

Gambling, Grief and God

by
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At one time, my friend Dave was on top of the world. He had a fantastic job and was widely respected among Pennsylvania Bankers. He was quick with a smile and a self-deprecating joke. He had great stories and could be genuinely funny. But there was a dark secret in his life that none of us knew anything about. Dave was a compulsive gambler.

Dave got hooked on sports betting. What began as a \$12,000 betting debt snowballed into half a million. Each time he gambled, Dave thought he would finally hit it big and make it all back. He never did. Once down that slippery slope, he never recovered.

Dave London was the Chief Executive Officer at the former Peoples Bank of Unity headquartered in Plum. His friends agreed to take out loans at the bank and give him the proceeds to pay his gambling debts. Dave kept the loans current until what he did was discovered and he lost his job. Later, Dave was convicted of a crime. On April 3rd he began a 21 month prison sentence in Morgantown.

Over the last few months, as Dave held down a construction job making minimum wage, he was a man barely keeping it together, haunted by the shame and carelessness of his actions. Thoughts of prison paled in comparison to the personal scorn he faced and the public humiliation he quietly endured, often alone. Dave not only lost his livelihood, he lost many friends due to his compulsion including many banking associates who distanced themselves from him. Dave also lost himself as he contemplated suicide sometimes wondering if he should pull the trigger. But Something held him back.

One day, Dave surrendered his life to a higher power. It was one of the steps in his gamblers anonymous group. As he did, Dave discovered friends that helped him to put the pieces back together. He also found some old friends that genuinely cared, that hated the sin but still cared for the sinner.

When I spoke with Dave recently at lunch, he unraveled more of his story to me. He made no excuses. He knew he did wrong. He knew he needed rehabilitation. He knew his compulsion was an illness. He knew he needed help.

But Dave never painted himself a victim. He didn't want pity or sympathy. He understood exactly what he was, an addict that needed help, a sinner in need of God's redemption.

Although I always liked Dave, I could relate better to the broken man sitting next to me than the prouder man I once knew. One doesn't have to experience addiction to know something of that crummy, gnawing feeling inside.

For some of us, a tragedy can be so terrible, a hurt so unimaginable, a humiliation so unbearable, there is no choice but to get on our knees each night and ask for God's help. It is a humbling position to be in but in a sense, there is no better position to be in. It is the essence of the beatitudes. Blessed are the lowly, there is no where else to go but God.

God didn't come down and rescue Dave from His sentence. God didn't give Dave money to pay off his debt. God didn't even cure Dave of his addiction. But God did give Dave a chance to help himself. Perhaps God allowed Dave to be drawn down, down to his knees so he could reach up for eternal glory. For Dave, not hitting the big one and facing himself may ultimately be his salvation.

Dave has to pay the price for his crime. But like so many who have paid their dues, many unanswered questions await him. Will he ever be truly forgiven; trusted again by those who knew the man he was? Will relapse occur? It often does for addicts. Is God just the ultimate hedge? I pray it is not. Having been Dave's friend, something inside me relates and cries "but for grace of God, go I".



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