

Fourth Chances

Shortly before Christmas of last year, one of the programs that my organization runs sent out their annual Holiday Cards. This program, a drug and alcohol detoxification center, provides 3 – 5 day stays for individuals trying to safely come off of substances. On their annual Christmas card for last year were printed excerpts from some of the thank you notes sent by former clients. There were your normal, “You guys are the best,” “Thanks for everything,” the everyday, “You saved my life,” and for me, the extraordinary, “Thank you for giving me a fourth chance.”

Thank you for giving me a 4th chance.

I cannot recall ever hearing a person talk about fourth chances. Second chances are what people usually get. A quick internet search proves that second chances are everywhere, lots of shelters, animal rescues, dating advice columns not to mention the thousands of songs, movies and love letters. Third chances, for sure – sports and games come to mind right away, three strikes you're out, three sets to a game, best out of three. But when have you heard about Fourth Chances? How many chances does it take to just think of it as too many?

The problem with chances is that by having a second or seventh one it means that you tried and failed to get

something right the first or sixth time around. If you are taking another chance you have been unable to accomplish a goal, to make a change stick or to live up to an expectation. Every time there is another chance there is another opportunity for failure. Another opportunity to let yourself down or to hurt a person who cares for you.

The person who wrote, “Thank you for giving me a fourth chance,” has a long track record of failing at recovering from substance abuse. Now I have never met him as far as I know, but it is safe to say that a really positive way of looking at it is that this person is very good at failing and getting back up to try again. He is so good that he can fail again and again and again and still give himself another chance to ask for help another time.

You don't end up in a detox because you had a hard night; he hit rock bottom, many times, and has nowhere else to go. If he had to come to a social service agency for a fourth chance that likely means that he used up all the chances he may have had with family and friends.

The words we use with “chance” are “take” and “give.” A chance is a thing that one person gifts to another—it is their trust, their love, their feelings, property, safety and ego. When the person who “took” that chance fails those things are lost. There is trust that is eroded, love challenged, feelings hurt. Maybe things have been stolen, people have been hurt or there is just an overall sense of loss. We talk about unconditional and never-ending love, but the truth is that sometimes we run

out of trust and we no longer have faith that we will have anything more to give when we are asked for another chance. When we keep giving our time, energy, resources and emotional support to a person who keeps failing sometimes we just run out. Sometimes this looks like “tough love,” sometimes it looks like “abandonment” and sometimes it just looks like burnout and exhaustion.

Before my recent career change, I used to run a domestic violence shelter. We took in individuals and families who had no other safe place to live because of the abuse in their relationship. Their chances had run out—they rightfully stopped giving chances to their abuser and the fact they had to use a shelter most likely

meant that their community, their family and friends stopped giving chances to them.

Most people who leave abusive relationships had to run 6 or 7 times before they left for good. People go back to abusive partners for all kinds of reasons, kids, money, companionship, drugs, homelessness and of course, love. In my experience, the people who end up in a shelter are not leaving for the first time. They have left many times before but this time they can't go to a friend's house, their family can't pay for a safe place to live or the state won't put them up in emergency housing again. Every time they left and then came back they lost a chance with someone. Domestic violence damaged their entire social network, it

took up everyone's trust and love and left a gap that a social service had to fill.

Research has shown that one out of four women experiences domestic violence in her life. That same statistic exists for LGBT people, one out of four. That is a lot of people. Compare that with the approximately 350 shelter beds that exist in the entire state for individuals and families running from violence. Every shelter bed will be full tonight. Every shelter bed is full every night.

At one point in my career, I was a one-man shelter operation. We were a very small agency that ran a 3-bedroom apartment that provided a safe place for an abused person to run to. This organization functioned as someone's first last chance. A guy I'll call Peter called the

hotline on a Friday afternoon at around 4:30. These calls always came on Fridays at 4:30. He was thinking about leaving his abusive partner but didn't know where to go. He had recently been physically abused leaving him with bruises, a limp and a dislocated jaw. He said that he was hiding in his apartment and needed to leave right away before his boyfriend found him.

So we arranged transportation and I met him at my "office" (also known as Starbucks). We sat down for a cup of coffee and to go over the program and Peter told me his story. He had been kicked out of his house when he came out as a young man but recently his parents gave him another chance and asked him to move back in. He moved back in but shortly thereafter met and fell in love

with his current boyfriend. He then moved in with the boyfriend and tried to keep connections with his family.

His relationship was up and down. They had a very passionate relationship, screaming, yelling, crying, fighting, laughing, loving... everything was big and dramatic. Shortly after he moved in, Peter noticed that his boyfriend was really into drugs. When they started dating he told Peter that he occasionally would smoke pot. What Peter discovered however was that occasional to his boyfriend evidently meant daily and pot also included cocaine and heroin. They had lots of fights about drugs and sometimes his boyfriend would make Peter use drugs with him.

