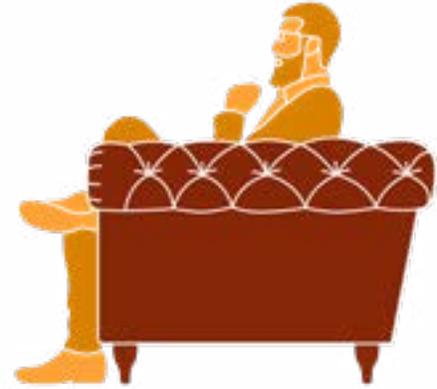


# UNLEASHING MY STRENGTH FROM JAIL TO JOY



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It is a paradoxical truth that your most significant weakness can often become your greatest source of strength.

As I sat in a county jail cell in late winter of 2016, I was not thinking about how one day I would look back at this moment in my life and be grateful for it. All I could think about was how my life as I had known it was crashing down around me.

This is my story.

It's a story about how I spent the formative years of my life desperately seeking to find a sense of belonging and how that yearning for affirmation nearly killed me. Ultimately, this is a story about how I finally embraced my weakness, which unlocked personal strength I never knew I had.

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I grew up wanting to be an archeologist, but really I just wanted to be Indiana Jones. When I learned that real archeologists rarely carried whips and guns, I stopped wanting to be an archeologist.

Then I wanted to be a wealthy surgeon, then a famous golfer. Neither of those aspirations lasted long.

So it was that the summer before 8th grade, I found myself at church camp as a squirrely 13-year-old. On this retreat with my church youth group, I felt a

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distinct calling to do something real and meaningful with my life—something that mattered, not just for myself, but for others and the world. I knew what I was going to do when I grew up. I wanted to help people.

Over the next decade of my life, I became a minister. I went to college and chose a major that made sense—education. I started working as an intern with the same youth group that took me to camp that summer years before.

I graduated from college and went on to seminary to earn my Master of Religion & Youth Ministry degree. I knew that this was the path to take to do something meaningful with my life.

But there was a problem. Around the same time that I went to church camp as a young teenager, I started developing a habit which, years later, I would painfully come to know as addiction.

The locus of my addiction was not on alcohol, drugs, or substances. It wasn't money. It wasn't adrenaline or experience. I was addicted to approval and affection and I found the perfect way to get my fix through the then new phenomenon of internet pornography.

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At a young age I developed a distorted image of myself. Much of this unhelpful understanding of my self-worth stemmed from the fact that I noticed how different I was. When all the boys at school were having lunchroom conversations about which girls were the hottest, I was mentally noting the most attractive guys.

I was gay and I was terrified to admit it. Each time I caught myself admiring a boy from across the classroom, my stomach would tighten and I would hate myself a bit more. To be gay was to be different, and in my adolescent mind, to be different was to be wrong.

But I had an outlet that I could turn to in order to feel better, even if just temporarily. Internet pornography offered me non-judgmental bliss. I could view whatever, and whomever, I wanted and never felt rejected. That is, as long as no one ever found out.

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This compulsive escape through pornography continued into adulthood, and like any other addictive disease, escalated into a debilitating obsession. By the time I had graduated seminary, I was steadily streaming pornography, interacting online with strangers, and meeting up with men for sex.

My compulsive need to feel affirmation also found a home in the public part of my life—my work as a minister. My passionate sermons and personable demeanor earned me praise and respect. It was intoxicating to hear a retired pastor praise one of my sermons as “the best sermon I have ever heard in my career.” I lived for the approval and applause that came with my work.

Each week I would pour my entire self into my job, hoping to do so much good, so much meaningful service, that I would fill the hole I felt inside of me. At the end of each week, I looked up in exhaustion and realized I hadn’t done enough to feel enough. No matter how much approval I got from my congregation, I still felt empty.

As a result, and in a haze of dejection and shame, I would escape for the weekend into a fantasy world of sexual addiction.

It was like I had a spring inside of me. Each day the spring would tighten just a little bit more. The tension would steadily build, and no matter what I tried I couldn’t loosen it. I would preach a great sermon, but the tension increased. I would get a pat on the back from my boss, still the spring was cranked a bit tighter. I would take a day off from work, or try to pray a little harder, or maybe read a new book on building healthy habits, but nothing helped—the spring never stopped tightening.

But the moment I opened up my computer, that spring was finally released of its pressure. It was like I could breathe again. At least for a moment.

I was living a double life. It was a dark, vicious cycle, that I knew would, inevitably, spiral out of control.

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In the midst of all of this turmoil, I never lost the profound sense that I was

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supposed to be doing something meaningful with my life. Even when I doubted that I had anything of value to offer, I couldn't shake the fact that I had to keep going. I had to keep serving others. I had to keep helping others thrive in their own way.

But even that sense of purpose alone couldn't slow me down.

As any addict knows all too well, morality and ethics, no matter how tightly held in moments of clarity, have little motivating power when seeking that next fix. I would always tell myself, "I'll never do THAT." But then I would. Each boundary I would set for myself I would easily and quickly hurdle over in my pursuit of seeking my release from reality.

