

## Letter to Joe\*

Dear Joe,

I feel moved to write this because even though I barely know you, my heart hurts for you -- for the part of you that has been hurt that reminds me of the part in me that has also been hurt. I can't honestly say that I understand your pain. I don't. I've never been a soldier in someone else's war. I've never had to don heavy black armor to protect myself from danger in the streets and have never run with a particularly rough crowd. But I do know what it's like to be betrayed by the people who I should be able to trust. I do understand the pain of an internal war. I've felt the pain, fear and rage that stems from physical and emotional abuse and know the teeth grinding determination to never ever let anyone hurt me like that again. I do understand what it's like to feel like I'm on guard as I walk down the streets lest someone with a hair up their butt or a machismo complex take a notion that today would be a good day to bash a random queer's brains out with a baseball bat. So while I can only begin to imagine the jagged edges of *your* pain, I suspect that were I in your shoes, I'd do my best to stay numb, to pretend like it didn't hurt or sweep it back into some closet of my past -- a secure closet with a deadbolt strong enough to keep the demons at bay. I'm guessing, further, that I would do my best to put up a tough front, to avoid feeling vulnerable, because logic would tell me that being vulnerable gets me hurt. I imagine that you might do this because this is what I did with my pain for years.

I felt it in the core of my heart when you stated that you never want to be attached to anyone or anything ever again, because it hurts too much. I know that you feel alone in this. The irony is that as isolated as you feel, your approach is actually pretty normal. Paul Simon, for example, wrote a song called "I am a rock" in which he sings, "*I've built walls, A fortress deep and mighty, That none may penetrate. I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain. Its laughter and its loving I disdain. I am a rock, I am an island. Don't talk of love, But I've heard the words before; Its sleeping in my memory. I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died. If I never loved I never would have cried. I am a rock, I am an island*" So, you may be a rock. You may be an island. But you are hardly alone. You are a rock or an island surrounded by a heck of a lot of other rocks, of a heck of a lot of other islands, all who are suffering and shielding themselves from their pain. While your experiences may be unique, your feelings and responses are simply part of the human condition.

Paul Simon finishes his song with, "*And a rock feels no pain; And an island never cries.*" My question is, at what cost? I remember working with a young man in a runaway shelter years ago whose father was a boxer and used my client as a punching bag. The young man had run away and had lived on the streets in Camden, NJ. I was talking to him because he'd just thrown a brick through the window of the transitional house he'd been living in and had threatened to attack the staff member on duty. The program was contemplating washing their hands of him, leaving him to fend on his own. I pointed this out to him and was trying to help him come up with a different strategy and contract with him to act differently in order to keep the housing and support he was

receiving. He tried to shake it off. He knew, he said, how to survive. But that's all he was doing. Surviving. Getting by. I pointed this out to him. And then I asked him what he had wanted, why he went back to the transitional apartment when he had his own apartment. Not the excuse he gave, but the real reason he went back. He finally admitted that he wanted someone to talk to, that he was lonely. Turns out that being an island hurts too.

And how fast and far does someone have to run to avoid their pain? And does it ever really work, at least without causing other problems? I remember running a group on the detox ward and one of my tough guy clients confessed that he was there because he'd gotten arrested for assault and, when pressed by other group members, admitted that the assault was an effort at bravado largely fueled by Jack Daniels. And why the drinking that night, (and the 6 month bender he'd been on before the assault)? Self-induced anesthesia to block the pain he felt after his girlfriend dumped him. Sober, on the detox ward, with a bus waiting to take him back to jail upon release, he admitted that perhaps the alcohol not only hadn't stopped the pain he was feeling, but that it actually made his life worse because being in jail really sucks. And, while he was whiling his time away on the detox ward and in jail, he was not able to work and might even lose his job. And then there were the fines and fees for treatment. Most people end up needing rehab because they've been using drugs or alcohol to avoid their pain. Worse, they discover that the cost of better living through chemistry has caused an avalanche of other problems.

Though the legal consequences of other addictions may not be as serious, using work, food, exercise, video games, surfing the internet, reading, watching TV (the list is endless) to avoid your feelings all have a hidden cost. Obviously, if you drown your sorrows in Doritos and candy bars, your waist band is going to complain, which for many people leads to shame, self-disgust and self-recrimination. Purging those Doritos and candy bars may not affect the waist line, but then you've got an addiction on your hands that may be more difficult to tame than an addiction to crack. Working – well it's hard to maintain relationships, even with colleagues, if you're working all the time. Then, when you do want to talk, who is there to talk to? And how do you get your bills and other personal details taken care of when you're so busy expanding your hours or fleshing out your time card? When do you find time to take care of yourself – eating healthy meals, exercising, meditating or other practices that help get you or keep you grounded – when you're always working?

And then there's the deeper cost of avoiding pain: the loss of self. Ultimately, the only way to avoid feeling pain is to avoid feeling everything. In this space, we're not consumed with sorrow or anger, but we also miss the experience of love, wonder, and gratitude. We can't feel our misery, but we also can't feel the rapture of being alive. Life then becomes a matter of putting one step in front of the other, a form of misery that almost begs for relief through drugs, alcohol, work, eating, gambling, or a thousand other ways of turning off and tuning out.

And Joe, I know that the man in you does not want to cry. I know that you grew up with the messages that, "real men don't cry" and as a consequence see crying is a sign of

weakness. But what I know is that it takes a lot more courage to face one's tears than it does to get drunk, stoned or otherwise numb out. And I think you have an amazing amount of courage. So I'd like to encourage you to find a place for your tears, maybe not around people who will laugh at you or use your tears against you, but in a place where it's safe, or around people who are safe. And if you don't have anyone in your life right now that's safe enough to cry around, find a counselor who's brave enough and strong enough to hold your tears.

\*Name changed to maintain confidentiality

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