

I have always been passionate about music, both performance and composition.

When I was four I asked my parents for a violin as a gift for my birthday. I took to it very well, naturally some might say. Most of my family on my mother's side are musicians, and musical talents are considered to be a natural gift amongst our family.

When I was eleven I was offered a scholarship at the Junior Royal College of Music. Did I want to go there? Or was it someone else's choice? All I know is that I felt very uncomfortable in that environment, out of place and constantly on guard. It was a very competitive environment in which I did not thrive, instead I receded, fearful of judgement, to which I was constantly under scrutiny.

At the age of thirteen after spending two years there, I was asked to leave. The exact words from the Head of Music to my parents after my final assessment were. "Your son will never make it as a solo violinist!" Words that crushed me, and so I said goodbye to my childhood and peered into an adult world, contrived with lies and power.

As I entered into my adolescence, reacting from this rejection, I decided to recreate myself. I stood up for myself, kept my ducks up and basically protected myself from every exchange that threatened my already shattered low self-esteem and untouchable ego.

My studies progressively went down hill in a prestigious private school. I started to become aggressive, towards my family, fellow students and even to myself.

I remember several times taking a pair of scissors to my skin and pressing hard to release the pain from within. In hindsight I can see now that I already was maladjusted to the life I was living.

People became aware of me, because I would and could fight. I found out early that I could take a punch, even several, I wasn't made of glass which people had led me to believe. But what struck me more was that I could also dish it out. In my entire school history, I got into three fights that created an even more hostile environment to anyone who wanted to really know me, for in reality, I was afraid. I did know what of at the time, but now I have identified it as a fear of being a human. Of feeling vulnerable, scared, uncertain and unworthy.

I didn't want anyone to know, so I lied and created a façade which would inevitable come crashing down and I would have to ultimately decide whether I wanted to die as a lie or at least try and live in a truth.

Alcohol was always present in my household. There was never any unhealthy stigma attached to it and it flowed gloriously at our table. Wine was my first drink, initially I could enjoy a glass or even half a glass of wine with my food. As a young teenager I would travel to Italy, deep in the countryside where my grandparents lived. There I was introduced to a different type of drinking and a different type of wine, home-made! As a fifteen year old it seemed like freedom at last!! I could buy cigarettes and alcohol without producing an unconvincing fake I.D.

At lunch we would all sit and eat and drink and enjoy each others' company. And then sleep in the heat of the summer afternoons. These were the good times. The evening would come, I would go out with my older brother and numerous cousins and find beer. Large bottles of beer that we consumed whole heartedly. I remember having the feeling of invincibility, protection and charisma. I even managed to talk to girls, but still underneath it all was the fear, the self-loathing and crippling low-self-

esteem. Alcohol vanquished these ever-present uncomfortable feelings and for the first time in my life I was really enjoying myself.

Some nights we would take wine from my grandfather's cupboard and stay up late playing cards and drinking. My head would spin as I tried to sleep and I would make promises to myself that I would never drink that much again.

It continued like this for the next two years. My studies oscillated between disciplined work and none at all. I achieved reasonable grades at GCSE level in my eyes, but not in the eyes of the school.

So into my A-Level's I really struggled to assert myself. I couldn't commit to my studies.

At the age of seventeen, my group of friends introduced me to cannabis. The first time I tried it nothing happened, so I made sure that the second time I did I would receive the so-called "high!" It was exciting because it was forbidden and this more than anything gave me a buzz, a behavioural trait which has followed me throughout my life.

At first I smoked it occasionally but I always supplemented it with alcohol. Then gradually I started to smoke it before I went to bed. I would lie there and bask in the new sensations that I so longed for. I remember feeling emotionally confused during this period of my life, as I was nearing the end of my school career, saying goodbye to good friends who I had basically seen everyday for the last seven years and also I had met my first real girlfriend. We enjoyed a sincere love for each other and each others' company, but she was going to Cambridge and I was going nowhere fast for the foreseeable future, so inevitably we parted ways and for the first time in my life I had tasted the bitter blow of love lost.

