

Understanding the Mind of an Addict

by Todd Smoke

I always clarify whenever I speak, “My name is Todd and I am an alcoholic. I have to constantly look at who I am, what I’ve been through, and I what I have to offer. It was interesting when John asked me to speak again this year, and he said, “I want you to speak on understanding the mind of an addict.” I figured, “Well, there’s a couple of ways I could go with that one. I could tell you that you’re not going to be able to understand the mind of an addict. Just realize they’re selfish, self-centered and get over it.” Then I’m done. The other way I figured is, that I’ve been in school the past couple years studying addiction studies and working toward being a drug counselor. I figured I could get a chalkboard up here. I could draw a brain and we could talk about neurochemistry for 45 minutes understanding the mind of an alcoholic. I could tell you all the things about alcoholics and addicts, how it affects our bodies, etc. But I really didn’t think that was what he was interested in either.

I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I am not here representing them in any sort of way. There’s no way I can tell my story without talking about this kind of stuff. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous says the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than his body. First thing I do when I talk to guys that are struggling with addiction, whether they be in detox or in a meeting or whatever, is to ask them what they think their problem is. Inevitably, it’s going to be “Well, my problem is alcohol. My problem’s heroin. My problem’s cocaine.” I’m quick to point out that that’s not the problem. You see, if I was to have a group of alcoholics’ dope bag on this table, and put a bottle of alcohol on this table... or, if I put a syringe full of dope on this table or a crack pipe on this table, those substances are just going to sit on that table. They’re not going to do anything. So, what’s the problem? The problem is the alcoholic or drug addict that gets up and walks over to that table thinking they can handle that substance, thinking it’ll be different this time. So, it clearly points out, it’s our thinking that is the problem. Before I pick up that bottle and take that first drink, I’m sober. Now once I take that first drink, all bets are off and I’m off and running. So, that’s what I am talking about with the problem being in our heads. It’s our thinking.

I’ll tell you a little bit about what I’ve been through and about my thinking at the time. I know when you look at your kids that are suffering from this disease, you think, “What are they thinking? Don’t they know? How could they do this to themselves?” That’s what I think is a real hard thing for parents. “Just let me know what’s going on inside your head, so I can fix it.” A lot of times we addicts just don’t know. I grew up in a really fantastic family. I tell my parents that to this day. It was a perfect childhood. Mom and Dad together, loving parents, two younger sisters. Dad played ball with me. I did well in school. I never felt there was a lack of love from my parents. I never needed anything. Everything was just fine. People always ask, “Why did you start using?” Well, it wasn’t cause I was lacking anything. I wasn’t hiding from anything and there weren’t any anger issues. I didn’t start drinking and using because no one showed up for my six-year-old birthday party. There’s no deep underlying issue here. Fact is, it looked like fun to me. That’s the only way that I can nail it. I saw other kids doing it and I thought, “That looks like fun. I’m gonna try that.” Just like with skateboarding, just like with surfing, just like with playing ball, it was exactly the same thing. There was no big deep emotional issue. It wasn’t even to fit in. It wasn’t peer pressure. I wasn’t trying to fit in with that crowd. It just plain looked like fun. From Day 1. This is cool. I can do this. I can drink. I enjoy drinking. I can smoke pot. I enjoy smoking pot. And on and on and on it went.

I started drinking and using pretty much around the age of fourteen. It was mostly at school/after school type activity. It was just another activity. Just like going to the beach. Go get high. It worked for a while. My thinking at those times was, “I can handle this. It’s no big deal.” At the time, it really wasn’t a big deal until I started getting caught by my folks. Then it became a big deal to them. To me, it was just, “Well, I’ll just be sneakier or I’ll just hide it a little better.” I was one of those con artists, manipulators, actors.

Addicts have to be like that. If an addict took all this behavior, all the manipulation, the lying, the acting, the role-playing, and focused that energy into Hollywood, they’d probably be Academy Award winning

actors. We have to be the actor all the time because we've got to act a certain way around our folks, a certain way around our freinds, a certain way around the boss, and a certain way around our siblings. We're acting all the time. Our big thing is we want to control the situation. We want to do what we want to do.

