

Writing transformation: Using addiction recovery memoirs toward personal and social change

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Exploring the currently popular “recovery memoir” as a contemporary form of confessional spiritual literature, this paper considers how memoirists use their writing as a practice of healing and recovery. For some, the memoir’s narration of spiritual transformation from the ravages of addiction to recovery functions as a story of inner transformation and personal integration in which the primary focus is on the spiritual re-forming of the person. A newer category of recovery memoirs seeks to bring about social reforms by fostering changes in societal understandings of addictions and those suffering from them. Together these advance practical theological perspectives on addiction and recovery.

Introduction

Addiction and recovery are embodied experiences of a spiritual reality. Recovery memoirs constitute confessional spiritual literature in which persons struggling with addictions offer readers access to their personal narratives of transformation. The transformations these memoirs describe may be among the best available test-cases that spirituality and the body are bound up together in a person’s identity. From the standpoint of practical theology’s concern with contextually situated experience and lived religion, memoirs provide a point of encounter with people suffering from addictions. Recovery memoir writing thus comprises a spiritual practice for writers that: (1) participates in the formation of a new identity; (2) provides a site for practices of confession that are largely eclipsed from contemporary ecclesial and social practice; and (3) makes links between individual embodied change and transformation within the social body.

To better understand this embodied spiritual practice, I begin by listening to memoirists. Out of this hearing of stories, I ask why people write recovery memoirs, and why they are so prevalent at present. Then I discuss memoir writing as source for a

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first-person narrative perspective through which practical theological learning about addiction and recovery may take place.

Listening to memoir writers

Sarah Hepola’s *Blackout* (2016)

Sarah Hepola’s memoir opens with a story about waking up in bed with a stranger, unable to recall how she got there. As she tells it, her experience of drinking was terrible—but living with the anxiety and fear of her own wide-awake life was more terrible. She writes extensively about a common occurrence in alcoholic drinking in which a person’s





memory of their own actions is “blacked out,” inaccessible to recall. “A blackout is the untangling of a mystery. It’s detective work on your own life. A blackout is: *What happened last night? Who are you, and why are we f****g?*” (Hepola 2016, 3, italics in original, asterisks mine). She writes:

I had wanted alcohol to make me fearless, but by the time I’d reached my mid-30s, I was scared all the time. Afraid of what I’d said and done in blackouts. Afraid I would have to stop. Afraid of a life without alcohol, because booze had been my trustiest tool. I needed alcohol to drink away the things that plagued me. Not just my doubts about sex. My self-consciousness, my loneliness, my insecurities, my fears. I drank away all the parts that made me human, in other words.... (Hepola 2016, 22–23)

Hepola stopped drinking many times, only to begin again the next day or the next year. Her account indicates that sobriety is not a once-and-for-all achievement. What we learn from listening to her stories is how painful these relapses became, and how arduous was each climb back out of that pit into recovery. She invites readers to realize the extent to which, during the years of her alcohol abuse, her thinking adjusted to make drinking and even blackouts seem normal. Hepola writes: “People who refuse to quit drinking often point to the status markers they still have. They make lists of things they have not screwed up yet: I still had my apartment. I still had my job. I had not lost my boyfriend, or my children (because I didn’t have any to lose)” (2016, 131).

Hepola gave herself credit for not being as bad as other drinkers who lose boyfriends or children, ignoring the fact that she was not in a position to lose either. She writes about her own self-deception, however, from the perspective of a person in recovery who can now see this dishonesty for what it is. As the subject of the story, Hepola is an actively drinking alcoholic who performs the unconscious mental gymnastics necessary to preserve the ability to continue drinking. As the narrator, however, Hepola is the person in recovery, looking back on her “drinking self” with full awareness of her distorted thinking and how it functioned. From this dual position, the memoirist invites readers simultaneously to “know what was going on,” and also to have compassion for the addict through a growing understanding of her anxiety.

