



Exiting the Self-Destructive Highway **A Sociological Path Back to A Future Career**

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Abstract: Lucky for me the date is 2007, because trust me when I say I would not have written these words, and you would not be reading them, if it was 2006 or prior. Why? Well, many times—at least many times that I can actually recall in my past feeble attempts at college—whenever a final paper was due, or any type of final project was assigned, I would just quit the class. Some might call it just plain old laziness and back then I probably would have agreed. Now, though, looking back, I think it had more to do with my being afraid of not just failing, but scared of actually doing something to get ahead. That's how I lived almost my entire adulthood; it seemed I would deliberately do things to derail any progress in my life. The problem with that, however, is that I may have thought for a time I was only hurting myself but now I realize I was also hurting all the people who loved and cared about me as well. Using various sociological concepts and theories, in this essay I explore the reasons for my self-destructive behavior of substance abuse while growing up, and explain how I have sought to exit the path in favor of more fulfilling educational and career plans.

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My thinking became so warped you could say I behaved in the polar opposite of how the theories on rational choice conventionally claim humans behave. **Rational Choice Theory** assumes that “people are rational and base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to their goals” (Wallace & Wolf 303). Looking back and thinking about all my past decisions and behaviors, never did I act with any rationale or with any particular focus towards my future. George Homans's term

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elementary social behavior—which means “behavior that appears and reappears whether or not people plan on its doing so” (Wallace & Wolf 315)—can best describe the manner in which I lived during my young adulthood. The behaviors that kept appearing in my life were behaviors that led to my own gratification. They appeared often.

Moving out of my parents’ house and gaining my freedom all my parents could do was watch in horror. The only time I finished a semester at school was when my father used what Homans called **the value proposition** that is “the more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action;” my parents actually would have to bribe me to go back and then stay in school. Once when they bought me a car and I didn’t finish the semester. I think they decided that they had enough and I was on my own when it came to school.

Several times I tried to go back on my own. I enrolled so many times I made a habit of it. In my previous half-hearted attempts at school I would make it to the end of the semester and just stop showing up—not every time, but enough times. I got to the point that I just expected to fail. I expected to fail not only in school but to fail in life as well. People I knew from high school were doing the same thing so I didn’t think there was too much of a **stigma** involved with not succeeding.

My expectations for myself were low, thus my self-esteem was low as well. One thing I found that helped raise the way I felt was to drown my sorrows in substance abuse. This went on for most of my young life. At the age of 29 I decided enough was enough and it was time to turn my life around. I had had enough of the way I was living and for the sake of my then-fiance and for myself I wanted to change. I needed to change.

While some people in this day and age are addicted to material things like big, huge plasma televisions, nice cars, fancy

clothes, and other meaningless possessions, I never had any need for most of these things at any time in my life. As shown in the film *Affluenza* our society is largely made up of people who are very passionate about accumulating material wealth. There were times that I wanted some of these things, but I spent so much time, energy, and money on my hard-living ways that I had no time for any of it. At the time I usually got by with the basic necessities and more often than not didn’t even really care.

Looking back is something I do often. I’ve learned that it is the only way to move forward and not make the same mistakes again. For this paper I think I need to go all the way back to high-school, to the beginning of my substance abuse, to really comprehend why I’ve been so self-destructive my entire adult life.

HIGH-SCHOOL

I always promised myself in my early teens that I wouldn’t ever pick up the bottle because of someone close to me who battled with alcoholism; I stayed with this for a long period. I don’t know if the first time I remember getting drunk with a friend was because I really enjoyed it or if I just liked the feeling of saying I got drunk to all my other friends. Either way it became part of my life. Being on the football team and just trying to fit in, I really couldn’t avoid it. My getting drunk was a **symbol**, “the stimulus whose response is given in advance” (Wallace & Wolf 211). I was symbolically telling the other players that I was part of the team. I was joyous on the outside because I had waited longer than most and got a certain amount of ribbing for not ever trying it sooner. Now I could finally say that I drank. I wish I could say it was the last time but the main reason I can’t is best described by Charles Horton Cooley’s concept, **the looking glass self**. The way I

imagined how my classmates saw me and the way I imagined they judged me left me feeling very alone inside. Yes I played football, basketball, and baseball, but I didn't have any real friends and just went out for the teams to fit in. I do remember feeling a certain amount of guilt when it became a regular thing but my feelings of belonging even just a little bit far outweighed them.

