

Transformation Story – A New Creation – Nickersons

By Wendell & Kathy Nickerson

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

Wendell: I was a 51-year-old husband, father, grandfather, practicing physician, and church elder when I realized I had a drug addiction. After a merciful intervention, I arrived at a recovery center in Wisconsin. I was still slightly impaired, and I felt confused, so I asked God to help me understand.

“I thought I was a new creation,” I said. “How could this happen?”

The response I felt from God was simple. “Every ‘new creation’ has a growth rate. This one is yours. Are you done? If so, let’s get on with things. You still have a lot left to do.”

For the first time in my life, I sensed unconditional love from my Heavenly Father. A warmth that didn’t require anything of me but made me want to be the adopted son worthy of His love. Now that I was secure in my covering of Jesus’ righteousness, I needed to “get on with things” and figure out why I ended up here. And why this was part of my growth process. Maybe it’s best if we review how I got to this transformational point in my life.

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Kathy: Wendell had built a successful career. Together, we had reared a family and served on the leadership team of our local church for a dozen years. At a point when many couples start thinking of retirement, we decided to pursue a dream.

I first heard about the dream when I was seventeen years old. We shared a table at a pizza joint and Wendell told me about the life he wanted to build as a country doctor. “I don’t want to chase money,” he said. “I want to go somewhere I’m really needed.”

That desire led us to an intentional community of believers growing up in what had previously been the middle of a Missouri cornfield. It was a place where we could serve a rural community and minister to people in drug and alcohol treatment centers at a place called Heartland.

Wendell: My desire to serve soon morphed into the stress and debt of owning my own family practice in a poorly populated rural area. It became clear this was a mission. The money the practice brought in barely sustained itself. My high school dream of not wanting to chase money soon became the cynical words of George Bailey from *It’s a Wonderful Life*. When Clarence the angel says they don’t use money in Heaven, George tells him, “It comes in mighty handy down here, bub.”

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We lost a twenty-year relationship with a close friend and pastor, causing turmoil in a wide circle of friendships.

Our oldest daughter suffered the premature birth of twins at 24 weeks and the loss of one of them after twelve hours. Baby Claire survived miraculously after months in the NICU.

And I gave my father permission to die. He had faithfully dragged me to the Methodist church all my life. When he started having a series of strokes, we had to take his car keys and eventually move him into a nursing home. He ended up with one last stroke which took all movement and his ability to speak.

He could move his eyes, so we knew he understood us. We had a family meeting and, as the doctor in the family, I was asked to go in and explain things to him.

I tried to be honest with him about the damage this stroke had done and the likelihood he would continue to have more. Finally, I said, “You have done well. We are all okay. If you want to just go home to Jesus, I think He would be okay with it.”

He blinked one slow blink, then closed his eyes, never to open them again. Ten days later, his heart and brain caught up with his will. I had given my dad permission to die, and I haven’t gotten over it to this day.

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My health was also confusing during this two-year period. Both because the doctor who treats himself is a fool and because there were underlying physical issues going on, which genuinely required medication. All the issues I was facing were made worse because I was caught up in self-medicating with narcotic prescription drugs, which is prohibited for a doctor to do. Sorting all that out was impossible for other physicians who didn’t have all the facts.

During this time period, Kathy had an abnormal mammogram that led to a biopsy. It weighed on me that I couldn’t help her more. Add in my inability to provide for us financially, and I felt like a failure as a doctor, husband, father, son, grandfather, elder, leader, and friend.

And, in general, a failure to my Lord.

None of these issues were excuses for my drug use, but they were the catalysts that accelerated it and exposed it as a pre-existing condition that had never been recognized by me or others. Most people would assume I could have figured it out that the narcotic drugs were my underlying problem. However, this is the nature of addiction. That’s why addiction is called cunning and baffling.

Kathy: The only thing I knew for sure was that Wendell had become ill. Terribly, mysteriously ill. For two years, we searched for an answer. When he began to randomly and repeatedly stumble and fall, we saw our family doctor. When Wendell started asking the same questions over and over every five minutes and wandering the house all night unable to sleep, we saw a neurologist. We chased Alzheimer’s disease, Multiple Sclerosis, smooth-muscle disorders, and a rare-disease-yet-to-be-named. We saw a psychologist and a psychiatrist, a gastroenterologist, and a urologist. Wendell endured MRI’s, CT scans, a lumbar puncture, and blood tests galore.

He was rushed to the emergency room twice – once by helicopter – and he spent a night in the ICU. We drove to Rochester and spent three weeks at the Mayo Clinic seeing doctors for every body part imaginable.

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Yet, in all these visits, no one ever ordered a drug screen. No one ever suspected what was stealing his memory and confining him to bed for weeks at a time. He was an honorable, well-respected physician. A church leader. How could he be an addict?

