

He Stood at the Turning Point

2005 was a big year for me. Not only was I at my lowest adult weight (303 pounds), but I had moved away from where I grew up to the seacoast of New Hampshire, where I still live today. Until then, I had always lived with other people: family, a roommate in college, and apartment mates after. The apartment I moved into was a cute little studio that I rented alone.

I had always had jobs that kept me busy and active, so I never really gave much thought to what or how much I was eating because I always worked it off. I was a materials handler and forklift driver in a warehouse environment, very physical work. Nonetheless, my weight went up a bit, and for several years, it hovered around 340.

I developed a pattern where I'd lose about 35 to 40 pounds, and then, for whatever reason, I would get off track and the weight would slowly come back on, sometimes with interest! I went on a health kick and started to lose weight again. This time was different, or so I thought when I moved into my new apartment. Little did I know I was about to start an epic journey into food addiction, big weight gain, and big weight loss.

When there was another person in my living space, I subconsciously felt accountable about the food I ate. Living by myself, I realized quickly that it didn't matter what foods I bought—only I would have access to it! Looking back with 20/20 hindsight, I now see that with this newfound “freedom,” there was a part of me that was relieved because I wasn't going to be judged for bringing junk food

into the house. Honestly, I don't think any of my prior roommates really cared, but there was that critical part of my mind, a part of my disease, that felt shame around food.

I found a local job as a second-shift lead person in a warehouse. I often checked my weight on the shipping scales as I walked by them. It was creeping up again, but I really wasn't worried, and I told myself that I was just living and enjoying life!

After another year, I was promoted to second-shift warehouse supervisor, which meant that many of my responsibilities changed. I started spending less time working on the floor and more time either in meetings or parked behind a computer. The problem was that my eating habits did not change; I was still eating like I did when I was more active. So, of course, the weight started coming back on.

I can remember times when I would get on the pallet scale in the warehouse and see the number and think to myself, "I won't let it get any higher"—but of course I did. When I was around 335, I swore I wouldn't let it get past 340. When I hit 350, I wouldn't let it get past 355, and the cycle continued. It never occurred to me that I was a food addict with an insidious disease of the mind.

After another year, the work environment changed again. The company started phasing out second shift, moving some personnel to first shift and letting others go. Thankfully, I was moved to first shift. My position changed from warehouse duties, to working full time on the computer. I felt proud and

accomplished because I was finally being recognized for my mind and trusted to work on sensitive material on the computer.

For the next couple years, I made good money and spent weekends with old friends. We had a great time clubbing, going out to eat, and spending money. But there was a nagging feeling in the back of my mind, in the depth of my spirit, that something was wrong, a little out of control. My weight continued to climb, and I continued to feel more and more uncomfortable in my own skin. It was increasingly hard to get around, and I developed mild COPD, which made it hard to breath.

A coworker at the time was going through the process of getting gastric bypass surgery. At the hospital where she was getting it done, the process entailed a five-year commitment: one year pre-op prep and four years post-op support. I went with her to a few pre-op meetings to see if it interested me. I decided to go for it. The total cost was \$75,000, but it would be covered by the company's health insurance plan. I printed off the 35 pages of insurance information and the ten-page application. On January 10, 2010, I had all the appropriate forms filled out and ready to submit to human resources for approval when I was called into my boss's office and laid off.

I felt crushed and confused that I had lost my job. I went into a deep depression, and my eating got worse. I had no idea how heavy I had gotten, but I knew I was well over 400 pounds. I felt grim when I started looking for work because I could hardly move and got easily winded. How I could I perform any type of meaningful job?

After almost a year without a job, my health was getting worse. My mother suggested that it might be a good idea to explore applying for disability. My mind told me that by doing so, I would be admitting defeat, and that I would be less of a man because I wouldn't be able to earn a living. But I reluctantly went forward with the application. I applied in January 2011 and was denied a few weeks later, so I hired a lawyer and appealed the decision.

As the end of my unemployment money neared, the fate of my disability application was still unknown. I was coming to terms that I might have to give up the apartment I loved so much and move in with a family member until I got back on my feet.

On Sunday, April 10, I sat in my mother's kitchen. We had a heart-to-heart talk about my situation and about life. I committed aloud to both myself and to her that beginning that day, I would do whatever it took to turn my life around. I had no idea what that would be, but I knew I needed to do something drastic, or I would eat myself to my death. The following day, April 11, 2011, I walked into my first OA meeting.

I can still clearly remember opening the door and walking into the meeting and feeling a little embarrassed. Here I was, clearly the biggest person in the room, the only guy, and twenty years younger than everyone else. But, in a leap of faith, I went in and sat down. Within the first few minutes, I truly felt that this was exactly where I needed to be. I immediately felt comfortable and at ease. I don't think I said anything during that first meeting, but I heard so much that I needed to hear. For the first time in a very long time, I didn't feel judged in the

slightest, but instead I felt welcomed, accepted, and, finally, understood. For the first time, I was in a room of people that just got me, who understood exactly where I was coming from with regard to food. After the meeting, several people warmly welcomed me and made me feel accepted. I realized that I was finally going to be OK. I met extraordinary people in that evening's meeting, and I still do today.