It basically comes down to selfishness and self-centeredness. When they wrote that *Big Book*, the original manuscript said, "The alcoholic is the most extreme example of self-will." I realize that that's true today about me. In my entire drinking and using career, I thought of me and nobody else. I started getting into a little trouble in high school, and that was just the no-show trouble. I got a ticket. I didn't go to court. They threw me in jail overnight.

Out of high school, I started having more problems. I thought at that time the drugs and alcohol were still working for me. I was asked to leave the house when I was eighteen. That was okay because I had friends. I was real involved in the early punk rock movement at the time. I was a sponsored skateboarder at the time. I could get loaded and hold a job. So everything was cool. Sure, I used all the time and all my money went to that, but I still paid rent. I still kept a job down. I was still able to do what I wanted to do. It's not a problem, don't you see? I'm fine. I don't know if I want to call that denial because it really wasn't a problem at the time, until the arrests started.

My first major arrest was the first time I overdosed. Alcohol and heroin are a bad combination. I can attest to that. Waking up to the paramedics and the police is not a pretty sight. That was my first major stay in jail. However, I really didn't think I had a problem. It was just a bad night. It was a rough weekend, that weekend. My thinking was, "I can control this. It's just fine. I'm a smart guy, don't you know?" The *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* mentions that most alcoholics are above average intelligence. Well, that's kind of a detriment to us because we think we can figure it out. I thought I could make it go my way. If I do this, then they'll do this, then this and that will happen, and I'll be fine. Here I am trying to run the whole show again. Fixing everyone around me, so I can be comfortable and I can be happy and I can still use. It'll be cool. It wasn't for quite a few years after that I actually started thinking that I did have a problem.

The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous is admitting you are alcoholic and your life is unmanageable. You see all these movies about the thirty-day programs where people walk into a meeting and admit that they're alcoholics. Everyone claps and says, "Oh, you've taken the first step." I say, "That's a bunch of BS." Actually admitting you're an alcoholic is a very small part of that first step. I admitted I was an alcoholic years and years ago and that became my excuse for what I did. "I went to jail because I'm an alcoholic. I'm having some trouble holding a job down these days. Oh, because I'm an alcoholic. I went to the store and came home four days later. Well, it's just because I'm an alcoholic." That became my excuse. So, I hadn't taken the first step. I'd just found an excuse. I can now put it off on, "I've got a disease. I'm an alcoholic. That's why I do this stuff."

That second part of that first step, "My life is unmanageable," took me quite a few years to really understand. Because, like I said, I'm a smart guy. I can figure it out. It's gonna go my way. If I just come up, if I fix, if I go there, get the perfect job, perfect girlfriend, diamond, nice house, everything will be fine. But see, I'm thinking about me. Me, Me, Me. That's all I think about. I'm sure it's hurting those people, but they're fine, they're older, they know how to handle that stuff or I'm worried about ME today. It took me a long progression to get to that point of unmanageability. You'd think that first waking up with the paramedics, the tubes in my arm, the ventilator, going to the hospital, then going to jail for ninety days, might have been enough to see that my life was unmanageable. Nah, it just kind of gave me more armor. "No, I'm cool. I can hang." From then on it was a progression, a downward spiral. I was still able to keep jobs most of the time, to live indoors.

I did a big geographic move to the Phoenix area in 1987. I was going out there to get off heroin. I tried the Methadone. They wanted to put me in Teen Challenge. I said, "No, that's not for me. I want to do it my way." I was able to get off the heroin there. However, alcohol was still my thing. I'd go into meetings all the time repeating, "I'm an addict. I'm an addict, but don't take my alcohol away from me, because I can handle that just fine. I'd already picked up one drunk driving citation before moving to Phoenix. Then I

picked up another one right after I arrived in Phoenix. The citations were spread out over a time span and in different states, so the authorities didn't connect them. I still didn't think I had a problem. I thought I could handle drinking. I lived in Phoenix about three years had eight or nine jobs and was unemployed two out of the three years that I was there. That was pretty much my first time homeless, where I actually lived outdoors. Once again, I rationalized it was okay because I could do what I wanted to do. I'm in Phoenix. It's summer. I'm not gonna be cold. The only thing I had to worry about sleeping outdoors was those thunderstorms that roll around in the evening time. I just had to get under something. I was still managing. At least, my head was telling me I was still managing. I'm fine. I can figure this out. It was just my thinking was all screwed up.