Hepola spent years going in and out of 12-Step recovery groups, always struggling with the explicitly spiritual dimensions of the 12 Steps. Eventually she found her way to a truce with her anxieties

about God, by recognizing the power of narrative:

Even the major work-around of a ‘God of my understanding’ was way too much God for me.... The ‘higher power’ idea came to me in increments. Like sobriety itself, it was not a spectacular, flailing jump but a tentative inching in the same direction. I thought a lot about storytelling. That was a power way bigger than me. When I listened to someone’s story, when I met the eyes of a person in pain, I was lifted out of my own sadness, and the connection between us felt like a supernatural force I could not explain. Wasn’t that all I needed? I needed to be reminded I was not alone. I needed to be reminded I was not in charge. I needed to be reminded that a human life is infinitesimal, even as its beauty is tremendous. That I am big and small at once.... My spiritual life is in its infancy. But the major epiphany was that I needed one.... Whether God exists or not, we need him. (Hepola 2016, 212–213)

Hepola’s language is not theologically sophisticated, yet it points out the complex spiritual and theological realities with which she must struggle. There is an honesty to these questions, because they are tied to real, significant, embodied experiences of being alone and afraid, of trying to be in charge of what could not be directed by her efforts. This is theological reflection on experience (see Gilmour 1997). Hepola describes herself as a spiritual novice, but with a significant awareness of her need for God.

Mary Karr, *Lit* (2009)

The poet and accomplished memoirist Mary Karr, like Hepola, recounts a journey of moving in and out of recovery numerous times. Karr’s recovery memoir, *Lit* (2009), aptly describes the intersection of class wounds and addiction. She describes digging her way out from lower class Texas origins into upper class surroundings in an elite Midwestern college. The same issues of social class followed her into marriage with a man from a wealthy family. Alcohol provided some respite from the constant feeling that she was not okay and did not belong.

Karr tells of a brief period of temporary sobriety during pregnancy and the early infancy of her son, and of returning to drinking when he was still an infant. She confesses that drinking became so central to her ability to function that it even superseded her care for her sick son: hearing him cough in the night, she stopped to take a drink of whiskey on her way to help him, although alcohol’s palliative effects were diminishing as her tolerance to the drug increased:



A drink once brought ease, a bronze warmth spreading through all my muddled regions. Now it only brings a brief respite from the bone ache of craving it, no more delicious numbness. Slurping these spirits is soul preparation, a warped communion, myself serving as god, priest, and congregation. . . . In the next room, my son clings to the crib bars like a prisoner. . . . But before I change him, before I squirt the syrupy acetaminophen into his mouth, I haul him whooping down the stairs to the kitchen. I open the stove where a near empty bottle of Jack Daniels squats like the proverbial troll under the bridge. Needing neither glass nor ice, I press my lips to the cool mouth, and it blows into my lungs so I can keep on. (Karr 2009, 161)

In this confession, the now-recovering narrator invites readers to be as shocked as she is that her craving for alcohol took precedence over even the need to tend to her sick child. The narrator and the reader recognize what the actively drinking alcoholic subject of the narrative could not see, namely, how completely her life was directed by alcohol, and how muddled her thinking had become.

Karr's memoir details not only her journey into recovery but also her eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism. Initially, she had difficulty with the idea of a higher power. She offers this description of her first attempt at prayer:

... I take a small cushion down and get on my knees for the first time in my life—prayer number one. Higher power, I say snidely, where the f**k have you been? The silence envelops me. There's something scary there, some blanket of dread around me that feels like God's perennial absence, his abandonment, if he does exist. (Now I'd call it my deliberately practiced refusal of his presence.) ... A few seconds later I say: Thanks for keeping me sober today. I get up. Wait, the sober mind says—that's trying? You could've died last night. I flop back on my knees. And help me. Help. Me. Help me to feel better so I can believe in you, your subtle bastard. Such is my first prayer. (Karr 2009, asterisks mine)

There is an irreverent, humorous edge to much of this memoir seen here in the way she reports the content of her prayer. Importantly, though, Karr soon began to pray regularly, a practice that more than any other seemed to shepherd her into her new identity in recovery.

Karr's story of recovery is more explicitly religious than is Hepola's, even though the two of them shared an initial longstanding avoidance of spirituality. Karr eventually joined a Catholic parish and was baptized. She recounts theological conversations with her priest, her friend, and her sponsor as she sought understanding of faith.

Prayer became essential to her. *Lit* ends with these words, an expression of her faith that the mystery of God enfolds her even in the deepest fear and suffering:

Every now and then we enter the presence of the numinous and deduce for an instant how we're formed, in what detail the force that infuses every petal might specifically run through us, wishing only to lure us into our full potential. Usually the closest we get is when we love, or when some beloved beams back...It can start you singing as the lion pads over to you, its jaws hinging open, its hot breath on you. Even unto death (Karr 2009, 382).

Why memoirs? Why now?