Goffman's concept of **impression management** can best describe my high school years. I certainly tried to guide and control the impression my peers formed of me by following what everyone else was doing. Everyday I made sure to wear my football or basketball jackets depending on the weather. They were my **personal fronts**. The only place I considered my **back region** was my bedroom. I didn't even want my parents to see how unhappy I was. Since everyone else during my senior year was binge drinking almost every night, that meant I was as well and since the next logical step for everybody else was to smoke, I did that too. I look back on those years and while part of my recovery is to try to have no regrets I do wish I hadn't tried so hard to **associate** with people who were doing things that weren't any good for me and in the end weren't really my friends at all.

THE OLD COLLEGE TRY

Leaving high school I definitely thought going away to college would be life changing for me. Even though I was not purposefully conducting what Herbert Blumer calls research **exploration**, the concept can sum up how I felt to leave home and go off to school. I was engaging in "a close and comprehensive acquaintance with a sphere of social life which was unfamiliar and hence unknown" (Wallace & Wolf 228) to me. I thought leaving my town and the classmates I tagged along with for so many years would be good for me. The four years I spent in high school felt like

one long process of **self-indication**, meaning that I never felt like anyone was really listening to me, that I was just conversing with myself. I thought with college things might be different.

One night after being there for only a short while I ended up alienating every single person on my floor which had roughly seven or eight people living together on it. I got severely intoxicated and got into a physical altercation with just about every one living there. I vaguely remember calling my father in a drunken state after the incident and begging him to come get me. My father drove all the way to my school which was in another state just to console me. He didn't want to but I made him take me home. For a very long time afterwards I felt like a **sociopath** and a very selfish person in my father's looking glass eyes.

My father never once pushed me for answers on why my attempt at going away to college failed but it wasn't for the lack of his not caring about me or his not caring about my education. He and my mother always stressed the value of a good education to my sister and me. I think he realized I was extremely embarrassed by what had happened at the school and he didn't want to embarrass me any further. Just recently, however, we sat down for the first time and talked about what had happened and why I really left that particular school. To delve more into the matter I would have to relate it to the concept of **ethnomethodology**.

Harold Garfinkel, as restated by Wallace and Wolf, defines ethnomethodology as the method "of making sense of everyday activities," of "how people make sense of their everyday activities," (Wallace & Wolf 269). Looking back at my behavior then amid my friends, I think that I felt then that by drinking and being rowdy with my new "friends" they would not only embrace me but find me funny and completely normal. What I didn't realize then, and not until years later, was that I should have been doing the exact opposite. I should

have stayed away from the alcohol and tried to stay as low-key as possible. My **stock of knowledge** then of what went on at college was limited to what I had heard about it from my high-school classmates and the stories they told me about the college parties either they or their siblings went to and how they couldn't wait to go to college themselves to be free of their parents and to party it up. In no uncertain terms did I actually think that I was going to learn something; I was going to meet girls, have fun, and be free of my parents.

In the end it may have taken me over 10 years but with the help of sobriety I was finally able to sit down with my dad and give him a full **account** of what had actually transpired and relayed to him the events that occurred and why I was in such a rush to leave that college. I never realized that he harbored almost as much guilt about it as I did because he had put some of the blame on himself for taking me home that day and feeling somewhat responsible for my not wanting to return after the fact. After we talked about it, though, I think we both got some much needed closure on the issue. I just only wish that we had spoken about it sooner so that he knew that I felt solely responsible for whatever stupid things that I've done—especially that one.

