ART'S WORKAHOLIC STORY

Revised in August 2003, the original version appeared as "Art's Story" in Bryan Robinson's definitive text on workaholism, CHAINED TO OUR DESKS (N.Y. Univ. Press. 1998). This story also appeared in the W.A. BOOK OF RECOVERY (2007). Although I've used the term "workaholic" here, I now believe "activity addiction" is a more apt and honest label for the world's most promoted disease..

I've been a workaholic since 13. Before that my childhood was the meat of a dysfunctional-family sandwich. I was pressed on one side by a tyrannical workaholic father whom I rarely could please. On the other was an apprehensive and distant mother always within arm's reach of potent prescription drugs. In the middle, aggressively competing with me for our parents' unfilled promises of conditional love, was my sister: seven years older, braver, stronger, and smarter than me.

My father was an Episcopal bishop, civic leader, a force in state politics. Around him I was always fearful I would be (and often was) scolded or punished for some awkward, selfish, or mean-spirited thing I hadn't intended to do. My mother spoke four languages and digested books on all subjects like some people eat candy. Around her I experienced constant anxiety and rejection, concluding I simply wasn't worthy of love. Confusion and conflict dominated all family communication. Exuberance was criticized. Sadness was ridiculed. Tenderness was wrapped in mock gestures, delivered with sarcasm.

Ironically I was told by my parents, house guests, and teachers how fortunate I was to be raised in a model loving home. What did I do with thoughts and feelings to the contrary? Like most kids in dysfunctional families, I denied them; stuffed them; considered them proof of my selfishness and ingratitude. Indeed, I could not trust any positive emotions I felt as real– only guilt, shame, fear, hurt, and betrayal. In short, to survive my childhood I accepted perpetual conflict and tight-lidded emotions as perfectly normal.

Around spontaneous, self-assured kids, I felt puny, ugly, and unpopular. I felt safest-- most in control-- when playing alone. I could then pretend I was one of my favorite fictional heroes: a strong, respected champion of justice, battling on behalf of the unloved and powerless. Thus childhood nurtured lethal seeds that would later bloom as workaholism: self-denial, self-control, and self-images.

Then I hit puberty. Emotions swirled in a flood or hormones, forcing my mind to resort to more effective means to channel the raging waves. As my body grew stronger, I selected small arenas to play out hero fantasies. Pitching myself into school and projects let me funnel my energies into creating respected self-images. The only price I had pay was to spend every waking hour struggling towards some socially accepted goal.

Every day I stuffed my hip pocket with a worn, week-at-a-glance notebook. It was Bible and scorecard, directing each hour of devotion to my disease and insuring I wouldn't forget a commitment in my frenzied pace. Its margins were crammed with lists of tasks to accomplish between meetings and before I could sleep. As long as I was working, thinking about work, or lining up work in my notebook, I felt in control, powerful, important. When I recalled how I felt pre-workaholic, the old fearful, shameful, guilty, kid seemed like someone else on a distant planet.

By the time I was eighteen I had become a professional musician, school-champion boxer, state-seeded tennis player, state-champion track athlete, straight-A student, and National Merit scholar. I was an Eagle Scout, president of a state church fellowship, and my high school's selection for Boys State. For two years I went steady with the school's most popular cheerleader, and a month before graduation was awarded a scholarship from Harvard.

Yet my parents' attitudes toward me did not change. No accomplishment was enough to draw Father's praise or win Mother's warmth. My response? Already up to my knees in disease, I dug deeper, tried harder, sought more accolades. I looked elsewhere for strokes of respect and approval: to teachers, coaches, teammates, and friends.

Workaholism totally engulfed my life. Proof? Awards, publicity, and self-images replaced love, affection, and self-acceptance. Even when I was out of the limelight, the relentless pace of work numbed my mind to haunting, unfaced feelings of lovelessness, powerlessness, resentment, and shame.

College devastated me. My sense of self-worth was completely dependent on high school triumphs. I viewed existence as perpetual conflict where only superior people survived and were worthy. At Harvard, however, it seemed every student was a better musician, scholar, or athlete than I. What's more they all seemed to know exactly who they were and what they wanted to do with their lives--whereas I hadn't a clue. For me workaholism had been so consuming I'd been too busy (and, of course, too afraid) to discover what career might actualize my real self– whoever that dreaded creature might be.

For three undergraduate years I battled suicidal depression, interspersed with belligerent bouts of drunkenness and savage play on rugby fields. Harvard threatened to expel me for riotous behavior. Molding frustration and fear into macho fury made it easy to win the school's middleweight boxing title.

Those three years I majored in English literature in what I now realize was a desperate attempt to retreat to the realm of fictional heroes. At the end of my junior year, foundering in warring emotions and seeing no other way out, I switched my major to psychology. Perhaps there I could safely discover who I was, why life had lost its direction and meaning.

I also became a Zen Buddhist and choose a career in criminal law. In Zen I could probe to reality's core. In court I could wield powers I'd fantasized all my life. I could harness disparate skills and energies, wage real struggles to make justice more than a concept in books.

After a stint in the Air Force I finished law school, along the way becoming the only law student to argue a client's case before my state's supreme court. The latter won me fellowships for further legal studies. I relished the logic and rationality of law. I was also in love with the most intelligent, talented, and beautiful woman I'd ever encountered: my wife.

