



## *Thursday Memo – October 15, 2015*

### **“Third Time the Charm” or “Three-time loser”? – Warren Ferguson**

“I need your help” lit up in my iPhone, texting with an unrecognized number. I asked who it was; “Tom”, came the response. Tom had relapsed with heroin 3 months prior, having no showed for his last visit for buprenorphine treatment. He had been sober for a year then.

That year followed his second entrance into treatment, when he wept and begged for a second chance. His begging was so visceral that I felt embarrassed for the power that I held. “I just committed my third felony by cashing a bogus check. If I get arrested and convicted, it will be my third offense. They will throw away the key.”

How could I say no?

Tom is a very smart man. He actually ran a halfway house for individuals in recovery for years, typical of many people in recovery being drawn to the field. We had talked many times that sometimes intelligence and knowledge get in the way of one’s own recovery. It’s easier to intellectualize than to deal with emotional baggage, struggle with humility, admit powerlessness and the need for help.

This time, his third entrance into treatment, was easier. I knew him better, more importantly I knew of his demon. He had told me that he was a survivor of sexual abuse. At the encounter provoking this reflection, his trust in me provided enough comfort for him to divulge more information.

“Are you having any cravings?” I asked.

“Oh yes, especially this week”, which was at the end of March. “The religious holidays are always challenging.” A clue.

“Was your abuser a priest?”

“Yes.” Long silence.

“One of the most challenging parts of a 12-step program for me has been belief in a higher power. For years I asked, “how could there be a God if an agent of God does such terrible things”? The idea of a higher power just could not resonate with me.”

We spoke of turning points, the importance of counseling for PTSD and of his enlightenment, that religion is man-made as are the institutions and leaders of religion. Religion, he had concluded, was not synonymous with spirituality. He is a deeply spiritual man.

It is now August, 5 months later, and we are beginning to address some of his medical concerns: bad teeth, a bad hip, hepatitis C and tobacco addiction to name a few.

As someone who works in criminal justice health policy, these experiences are foundational. Why are we locking up men like Tom for non-violent offenses who need and deserve treatment? His innocence was lost while in service to God as an altar boy, perpetuating the short term solace of a spike in his arm to endure the flashbacks and emotional pain which has followed him for 50 years. Consider our crisis of mass incarceration in the United States. We are the most powerful country in the world, yes. But are we yet the most progressive? Are we yet the most just? What is our role as advocates to right the system?