DRIFTING

Looking back, for several years I really felt like I had just drifted through life. Not really going anywhere but never feeling I was in one place for very long either. I did things that I'm not proud of, but some were things that I justified at the time as helping to pay the bills. My behavior during this time could be described by Robert Merton's **Theory of Deviance**. If we follow Merton's typology of deviant behavior, in the United States where "monetary success is highly valued and the legitimate means to it are unavailable for many our society should

have a lot of deviance" (Wallace & Wolf 55). I, sadly, fell into to this category. My **dys-functional** way of thinking led me to believe that engaging in deviant behavior was the only way I wanted to be living. To me it was the American Dream; but it was just my American "Dream." I thought I was being my own boss, making my own hours, making enough money to pay whatever bills that I had to pay, and the number one thing for me was that I almost always had something to help me escape reality and keep me feeling euphoric. Another thing that I thought was great about not having a steady job was that I didn't have to deal with any type of **bureaucracy** telling me what to do and when to do it. I thought this was great because I was never good at taking orders even if it was sound advice that might point me in the right direction.

I can almost identify with the last hold-out juror in the film *Twelve Angry Men*, in a twisted sort of way. If I was in a room with five people having a discussion on any type of subject I more often than not would turn it into some kind of heated debate. Just as the juror probably felt cornered, I would almost force people including my friends to try and back me up against a wall with my sometimes outrageous views on the world. I think I became so combative on purpose, or perhaps became so subconsciously, so that it would be easier for the people around me to care less about me and my problems.

The only **manifest function** such a behavior served—i.e., functions involving "consequences that people expect" (Wallace & Wolf 51)—was to supposedly help me have a good time. My life revolved around nothing and no one, except the substances that kept me going. Sometimes I wanted to change and other times I thought I was just living the good life. Neil Smelser's take on the concept of **ambivalence** sums up how I felt about my life at the time after living this way for several years. "As quoted by Wallace and Wolf, ac-

according to Smelser “the nature of ambivalence is to hold *opposing affective orientations* toward the same person, object, or symbol. Further, in the words of Wallace and Wolf, “In applying the notion of ambivalence Smelser refers to phenomena such as death and separation, retirement, and moving away from a community” (Wallace & Wolf 60). Smelser also says that the form of dependency may vary. Feeling ambivalent, I was afraid of separating myself from the substances that helped get me through the day. After living the way that I had for so long I often thought about cleansing my body of these chemicals and moving on from the toxic lifestyle I had been living for all those years but I didn’t realize until it was too late that it wouldn’t be as easy as I had thought. My ambivalence stemmed from the part of me who wanted to keep doing the things I was doing and the part of me who wanted to clean up and straighten out.

A passage from Toni Cade Bambara, quoted in Avery Gordon’s book, *Keeping Good Time*, describes it all for me, “So used to being unwhole and unwell, one forgot what it was to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught, be better than one was programmed to believe” (Gordon 200). This is what became of me, I had become so used to being a broken down man at the age of 25 that I all but gave up on myself. I felt “unwhole,” and “unwell.” I needed help but didn’t know how or even whom to ask for it.

THE NEXT STEP

Using C. Wright Mills’ **sociological imagination**, which involves the ability to relate my personal realities to the larger social structures, I often wondered at the time if my feelings and actions were normal. It took me a long time to realize I had a substance abuse problem, and even longer to

make the distinction that my **personal troubles** could even be related to a **public issue**. Mills makes the distinction between the two and his definitions of both are what make me believe that my problem although very personal to me is part of a very public one. There is another passage in *Keeping Good Time* that struck a chord with me, “People all over the world and in unprecedented numbers are struggling in all kinds of ways in the streets, on their farms, in their communities and schools for a sustainable existence” (Gordon 116). I honestly was oblivious to the fact that there were many people out there like me that were struggling with anything, including the substances that I was struggling with. My **alienation** from society in every way led me down a path where I was only concerned with myself; I had no concern for the people I loved or for anyone else’s well-being but my own. One could characterize me back then as having a very **blasé attitude**—i.e., as people who are “in boundless pursuit of pleasure, to the point where they become disinterested” (Farganis 132). I was only interested in myself and gradually it became only interested in where and when the next feeling of euphoria came from.