The above investigations raise the question as to why this genre of literature is so prominent at present. Hepola offers a clue: "Every sobriety tale is a cliffhanger. None of us knows how our story ends. But these ... conversations [with fellow alcoholics] are good for me. They deliver me from my own sorrow. They remind me of my usefulness. They keep me from forgetting. How I got here, how I climbed out. I forgot too many things for far too long. Not just what we did last night but who I was, where I wanted to go. I don't do that any more. Now I remember" (Hepola 2016, 230).

People suffering from addiction write memoirs because, like the narratives told aloud in 12-Step meetings, a recovery memoir is a way to share one's experience with fellow sufferers, to prophylactically cement the memories of how bad things got while using drugs, and to integrate the story of drug use and recovery into a new identity.

Of course, there are many other possible reasons for writing such a memoir. Influenced by social media trends, it has become appropriate—even expected—to talk about one's self in great detail with the full expectation that others want to hear the story. Such sharing makes public matters like addiction which once remained private—a change some welcome as a mark of greater openness and health because it works against secret-keeping that can perpetuate dysfunction. But perhaps the boom in memoir production stems from the context of a narcissistic, "selfie-" oriented environment of tell-all talk shows that market personal struggle as a form of entertainment. Memoirs that make a spectacle out of addiction's debauchery, abuse, and humiliation will sell (Rak 2013; see also Duff 2013). Some such



memoirs have the appearance of a truth-telling confession, but their disclosures take place in the absence of narratives of forgiveness and transformation (cf. Lansky 2016).

Michel Foucault's critical connection between confession and the workings of power comes to mind here. Foucault identified Christian confessional practices as complicit in domination and the workings of power, involving people in participation in their own surveillance. He specifically considered writing about the self as a form confession can take when it reiterates normalizing discourses and produces the socially "required truth" about oneself (Foucault 1988, 30). According to Foucault, truth-telling as a technology of the self shifts during modernity from its religious domain in pastoral practice to the domains of medicine and psychotherapy, as discursive practices of power become more dispersed in a secular society. Under the guise of liberating the self, required truth-telling disclosures actually become ways that a person's verbalizations participate in their own domination.

In several of his later works, however, Foucault turns to an exploration of certain "techniques of the self" from the Greco-Roman period organized around the art of self-care. He considered ways that people can "effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, own their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves" (Foucault 1993, 203). Self-writing/autobiography may be a technique of self-care in which a person participates in their own *subjectification*, an act of constituting or transforming the self, when it involves a critical look at the ways one has been constructed by social practices of power, says Foucault.

From a practical theological perspective, it is possible to see both elements—domination/oppression and self-transformation-- at work in recovery memoir writing. While memoirs certainly can play into the cultural narcissism of truth telling as spectacle, if we listen to writers like Hepola and Karr, the most important reason the authors themselves indicate for writing memoirs is that the act of narrating their move from active drug use to recovery participates in a transformation of life through narrative re-formation of the "old self" into a new person-in-recovery.

Memoir as a source of first-person encounter with addiction and recovery

Memoirs offer first-person encounters in which the primary agenda is to learn about the experience of addiction and recovery *from the perspective of addicted persons themselves*. Sally Brown puts into words why this is so important from the perspective of practical theology when she writes, "At its core, practical theology is critical reflection, both socio-cultural and theological, on living texts of human action. The ultimate goal of such practical-theological investigation of action may be to guide individuals and communities toward better faith praxis, however, the immediate goal is not to get at what human beings ought to do but simply to learn what they actually do and what they actually experience" (Brown 2013, 31). As Peter Gilmour notes, in our time memoir functions as a "postmodern sacrament," for "outward signs of God's grace are sacraments, and these signs of God's grace may be and indeed are most commonly found in the ordinary experiences of human beings. The stories of these encounters are sacraments: actions of God" (Gilmour 1997, 71–74).

Practical theology's methodological concern for contextual, situated knowledge suggests the importance of hearing first person accounts of addiction and recovery. Commonly, we access such narratives through ethnographic research and interviews. But as Kathleen Greider (2007) has demonstrated in her study based upon the memoirs of persons who suffer from mental illnesses, there is wisdom in memoirs' storytelling that cannot otherwise be gleaned. There undoubtedly exists within the academy a tendency to discount these books, as many are published on the popular "trade book" market rather than for academic libraries. Nevertheless, memoirs as works of self-interpretation offer an important means of learning about the experiences of addiction and recovery from the perspective of recovering persons themselves.