Actually, in Phoenix, I had my first attempt at getting sober. I went to a detox because I didn't have anywhere to live. I was getting hungry. I did the thirty day program and proceeded to get drunk as soon as I got out. I was exposed to recovery and to Alcoholics Anonymous, but I rationalized that I wasn't like those people. I rationalized that all I needed was a good job and I would be cool. It just didn't seem to go that way.

When I moved back to California, I started a seven or eight year cycle of in and out of recovery. Go to detox, get into a recovery home, last about a month or two, live on the streets or get an apartment, end up back in detox, round and round and round and round. It became a way of life for me. I see people saying, "I've been trying to get sober for ten years and rehab is just not working." I tell them, "BS, rehab is working exactly the way you want it to work. It's a place you hide out when things get too bad. Where you clean up and go back to doing what you were doing." I see that over and over again in the work I do. I spend a lot of time in the local detoxes in Orange County. I spend a lot of time in the recovery homes and a lot of time in the treatment centers. I see the same people over and over. That is kind of their way of controlling their drinking. The *Big Book* talks about how we'll do anything to be able to control and enjoy our drinking. Well, for me, if I'm controlling my drinking, I'm really not enjoying it. If I'm enjoying it, I'm way out of control. But these people are doing that control by bouncing from rehab to rehab to detox. Then we start throwing in the jail stays in between and maybe some hospital stays in between. That was my experience too.

I started getting real physically ill from my drinking. I ended up in the hospital for a week twice with pancreatitis and alcoholic hepatitis. Also, I started doing all the jail stays. First it was the piddly stuff. "Well, you didn't show up for your court dates, so you gotta go to jail. You didn't apply for your alcohol class, so you gotta go to jail." Then, it was another overdose. Then, it was an actual possession charge. Things kept getting worse and worse. The *Big Book* talks about worse, never better. Where I come from, we call it *worser*. Things get *worser*. **An alcoholic never goes back to the same level. It's always worse.** It took a long time for me to realize that.

It is said, "let the alcoholic or the drug addict suffer. Let them get their own experience." I know that's hard, but that's the way it's gotta be. I can't fix anybody else. If I'm working with someone that still really wants to drink, I'm gonna tell them, "Go drink then. Come back later when you're willing." It is harsh, but what else can I say. In order for me to wise up, I needed every bit of experience I got. I needed a two-by-four along side the head. That first trip to jail, the tenth trip to jail, wasn't enough "experience" for me. That third overdose wasn't enough "experience" for me.

You can't scare an alcoholic or a drug addict sober unfortunately. We try, and I still try it. But if it worked, I'd just get all the alcoholics in a room and show them scary movies. Bill's story, in the *Big Book*, talks about how fear sobered him for a bit. I've asked these guys, "Well, how long is it? Is that a day? Is that a month? How long can you tread water?" Some people longer than others. I've seen that. I've seen people white-knuckle sobriety for a while. I had to try white-knuckling it. I had to try treading water. I tried "Just Don't Drink." I hear that one sometimes in meetings. I'm like, "If I could just not drink, I wouldn't be here." "Just don't pick up that first one." "Well, why don't you show me how?" I've got this head that says, "I can do it. There's got to be a way." That's the screwy addict logic.

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My reason for coming into recovery in the beginning was I wanted the bad consequences of drinking to stop. Those seven, eight, years of in and out, in and out, I never wanted to stop using. I never wanted to

stop drinking. I just wanted the bad stuff to stop. I wanted to live indoors and to stop going to jail and I kinda wanted to work. Those are the things that were important. But don't touch my drugs and alcohol. I can handle that just fine. See, my head's thinking, "I'm managing." But I wasn't managing. What I was becoming was very adaptable.

