

I attended the “Sex, Drugs and Alcohol” meeting (Open) on Sunday 28 January 2023 at the LGBT Center on 208 West 13th Street in New York City. The meeting was from 5:45-6:45 pm. When I learned about this assignment where I was to visit and write about a 12-Step meeting experience, I knew immediately that I wanted to sit in on a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting because it is something that I know nothing about and wanted to gain some insight on the plight of those who identify themselves as a sex addict.

To be fully transparent, I experienced much anxiety about going to the meeting. I was not anxious at the thought of being surrounded by individuals from the LGBTQ+ community (I mean, come on, live in New York City!) I was anxious because I felt as though I was invading such a sacred and safe space which is so vital and necessary to those struggling with addiction. I feared that the members would think that I would be judgemental. These are very, very private and sensitive issues and I did not want to deter anyone from sharing their experiences and feelings because a new person was there.

On my way to the Center, I was practicing in my head how I would introduce myself: “*Hi I’m Soraya, I’m a Grad student and I thank you for allowing me to share this space with you*”. I vaguely remember Prof. Park mentioning not to share that we were in Seminary. I can imagine that if I shared that, they would think that I would be judgemental; but I did take that risk and shared that with them; they just nodded and smiled!

When I arrived at the Center, which was filled with music and a variety of people socializing, heading to meetings, having coffee, etc. I couldn’t help but smile and think about how welcoming the atmosphere was. It made me proud to live in a City like New York that has invested so much to make these centers available to those of the LGTBQ+ community. When I entered the room, I was greeted by two men (one Black and one White) who were sitting in a circle with about fifteen chairs. Slowly but surely, the room began to fill up. In total, there were eleven of us: ten men.... And Soraya in a circle! The racial dynamic was: Three black men (2 Jamaican and one African), 1 man from Chile, and the remaining men appeared to be White. As I was looking around, I have to admit that I could not help thinking about how the majority of the men, looked like “regular” guys. To be honest, I don’t know what I was assuming these men would look like. Several men were much older,

looked like business professionals and shared that they were in the Program for over fifteen years and still continue to struggle.

After all of the introductions, one of the men (whose name I will omit) sat in a chair in the center of the room because he “qualified” which I took to mean that it was finally his turn to sit and share his story. We sat next to each other. He shared that it was a very big moment for him to be able to share because he also had social anxiety and apologized in advance for not maintaining any eye contact with the group. He shared that he was from Africa from a tribe and was raised in a very Muslim family.

Additionally, he revealed that he learned about sex when he was two years old as he was molested by his two cousins for several years. As he continued with his story, I intentionally practiced some of the skills that I learned during our Course; Head nodding, controlling facial expressions (the negative ones), leaning in towards the speaker, etc....I was thrilled when at one point the Qualifier made eye contact with me and was talking to me; I made sure to meet eyes with him as he spoke to me.

After the speaker shared, everyone in the room had 3 minutes to share. This was controlled by a Timekeeper which would give them a 1-minute warning which EVERYONE respected. Each of the members that shared made it clear in some way that they need life change. They did not want to be the person that they were and did not want to be controlled by their desires. As one member shared “Addiction and Sex were like my Higher Power” and another member bluntly admitted that, “Addiction is powerful!”.

The men are going about achieving this life change by holding each other accountable in their group. In order to do that, I noticed that there had to be total transparency with each other. Several men who had been either sober of alcohol, drugs or sex for several years, months, and days, admitted when they fell back into their addiction. The support they gave each other was so encouraging; pats on the back, empathetic head nods, etc. As one member shared, “I just have to get back on the horse and try again”. That is really what it’s all about.

As they continued to share, one man stated that he was grateful for his addiction because it allowed him to get to the point where he is now which is trying to process everything that has happened during his childhood. He felt that it pushed him to the edge. I realized that the family of origin and the trauma that has caused was a common theme between the men and the addiction to sex, drugs and alcohol all stemmed from their trauma.

Another common theme that the men shared was a need to feel wanted and loved. Several shared that they did not receive love or attention when they were children and could not understand how wrong molestation was because the person was paying attention to them. As they were speaking and sharing all of the sexual molestation and trauma that they were exposed to at such young ages, made me so grateful for my family of origin. It broke my heart to hear that so many of their first sexual experiences were with people that they trusted, family members.

A few of the men acknowledged their “Higher Being” and several men admitted that they had no concept of a Higher Being before they started the program. It warmed my heart when one member admitted that there *had* to be a “Higher Being” because there was no way that he could have gotten through what he went through on his own. One member, who appeared to be in ill health and seemed to be the oldest one there, acknowledged that because of his sickness, the “clock is ticking” and instead of going to Ireland or Paris, since he is not working, he thinks it is better to go to three meetings a day because if he went to Ireland or Paris he will find people to have sex with. I appreciated his candor.

There are several things that the church can learn from how they do things. The first thing is having open, real, and raw conversations about the types of sensitive and private issues that the church also just sweeps under the rug. The truth is that there are Sex and alcohol addicts in the congregation and even in the pulpits. These are genuine human issues that people are struggling with and need to be addressed. Another thing that the Church can learn from this is the need for true and authentic transparency without fear of being judged or shunned by the Church.

This was such an encouraging experience and it made me realize how vital counseling and support groups are in order to begin the process of healing and recovery. It made me see how much people are hurting. As Dr. Reimer says, “Hurt people, hurt people”. I never considered that the people the hurt person could be hurting are actually themselves. The self-destruction that they are causing to themselves because of the shame and pain as a result of what they endured needs to be healed. My prayer is that God heals them in every area of their lives.