My reaction to all of these changing external conditions was to indulge in my unquenchable appetite for drugs, alcohol, sex and night-life.

Where ever I was, whatever I was doing, I was under the influence of some kind of substance and for a long time I enjoyed it, but I knew I was using substances as a coping mechanism, to which I accepted and then pledged to myself that it was only a faze. How wrong I was!!!

I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life at that point so I took a job working for my father as a chef in our family restaurant.

I smoked cannabis before work, during work and after work and associated myself with people who did the same. Even though I had a job, was making good money, going out socialising, to a stranger I appeared happy but underneath I felt lost, a huge sense of despair and a profound shame surfaced concerning my very existence. My musical talents were not being exercised, my creativity stifled and it was my mother who convinced me to apply to university to study for a music degree. So in 2002 I was accepted at Brunel University with an unconditional offer to study music.

I learn't a great deal whilst at University, my violin standard progressively got better and I achieved a professional standard of performance. I also started to write thorough and finished compositions for numerous ensembles, however not a day went by without me using. I was smoking cannabis daily and whenever I drank I would drink in order to pass out. My lecture attendance suffered but I didn't worry as much as when I was in school because I was now participating in the creativity I so longed for.

Still holding a resentment with The Royal College of Music I thought to use my classical training with a rock&roll band. So during my first year at university I joined my first band, The Rockets. It was an exciting time, and I was the bass player.

I suppose I was more attracted to the stigma, or lifestyle attached to being in a rock & roll band: house parties, notoriety, drugs, women and music. We were all good musicians and worked well as a unit. The lead guitarist, who was the senior member of the band had previously been signed and had toured around Europe, so his experience and musical knowledge was incremental to our progress. The rhythm guitarist was a young, innocent Yorkshire boy who had lightning guitar skills, he was hungry for fame and fortune and also appreciated good music. The drummer was a tall, large man, very quiet, he reminded me of a cuddly bear. The lead singer was my brother's best friend at the time who I didn't care for much. As my first year at university started to come to a close so did The Rockets. One night the lead singer violently attacked my brother, fracturing his eye socket causing him severe concussion. I spent that night with my brother, tending to him, it was a horrendous time. He recovered but has been left with scars both physically and emotionally, and I suppose I have been

left with scars of my own. The lead guitarist ended up having a nervous breakdown and had to be hospitalized, I never heard from him again. The drummer faded away and the lead singer was prosecuted. And so my first year at university ended.

My second and third year at university went very quickly, in fact it seems like a blur of drunken nights, blackouts and missed opportunities. However, I applied myself to the violin and progressed in standard along with my piano playing. I continued to play with the Yorkshire guitarist from The Rockets and my brother became our lead singer. We composed a lot of songs and I still continued to compose classical music to a degree of professionalism. The drugs however, were constantly present. I remember re-uniting with friends from secondary school in Camden Town one evening. My best friend from school mentioned cocaine and ecstasy to me, drugs which I had not yet taken, he asked me why I only smoked cannabis and drank and my reply was " I have an addictive personality, if I touch them I'm sure I will be done for!" How right I was, but I didn't follow my own advice.

I finished university, obtained a degree and felt just as lost and confused as I had done when I left secondary school. So I returned back to what I knew, a sense of security, my parents' home and my father's restaurant.

I now decided to apply myself to a real band, to be successful, write songs that were musically crafted to a high degree, and gig as much as possible. And this is what I did for the next year. I worked steadily for my father in the evening, went out at night, drank, smoked, played music and then get up and did it all again the next day. I wasn't alone though, I was always with my brother and our guitarist. We got ourselves a drummer and we formed the band *Ceteris Paribus*, an economics term I had learnt whilst studying Economics at A-Level, meaning - when all things are equal.