In memoir, addicts are the experts on their own lives--the ones naming what is true from their perspective, the ones in charge of how their addiction and recovery is portrayed. This creates conditions for upending the usual power relations between experts (including theologians) and addicts, in which the experts tell people struggling with addiction how they should understand their experience. Thomas Couser, writing more generally about illness me-



moirs, put it well when he said, “Ultimately, illness and disability narratives are too important to be left to physicians; as much as possible such narrative should be authored by those with the condition in question” (Couser 2016, 7).

Performing a recovering identity through writing

“Therapy rescued me in my twenties by taking me inward, leaching off pockets of poison in my head left over from the past. But the spiritual lens—even just the nightly gratitude list and going over each day’s actions—is starting to rewrite the story of my life in the present, and I begin to feel like somebody snatched out of the fire, salvaged, saved” (Karr 2009, 300). With these words, memoirist Mary Karr begins to describe her transformation from a life centered around alcohol’s numbing effects to a new life in recovery. It is not accidental that she speaks of this new identity through the metaphor of a rewritten story. As a poet and writer, Karr is keenly aware of the connections between narrative and identity, just as she names here the connections between spirituality and her new recovery life-story. Through her recovery memoir, *Lit*, Karr performs the narrative re-writing of her identity, from a person for whom alcohol “shrinks me to a plodding zombie state in which one day smudges into every other,” to a person self-consciously living by the grace of God in recovery (Karr 2009, 177). Scholars and practitioners in the field of addiction studies agree with Karr that the move into recovery necessitates inhabiting a new narrative (Winslade and Smith 1997; Miller and Rollnick 2013).

“Illness memoirs” offer first-hand stories about personal encounters with disease, the medical establishment, and healing. Their common template resembles what psychologist Dan McAdams (2006) refers to as “redemptive narratives.” That pattern involves a person whose beginnings are not extraordinary, who then experiences the occurrence of a seemingly insurmountable difficulty (illness, poverty, tragedy, loss). This is followed by narration of how the person triumphed over these difficulties, concluding with a new story of identity based on the wisdom, strength, and character attained through the struggle of overcoming the difficulty. The subject of the story experiences suffering as “redeemed” (justified, made worthwhile) by its products in the

life of the narrator, in ways that give hope and are satisfying to readers.

Recovery memoirs constitute a subset of illness memoirs and redemptive narratives, following a similar template of an encounter with difficulty, transformation, and the emergence of a new self. Thus Heather King ends her memoir, *Parched*, saying, “I don’t know why God allows obsessions, cravings, disease: I just know I’m really glad that when Christ stood among the Pharisees he said, ‘Healthy people don’t need a doctor; sick people do.’ I just know that anything that is worthwhile about me arose, in one way or another, from the suffering of those twenty years of drinking” (King 2006, 276). Tracey Mitchell, a recovering heroin addict, similarly writes in the prologue to her story, *The Big Fix*:

To some, my story, my journey to recovery, is a cautionary tale. To others, it is a light in the dark world known as addiction. When I look at the life I have built for myself, it is hard for even me to believe that I was ever a hopeless drug addict. To this day, when I reflect on how I went from college student to junkie, I have more questions than answers.... What I do know is that when I hold my child’s hand or help a person in need, all of the pain I suffered becomes transformative. I have learned from my journey that I am strong. I am capable of great things. Not despite my past but because of it.... We can all do something that will make a difference. I am the proof. (Mitchell 2016, 7)

As written accounts that construct and disclose a narrative identity-in-process, recovery memoirs can become for their authors a spiritual practice through which they deal with addictive pasts and construct present-tense recovering identities that they hope will take them into a different future, even as they offer help for others who similarly struggle.

Memoir as spiritual practice: Making space for confession

Many recovery memoirs take on a confessional tone. Even though some writers take an explicitly non-Christian stance, their narratives still bear the marks of a theological practice of confession when they name and acknowledge their participation in wrongdoing/harm/sin in the hopes of forgiveness and perhaps even reconciled relationships. I read this situation as the convergence of three phenomena: (1) existence of a basic human need for practices that facilitate a person’s address of wrongdoing and



need to be unburdened from guilt; (2) the decline in spaces where rituals of confession take place, both ecclesially and in secular contexts; and (3) the dominance of 12-Step programs in shaping the discourse of addiction.

