greatest joy in life. I see my work not as a job but a vocation. Giving to others for their benefit. Bodhichitta? I love what I do and no matter how hectic my life is or how much chaos is going on for me, when I close the door to my office with a client I am able (for the most part) to shut the rest of the world out and just be there for and with that client. I am not so vain as to think that I'm great at what I do but ... I know that I am a good therapist. I also benefit from the fact that I have to be real in that room, and it makes me have to be constantly aware of who and what I am and where I'm headed with my life.

Every day, I re-examine myself. I deal with many angry clients and it makes me examine my anger (which all too often manifests itself outside of the counseling room with all the paperwork and politics), my attachments and greed, and my ignorance, and attempt to re-adjust. Alcoholics and addicts can usually spot a fake a mile and a half away.

Oh, I have my share of "failures," but I constantly receive positive feedback from clients and past clients. Recently a

client of two years ago returned and stated, "You're like a good car mechanic, once you find one you want to keep them." I benefit my clients by being myself with all of my strong points and flaws. I attempt to hold up a mirror and help them to look inside themselves for their answers. I can share my knowledge, experience, and what little wisdom I have with them, but the rest is in their hands. At best they are with me for one hour out of 168 hours in a week. The client must go out there and do the work themselves. I know I am giving them something they want and need or they would not continue to come back.



A large percentage of my substance abuse clients are mandated (by the court or probation) to be in treatment. Thus they enter with a large degree of skepticism and suspicion of both the program and me. They often see it as just one more part of the system "out to get them." In the IOP, within a week or two they generally would become comfortable in the group and often stated I provided a "safe" atmosphere for them to come at the end of their day to "just be themselves" with no fear.

I saw myself, with my addictions, as well as seeing my dependent clients, as pretas or hungry ghosts, with an insatiable hunger and thirst that cannot be satisfied and only brings more pain and suffering when sustenance is found. This is where I attempt to bring in spirituality. Very few of these individuals have a sense of their spirituality, having lost it or never found it. I see the greatest success with clients who have or are developing their spirituality.

Spirituality, to me, is what helps a person to seek meaning in their life; what makes them feel connected to the bigger picture and the willingness to continue. It is what helps fill the empty void in our life and for the addicted person alcohol and or drugs are used in an attempt to fill this void, but it only makes our suffering worse.

I make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. Religion is an expression of a person's spirituality and praying is a behavior, both driven by the person's spiritual nature. However, it doesn't have to be a particular religion or philosophy. It can be a person's creative nature, their job, family, or whatever their passion is. For those not ready or who are unwilling to accept this due to little or no faith I discuss electricity: an invisible force, that we all accept, have faith in, and trust it will be there to help us, most of the time – except if you live in California [currently undergoing a lengthy energy crisis]. This

generally helps them to see they do have faith, they do trust something and it's a start.

I have several photos and statues of the Buddha, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Geshe Tsulga, and Ven. Robina in my office. Thus, part of my spiritual beliefs becomes apparent to many clients. When questioned about my beliefs I discuss the Dharma with them and how it helps me with my sobriety and mental health. However, I make it clear, these are my beliefs and work for me but each person needs to explore their own and what will work for them. I attempt to help them find their own way, be it Christianity, Judaism, Wicca, or whatever. I've gone so far as to suggest to a client to use whatever works for them, even if it is their left shoelace, or a rock or a tree. If I don't meet the client where they are on their journey I might as well pack up and go home because I'm useless as a therapist. If I only present the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous to clients, I will lose many who do not believe in these 12-Step programs. Whenever I do present Dharma I find it invaluable to do so in non-Dharma terminology and clients appear to almost immediately embrace it with open arms. This way there is no threat, just an idea for them to look at as a possible tool for them to use.

I also try to introduce various kinds of meditation to clients. For those not ready or willing to look at meditation, I suggest video games. If a person has their mind focused on that little creature (of whatever kind) on the television screen, their mind slows down and isn't racing at a thousand miles an hour in a thousand different directions making them feel like they are crazy and making them want to use. Clients laugh at me but come back repeatedly telling me how good it works for them. It's also good for business because then I have to work with them on their new video game addiction. Here is a good plug for someone out there to invent some Dharma video games!

Most of my practice is my work, but when I'm sitting, my analytical meditation is focused on how my past karma has ripened in this or that particular way, and how I need to continue to stay in tune with my body, speech, and mind to make positive changes to be able to help myself and for the sake of those whose lives I touch. When a client walks out of my office after an hour, neither they nor I are the same person we were when they walked in because we have both touched each other's life. This is very important for me to remember so I can keep a balance. I guess that is how I keep from burning out, my practice, my altruistic intention. I'm happiest when I'm helping others. ☸

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