What is hitting rock bottom? I don't know if I've ever hit rock bottom. Today, I've decided to stop digging. It's different levels for everybody. I needed every drink, every drug I did. I needed every jail stay, every night outdoors, to get me to the point where I was willing to recover. My thinking was "I can handle this. Someday I'll come up. I'll clean up." I see people transformed in three days all the time. Someone off the streets, drunk, will come into a detox center. Will sleep a couple of nights, maybe get some food. Three or four days later, they're like a brand new person saying, "Got it going on now. I just need to get my job back and I'll be cool." We clean up real quick unfortunately. If we could just stay sick for a year, that might help. I know that because I did the same thing. Come in willing, "Mom, I'll do whatever it takes. I'm done this time. I'm really sorry." I'm sure any of you who've been through it have heard the 'I'm sorry's' over and over and over again. Three days later, it's like, "Well, I've gotta get this and I've gotta get that and I've gotta get this and everything comes and we want to do it all because we're back to taking the control back over. I want that control. I want it to go my way. Me, Me, Me." Back to that. Selfish and self-centered to the **extreme**.

So, what did it take for me to actually get sober? Was it one incident? Was it an accumulation of incidents? Was I actually done? I can't really nail it down. I can tell you the last two days without were pure hell. After all my jail stays and the couple of years that I lived outdoors, finally got me to the place where I was in state prison. I went to state prison with the great idea that as soon as I got out, I would go into recovery. I was going to Bible studies and doing a lot of praying and a lot of reading while I was in there. I got real healthy in state prison. There wasn't much else to do. I worked out, I jogged, I ate well, got some good sleep and read a lot of books.

When I got out of state prison, I was probably the healthiest I'd been in fifteen years. Of course, my head took over one more time, "You can handle just a pint now. Look how healthy you are. You haven't had a drink in six months. This is the longest you've been sober since you were fourteen years old. You can handle a little bit." But the fact is, I couldn't. I got to stay at my folks' house for a couple days. They were going to let me stay there until the holidays were over, but it didn't work out that way. My dad found a bottle I had stashed and I had to leave. The thing was, I hadn't even been drinking yet. I wasn't drunk. I wasn't causing a scene. I wasn't shirking on my responsibilities. However, my dad knew when he saw the bottle, what was going to happen. He was passed that point of being angry with me any longer. He didn't get mad. He didn't scream. He didn't yell. He didn't get demanding. He didn't ask why or what are you going to do. He just looked at me and said, "You gotta go." He was burnt up with all the stuff I'd put him through over twenty years. He was so burnt, he didn't even have an emotion to spend on me. He just looked at me and said, "You gotta go." That really, really hit me hard. I could see the look in his eyes. It was like total defeat. One more time, he was hoping something was going to happen. That whole time I was in prison, I was calling him. He had been sending me books. He came and visited me. We were writing letters. I'm sure he thought, maybe this was going to be the time. The defeat I saw in his eyes was heartbreaking.

I had to leave one more time. I went out and drank and used for another couple of weeks, but for some reason it was different that time. I was drinking as much as I possibly could just to shut off my thinking because it was getting completely out of control. I was in such pain and I didn't want to face anything. I had a Probation Officer I had to see in a couple of weeks and all this hurt and confusion came crashing down on me.

I was sleeping outdoors up in the canyons where I used to go run and hide. It was raining and it was January and cold. The biggest thought in my whole world was to find a bridge. The reason I was sleeping outdoors in the canyon was because my head was telling me that I'm not homeless and I'm not a bum. See, even living in a canyon outdoors up there, with the mind of an alcoholic I was saying, "I can handle it and I'm adapting." It was telling me, "I'm a camper. I'm communing with the great outdoors." I had seen the homeless people in detox, with their dirty clothes and dirty bag, sleeping behind dumpsters, behind

buildings, or behind car washes. It's where they'd set up their little camp. I would rationalize "I'm not like them. I'll go out to South County and sleep under a tree because I'm a camper. I'm not a homeless person." This was my thinking. I'm dead serious about this, because I was "adapting." You talk about denial. Living outdoors, out in the canyon, but I'm not like them. I was never a panhandler. Never went to the soup kitchen, but I was real good at taking my Food Stamps and buying a banana and stealing a bottle while I was in the grocery store. I couldn't go ask for a quarter for a phone call. I'd go steal something and sell it. That was just my way. I couldn't face people is what it really came down to. I couldn't look someone in the eye and ask them for something.