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES

I never thought I had a problem because I wasn’t like this twenty-four hours a day, I became pretty good at hiding my ever growing dependency on substances. I could be one way when I had to see my family and then another way when I was out looking for the next good time. I had several of these personas, one for work, one for my parents when I would go by their house every few weeks to let them know I was alive, and my favorite one at the time was the one for when I was out drinking. Only after viewing the movie *Multiple Personality: The Search for Deadly Memories* (HBO) did I become keenly aware of some-

thing. The movie obviously showed the extreme side of the mental illness and, while not to the extent of the cases portrayed, I think everybody has multiple sides to their personalities. What I've become aware of was the several personalities that came out in me quite frequently. Not to the extent of the three people the film portrayed, and not because of any horrible thing that happened to me during childhood, I now realize how different I could be in the double-life that I was leading. Looking back on this I think the time I finally realized it was time to clean my life up was when the side of me that was very self-destructive completely took over and became the sole personality that I lived with.

WHERE DO I FIT INTO THE WORLD?

One thing on my road to recovery that I have struggled with is answering the question: after all the years of wasted time and energy spent chasing something that was never there in the first place, now that I'm free and clear of those demons (or at least now that I have got a hold on my demons) where do I fit into the bigger picture of life? Where exactly can I find a place and contribute to society? Where do I fit into the world?

While I was wasting my twenty something years old life away most people my age were training and preparing themselves for promotions and better things; at least, the people who I ended up wanting to be like were. I wanted to get a good job and support my wife but knew I didn't yet have the tools or skills required to make it in today's job market. In this age of **globalization** where "large corporations dominate the globe" (Wallace & Wolf 179), no respectable company was going to hire me on my life skills or the associate's degree that I somehow managed to get when I was younger.

I was nervous but I decided it was time

to go back and finish what I started. I needed to go back and attain the skills I would need to be employed in one of those jobs I knew I wasn't still qualified for. I not only promised my parents but myself as well to follow up that route and make the effort. As the anonymous author of "Hooped Dreams: Internal Growth, External Stagnation, and One Man's Search for Work" said, "It involves fits and starts, sometimes it takes two steps forward, other times three steps back" (4). I felt like I'd taken enough steps backwards and that going back to really finish school would be a huge step forward for me. I also thought that now was my time to start contributing something towards a society that I had for long shunned so as to be alone and stay introverted caught in my own realities and addictions.

James McHugh's "It's Worth Living in the World" (2003), even its very title, was very inspirational for me. I picked his essay to read because the title caught my eye, then reading into it I found out that James was a homosexual. At first, I just didn't think I could relate to him. While James's main issue was different than mine he still dealt with most of the same struggles, fears, and emotions as I had. He also handled life situations the way I did: "I was alone, I avoided those around me, but I still wasn't happy when I pushed everyone away either" (1). This statement made me reminisce about the way I used to be. The last stage of my substance abuse was when I got to the point where I pushed everyone away and just wanted to be alone with the substance of my choice at the time. Opening up when it came to my journey through sobriety was at times painful and difficult and at other times wondrous and simple. Something Morrie told Mitch in *Tuesdays with Morrie* deeply resonated with me. He said to him "When we're infants we need others to survive, when we're dying we need others to survive, and in between we need others to survive." That was a lesson

that I had learned the hard way, but it was a lesson learned none the less. I was ashamed of the problems I was dealing with and the thought of asking for help to me was out of the question. The problem was that I had a very beautiful, loving girlfriend who didn't like the way I was living and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. Even in the haze and fogginess of my life I knew I wanted this and that if I did lose her it would lead me down the path of never being able to change my life. Morrie was right; in between we do need others to survive.

