

Frey's fiction helps no one

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AS YOU WERE SAYING . . Jeffrey S. Wolfsberg

I've watched with some amusement and self-satisfaction, as the James Frey scandal has evolved on a national level.

For months now, parents and students have asked me if I read his book. I said no, that as a recovering addict and alcoholic myself, I've lived it, and that books about recovery have a way of sensationalizing a process that is personal, discreet and nuanced. How do we process Frey's revelations of untruths and embellishments?

Most treatment programs for addictions and self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous put at the heart of the recovery the value of honesty. Alcoholism/addiction is often referred to as the disease of secrets. Step 4 of the 12-step program suggests that we make a fearless moral inventory of ourselves. In Step 5, we admit to God, to ourselves and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

It doesn't say that if your wrongs are not interesting enough, just make up a few details and add some pizzazz to them. Many professionals and those with long-term recovery feel that without daily self-honesty and honesty to others, people struggling with addiction will relapse.

I have a problem with the idea that recovery has a beginning and an end, as many books about recovery suggest. The notion that I



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THROW BOOK AT HIM: James Frey has done recovering substance abusers an injustice.

was sick then and I'm better now demeans the heroic daily struggle that millions of addicts face every day. It doesn't offer hope, but rather false hope to those who question themselves — "I've been sober for 10 years, why is it still so hard?"

My professional work as an alcohol and other drug-prevention specialist has me speaking to kids, parents and school personnel around the country about the damage underage drinking and drug use can cause to someone's life.

Perhaps one of the strongest messages I send is that my use of alcohol and other drugs and my ultimate dependence is a lifelong battle.

I have good days, good months and even good years, but I have bad ones, too. I think about getting drunk when I am stressed, angry, lonely, tired and sometimes for no reason at all. I miss getting high on crack cocaine, although I know the damage it caused me and the damage it would cause again.

There are happy pieces of my

life but no happy ending. I have an amazing wife, family and home. I love my work and have the privilege of dealing with bright and dedicated people. I enjoy these gifts daily, yet still think about getting high and drunk again. Tomorrow is not a certainty. I have friends who continue to drink abusively, use other drugs and struggle with the task of life.

The hard work of sobriety and clean time does not make a good screenplay. The work is slow, almost unnoticeable. It happens quietly with little fanfare and applause. It happens in the quiet and solitude of a church basement at an AA meeting on a Friday night when the rest of the world is out laughing and carousing. It happens during counseling when you face your history and have the courage and confidence to change. It happens when you face those you lied to, stole from, cheated on, broke promises to, let down, failed to show up, showed up and ruined their evening and given your apology. Ultimately, you have to forgive yourself for ruining and delaying the gifts you were brought into this life to use.

A school counselor once caught me lying about missing a meeting and told me to take a hard look at myself. If I ran into James Frey, I'd say the same thing to him.

Jeffrey S. Wolfsberg lives in Canton, and works in schools as a prevention specialist in the area of adolescent substance abuse and bullying. As You Were Saying is a regular feature of the Boston Herald.