

PRINCIPLE SEVEN

As we live in sexual integrity, we carry the message of Christ's healing to those who still struggle, and we pursue a vision of God's purpose for our lives.

Finding a Purpose: I Have a Vision

When Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, was first published in 2002. It quickly became a best seller. In its first two years almost 19 million copies were sold. People hunger for the answer to the book's sub-title, "*What On Earth Am I Here For?*" We are likely to ask, "Why on earth did I do everything I did?" "What was God's purpose for my life?" or "How did I get so off track from God's purpose?" There are no easy answers to these questions, but understand this:

You cannot undo what is done.

And

You must go forward from here.

As you work through our last principle, you will learn how to go forward and use what you are doing now to carry the message of Christ's healing to those who still suffer.

In the first assignment you will prepare your story, which will become your testimony. You will begin sharing your testimony in the second assignment, first with your trusted L.I.F.E. Recovery Group; then, as you become stronger, with others. When you work on the third assignment, you will be developing your vision, your "mission statement" for how you want to conduct your life.

Assignment Two - Sharing Your Pain

In Assignment One of Principle Seven, you made preparations to tell your story. Before you unleash yourself on others, take one more step. The goal of this assignment is to help you understand what God has been trying to teach you about Himself through your story.

I'm not saying that God sat up in heaven one day and decided to make you an addict or even simply to permit all these crazy things to happen to you. God allows us to have free will and to gain knowledge of Him through our own decisions. Amazingly, God designed life in such a way that our experiences can teach us powerful lessons about what He is really like. Our job is to listen.

Many books can be resources to help with this assignment. I would encourage you to read Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. (The biblical account is found in Luke 15:11-32, but you probably already know the story.) In powerful and insightful ways, Nouwen's book describes the roles of the Prodigal Son, the father, and the older brother.

How is it, do you think, that the father in this story was so understanding of the son? How is this earthly father able to be so forgiving? Isn't he like most other earthly fathers, who would react more harshly to a disgraceful son? One interpretation is that perhaps this father had his own sinful past. Perhaps he knew what it was like to make mistakes and to feel like he was in the "pig pen." Did this father's understanding of how all of us turn away from home allow him to take his son back in such a loving and gracious way? Clearly, in this parable Jesus illustrates the forgiving nature of God.

What's equally obvious is your own status as a prodigal son. You acknowledged your sinful rebellion back in Principle One, and you've continued your journey of returning home – your path into L.I.F.E.

While the father was glad to welcome the prodigal home, not everyone had the same reaction. Do you remember the jealousy of the older brother when the wayward son returned? He was judgmental and angry. Does that reaction describe your attitude toward others still mired in the pig pen of sin? Do you at times feel superior because of your progress in turning your life around? Wouldn't you want to be like the gracious father and not the older brother? It's your own life experience that can teach you to be forgiving and encouraging to others.

I recommend another of Nouwen's books called *The Inner Voice of Love*. Nouwen personally experienced a time of great despair in his latter life. The word is that he, himself, struggled with some sexually sinful behavior. Eventually, he went on a personal retreat, where he kept a journal, just as you've been doing. Nouwen's journal was later published as *The Inner Voice of Love*.

One of his reflections in that book is very powerful. Nouwen says we should allow our pain to become "the pain." He believes that all of us have experienced circumstances in

our lives that create painful memories and feelings. It is our pain. Nouwen goes on to say, however, that if we only spend time dwelling on the unique circumstances that caused our pain, we'll fall short of really understanding it. We might believe, he says, that if our circumstances had been different, we might not have any pain. Better, he thinks, is to come to an understanding that our personal pain is our "opportunity" to experience the pain of all humanity.

Think about it. What has connected you with others in your life? Was it success? Have your various achievements really brought you the peace and serenity you've longed for? Have you felt connected by being on the winning team? Or, have you felt more connected by getting honest in the last weeks with others who know what you've gone through? It seems to me that when we allow ourselves to share our suffering, we find true connection with other sufferers.

Another book with a similar message is Larry Crabb's *Shattered Dreams*. He describes our reactions when we become shattered by life experiences and how we come to true connection through our brokenness.

Consider these words of Jesus:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

As a man who has struggled with sexual sin and addiction, you have lived that first part about being tired and stressed out. You have sought the rest that Jesus promises. But if you're like me, you've had difficulty understanding the last part about taking on Christ's yoke. Was His burden really light? It certainly doesn't seem "light" to me.