Something that I had procrastinated about for a long time, probably longer than most, was what I did want to get my degree in when I finally did finish. I've worked in restaurants for years as a waiter and as a bartender I had to engage more than a waiter in **emotional labor**—which is “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage” (Wallace & Wolf 250). I didn't want to leave my fate in the hands of someone who could fire me on a whim and/or pick up and move the company elsewhere like we saw in Michael Moore's film *The Big One* where in the movie it is all about the big corporation stomping on and taking advantage of the little guy. At first I thought when I entered my first semester at UMass Boston I would major in business management because of all my restaurant experience. I decided halfway through that first semester that it probably would be best if I majored in something else because I was stuck with what Arlie Huchschild called a strain of **emotive dissonance** which is “the struggle to maintain a difference between feeling and feigning” (Wallace & Wolf 251) from working in restaurants and bars for so long.

My father was a teacher, my grandfather was a teacher, and my uncle Paul who I am named after was a teacher. I was never comfortable in front of large groups of people and I just never thought that it was for

me to become a teacher. Even though growing up the thought of my becoming a teacher felt awkward to me, I thought it was a profession held in great esteem and I was proud of my father. I have been blessed with some degree of what Pierre Bourdieu calls **cultural capital** from my parents. Bourdieu says that in the educational context, “those from privileged homes have the attitudes and knowledge, especially cultural knowledge that make the education system a comfortable, familiar sort of place in which they can succeed easily” (Wallace & Wolf 113). I think that in my generation there is a strong trend whereby everyone believes that they have a destiny to become part of the **power elite**, that is “those who hold dominant positions in political, military, and economic institutions” (Wallace & Wolf 107). However, I think not everyone has to be a millionaire off of the website that they sold for a bunch of money. In the age of reality television and personal websites everybody seems to want their fifteen minutes of fame even if it means selling yourself out. I'm not judging anybody because I know what it feels like to sell out the values you were raised with.

Leaving those feelings behind and no longer looking for any great social **status** I have decided that I would like to teach in some capacity and in fact came to the conclusion that I owed it not only to myself but more so to the society I live in to give back. For years I not only didn't contribute anything I actually worked against it and I was not only hurting myself but I was helping others hurt themselves along the way. I thought that by helping to counsel others about the dangers of drugs and alcohol and the impact they have on one's life I would be rectifying some of my past errors while contributing to the betterment of society.

TODAY

I was looking forward this semester to

working on this paper, the opposite of what Harold Muriaty said in his essay titled "My Life So Far: A Work in Progress." Harold started his paper saying he had been dreading it for so long and begun to worry as it got later and later. Well, I wasn't dreading doing this paper and in fact I was quite looking forward to it. While I was writing it, though, I became keenly aware of the extremely personal feelings I was actually putting on paper. I didn't know if I would be embarrassed that a professor I held in high-esteem and respected was going to be reading and grading my account of my emotional and spiritual reawakening. Then I thought of something Morrie Schwartz said to Mitch Albom in *Tuesdays with Morrie*. A little wave is moving up and down and a big wave says to him why it looked so sad? The little wave says sadly that what's the point of being happy when we're all going to just crash onto the rock? The big wave then tells the little wave to not be so sad about that because it is not just a little wave, but a part of the ocean. The lesson I got from that was everybody in life sometimes crashes and it's part of life, but one has to see this as part of the bigger picture of world's troubles and promises. I'm not embarrassed by the person I used to be because I've taken the things I've done, the missteps and mistakes, and learned and grown from them and like Morrie said, can now feel that I am part of a bigger life of people in public who have similarly experienced troubles such as mine.

Today I'm happy to say I've been on the road to recovery for the last two years and been completely clean and sober for one full year. I took baby steps at first and then decided it was all or nothing. My girlfriend is now my wife and along with just celebrating my one year anniversary of sobriety we just celebrated our one year anniversary of marriage. Life is better now, but I am constantly reminding myself of my past. I am neither embarrassed nor ashamed of what my life was like before I

became sober, I have no regrets about the past, only hopes for the future. I've turned my self-destructive tendencies into more positive and hopeful ones, by not only getting sober but also by reflecting on why I was so destructive to myself—realizing through exercises such as this paper that I do deserve to succeed in life and to be happy doing it.

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