That last night out in that canyon, I went down, got another bottle at about 6 in the morning. I couldn't keep the alcohol down. I felt real sick, so I called my dad. He helped get into a motel room so I could clean up so I could go see my Probation Officer and get some help. He wasn't trying to enable me. He meant the best. He was just showing me that he loved me, but he intended to cut this one off quick. I pretty much spent those two days when I was supposed to be cleaning up, just drinking in the motel room. I got to the point where I was so physically ill that I could not drink. *The Big Book* talks about the jumping off point. You can't imagine life with alcohol or without alcohol. That last day I was in the motel room. I had a full bottle. I couldn't keep a swallow down without throwing it up. I was shaking really bad. I was seeing spots. Itching, sweating, all the classic hardcore detox symptoms of alcohol poisoning. I couldn't get well. I got to that jumping off point. I started praying, God, "help me remove this obsession to drink, but help me keep three swallows down so I'll stop detoxing." So I'm praying to stop and the same time I'm praying to drink. That was pretty much when it hit me how messed up I really was. I couldn't imagine life with it. I couldn't imagine life without it. Now what?

We talk about people getting arrested. We pray, "God get me out of this just this time." There I was one more time praying to God, but realizing what I was praying for. What was I doing? I was just so confused. I had no ideas left. I didn't know what to do.

My dad showed up there that morning, devastated one more time. He took me back into detox. To this day, when I walked into the detox center, I am not sure if I was willing to stop drinking. I didn't want to drink. I didn't want to do bad things. However, I had to make it real simple because my head was still telling me, "Oh, I've done this before. I'll be fine." I was actually getting to the point where I was realizing I'd done this before and it didn't work. I had tried it over and over, but by then it had been ten years of this revolving cycle. Round and round, and I could handle it, and oops, oh just a little slip there. But the fact was, it was time to really get honest and that was one thing I had never gotten. "My life's manageable and I'm just adapting. I can handle it." Where's the real gut-level honesty? That 2 am can't sleep-honesty you get where you just want to say, "Just put me to sleep. I don't want to think about that." I really had to start getting honest with myself and I didn't like it. I don't like it to this day, but I do it. It's pretty funny, in the *Big Book*, the guys that wrote the book said that they don't like doing it either. It says in there, "Not many of us like this self-searching and leveling of our pride."

That first year of sobriety was really tough. It had to be real simple for me. Real simple. I got clear-cut directions on what to do to stay sober on a daily basis. Growing up in the church, I came to believe that if I went to church everything would be fine. However, I also had to work the twelve-step program. One thing I want to talk about is some of the pitfalls ministers' kids may have. What are some of the things that are unique to our situation? Well, growing up in the church, I had a preconceived notion, I guess, of what an ideal Christian should be. This was all in my head. It's not like someone wrote this down and said, "Here, this is what you have to be." My idea of being a complete Christian, giving my life to the Lord, meant I was going to have to wear a tie. I was going to have to have short hair and more than likely, I was going to be in Africa as a missionary. That was my big fear: I've got to be perfect. One of the big overlying things that I've seen with people in the church who have kids with drug and alcohol problems is that they believe "If they just get right with God. If they just recommit, everything will be fine." For a lot of people that works, but for someone with my level of addiction, I was way past that point. I tried that and it didn't work for me.

A lot of people in the ministry or Christians in church will look at twelve-step programs and it will feel foreign to them. Some people talk a lot about the smoking and the swearing and the rude conversations at

Nar-Anon or Al-Anon meetings. They look at that surface stuff and say, "Eww. We need church." People don't realize that the twelve-step program, the *Big Book*, is all about finding God. We get guys into recovery all the time for all different reasons for coming; the courts, the old lady, nowhere to live. There's no wrong door. Once you get here, I don't care what got you here or how you came in. I'm using the Big Book for a way to find God. Some people can't just walk into church and recommit. Okay, let's get real simple. Let's take a look at you. The book is for you to find a power greater than yourself, which will solve your problems. In that book, we talk about the second step: *We came to believe that a power greater than yourself can restore your sanity*. The book talks about how it's not necessary to believe when an addict comes in; the addict just needs to be willing to believe. "Are you willing to make a start? Are you just willing to believe? That's all that's needed." We start working with the honesty.

