Bouncing Back and Moving Forward: Resilience, the Joseph Narrative and Addiction Recovery

Marion L. S. Carson

Abstract: The use of biblical narrative is an important resource in the practice of pastoral care and counselling. In this paper, which draws on the psychology of resilience as well as recent work on trauma and resilience hermeneutics, it is argued that the Joseph novella can be a useful resource for helping people to develop resilience in their journey of recovery from substance abuse. Joseph's experiences of complex family relationships, abandonment, betrayal, estrangement, and imprisonment are deeply resonant with the experiences of many who have been caught up in addiction. This is the story of an individual who displays resilience in the face of repeated trauma and reversals of fortune, and it provides a rich resource for people in recovery to reflect on their own experience and develop skills for resilience as they learn to live lives free of alcohol and drugs.

Keywords: resilience; Joseph novella; narrative; addiction recovery; pastoral care and counselling

DOI: 10.14712/30296374.2025.9

1. Introduction

The importance of narrative for pastoral care and counselling has been increasingly recognized in recent years.[1] Stories, as Karen Scheib says in her book on the subject, can help us to make sense of our own lives and those of others. She writes, "As a narrative practice, pastoral care attends to the inseparable interconnection between our own life stories, others' stories, the larger cultural stories, and God's story."[2] For Christians, of course, the major

1 See C. V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counselling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984); Suzanne M. Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Fortress, 2014); Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015); Karen D. Scheib, *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of Our Lives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016).

2 Scheib, *Pastoral Care*, xi.

resource for such stories is Scripture itself.[3] It contains not only the narrative of God's intervention in human history but the stories of those who were trying to make sense of their own part in that narrative. As Anthony Thiselton notes, the biblical narratives inform and transform our lives, and "provide a resource by which readers can transcend the present," helping us to see another way of being and viewing the world.[4] In the Hebrew Scriptures there is much to be learned from stories of characters such as Joseph, Elijah, Jeremiah or Job. So too, the stories in the gospels and Acts of the Apostles tell of communities of faith learning how to be followers of Jesus Christ. For centuries, readers of these stories have identified with the characters and drawn their own lessons from the struggles and experiences recorded in them.

In this chapter I wish to consider ways in which the Joseph novella can be a resource for people in recovery from addiction to drugs and alcohol. In my own pastoral practice I have found that the story of Joseph is particularly helpful for discussions of the theme of developing resilience.[5] Of course, there are major differences between the character of Joseph and people in recovery – not least that Joseph does not suffer from addiction and that for much of the story he is in a position of great power. Nevertheless, several of his experiences are deeply resonant for many who have been caught up in addiction – for example, complex family relationships, abandonment, betrayal, estrangement, imprisonment.[6] This is the story of an individual who displays resilience in the face of repeated trauma and reversals of fortune, and it provides a rich resource for people in recovery to reflect on their own experience and develop skills for resilience as they learn to live lives free of alcohol and drugs.

In order to explore how the Joseph narrative might inform the pastoral care and counselling of people in recovery from addiction I will go through three steps. First, I will clarify what I mean by both recovery and resilience. Second, I will consider the nature and place of resilience in the journey of

3 Edward P. Wimberly, *Using Scripture in Pastoral Counselling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

4 Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 569.

5 I serve as chaplain to Glasgow City Mission in Scotland, working with people affected by homelessness, displacement and addiction.

6 On resonance and analogy as hermeneutical tool for contemporary application see Christopher Rowland and Zoë Bennett, "'Action is the Life of All': The Bible and Practical Theology," *Contact* 150 (2006), 8–17.

recovery. Third, adopting a narrative approach, I will focus on the characterisation of Joseph himself, and draw some insights from the story which I believe can prove helpful for the development of resilience amongst people seeking to live without drugs and alcohol.[7]

2. Addiction, recovery and pastoral care

The journey of recovery from substance addiction is fraught with difficulty. Very few people who want to give up drugs and alcohol succeed at the first attempt. In fact, recovery tends to be marked by several relapses before lasting sobriety is able to be maintained.[8] Explanations for this can vary depending on one's view of the causes of addiction. Those who espouse a neuro-biological view are likely to stress the difficulty in overcoming the body's desire for the drug of choice, while those who understand addiction from a psychological perspective are more likely to think in terms of default thinking and behaviour patterns. Whatever theory of addiction is preferred, it remains the case that life events such as bereavement, illness, family breakdown and estrangement can heighten the risk of relapse.[9] People in recovery need to be able to live with the effects of severe trauma, often from childhood, but also from events which took place during the years of active addiction. Stressful circumstances and past traumas are, of course, part of normal living, and we all have to develop our own ways of coping. For those who are trying to live without their accustomed coping strategy, however, these can be particularly perilous. In the effort to remain drug and alcohol free, individuals need to be able to develop resilience in the face of adversity and setbacks, in order to learn from them and grow.