I carried my violin, guitar and bass with me almost everywhere I went. We became the house band in a pub in Chalk Farm, we were given opportunities to play all over London. I started to feel excited again even though I was smoking cannabis and drinking heavily everyday without fail. I remember thinking to myself - will there ever be a day when I don't smoke or drink?

It was starting to wear me down but I unfortunately I didn't know that I would later slip into a much deeper pit of despair.

We got ourselves another drummer, he was a French man who loved to drink, and so we all loved to drink. We looked out for each other. We performed three or four times a week and rehearsed as often as possible. Our drummer was friends with a very famous band at the time and slowly we started to make our way into the inner circle.

Back stage passes, after show parties added the glamour that was lacking in my life. But it meant nothing except free booze and added to my frustrations concerning my own success which I had placed on a high bar.

Whilst working in the restaurant throughout the years, employees came and went, but a sweet couple, one a waitress and the other a chef befriended me along with the bar man. I would go around to their flat on Sunday evenings for dinner. We would all drink heavily and smoke copious amounts of marijuana. It continued like this for a few months until one of their friends joined us. He was a warm, likeable man, whose company I enjoyed. After dinner we sat as usual, discussing various bands and films until I noticed a white powder being finely chopped on the table. I knew what it was immediately, I watched as they each took a turn snorting this fine white powder up their nostrils, then greedily wiping the table with their fingers and brushing their teeth with them. My heart pumped as the twenty pound note was passed to me. I looked at them individually, they seemed fine, no dead bodies anywhere, so I threw caution into the wind exposing to them all that it was going to be my first time, bent down and snorted. I immediately liked the sensation in my nose, the bitter taste in my throat and then, bam, elevation. My first thought was, I should have done this ages ago. One line was enough for me that night, I didn't shut up for three hours and was still "high" when I got home. I lay on my bed eagerly looking forward to the following Sunday where we had pre-arranged for some more to be brought, but this time I was going to pay for my own slice of the action.

Every Sunday became a party, we would eat, drink and snort. I had a dealer at the time who had been supplying me marijuana, and so on a whim I asked him if he also had cocaine, his response was "Of course bruv!" So I started bringing it to the table. Small amounts at first, never more than one gram as it would last me all day. Then I only started going to their house on Sundays for the drugs. I

no longer cared about the food or their company, I just wanted to use freely without worrying about the presence of my parents. Within two months I had a problem. What started out as recreational use on the weekend rapidly made its way into my work-life. I wasn't using a lot but I was using more regularly. I didn't care though as I was enjoying myself. I divided my wages well, I used half on drugs and the other half on household items and still managed to go out clubbing. Then my Sunday friends stopped inviting me. I still don't know why but they probably caught wind of the fact I was using cocaine regularly and on my own. I started to go into the restaurant late at night as I had the keys to drink and use on my own. I would wake up on the floor in the early morning shivering and ashamed. I started to become worried, I knew I was gripped, my bank account was empty and I wanted more. That summer of 2007 I went to Greece for my holidays, I stayed in our family home on the island we come from. I knew there wouldn't be any cocaine on the island so I brought some with me, it was gone after the first night and I still had four weeks of holiday left. My mind constantly revolved around quenching my desire to get high. As cocaine wasn't present, I drank heavily everyday so that I could sleep, I couldn't wait to get back to England and use.

At the time my father opened a restaurant in Greece and fearful of my progressive use of drugs I decided to go and help him. So in October 2007 I moved to Greece. I knew deep down that I was trying to get away from the drugs, to start a new life. The band I was in had long parted due to a clash of egos, so I suppressed my musical talents and became a chef.

The thing about working in a kitchen, is that chefs also like their drink and drugs. I didn't have to wait long. I remember thinking I haven't had cocaine now for over a month, that's long enough! I asked a head chef if he knew anyone and he did. This time I promised myself I would maintain a degree of control and for a while I did. I used cocaine only on Saturdays, although I was still smoking and drinking daily.