Not only did I cross moral and ethical boundaries, but I also crossed legal ones. Eventually, my distorted need for approval and affection led to me spending the night in jail.

As I sat on my thin prison mattress snacking on the packet of crackers my Spanish-speaking cellmate offered me out of pity, I tried to figure out what my life would look like from that moment forward. Unsurprisingly, I was let go from my ministry position and ultimately received a criminal conviction. And I'm lucky I did.

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With my life in shambles, unemployed, and with non-existent self-worth, I walked into a 12-step meeting. I'll never forget that first night; I was terrified, broken, and hopeless. I was trying to seem like I had things under control, which most certainly was not the case. I didn't really know what to expect.

I was given a newcomers meeting, in which I was pulled aside by two more experienced members of the fellowship and bombarded with a wave of information about the 12-step program I had just stumbled into. I didn't ask any questions. I didn't say much of anything. I just took it all in.

When we made our way back into the main room, someone was preparing to share his story with the entire group.

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As this stranger told his story, I heard for the first time someone talk with vulnerability and candor about an affliction that I had battled for two decades. For the first time, I felt like I wasn't alone. I felt like I belonged. That spring coiled tight within me was being released simply by listening. I felt like I was home.

This guy was telling his story; but it wasn't just his story, it was mine too. He described how I felt—the pain, shame, isolation, fear, and despair of addiction. I saw myself in him. For the first time, I saw myself.

When he finished, fellow members offered feedback and encouragement. I heard people talk of God in ways I had never heard before, even after a decade of working in ministry. They spoke of surrendering, letting go, finding serenity. They spoke about a relationship with a Higher Power as if they actually believed what they were saying. Their faith, their absolute trust in the possibility of love, grace and restoration was palpable. I was sitting in a room of saints, and a third of them had criminal records.

I had spent the previous decade of my life training and studying to become a spiritual leader. I was pouring out myself in an attempt to manufacture a depth of spirituality that seemed all but impossible to achieve. In fact, I began to believe it wasn't possible.

I had never really met anyone who displayed the spiritual maturity that I felt was the goal. I had read books by people that had reached some level of insight that seemed so foreign to me and my experience.

But in that rundown classroom situated above the sanctuary of an old church, I met a roomful of spiritual giants. They were architects, contractors, lawyers, artists, engineers, executives, and pastors. These were men and women who had nothing special about them, except their exceptional brokenness.

In the end, it was a room full of frail, finite humans who invited me to discover a depth of character, peace, joy, and possibility that I had never before experienced. That room full of addicts sparked within me a flame of hope—a flicker encouraging me that my story was not over.

It was only just about to begin.

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Over the next number of years, I learned what it meant to be honest, vulnerable, and genuinely selfless. I'm nowhere near perfect in these areas, and I never will be.

But slowly I began to regain some of that old sense of being called to pursue meaningful work. I found purpose in my ability to help my fellow addicts achieve transformation in their lives—I was doing the work that I first felt invited to do almost 20 years before. I finally felt free. I decided that I would use my journey through failure and transformation to help others live with meaning and purpose; to experience joy, gratitude, and peace in all aspects of life.

The question that was coming up for me was could I help others that didn't identify as an addict? I may have known that I had something to offer to everyone, but I still doubted that anyone would want to listen to a recovering addict with a criminal record.

In essence, I was afraid that the experience that makes me most able to help others is the exact thing that would disqualify me from helping.

I thought my unique strength was unfortunately my greatest weakness, but I now understand that I had it backward. My greatest weakness is my most significant source of strength.

But the way this weakness becomes a strength is by fully owning the weakness. Honesty and vulnerability are the keys that unlock the power that lies within the shortcoming.

Unleashing this potential takes courage. It involves a leap of faith that only a few are willing to take, and therefore many miss out on their most significant source of strength.

I'm no different. I typically operate from a courage deficit and would much rather play it safe without risking the unknown, no matter how much upside the unknown may hold. Fear is a powerful motivator that for years had kept me stationary, comfortable, leaving potential untapped.

Gratefully, I am surrounded by wise men and women that remind me there is

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more to be had. All it takes is a little bit of courage and honesty to turn what seems like my most significant weakness into my greatest source of strength, one day at a time.

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Today I have the privilege of coaching business owners, entrepreneurs, and leaders of all sorts. My clients are meaning-driven people. They feel that same tug that I have felt since I was a kid. But this invitation to live a life of purpose is not easy.

And for some it will start with recognizing that the one fatal flaw that if anyone ever knew about you would ruin everything—your greatest weakness—that is the source of your greatest power.

**LET'S UNLOCK THAT POWER TOGETHER.**

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**ENLIVEN COACHING & CONSULTING** was founded by Tyler Smither in 2020. Tyler is a Certified Professional Coach with over a decade of experience partnering with churches & individuals in the pursuit of transformational change.