

bread for the journey

Reputation and Character

By the time an addict finds his way to Rosecrance, his reputation among those who know him is pretty much shot ... such is the story of Tommy.

No one talks any more about Tommy's character and what a great guy he was. There may be a few "hangers on" who claim underneath it all ... Tommy is Tom Terrific, but there are not many left in his corner.

Before I go any further into Tommy's story, let me say: Addiction is a disease. It is a *potentially* fatal disease. It is also a *treatable* disease. Rosecrance knows addicts can recover from this disease. We say life is waiting for them. But there are also some hard-edged things we must say about addicts and the human condition. Chances for recovery and renewal increase exponentially to the degree we own the sorry truth of the stuff of which we are made.

With this said ... most people know the truth about Tommy's character and have learned to stay clear of him—or care enough for him to get him admitted for treatment. He's become the prototype for John Calvin's assessment of the human condition: All humans are totally depraved. We are not totally polluted, but we are certainly altogether tainted.

Tommy's reputation was pretty much sealed the day he drove the wrong way on Lake Shore Drive while intoxicated and killed a promising law student, who happened to be driving home the right way. It was the last in a long string of alcohol-related incidents that began years ago. Let's see, there was the assault in a bar, with Tommy resisting arrest and spending three nights in the county jail. Then there was the time he was caught rummaging through his father's wallet for money. It went on and on until his parents evicted him from their basement apartment. And now this.

Lincoln once said, "A person's character is the tree, but his reputation is its shadow. We are fond of focusing on the shadow, but the tree is the real thing." Here, Lincoln's assessment of the human condition is sentimental romanticism. Siblings and family members have sized up Tommy accurately. It's a character issue. His reputation is a reflection of his character.

Does it seem unfair that what people think of us is weightier than the character we think we bear? It is easy to understand how one might connect a person's character with his reputation. A tree full of tall tales casts a long shadow.

Tommy defensively argues what people think of him distorts what he claims is true. He is not as bad as what people say. Alcohol did this to him. Alcohol abuse mutes and muffles his true identity and character. So he says. Most steely eyed realists demur: "You are what you do. Your behavior trumps your self-evaluation. If you look like a dog, bark like a dog, and act like a dog, then you are a dog. An alcohol-addled dog but still a dog."

Tommy secretly knows he deserves the reputation he has earned. He is not a good egg. God doesn't make junk, but humans, fuelled by addiction, too often corrupt the original design.

Recovery begins and ends with an honest self-assessment: "I've been a rotten egg." The language of AA's first step is softer and kinder: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol that our lives had become unmanageable." AA is relentless in its pursuit of truth on behalf of a recovering addict. An admission of powerlessness over alcohol is not enough. Now comes the need for opening the vault of lies, deceptions, secret and deadly sins—the whole boat-load of sociopathic behavior so often descriptive of an addict's history. Steps 4 through 9 of the program of AA cover all of it from a searching moral inventory, to a painful self-disclosure of the whole truth about oneself to a complete list of character defects, to a willingness to have God remove them, and finally, to a list of all the people we have hurt along the way—and a willingness to make amends to them all.

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Even there, AA is not finished. We need to continue taking personal inventory and when we are wrong, promptly admit it.

And now it becomes clear. We understand why the Tommys of the world are reluctant to seek treatment but rather stay in denial. Exposure to the truth is painful.

Therein lies the hope: rigorous honesty about oneself. My reputation is what it is. I may be powerless to change what people think of me, but my character is something else again. It is possible for me to *manage* my character, not *change* it. I am responsible for taking charge of how I behave and the morally loaded decisions I must make. My life today can be something

more than “I am what I am”—something new, faithful, redemptive, loving and free. To trust a God of new beginnings and second chances makes all the difference. *Confession* for past sins heals. *Regret* for past sins, however, is a waste of time. One must resist the regret of doing things that did not fit one’s character, but find hope in the process of a character that is now being honed, refined and forged by the fires of speaking and living the truth ... maybe for the first time in my life. ☪

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Rosecrance Church Relations Coordinator. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with substance use and mental health disorders. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.