When we get to that third step, walls go up: Turn my life over to God ... ask a caring God to understand me? Well, that's pretty scary. That was the one thing I was running from for years. I got sober. They told me to say, "Thy will be done." Throughout the day, "Thy will be done." I thought, "Okay, that seems pretty simple. Kind of corny. Easy to memorize. Thy will be done. Okay, I can do that." Until I actually looked at that statement, "Thy will, not mine, be done." Not mine? I wanted to go my way. If I'm saying God's will, then that's taking the power from me, putting it on this God that I believe in. I know He's there, but to have Him running the show here, then I don't know what's going to happen. That means it may not go my way and I'm not gonna get what I want. It was a real simple statement that was real scary for me. Something I ran from for years and years and years. Come back to the church and say, "Thy will be done." Oh, no, no, because then, I'm doing these things that I want to hold on to. I don't want to give up. It's not about giving up. It's about getting.

This last time into recovery, when I really looked at that I became willing to believe. You'd think after having growing in the church that wouldn't be a problem for me, but it was difficult. I had to be willing to believe that He could be in my life and things were going to be okay and He was gonna help. Well, I started being willing to believe. I started saying, "Thy will be done." I started working those twelve Alcoholics Anonymous steps. I started getting that honesty that I never had had before. I'm not saying that I walked in that first month and was totally honest that first year, or today for that matter. But I'm as honest as I can be to this point. I strive for it everyday. It's something I really look forward to.

So that is some of the pitfalls addicts face. They come in thinking they've got to impress their parents, thinking they've got to be perfect little Christians, because they were raised in the church. They think if they start going to church with mom and dad then They will be expected to live by the same standards as their parents. Those expectations can make it real tough for them to get sober. In truth, they don't have to be perfect Christians, just willing to believe. It's so hard. Parents want to fix the problem, but they've got to walk through this valley themselves.

Guilt and shame doesn't work on addicts/alcoholics because they only think of themselves. We can't shame anybody into getting sober. That just adds more baggage. That just gives them a better reason to go run and hide. The addict is only thinking about himself/herself. The addict thinks he/she can handle it. Like I mentioned before, that's why we have to **let the alcoholic, the addict, feel their own pain, get their own experience**. Until they get to that point where they realize that selfish, self-centeredness is killing them, they won't get well.

I remember when I was going to prison, I began planning. "If I wait until the middle of July, I won't miss my kids' birthdays, so I've got three months to hide out until they catch me. My great thought was to go live under this bridge in Huntington Beach. It was summer time. I'll be on the beach. If I'm going to be homeless, I might as well be where I want to be. So I had my little backpack with my clothes and my surfboard. I was sleeping under a bridge. During that time I started getting real depressed and I had this great thought, "Maybe I'll just drink myself to death. I'll just crawl under that bridge and I'll just drink myself to death." **Selfishness and self-centeredness. I was always thinking of me. Just thinking of me.** The fact was, when I started getting to that point where I thought I might die, I was too selfish and self-centered to kill myself. The one thing that was killing me was the only thing keeping me alive at that time. Another phone call to daddy, another trip to detox, and then I went and did my state time. I just think

that is interesting that we're too selfish to kill ourselves. We'd rather just suffer and let everyone around us suffer too.

We addicts' thinking is not right. We have to get honest. We have to see that selfishness and self-centeredness in ourselves. It's so hard to see for the addict. I've got to get honest with myself. Part of my twelve-step work is reviewing my day at night, being honest with myself and cleaning up any messes that I made that day. This includes making any amends that I need to make. To this day I don't like doing that. Journaling allows you to examine your thinking for signs of denial. That's something I have to do on a daily basis. I still have to look at me and I still don't like it.. You know what? I'm not a perfect Christian today, but I am happy with who I am and with what I do. There's lots of room for growth. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous, my sponsor, or my parents point it out. There's always room to grow. As long as I'm going forward, cool.

I see God working through my life today. It took a while to get where I am today. I was doing that "Thy will be done" for a while, before I actually *saw* Him working in my life. When it got to the point when I could look back on seeing the things He had done, then I got it. We tend not to see it when it's happening. After walking through a rough spot, a rough trial, you come out the other side and it's like, cool. I couldn't have done that on my own. That happens all the time. I face things today. I walk through the fear. I walk through anger. I walk through pain and come out the other side much stronger. I have a faith in God that I never had before. A real faith that's in here. It's not, "Well, yeah, I believe." Real faith in here. I keep moving forward. I can't afford to backslide. Occasionally, I might do one of these, but I keep moving forward and I get back on track. What more can I say? Life's pretty cool today. Thanks.