Wendell: One thing about drug addiction, particularly narcotic addiction, is that if you stop taking the drug or decrease the dosage, it can paradoxically cause pain. The very thing that relieves pain can turn on the system and make it think it needs more.

For a Christian, lying follows a similar pattern. When we lie to cover our sin, we then feel guilty about both. The only way to live in our own skin is to twist things in our mind so we start believing our own lies. Then we can maintain a façade of faithfulness. Of course, that can’t last because the voice of the

Holy Spirit gradually recedes into the background until He is no longer heard. We can no longer tell the truth from our lies.

Kathy: On Valentine’s Day, 2005, I took a drive and prayed, “Father, You talk to us about all kinds of things, why won’t you tell us what is wrong with Wendell?”

When I returned home, Wendell met me at the door with a smile and said, “Hi, was the organ-grinder’s monkey in the yard when you pulled up?”

I dropped my purse on the table and shook my head.

“Huh,” he gave me a goofy grin. “He was there just a while ago.”

Then Wendell walked into the living room, fell on the couch, and promptly started to snore. When I went into the bedroom to change my shoes, I saw a used syringe and empty vial of medication on my hope chest.

Suddenly, things I should have seen – or admitted seeing – the past two years glared at me. Denial is a strong enemy of truth, and I had denied everything that looked like drug use. Looking back, it was easy to see times in our life when Wendell had struggled with this addiction for a brief period. But those had all been explained away or ignored.

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Wendell: I didn’t hear the story about the organ grinder for a whole year. She told me on my one-year anniversary of sobriety. I laughed, as any addict/alcoholic would and said, “Why haven’t you told me before?”

Kathy said, “Because it wasn’t funny yet.”

When we speak to recovery crowds, they always laugh and clap at that part. When we speak to Christian crowds, there is always a nervous reaction with people looking at each other wondering why Kathy and I are smiling.

Those of us in recovery recognize the monkey (besetting sin) because we face it every day. One day at a time is one of our sayings. By keeping ourselves aware of our need for Jesus’ blood and His righteousness, we live day by day. Sometimes hour by hour. Or minute by minute.

That doesn’t mean we walk around in fear of failure. Our God is bigger than that. We are just aware of our earth suit and the need to make sure it hasn’t sprung a leak. Until God takes us home, we have things to watch out for.

Two scriptures became my anchor:

- Proverbs 24:16 – The Godly may trip seven times, but they will get up again. (I like to throw in: “... always get up again.”)
- Luke 18:11-13, 11 – The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector ...’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

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I realize I am always a sinner without Christ.

Having been raised a good Methodist boy, I was saved at age 8 in a tent revival and disciplined by a pastor recently kicked out of Castro’s Cuba. He used Billy Graham materials and gave me a solid foundation. I

thought of myself as a “good kid.” However, rebellion in high school led to many episodes of drinking to blackout which were thought to be “oops” episodes.

Occasional drinking in college and medical internship were rebelliously done since alcohol was considered the devil’s brew in our circles. In rehab, they led us back through our entire life, and I learned my behaviors were more addictive than I had realized.

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I also realized as soon as my mind cleared in the first week or so, that everyone there had a similar way of thinking. There was a sense of familiarity even though we were a mixed lot. I found people who thought like me.

Kathy: Before our move to Heartland, the word addiction had never been in my vocabulary. That kind of thing didn’t happen to church folks. Fortunately, we were surrounded by church folks who were quite familiar with the territory. Most of them had come through recovery or were helping someone come through. Instead of hiding this time, I called our pastor. Something I might never have been brave enough to do before.

When I walked into the office, Pastor Charlie started telling me how to check for more drugs in the house. He told me to take the day off and go home to be with Wendell. To look out for any problems.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I said. “I don’t know how to treat him.”

His answer was perfect. “This addiction does not define Wendell.” Pastor Charlie said. “He is a wonderful man, a great husband and father, a tremendous doctor, and a good leader. He just happens to have a problem in this one area.”

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I know that is a simplistic definition of something so “cunning and baffling” but it helped me put things in perspective and guided us through the recovery and restoration process.

Wendell: When Kathy brought our friend, Tony, to see me the day after the monkey incident, I felt like a weight was off my shoulders. I didn’t have to hide any longer. It turns out our Pastor Charlie, who prayed every morning from 4:00am to 6:00am, had told Tony that morning, “I think Wendell has a drug problem. We’re going to have to help him.”

That was the miraculous kindness of God.

I was ready to take my lumps, no matter how hard. I needed to get right with God and my family, church, and friends. I felt there might be irrevocable damage all the way around, but at least we would be in the light.

Kathy: With help from our pastor and close friends, we called our family physician who is also a friend. Wendell dared to admit the truth to a colleague for the first time. We knew the disclosure might mean the end of his career or the beginning of something even worse.

A few minutes later, our doctor called back. He said, “I’ve got the number for this guy ...”