On the the 5th of December 2007 I started a relationship with a waitress who worked at the restaurant. We would go out almost every night after work and drink. She didn't smoke marijuana but we used cocaine together occasionally. We would pick up cans of beer on our way home at six in the morning after a heavy drinking session. One particular morning we bought some cans, got home and drank one each. Afterwards she said she was going to sleep, I said I was going to have another, she replied

"Why don't you come to bed? It's late."

I said " I want to have another beer."

She replied " Why can't you stop?"

PAUSE. I no longer had any excuses. I didn't know what to say, and for the first time I saw that I couldn't stop once I had started. I drank my beer and went to bed.

Our relationship was turbulent, volatile and exciting. We spent as much time with each other as possible. The long working hours and the long partying nights started to take their toll. I began to lose weight, my hair started to fall out and my enthusiasm for life depleted. I felt ill inside.

One night, I had no marijuana, no cocaine and no alcohol, I couldn't sleep and the thoughts I had worried me. I became anxious and deeply sad. My alcohol consumption increased and blackouts and pass outs in the streets became more regular, and I started not to care any more about saving face. I became reckless, dangerous and highly unpredictable. My emotional well-being was in tatters, I needed a way out.

The restaurant was unsuccessful, so after it closed in 2008 I moved to the island I come from with my girlfriend. A relief I thought. It started well, we were on holiday for the first month and then we started working in a taverna. We were happy at first, we earned money, we had a roof over our heads and we were alone. Inevitably I started to drink as I had done in Athens, I would work and then drink. I neglected my girlfriend and ultimately myself. We constantly argued. As soon as I had alcohol in my body I had to drink to reach oblivion. I would return home with broken ribs, twisted knees, cuts on my face and arms from motorbike accidents that became a regular occurrence. I would drive up the mountain tipsy and drive back down totally drunk. Accidents were inevitable. I could have died many times. On one occasion I was so drunk I wasn't aware that I was driving with a flat tyre. I slipped on the road, smashed my head, my ribs and my elbow. I passed out from the pain. I woke up being carried by two men who must of thought I was dead, as they were shocked when I became conscious. The insanity is, I replaced the tyre the next day and did it all over again. Up the mountain tipsy, down the mountain drunk. I got high on the risk factor, it made me feel alive.

My relationship with my girlfriend became abusive and then violent, values that I had grown up with were broken and I felt a terrible guilt and shame descend upon me and I knew that it would be lasting. I wanted to stop drinking but I didn't know how. I would stop for a few days, think I was ok and then start again. I felt as though I was in hell, being punished over and over again. I was in so much internal pain that I took a blade to my arm and cut into it over and over again so I could physicalise my internal turmoil.

My partner and I knew we had to leave for own well-beings, so we returned to Athens and then I immediately to London for Christmas 2008.

On my arrival I knew exactly what I was going to do, I was going to use again. This time I increased the quantity and regularity and spent the next two weeks almost constantly under the influence. The feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt and intolerance became heavy burdens and so I sought relief in cocaine. There was no enjoyment though this time, it was plainly to stop feeling.

I returned back to Athens in the beginning of 2009 to try and reconcile with my girlfriend. She made me feel human as now I was feeling more like a monster that had been released from a deep sleep. I drank inevitably and smoked marijuana but I stopped the cocaine. I couldn't afford it. I took a job handing out newspapers on a busy road. I would come home and drink. I borrowed money from my auntie, whilst my brother and my girlfriend fed me. I even tried teaching the violin again but I couldn't. I was in dire straits and so I decided to go back to London without my girlfriend.

On my return I used immediately, I extended my overdraft to pay for drugs with no idea of how I would pay it back. I convinced my girlfriend to come and join me. I got a job in a local hotel working as a porter and she started working as a waitress. She noticed my drug use and asked me stop for forty days. I promised her and myself that I wouldn't drink or take cocaine. I managed to get thirty seven days. But I went back to using with a vengeance.

