NED

About seven years ago my administrative assistant told me that I had an urgent call from my significant other. I stopped typing on my computer and grabbed the phone. My partner, Victor, did not wait for me to say hello. "There's someone here at the house from the water com-pany telling me he is turning off our water service!" he shouted into the phone. What? I thought for a minute. I owned the house, lived there with Victor for about thirteen years, was a partner in a prestigious law firm, had all the outward appearances of a successful attorney, and yet my $100 water bill that was 60 days overdue. I had Victor put the guy on the phone and begged him to stop and take a credit card for payment. He said all right. I flipped through my wallet looking for a credit card that still had $100 available and took my best guess. It worked. No water shutoff. Lucky me? Not so much.

How did life get to that chaotic point? Well, I was in a ten-year "relapse" after abstaining from gambling. I had been clean for twelve years at one point, then went back out, and stopped and started in spurts and fits…. until I just gambled until I couldn't gamble anymore. In 12-step recovery I always disliked the term "slip," as I believed the central theme of Gambler's Anonymous — the desire to stop gambling — was the most crucial requirement to progress into recovery. I knew I didn't "slip." Rather, over a period of several years of not working any program, I had lost the desire to abstain. Once that desire was gone, I felt no barriers and reentered the gambling arena with a vengeance.

The compulsion took over my life, as I started to spend more time at local casinos than at my law office I went before work. I went after work. Initially, I brought a limited amount of cash with me sufficient to "play" for a while and left when it was gone. If I won, I might leave with some winnings, but returned within days to gamble away the winnings (and more. Over the period of about five years, I depleted my checking and savings accounts, drew down most of my retirement accounts (for which I still owe taxes on to this day, and worse, had to borrow against my house (which I eventually had to sell to get out of the large mortgage payments), used other people's money (which caused massive shame and self-loathing), and had to borrow from payday lenders against my cars (which were old and needed to be replaced in the first place).

Gamblers learn as I did that it is not just about the lost money. We lose time. We lose focus, perspective, integrity, and drive. Our

primary relationships falter. Our family and friends can sense that there is a hidden problem even if they don't become fully aware of the real problem. Our actions poison relationships with family, friends and colleagues. I experienced all these losses. Victor no longer trusted me. I rarely came home until the sun was coming up and he was leaving for his job. I was short-tempered. I was in that mode where one only looks at everything or every person in their life as a means to get something else. For me, that was to get money to gamble and to somehow survive until I could gamble again.

During most of my life, I was active in the LGBTQ and Jewish communities, my legal profession, community service, and in health and education charities. Losing the drive, focus, time, and resources that I used to bring to this work resulted in it all but evaporating from my life. My creative outlets in hobbies such as photography, cooking, writing, and music also dried up. Instead, I spent the majority of my days figuring out the minimum things that I needed to do to just "get by" at work and in life and then spent the rest of the day gambling, figuring out how to get more money to gamble, how to cover the increasing dangers from maxed-out credit cards, NSF checks, and ridiculously high cost payday loans. I had to sell assets or let them go, such as a timeshare which I could no longer pay the yearly maintenance, and some artwork I had managed to collect over the years. I canceled vacations. I canceled home services. Victor picked up the slack around the house but not without just-cause for multiple resentments. In sum, everything I had worked on and for over the years — a stable relationship, a successful workplace, community engagement and a reputation for integrity, were all crumbling under the weight of my insatiable compulsion to gamble.

When I look back at the chaos and suffering during the days in my active addiction, I am most cognizant of my loss of choices. It often felt like my car simply took me to the casino after work. My ability to make wise or safe choices was completely obliterated. The tentacles of my addictive cravings wrapped around every nook and cranny of my brain until I became focused on one thing…gambling, or as its often called, "staying in action."

I somehow had a block against going back to my 12-step program after all those years "in action." I was not wanting to hear judgmental and directive comments, whether well intended or otherwise, from the GA members that I would encounter. Instead I turned to a recommended therapist who specialized in addiction. Among the helpful

advice I received from him was that I try a program that he was aware of that was based on Buddhist principles in lieu of the traditional 12-step approach. I followed his advice and never looked back. At Recovery Dharma, I found a non-judgmental space where I could make changes and have a unique and empowered recovery experience.

Through my time in Buddhist recovery programs, and most actively and consistently in Recovery Dharma, I have learned that I DO have choices. I can choose how I act in the face of stress, disappointment, and even happiness. Developing a meditation practice, attending and chairing meetings, writing detailed inquiries, meeting with sangha members outside meetings to share our experiences — have all been key components in finding a better way to live. Learning the difference between feelings and emotions on one hand, and wise action on the other, changed everything for me. It opened me up to change my conduct and choose the compassionate or loving response to tough situations. Along with seeking forgiveness from those I harmed, learning how to act compassionately and practice forgiveness — of myself and others — are key lessons I have gained from working through the path suggested by RD.

It is not magic. It is not instantaneous. It takes work. For an addict, that is very frustrating. We want things right now. I was in active gambling addiction in the last round for about fifteen years, and yet I expected the cleanup would take a year or two. How many journeys work like that? Experiencing the length of time it is taking for me to dig out much of the mess that I created through my own actions is one of the hardest but most important lessons I have learned. Not letting that ongoing experience follow me like a cloud is also part of the learning. Letting go of "what was" and living in "what is" has been key to improving my life. And so if it takes longer than I hoped to get right again, I have also learned to let go of the idea of instantly getting my old life "back."

A compulsive gambler always thinks about "getting it back." The next bet, the next machine, the next deal, the next hand… always beckon with a mysterious allure of an instant fix. That unreal imagery is not for me anymore.

Today I try to live in the present, in the day, in the meeting, in the concert — in the moment. I make sure that I am mindful of what is happening and how I am experiencing it right at that moment. I double check with myself and sift through emotions and feelings to understand how they inform what might be my most constructive or compassionate reaction. I ask myself what is the wisest response in light of these consid-

erations. The issues do not have to be monumental — they can be as everyday as how I consciously respond to a rude sales clerk to the response I provide to an employee that delivers a disappointing performance on an assigned project. Working through situations with the ability to provide a considered response over a knee-jerk reaction provides a much more satisfying and peaceful way to live.

Certain other key concepts from RD enhance the path forward. Service has been key in my recovery, from starting meetings to helping other members with their projects. Sangha has also been important. The connections we make through service and activity within a sangha create a web of protection based on a couple of important attributes that we rarely experience during active addiction: trust and honesty! We learn that we can have relationships based on these qualities outside of the sangha too. Life does get better. Slow progress is always better than a slide backwards because there is no guarantee that we can overcome the next low.

Finally, the RD program and our recoveries rest on our reaching out when we feel vulnerable. It is not easy for an addict, as we spend so much of our active addiction making sure we don't need anyone else and certainly never showing our vulnerability. I have learned that reaching out for help is a crucial part of the transformation from being lost to following the path. It feels risky, but it's proven less risky for me than a spin of a wheel or the turn of a card. The journey on which I find myself today through RD is one of positive transformation. I hope you start or continue your individual journey and follow your own path toward a better life. The RD program is here for you. Reach out.