Here, I am using the term "recovery" to refer to the experience of people with a history of addiction who have embarked on a journey of trying to

7 See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2002); Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph: Genesis 37–50* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 66–105.

8 Gabor Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (Toronto: Vintage, 2008); Sonia E. Waters, *Addiction and Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

9 For overviews of the main theories of addiction see Alan A. Cavaiola and Margaret Smith, *A Comprehensive Guide to Addiction Theory and Counselling Techniques* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

live without alcohol or drugs.[10] The term, therefore, refers to a process of returning to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health, all of which have been diminished because of substance abuse. For many, the return to physical health is the easiest part of this journey. Abstinence and medical interventions can help restore depleted vitamins and heal damaged tissue and organs. For most, however, it is far harder to learn to respond to life stressors such as relationship difficulties, unemployment or bereavement without resorting to drugs or alcohol. There is a need, too, to learn to live with memories and consequences of the past. Shame, guilt, grief, anger and anxiety can be overwhelming and debilitating. In all these things, the recovering addict has to learn to cope with difficulties without recourse to the substance on which they previously relied. In other words, they need to develop resilience. But what exactly does this mean?

According to Gill Windle, resilience is "the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant sources of stress or trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment, facilitate this capacity for adaptation and 'bouncing back' in the face of adversity."[11] Resilience, then, does not mean avoiding stressors or being able to ignore them. Rather, it is the ability to face the reality of the situation, acknowledge its painful nature, then to "bounce back" and continue on the journey. It is the idea of "bouncing back" which distinguishes resilience from that of perseverance. Perseverance refers to continued pushing through in a prolonged period of stress or effort – for example, persevering through to the end of a rehabilitation programme or through the inevitable days of boredom which accompany sobriety. While perseverance is important in the long haul of recovery, it is resilience which enables people to respond in a healthy manner to potentially overwhelming setbacks such as a bereavement or loss and so enable them to persevere in recovery. Resilience then is an important component of perseverance, but it is not the same thing.

10 Note that I am assuming that abstinence is essential in the road to recovery. For alternative approaches see, for example, G. Alan Marlatt, "Harm Reduction: Come as You Are," *Addictive Behaviours* 21:6 (1996), 779–88; Patt Benning & Jeannie Little, *Over the Influence: The Harm Reduction Guide to Controlling your Drug and Alcohol Use* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2017).

11 Gill Windle, "What Is Resilience? A Review and Concept Analysis," *Reviews in Clinical Gerontology* 21:2 (2011), 152–69, at 163.

However, resilience is not simply about bouncing back, it also includes the idea of moving forward – getting on with life, learning from experience and becoming stronger and wiser. Michael Neenan writes,

> This forward movement is a defining feature of resilience. As such, being resilient doesn't restore your life as it was prior to the adversity but, rather, what you've learnt from tackling the adversity usually changes you for the better; it helps you to become keenly aware of what's important in your life and, as we said, encourages you to pursue it.[12]

This "forward movement" entails the ability to learn from experience and to become more discerning as to what is important in life. In other words, resilience also entails growth towards maturity and wisdom. In a study of resilience in the elderly, psychiatrists Monika Areldt and Dilip Jeste note that people who are wise have developed a desire to understand life and human nature, "the inherent limits of knowledge, and of life's unpredictability and uncertainties." They are also willing to reflect on their experience and see things from others' points of view as well as their own. "This process," they say, "tends to reduce self-centeredness and increase acceptance of human nature and an awareness of the suffering of others, resulting in greater sympathy and compassion for others and the motivation to help others in need – the *compassionate (affective) dimension* of wisdom."[13]

Over many years, wise people have learned from reflecting on their experience, have remained teachable even in old age and become more compassionate towards others. People who are able to develop wisdom of this sort, Areldt and Jeste argue, tend to be able to withstand the hard knocks of life. Facilitating the development of resilience, maturity and wisdom must surely be part and parcel of any recovery programme.