I left the job at the hotel and with the money we had saved we moved into a small flat in Putney. My using hit another level, I was using four or five grams a day, that's 160 to 200 pound a day. I was constantly hiding it from my girlfriend, but she knew. I tried to stop after each binge, three days would go by, I'd start to feel better and then use again. I managed to get a job as a waiter in a local restaurant, it was an evening shift. I would use three grams before turning up to work and when I got there I would be a complete mess. I couldn't concentrate, my behaviour was erratic and I felt so desperate because I had the compulsion to use more and I had already finished all the drugs. I was a greedy user, once I started I had to finish what I had. I eventually stopped turning up to work, my using had taken over. My girlfriend became worried and I assured her everything was under control. I spent all my wages within days, so she ended up paying all the rent and the bills. I started to become a real burden.

In October, I found another job as a telephonist, the pay was decent and I promised myself I would definitely stop using this time, but again I didn't know how.

The drug dealers started to give me drugs on tick, I was constantly in debt to them. I would spend my wages on paying them back, buying more and then continue to go into debt again. I crossed a line one day and decided to steal to support my habit. Even though I had a job, it wasn't enough to support my using. I was on a constant treadmill of scoring and finding ways and means to get more. I started stealing more because I was using more to suppress the guilt and shame that were accompanying my actions. I stopped eating. I took days off work, always when my pay check came in and I would tell horrendous lies to cover my tracks. I went on a four day binge, didn't eat or sleep for those four days, I had spent two thousand pound on drugs and alcohol and when I still wanted more I conceded to fact that I was either going to die or something had to be done.

I decided to tell my parents that I had a drug problem, it was a big step, they could tell something was wrong but they didn't know what it was. My mother printed off a list of Cocaine Anonymous meetings and I attended my first meeting on Sunday morning at 8:30 am at a time that I was usually dragging myself into bed.

I managed to get two weeks clean and then relapsed as I only attended one other meeting. I walked out of my job without saying a word and spent all of my wages in two days. I was in debt again. I called my Uncle N who had already been in recovery for a few good years. My intention was to ask him for money, but something switched in me and I simply said:

"Can you take me to a meeting?" He happily obliged and that was when I made my first few steps into the doors of Narcotics Anonymous, identified myself as an addict and began my recovery. On March the 17th 2011 I got my first day clean. I attended meetings daily, got myself a sponsor and learned how to ask for help when the obsession to use descended upon me. At first I couldn't quite believe it. I wasn't using and all of a sudden a sober day granted me new and exciting opportunities that in comparison to the endless grind of picking up and using, juggling work and relationships, hiding and conspiring were very welcome. I was free for that day. My girlfriend moved back to Greece on the 30th of April, two weeks later she called me on a Monday morning just as I was heading out to a 10:00am meeting, she sounded a little fragile. She told me she was pregnant. I was happy and scared. I had been considering killing myself a month previous and now I was going to be a father. It was a bit overwhelming.

Now clean and working a program I found myself with a lot of time on my hands. My instruments in my room surrounded me, yet I was unable to pick them up and play. I couldn't even listen to music. I could feel the urge to compose and play but my self-esteem and confidence were shattered. During a meeting one Sunday evening, a fellow addict mentioned a theatre group to which she attended. It was for people in recovery. I was immediately interested, I had always wanted to act but had suppressed the desire through the years because I thought my destiny was to be a musician and other members of my family had expressed their interest in acting so I thought that I better stick to what I knew.

After the meeting I spoke to this bubbly fellow addict and enquired about the theatre group. She mentioned to me how it was a very nurturing and safe environment and that I should come along as it is open to anyone. We were unable to swap numbers as I had got rid of my phone, so I said we would probably bump into each other at a meeting again. It played on my mind, I really wanted to attend the theatre group, partly because I had so much time on my hands and secondly I needed to express myself creatively.

