When it Comes to Addiction, There are No Simple Answers

An excerpt from The Los Angeles Diaries by James Brown:

“My beautiful sister, in the beginning alcohol and drugs bring you relief. They give you courage and confidence and then slowly, over a period of years, they strip it all away and you spend your final years struggling to fill the emptiness that it’s left inside you. It’s futile, it’s madness, and my drinking and using will one day take me down the same path. I will fight with my wife as you fought with your husband. I’ll explode for no reason and phone you late at night, drunk and wired, while my children cry in the background. These memories hurt, and I have others, many far worse. They accumulate over the years, and instead of fading with time they only grow more vivid. The shame and remorse builds. The load grows heavier as we age, and I understand now how every day you find yourself a little closer to that overpass above the Los Angeles River. My beautiful sister, we are drunks. We are addicts, and we behave recklessly without regard for the consequences of our actions. Sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, we destroy the ones we love as surely as we destroy ourselves.”

This excerpt is taken from a chapter of my memoir, The Los Angeles Diaries, which is dedicated to the memory of my sister and brother. Alcoholism runs deep in my family, and it’s spared no one. As a recovering alcoholic, I eventually had to come to terms with my addiction and attendant insanity. Simply put, it was either change or die. I could not continue to live and drink, and, perversely, I could not for the longest time live without drinking. My brother ended his same struggle with a bullet at the age of 27, an empty fifth of Ten-High on the night stand beside him. After one last binge, my sister leaped to her death onto the concrete banks of the Los Angeles River.

In writing The Los Angeles Diaries, and its sequel, This River, due for publication in March of 2011, I attempt to better understand the nature of the illness of addiction. But I don’t find any simple answers. I don’t know the root causes of alcoholism, and why one person can have a drink, and another safely cannot. And I try not to judge. What I regret most about my addiction is the emotional and psychological pain I inflicted on the innocent — my children, my ex-wife and my second wife, my closest friends. It’s only by taking action to remain clean and sober, one day at a time, with those days turning into years, that I’ve been able to earn back the love and trust of those I hurt most. That’s a blessing. I’ve been given a second chance at life where my brother and sister were not. Sobriety is a true gift, and I can never risk forgetting it.

**This post is in memorium of Marilyn Lynn-Brown, who took her life on July 28, 1998.**