In the following weeks, I went to three different meetings a week and started to feel real hope. Hope that I was going to be all right and that I wasn't alone. For the first time, I admitted to myself that I had an unhealthy relationship with food, an addiction to food, which had started from a very young age. Growing up, I always used my allowance to buy candy, and often hid food in the floor boards of my bedroom. As an adult, I had always used food to try to sedate myself whenever anything emotional or stressful would happen, or to celebrate something happy and good.

People kept asking me if I had found a sponsor yet, and when I answered no, the same name kept coming up, "Have you met so-and-so yet?" After attending a few meetings with him, I approached him and asked if he would sponsor me, and thankfully he said yes. (And to this date, he is still my sponsor!)

My outlook on life began to turn around. Things didn't look so bleak anymore. The first true test of my new attitude came as the end date of my unemployment came up. I had no job in sight and no word on my disability case. But God was truly already working in my life. First, both of my parents offered to help me so that I was able to stay in my apartment and meet all of my bills. To

this day I am still so very grateful that not only were they both willing to help me, and that they were both in a financial position to do so.

Then I found a new doctor in the area. For my first weigh in, I needed to go to a different specialist whose scales could accommodate my weight. My doctor's scales had a maximum of 400 pounds. I weighed in at 466. That was a big reality slap! I didn't have money to pay for my care, so going on faith, I applied for financial aid through the hospital my doctor was affiliated with. I thought, "Why would they care about me?" That was the disease talking. Much to my surprise, the hospital granted me 100 percent financial aid for one year of services. I had a second proof that my higher power was helping me.

I saw that the tides were turning in my life. I had found a great sponsor and started my step work. I had found a great doctor that was very thorough and watching out for my best medical interests. Then came a third blessing.

In September, I had my disability appeal hearing. It was much earlier than my lawyer expected it to happen. It went well, and the wait for the decision seemed to go on forever. But I'll never forget when it came. I was sitting in my home meeting—the one I'd walked into that first evening—when my lawyer called to say that I had received 100 percent disability. I believe this was God's way of giving me what I needed most, which was time. Time to do what I needed to do to turn my life and health around.

How else did I know my higher power was working in my life? I was reading the Big Book with my sponsor. It was a warm summer day, so we were sitting outside at a spot we'd been meeting at for weeks. We got to the end of the

3rd step, and he asked me if I was ready to take the next step and commit to writing a 4th step inventory. I took a deep breath and said yes. So we held hands and said the 3rd step prayer together. The moment we uttered the last sentence, the very last word of the prayer, as if on cue, a nearby church bell rang three times. It was a church bell that neither of us had ever noticed before. For me, it was God's way of chiming in!

I spent the next 10 months or so writing my 4th step and reading my 5th step. This was an incredibly healing time. I felt I could tackle the serious issues of my past in a safe, nonthreatening environment. Issues that were holding me back from my true potential, issues that were fueling the anger inside, issues that were strengthening the disease every day. For the first time in my life, I took on and released the anger and ill feelings I was holding onto surrounding sexual abuse I had survived as a child.

I had the willingness to not only work the steps—which was scary at first but was the best thing I've ever done for myself—but also a willingness to let my higher power help me develop a workable food plan with my sponsor. I also felt an interest in exercising and becoming more mobile. I would never have imagined that! Some of my first workouts were as simple as just walking to the end of the driveway and back. Now I enjoy working out 6 days a week! The support I have received has been incredible and life-saving. Because of it, I have so far lost over 165 pounds and only have about 50 or so more to go, all without surgery!

Perhaps my first true God moment was the day that I was laid off. I feel that was God's way of telling me that he had a better path for me to take than the one I was heading down. I am about to celebrate the three-year anniversary of my first meeting, and I am a completely different person than I was when I walked in. I never realized how bad I was feeling until I started feeling good—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I have learned and am still learning, to live life to the fullest. I don't need to sedate myself with food, and I can take it one day at a time. I came into program hoping to get my weight and food thoughts under control, not realizing that I would really get a whole new design for living. In addition, as my program has improved, my important relationships have improved. I can now say that I truly love myself and don't think of myself as second rate anymore.

The next few months are going to be exciting. Thanks to OA, I have a new, confident life. I feel that I am now healthy enough to reenter the workforce, and I want to take on a new career direction. With the experience of a 163-pound weight gain in 5½ years and then a 165-pound loss by using the program to arrest food addiction, I can offer a unique perspective to people who want to get healthy. What better way to do 12th step work, both inside the rooms of the program and outside, than going into personal training and weight-loss coaching? Never in my life did I ever feel that I would enjoy exercising as much as I do now, let alone truly wanting to make a career out of it! That, to me, is a sure sign of God working in my life.