As God's son, Jesus gave up His status and became a man. As a human, Christ experienced the difficult things that we do. He was even afraid of the pain of his death and asked God, "If it be Your will, take this cup from me." Jesus felt abandoned in the Garden by His disciples. He was rejected and despised by His own people. He was tortured and put to a painful death. On the cross, He doubted and wondered where God had gone, until Jesus cried in despair, "Why have You forsaken me?" Christ knew the meaninglessness of hell, because He descended into its depths for three days.

When we're in relationship with Christ, we have a brother who knows how we feel. Do you remember what it was like to go to your first meeting, tell your story, and experience the huge relief that others understood? In that moment, did your burden feel lighter? That is what Jesus is asking us to do — take His burden, and allow your pain to be the pain of all humanity. It is also His pain, and He knows full well how it feels. After you've considered how your pain connects you with the pain of others, would you take away your past if you could? Do you see that perhaps it's allowed you to experience the pain of others who

suffer? Your own pain has given you compassion and empathy for your spouse, your children, your brothers and sisters. Can you begin to believe that the pain of your “burden” has been a gift?

How else would you begin to understand the gift of God’s grace through His Son Jesus Christ?

Perhaps, it’s time to stop feeling sorry for yourself. Do you see why some introduce themselves by saying, “Hi, my name is _____, and I’m a *grateful* recovering sex addict”? That statement is a testimony to the transforming power of God!

Journaling Exercise: Depending on God

Reflect and write in your journal about what your losses and pain have taught you about depending on God.

Now, as you consider sharing your story, I ask you to reflect on any testimonies you’ve heard. Which ones have really been helpful and inspirational? Has it been those in which people bragged about how well they’re doing, or has it been those in which people honestly and transparently told about their struggles and their pain? Perhaps it was a man who was willing to tell you his story that got you to come to a L.I.F.E. Recovery Group meeting in the first place.

Would you like to give the gift of your story to someone else? Remember back to all those times when you longed to know that someone else understood what you were going through. By God’s grace, someone came along, shared his story of brokenness and his healing, and now you’re on the road to recovery, too. Right now, I’d bet that you know someone who needs to hear *your* story.

Consider people to whom you’d like to tell your story. They don’t have to be possible or probable sex addicts. They just need to be people whom you know struggle. You may feel frightened at the idea of telling your story to “normal” (non-addicted) people. You may even be having a “shame attack” - that is, you’re thinking, “It’ll be hard enough to tell my story to other sex addicts. How could I tell it to *anyone*?” Relax for now. You’ll probably begin sharing your story only with those you know are relatively safe. As you grow in your recovery and transformation, you’ll find others.

In my early recovery, there were no L.I.F.E. Recovery Groups or sex addiction groups to go to where I lived. I was advised to go to any kind of 12-step group. So, I chose AA. I started going to a relatively large group and tried to “pass.” I wasn’t an alcoholic, so I would just say that I was an “addict.” No one seemed to mind at first. Then one of the men asked me, “Mark, just what kind of addict are you?” So, I told my story. It turned out that he struggled with the same kind of sexual behaviors. Over the next weeks we told our stories to a variety of the men who came to AA. Before we knew it, there were 20 men coming to a sex addict meeting that we started. My belief is that the Holy Spirit will direct

your storytelling. God will always bring people to you, and you will feel that tug at your heart, that they need to hear your story. Trust your feelings and be of good courage.

Now, I don't mean you should rush out and tell your story to everyone. (That's not practicing healthy boundaries.) You may have that temptation, because part of you just wants to tell the whole world and get the truth out there. You might think spilling all would be a great catharsis - a cleansing of your soul. But you need to be careful so that you don't share indiscriminately with those who might not be safe. When in doubt, always check out your desire to share your story with your group or your accountability network. Get their feedback about the appropriateness of sharing with a specific person. On the other hand, your group might also be able to encourage you when you need support.

Journaling Exercise: Sharing Your Story

List the names of four people who might need to hear your story:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Keep track in your journal of those times when you do share about your journey. In your journal record your feelings about what it was like to offer your "experience, strength, and hope." Describe the other person's reaction.

Do you see, again, that working this assignment of Principle Seven is a lifetime journey?