For five years I litigated criminal cases for and against the government in Washington, D.C., got an advanced law degree, and mentored law students in court for five D.C. law schools. Proud at not taking a vacation during that time, I pitched myself day and night into preparing for and conducting trials.

Relentless activity muffled latent self-doubt, while the stakes involved provided adrenalized, grandiose illusions that my work was a matter of life or death. I resumed playing rugby on weekends despite numerous concussions and broken bones.

It was only years later I realized the powerless, oppressed, and unloved people I'd championed in court were parts of the child buried in me; the causes I'd fought for were surrogate battles I'd lost as a kid; each law student I'd mentored with loving care was the son I had wanted to be.

Near the end of this litigation time my six-year honeymoon jarred to a halt. My wife and I had fallen in love with each other's self-images and now found it difficult to sustain these fraying fictions. Yet we still feared letting each other see who we really were, to display true emotions, or reveal how insecure we felt most of the time.

One month I was offered a book contract by a publishing firm and a teaching contract by a California school. Nearing burnout in the courtroom, I jumped at the chance to take what I later learned

was a "geographic." My disease, of course, came with me and soon had me hurling myself into teaching, writing, and expanding the school's law-student clinic.

I toiled long hours in classroom and office, updating my law book til it became the nation's authority. Evenings and weekends (after long-distance runs or pumping iron) I'd occasionally swoop my infant sons into a gerry-carry and trudge off on mountainside hikes. In my warped mind paternal bonding could take place-- and fatherhood justified-- only through strenuous activity. Workaholism's lethal blend of anaesthesia and adrenalin let seven priceless years of fatherhood slip by in a flash.

One day by sheer accident-- or karmic design– I agreed to participate in a friend's addiction-recovery program. While I co-attended numerous meetings and workshops it gradually dawned on me that portrayals of addicts' lives, thoughts, and feelings also described my life. If I substituted "addictive activity" for "addictive drinking or using drugs," I was as much an addict as any I'd read of or met.

On 20 August 1983 (the day I consider my start of recovery) I drafted a long letter to my friend's clinic, described my symptoms, and asked if there were any treatment programs for workaholics. Weeks later a response arrived from a therapist not certain my request had been serious. He offered what's now too familiar a phrase: "What, workaholism, a disease?!" This spokesman for a cutting-edge clinic for recovering addicts knew of no program for people like me.

For the next seven years I observed my mental habits in light of what was known of the addictive process. I shared experiences with dozens of alcoholics, addicts, and others who worked from compulsive mind-sets. To a few workaholic friends I sent a booklet of my findings, urging recognition of workaholism as a disease and detailing discoveries of my own addictive thoughts and acts. Nearly all were supportive; some said I must have been running for years in their shoes.

During this period I attended sundry meetings of Alcoholic Anonymous. But when I introduced myself as a "workaholic" or a "political alcoholic" I got little sympathy. As the former I was just another of those will-power people who'd been bashing alcoholics for centuries; as the latter I was a weirdo in search of a social disease. Still, AA's twelve-step program seemed relevant and immensely beneficial. On the gut level of shame, fear, escapism, and self-esteem, the stories I heard in AA were mine.

One perceptive recovering addict suggested I attend Overeaters Anonymous. Although not overweight, for me the experience was a major breakthrough. It was true, the exigencies of earning a living kept me from completely abstaining from work (as recovering alcoholics abstain from alcohol.) But could I learn to face work non-compulsively-- as recovering overeaters must daily face food? Trying to synthesize wisdom from AA and OA, I wrote a year's worth of daily meditations for recovering workaholics.

In 1990 I decided I couldn't recover alone and started San Diego's first Workaholics Anonymous group; in two years over a hundred people attended. I volunteered for WA's first World Service Organization and became its secretary. Getting to know scores of other recovering workaholics awakened me to the power and immensity of this insidious disease: its deep roots, its destruction of families and health, its religious and economic rationalizations, its encouragement by cultures around the globe.

I continue unearthing facets of workaholism in my life: how strong emotions spark tendencies to turn from them and engage in distracting projects instead; how feeling powerless beckons me to physically control (or mentally "understand") whatever stands between me and desires; how doubts of self-worth urge me to build and believe in self-images; how inaction prompts me to fidget and make plans; how silence tempts me to gee-haw my mind with music, movies, or news.

I'm resigned to the likelihood these mental propensities will never cease wailing their siren songs. But from all honest beings I encounter (including dogs, horses, and non-human beings) I learn how to meet what is real.

Though my parents are dead, I've accepted their steadfast refusal to see what their parenting caused; who their son actually was; that their lives were ravaged by unrecognized fears. In a volatile marriage of thirty-plus years, Timeless Bride and I now discover, accept, and nurture each other's true-selves, freely share them instead of dancing or sparring with ghosts and self-images.

My fictional life is finally over. I'm more real, more honest, more me. Most days I feel wonder and joy from just waking without yellow chalk silhouetting my form. Some days fierce weather blows in from far poles. But I welcome all genuine feelings– others' and mine– and refuse to deny, distort, or flee from them.

As a practicing workaholic I never imagined serenity dwelt in my core. Now I can feel it merely by reaching through layers of what is not me: not titles, accomplishments– not this "story" of past events. It seems like a daily miracle to me how serenity can prevail through batterings by chaos and free-falls through mineshafts of I-don't-know's. And– as sublime paradox and cosmic joke– I'm getting much more "work" done!