The first time Peter left the relationship he went back home to live with his parents. They accepted him back into the home and were happy that he left his boyfriend. They gave him a job at the family business and everything seemed good. Three weeks later, Peter's boyfriend showed up at the parent's house and begged Peter to come back. Peter loved his boyfriend, accepted his apology and went back with him.

This pattern was repeated several more times. Each time, Peter gave his boyfriend another chance and then would be hurt either physically or emotionally. After the second time he went back to his boyfriend, Peter's parents told him not to come back to them... they were too upset about the whole thing. He went to his sister's after the

third time and when he left there to go back she told him that he wouldn't be welcome back because it was too much drama for her kids. He was already isolated from his friends, so after the last time he left, he couldn't go there and he was out of chances from anyone else he knew.

So, I helped Peter move into our shelter. The longer Peter was in our shelter the more it became evident that after his physical wounds were healed and he finally committed to himself that he was not the person to give his boyfriend another chance that his most pressing issue was drug addiction. He went from doctor to doctor with new and evolving medical issues. I couldn't believe that doctor's would deny him the treatment that he desperately

needed I finally said... “Oh... he is not looking for treatment, he is looking for opiates.” I even picked up a prescription for him, signing my name to the pharmacy’s opiate log because he told me that his leg hurt too bad to cross the street and go into the pharmacy. After 5 months and many, many 4th chances, my naiveté was stripped away and I finally ran out of chances to give.

I helped Peter move from our shelter to a homeless shelter. He hugged me and said he understood why I couldn’t give him another chance. This was one of my hardest days on the job.

A year later, I was running a different shelter for a different organization, 70 miles away from the one that Peter stayed at. I worked with the shelter to expand their

services from just being a “women’s shelter” to being a true shelter for all survivors of domestic violence and it turns out that our first male client was... Peter. I arrived to work on a Monday and there he was, same story as he had a year and a half ago.

I had recovered my strength again and decided that I could give him another chance. Convinced myself that this was a gift I was giving him... my faith... a second and this time a last chance. Peter stayed at the shelter for 3 months and then got his own apartment. He found the strength to live clean and sober. He repaired his connections with his family and at last report is happy, healthy and successful.

When I thought that I was “giving” Peter yet another chance it turns out that I received one too. I lost my faith in the ability for people to recover. I said to myself that desperate people did desperate things but that I really didn’t expect that my work could do anything but provide temporary shelter. By giving Peter another chance to either succeed or fail, I also gave myself another chance to repair my faith.

I found the truth in what has been written by Human rights, Bryan McGill has said, “When you give others a new chance, a new chance is really being given to you.”

Families supporting individuals in the throws of drug abuse can't keep giving chance after chance to their loved one just to be hurt again and again. The hurts get worse and the wounds are much slower to heal. It's not fair to ask someone to keep putting themselves out there to be stepped on over and over. How can we keep offering support, offering chances to someone who is really good at falling down? We take turns. When families run out, friends step in, when people we know run out charities step in, when charities can't give anymore... well, that's when we start another non-profit, right?

For some people, there are never enough chances and that is just the way it will be until it isn't any more. How do we know when enough is enough? This is when I think

it is important to personalize it. It can be hard for many of us to picture being wrapped up in the cycle of addiction that leads to crime, poverty, homelessness, prostitution, illness and eventually death for too many. Yet, how many of us have fought these same demons? How many of us have woken up and said, “Okay, today is the day,” and decided that we would be strong and this day we wouldn’t pick up? Maybe we aren’t talking heroin, but honestly, how many of us have said that initial “never again” to carbs, coffee, salt, tobacco, McDonald’s, swearing, endless hours of mindless TV, ect. Seriously my friends, I want to see your hands... you don’t have to testify to what it is, but how many of you have tried to quit

something, some material object, some behavior, some thought pattern, anything... and failed.

[Lots of hands raised]

That's what I thought... a congregation full of people who have failed.

Yet you are all still here! Congratulations, you have lived to fail another day! It is a safe bet that the majority of us will make another promise to make a positive change in our life and we will not be successful the first or 100th time around. This doesn't mean that we should stop trying though. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." To be fair, this quote is so powerful that it has

also been attributed to Confucius, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Goldsmith and of course, Vince Lombardi. However, because the 8th principle of UUism is an obsession with Emerson, I choose my friend Ralph.

Most of us will always choose to give ourselves another shot to fail. Who knows, this time we may get it right. What can we do to help others who need another chance to fail... we can hold one more chance back for when it is needed. We can rest when we are too tired from the last chance we gave. We can help that person find their next support and recover from the hurt that giving chances has brought to our door. We can give ourselves time to recover our faith in the goodness of people. We can give ourselves another chance and try to find ways of

extending a hand in a way that when and if that person fails, our hand will not be slapped quite as hard.

Most people struggling with change have not fought alone. A journey through recovery, regardless of the injury, may need a lot of 4th chances. It is okay to step back and hold that last chance for when you are able to, to not allow yourself to be hurt beyond repair. It is okay to pause and reflect on your ideas of failure. And then when you are ready again, step in and be part of the interdependent web of 4th chances.

Blessed be.