I still cry when I remember those words. Jim Weiberg became our well-being advocate within the hour. He guided Wendell in the process of entering treatment several states away. He offered encouragement, counsel, and straight talk for our crooked lives.

Wendell: I just assumed I would lose my license to practice medicine, possibly my marriage, and of course, never be a leader in the church again. When my doctor set me up with our state’s Wellness

Program, I talked to a man who is my friend to this day. He encouraged me and told me that if I would listen and follow instructions, he thought I would not lose anything professionally. The state worked well with impaired physicians who self-reported. He gave me hope that I didn't feel I deserved, but it was hope, nonetheless.

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Kathy: I worried about telling our grown children, but they were amazing. Each one told us how proud they were of their dad. They were grateful the enemy finally had a name, because now we knew how to fight.

Wendell: After the intervention, I was ready to get with the program. It took a little while for my mind to clear as the extra medication washed out of my system. Early on, God met me, and I was determined to "get the cure." Whatever it took, I was going to do it. I was going to treat this like boot camp. My survival as a man of God depended on it.

It looked like I might still be a doctor. At this point, I didn't know whether Kathy would ever forgive me, and I wouldn't blame her if she decided to divorce me. I didn't think I would ever lead in a church again, but I could be a really good janitor.

The treatment center wrings you out and gets to the bottom of what you are made of. Most people fight the process. Some doctors are there for six to nine months before they can be dismissed. I didn't care. I was willing to take up residence.

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In group therapy I had to read letters from the people I had harmed – out loud to the whole group. That resulted in a mountain of tissues next to my chair. There was art therapy and the universally hated psychodrama where we role played incidents in our lives. We voiced what other people would have been saying to us in specific situations.

The psychiatrist took one woman through five marriages in thirty minutes, leaving her a puddle on the floor before she was done. To a person, we complained about this because it dug deeper than anything else did. I didn't care. I came to get better. Bring it on.

When it was my turn, she took me back to an interaction with my dad. It had occurred after a blackout in high school. I didn't expect much because he didn't say much at the time. But, when we went through it, I suddenly saw through his eyes, and I broke. That one experience was worth the price of admission.

Once a week, we traveled to a large city nearby for a medical recovery meeting where I learned two of the most valuable lessons:

1. Recovery without God at the center is very seldom successful.
2. Fighting the process of drug testing is a symptom that you haven't yet surrendered. Every doctor there who had quit drug testing at the end of probation relapsed and had to go back into treatment.

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After treatment, I signed a probation contract for five years, agreeing to be tested randomly as required. Also, to attend 12-step meetings and marriage counseling with Kathy for one year.

I reported to the Board of Health, and they decided not to censure me as long as I fulfilled the five-year contract. I voluntarily continued the random testing for seven more years after the contract expired.

Kathy: Leaving Wendell in the treatment center was one of the worst moments in my life. I had no idea how to go forward, and I didn't know if we could make it through. Yet, in a few days, I discovered Wendell wasn't the only one being transformed. In the beginning, I felt like the offended party, and I held on to my right to be mad.

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One morning, Pastor Charlie stopped at my desk and talked to me about forgiveness. "This is mostly about your pride," he said. "It has hurt your pride to admit your life isn't perfect." The words stung, but they were so true.

After that conversation, I gave up my right to be mad. I forgave my husband, and I accepted my responsibility as a codependent spouse. I opened my heart for repentance, restoration, and recovery.

Wendell stayed in the treatment center for sixty-two days. Every other week, I made the nine-hour drive to join him for Saturday morning family sessions, and then we squeezed in a few hours of together time. Two of our daughters went with me the first time, and one weekend we broke a record with twelve family members in attendance.

Strangely enough, those memories are as sweet in my mind as any family vacation we ever took. Recovery has not always been easy, but it has always been good. We have discovered amazing things about ourselves as individuals and about us as a couple. We have gained new appreciation for family and friends and new gratitude for the mercy of God.

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Wendell and I once shared in our failings and today we share in our victories. We reopened his medical practice and worked together for many years. With blessings from church leadership, Wendell performed the wedding of our niece shortly after his return. We embraced our transformed lives and enjoyed the goodness of God.

Today, we both continue using the tools we learned during recovery. We talk honestly with one another every day. We journal, pray, read, and study our Bibles. We focus on strong relationships in our family, friendships, and church. And we remember to have fun together and make memories.

Wendell & Kathy: In 2022, we took a step back from our careers and moved to another state to be closer to our children. We celebrated our 48th wedding anniversary, our seventeenth grandchild, and our seventeenth Valentine's Day since the intervention.

We know our transformation won't be complete until Heaven, but God has brought us a long way. As new creatures, we both continue to grow in our faith and our relationships day by day. It is a process that will never end. But, with the grace of God and His mercy toward us, we have a firm hope that the organ grinder's monkey has retired for good.