Some scholars (cf. Jones 2006) attempt to restrict forgiveness to its explicitly theological meanings apart from psychological or sociological elements, and similarly to narrow the practice of confession to its liturgical and/or sacramental occurrences. While confession is theological and liturgical, it also is a basic human practice beyond its instantiation in the church, related to the need for the repair of relationships and communal bonds that are torn by the ways people harm each other (Wuthnow 2000). At the same time, theologians recognize that even in churches today people express declining interest in individual practices of confession, while liturgical confessional practices may be so general or poorly executed that they do not address the human need behind them (Morrill 2014; Ramshaw 2016; Dallen 1991). In non-ecclesial spaces such as courtrooms, confession is a carefully scripted strategy aimed at minimizing negative consequences of wrongdoing, rather than a practice connected to repairing damaged social bonds. The result is that there exist fewer spaces legitimating genuine practices of confession.

12-Step programs, of course, are an exception to this. It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of the 12-Step movement on conceptualizations of addiction, recovery, treatment, and even the criminal justice system's dealing with addicts, in North America. This movement is not without its critics, and its position within medical and criminal justice agencies dealing with addicts is increasingly contested (Sered and Norton-Hawk 2012). Despite such criticisms, however, 12-Step programs strongly populate the landscape of addiction consciousness in North America, creating a particular, widely shared framework for understanding and narrating these experiences (Warhol and Mitchie 1996). Socialization into AA culture entails formation via a particular narrative pattern. Recovery memoirs tend to adopt the shape of 12-Step narratives, regardless of whether the writer is active in a 12-Step group, because of the influence of these programs on the wider societal discourse of recovery. Recovery memoir writing becomes another such performance of a recovering identity, because to be in recovery *means* to tell such stories and in this particular manner.

Writing toward social transformation

Increasingly, recovery memoir writers also display an educational and/or activist agenda, bringing not only experiential but also theoretical expertise to the work of understanding the selves they narrate. Using neuroscience, feminist theory, critical race theory, or other perspectives that help addicts make sense of what has happened in their lives, memoirists make available these explanatory paradigms. Journalist Sarah Hepola (2016), for instance, having amassed a great deal of knowledge about the blackouts she experienced, teaches readers about what is happening in the body and brain of addicts who drink to the point of blacking out. Former drug dealer turned neuroscientist Carl Hart (2013) indicts racism in the US for its role in shaping even the science of addictions. Neuroscientist Marc Lewis (2012) intersperses substantive lessons on pharmacology and the neuro-biology of addiction with his personal story of drug use. Christian social ethicist James Nelson (2004) offers a theological reconsideration of sin and grace in relation to addiction, as he also shares his own experience of late-in-life recognition of alcoholism, treatment, and recovery. By combining two kinds of expert testimony, direct personal experience of drug addiction, and explanatory theoretical knowledge, these memoir writers shift their interest in transformation from a purely internal focus to the social realm, in an effort to change the paradigms through which readers understand addiction and recovery. As Rabbi Marc Margolius (1995) asserts, in Judaism, spiritual autobiography is practice of *tikkun*--repair of the world--suggesting the possibility that recovery memoirs can have social, not just personal, impact. Extending the practice of recovery memoir writing beyond personal transformation, these writers seek to participate in repair of the world insofar as inadequate understandings of addiction maintain stigma, impair help-seeking, and keep open the broken spaces in social relations damaged by addiction.

Conclusion

Recovery memoirs constitute a spiritual practice for their writers through which they endeavor to come to grips with addiction and live into a new narrative identity as a person in recovery. Memoirs constitute a form of first person encounter, and therefore can



be a resource for practical theologians who seek better understanding of what addiction and recovery are like from the perspectives of those who suffer with them, that cannot be grasped through propositional thinking. Instead, “narrative thinking” is required for this kind of knowledge about addictions (Bruner 1986). Memoir as personal narrative has the ability to “grasp” readers as it conveys not only the details of an addict’s drug use, but also something of the bodily, psychological and emotional processes that go on in the lives and inner worlds of addicts.

Memoirs as a spiritual practice constitute spaces for confession in a society where such spaces are disappearing. It is possible for recovery memoir writing to become part of the surveillance culture of domination critiqued by Foucault, especially in convergence with postmodern cultural forces that create entertainment out of suffering. It is also possible, however, for recovery memoirs to act as a counter-narrative to these technologies of domination, becoming instead what Foucault referred to as “technologies of the self” in which persons may participate in their own transformation. Recovery memoirs often bring into full light the kinds of spiritual/theological issues raised by addiction and recovery, and the close-to-the-ground grappling with these large questions. Increasingly, as writers offer their personal experiences interpolated with explanatory paradigms they find helpful, the emphasis of recovery memoirs shifts from an exclusive agenda of personal transformation to the work of bringing about social change and tikkun, repair of the world.

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