Later during the next week, after meeting with my sponsor in Notting Hill, I went to top-up my oyster card in the underground station and bumped into the bubbly fellow addict. She gave me the address to the theatre group and I left that encounter with a little flame of belief that a great benevolent force was working in my life.

The following Tuesday I turned up at Munster Road in Parsons Green, anxious, fearful, excited and uncertain. I immediately saw the lady who had given me the details and she introduced me to everyone. They were all friendly, welcoming, gentle and encouraging. One member mentioned to me that their next project was going to be a musical. The flame started to burn brighter and I guess I was being given exactly what I wanted - an opportunity to act and more importantly a reason to play music again.

I attended every week and through the coming months I eventually picked up my violin and guitar and began to compose and play again. It was difficult, but fellow musicians and other members of the group encouraged me warmly and I felt no judgment in their presence, only love.

In December 2011 after rehearsing for a number of months, we performed the Musical Substance Misuse in front of a sold-out crowd. I played the guitar and violin throughout and even got to sing a song with the fellow bubbly member who had introduced me to the group. My parents and other family members came to see us perform and they left with a renewed faith in their son. I was very happy and felt a sense of fulfilment that I hadn't experienced in such a long time, it almost felt foreign. I had met good people who understood me, who showed me compassion and patience and I felt blessed to be a part of something so brilliantly available which gave me so much back. The members never once judged me and allowed me to express my ideas and feelings. I finally felt like I belonged somewhere and I was doing something good for myself after all the years of self-abuse and dire consequences that came with it.

I

In 2012 on the 12th of January at 5:10am my son was born in Athens Greece weighing in at 3.17kgs. I had become a father and my girlfriend a mother. I reflected back on how my life had changed so rapidly and progressively since I had come into recovery and also how The Outside Edge Theatre Company and its Director Phil Fox had provided me with the creative outlet and nurturing environment that I had so longed for. There were no clashes of ego, no competition, no back

stabbing, it was the exact opposite environment of all the educational institutions I had been through and which had not worked for me.

After I returned back from Athens I was offered an acting role in the up and coming theatre piece called Double Whammy. It was the first time I was going to act in front of people, and not just any people. The show went on tour around England playing in prisons and treatment centres and finally finishing with a three day public performance. It was such a wonderful opportunity and I felt blessed to have been chosen. The whole thing was a completely new experience to me, formulating characters, remembering lines and learning how to perform without the feeling of repetition. The other cast members who I had already known from the last production were so supportive and caring. I had such low self-esteem I didn't know if I was doing anything right, but they were there holding my hand so to speak. It was the first time I had been in such close proximity with so many people for so long that in a way I was learning how to do it. We all enjoyed ourselves throughout the tour, with all its twists and turns and we all dreaded the day that it would end. I really relished the chance to cultivate two characters in this production, both of them being of the villain type. What actually happened through the tour playing these two characters was quite amazing really. I managed to come to terms with some of my own past behaviours and accept that people got hurt because of them. I achieved a level of acceptance regarding myself and my place in the world. I found wonderful, supportive friends who I could rely on, and Phil provided me with the opportunity to be a part of something that has helped me and given me a reason to embrace my desire to be creative. He has also shown me new and interesting ways of thinking and behaving and I thank him and all the members of The Outside Edge Theatre Company for helping me find myself again.

After the production I received so much affirmation concerning my performing that I am now considering to do a Masters in Acting. I have found a new direction in life and The Outside Edge has given it to me. So I say thank you once again to Phil, Cathy and the members of The Outside Edge Theatre Company, especially the bubbly fellow addict who introduced me to it all (you know who you are) and of course my fellow tour buddies, and I would like to extend an invitation to anyone who may feel as I once did, lost and confused, for Phil and The Company maybe able to help. Just come along and give it a try. I did.