

INTRODUCTION

FROM A THERAPEUTIC PERSPECTIVE

When I first met Darryl on June 6, 2005, I was struck by the duality of his rough exterior and voice (similar to my own in its coarseness) and his sincere desire to want to arrest his haunting illnesses of alcohol/drug abuse and depression. He was the epitome of what a quarter century on the oceans of the world can do to a man. He was a brash, salty “Ahab” ready to take on anyone at any cost and risk.

As his potential counselor, Darryl put me through a litmus test for quality and reliability. His style was full hog on, in your face, and yet sensitive to the smallest nuance of contradiction. Though I respected the process, it was no easy task. He was searching for someone in whom he could put his trust and to whom he could reveal the inner workings of his life; he was not going to take a chance with just anyone.

At first I took his testing as a challenge to my integrity and competency as a therapist. This “testing” continues today and is, I believe, a testament to his serious desire to find a male he can connect with who will not abandon or hurt him. His assessment and reassessment is a constant for which I am grateful.

As our relationship and trust grew, ever so slowly Darryl described bits and pieces of his very hard yet very exciting life. As a child he suffered excruciating and debilitating migraines treated as best medicine could back then, with lackluster results. Darryl suffered for a long time. And twenty-plus years of hardcore alcohol abuse and poly drug abuse had taken its toll. He had a litany of physical ailments that may be related to the years of abuse his body has gone through with his active addictions. As an adult, his physical being had taken a beating, and he was hurting as a result. It showed.

Psychologically, another story emerged. Before me sat a young man with scars from twenty years of sailing the world’s oceans as an active addict/alcoholic in addition to the unsettling experiences of his youth, including his father’s suicide. Darryl walked this planet hard—and sometimes ran it hard—with that pain and heartache held deep within. Too preoccupied with feeding his addictions and numbing himself, he had never dealt with those events.

When he wasn’t entertaining his addictive side, his personality emerged as either the consummate professional, perfectionist “workaholic” or the shadow of a “monster” that could rip you in half with his tongue. He would find himself swinging from one extreme to the other, but grew most familiar with the anger and rage within. This duality took Darryl to extremes in risky behavior and a devil-may-care, cavalier persona. His moods varied from a virtual wild man with frenetic activity and pace to a depressed miserable fuck who shot toxic darts at anyone near.

Imagine the pain and distance that grew in his heart and spirit. He became wrenched from “God” and couldn’t understand why certain things were happening to him, if indeed God did exist. His relationships became tangled and highly dysfunctional and distant. He became a man hurtling through life without any real plan or direction. What would become of him?

In our first meetings, I somehow successfully got through his rigorous and respectful testing. We then set on a path I hoped would give Darryl a long road of successful recovery from the active demons of his addictive ways and from emotional torture. Slowly, his teetering emotional state and his life in general began to take on balance. Early recovery and sobriety,

while prickly and sensitive, was at the same time eye-opening and soothing. Though he was still smarting from the rigors of the past twenty-seven years, he was also keenly aware of his most pressing needs. With a vengeance, he sought sobriety at whatever cost.

He engaged in self help (a twelve-step program) and began the process of working the steps. He also knew he needed more than just a few meetings with an individual therapist. If he was truly going to conquer his multiple addictions, he required intensive outpatient treatment. With an attitude still sharp and raw that sometimes looked for any apparent excuse to rip out at someone in anger, he lobbied hard with his insurance company, believing they should support his need for more intensive services. He won that battle and went on a two-and-a-half-week journey through the Mercy Hospital Recovery Center intensive outpatient program.

He came out of this experience with a stronger resolve to quiet his stabbing dependencies. While he remained sober from alcohol and illicit drugs, his behavior and attitudes ran amuck. He was the proverbial “dry drunk” with a razor’s edge, often leaving behind a bloody mess for himself and those he hurt. Try as he might to temper his impulsive anger, it gushed forth with reckless abandon.

Darryl then entered mid-stage recovery and began to identify some of his shortcomings and negative character traits. Simultaneously, he grew closer to his son, Darryl II. The boy’s calm demeanor, energy, and unconditional love soothed Darryl’s rage and hurt.

He began to feel feelings that had become detached from his soul. Memories and pain that had been buried and numbed poured forth as an endless litany of events and traumas. The dam had sprung a leak and was beginning to flood. The dualities were phenomenal. The stories swung from calm and soft to utter chaos and huge risk. Beautiful places and people—to the ugliness of sin and despair. Calm oceans—to vicious frozen storms at sea. These stories from his life mirrored themselves in Darryl’s very skin and soul.

He grew to despise his job and felt the urgent need to detach from that lifestyle. Darryl attempted to return to work, but that experience only served to validate what he already knew. He was done. He jumped ship and fully engaged in his life and recovery. While he was studious and made a concerted effort to work hard at sobriety, old scars haunted him: his father’s brutal suicide, his chaotic and wild life, and his confounding loneliness.

He searched for someone or something to fill the void, but nothing seemed to work. Darryl continued to take his anti-depressant medication and decided to join a Wellness group. His efforts, coupled with his ongoing awakening, ignited in him the idea to write his story. His book was born.

Though he was initially hesitant and nervous, we worked through that, and he started the journey of telling his story. He entered another stage of recovery. The process fueled a passion to work his program even more vigorously. He became willing to risk public venues beyond the self help groups and began to speak at colleges and in jails and hospitals.

While initially he bristled at the idea, he soon warmed up to the process and became adept at telling his story. This gave Darryl a positive therapeutic energy, which he drank in with a huge thirst.

Today, Darryl moves forward independently and assuredly. He stays in touch with an authentic blend of his caring, soft self and the abrupt, hard-hitting sailor. That is Darryl. His dreams are all his now, and they are tangible and in plain sight. His feelings are intense and alive. His soul is filling with spirituality, as he defines it, and it is a great comfort to him.

Some of the emptiness and void may always be there, but Darryl has found creative methods to cope. His feelings are no longer foreign and frightening. Like a sailor lost at sea, he

now sees a beacon of some distant lighthouse—pointing the way home.

Coming out of the sanctity of our therapeutic relationship of the past three years, Darryl asked for my input. I was humbled by such a request. It is with the highest levels of dignity, respect, and confidence that I write, though I don't believe words can ever portray accurately what happens between two humans on an intimate therapeutic journey together.

There are many nuances of Darryl's life and recovery that I have not covered here. I apologize both to Darryl and to the reader for those shortcomings. I defer the reader to Darryl's compelling stories.

Darryl will always occupy a place close to my heart. I fully support Darryl's pursuit of his dreams and meaningful connections in life. Live life with the full expression of all of your emotions, Darryl!

*—Felix ("Phil") A. del Vecchio, LCSW, LADC, CCS
(Just a man in Maine fortunate to meet many fascinating humans.)*

Phil del Vecchio is a private practice clinical social worker and psychotherapist working with young people, adults, couples, and families in Portland, Maine. He is currently an adjunct professor at a community college in South Portland. He also conducts training and is a consultant throughout greater New England. He has worked in the field of substance-abuse treatment and mental health for twenty-five years, including extensive work with dual diagnoses and Gestalt therapy. For two years he was the clinical program manager at Mercy Hospital Recovery Center (in and outpatient). He has held many other clinical management positions in the mental health and substance abuse treatment field. Before coming to Maine, he spent some time working in New Jersey. He attended Temple University in Philadelphia and Fordham University in New York City, where he obtained an MSW. The most important element in his life is his family: his wife, Joni, a clinical social worker and artist; his eleven-year-old son, Felix; and their standard poodle, Luna.