2.1 Resilience in recovery

For those in recovery from substance abuse, it is crucial to be able to develop the ability to face stresses and adversities without resorting to chemical

12 Michael Neenan, *Developing Resilience: A Cognitive-Behavioural Approach*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 18.

13 Monika Areldt and Dilip V. Jeste, "Wisdom and Hard Times: The Ameliorating Effect of Wisdom on the Negative Association Between Adverse Life Events and Well-Being," *Journals of Gerontology Series B Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 73:8 (2018), 1374–83. On resilience from a psychiatric perspective, see further Steven M. Southwick, Dennis S. Charney & Jonathan M. DePierro, *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

props. However, there is much more to resilience in recovery than simply the ability to live without drugs and alcohol. As Martinelli *et al* say, "it is clear that addiction recovery cannot be reduced to abstinence and that it concerns growth and change on various life domains."[14]

It must, surely, also be about learning to live with honesty and integrity, taking personal responsibility and making better choices.[15] The question for us here is how we can help people in recovery to do this. From a psychological perspective, as Kitty Harris and Sara Smock Jordan note, people in recovery need to be able to develop healthy coping mechanisms to deal with emotional pain.[16] Factors such as personality traits, inherited characteristics and temperament do have an important part to play. However, individuals can be helped to develop cognitive skills such as decision-making, coping with emotions, communicating well with others and managing finances. As they begin to see positive outcomes (such as family reconciliation and reduced debt) they will grow in confidence and self-esteem. Another important aspect is being part of a caring community. The support of others, particularly those who are further along the journey, who have gained experience and are willing to become mentors is known to be invaluable. It has also been recognised that spirituality and a sense of the transcendent have an important part to play in the development of resilience.[17] The sense of being a part of something which is bigger than oneself contributes to the development of a balanced sense of self in relation to others and the environment, and can provide a framework for developing a sense of morality and purpose in life.

---

14 T. F. Martinelli, G. E. Nagelhout, L. Bellaert, D. Best, W. Vanderplasschen & D. van de Mheen, "Comparing three stages of addiction recovery: Longterm recovery and its relation to housing problems, crime, occupation situation, and substance use," *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 27:5 (2020), 387–96, at 387.

15 A. B. Laudet, "What does recovery mean to you? Lessons from the recovery experience for research and practice," *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 33:3 (2007), 243–56.

16 Kitty Harris and Sara Smock Jordan, "Relapse Resilience: A Process Model of Addiction and Recovery," *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* 22:3 (2011), 265–74, at 270.

17 Julio F. P. Peres, Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Antonia Gladys Nasello and Harold G. Koenig, "Spirituality and Resilience in Trauma Victims," *Journal of Religion and Health* 46 (2007), 343–50; Christopher C. H. Cook, and Nathan H. White, "Resilience and the Role of Spirituality," in Dinesh Bhugra, Kam Bhui, Samuel Wong, and Stephen Gilman (eds.), *The Oxford Textbook of Public Mental Health* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 513–20; David W. Foy, Kent D. Drescher, and Patricia J. Watson, "Religious and Spiritual Factors in Resilience," in Steven M. Southwick, Brett T. Litz, Dennis Charney, and Matthew J. Friedman (eds.), *Resilience and Mental Health: Challenges Across the Lifespan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 90–101.

3. Introducing the Joseph Narrative

In his article on reading Scripture through the lens of resilience, Robert Schreiter speaks of texts in which "the undoing of trauma and evidence of resilience can be found."[18] Schreiter is interested in examining texts which witness to interiority, reflection and processing on the part of people who are in the midst of a traumatic experience. For example, Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, Lamentations and Ezekiel, which come from the Babylonian period, may be considered theological responses to imperialistic aggression and exile, providing pastoral care to those whose very survival is under threat.[19] Within these texts we see not only the emotional response to such trauma but also the ways in which the people were able to be, or encouraged to be, resilient in their circumstances.

The Joseph novella is distinctive in tackling the themes of trauma and resilience in Israel's story through an account of the life of one individual and his family.[20] As we trace Joseph's story from childhood into adulthood, we see that he is able to be highly resilient in the face of trauma throughout his life. We can observe some aspects of his emotional development as well as his response to repeated traumatic stress.[21] He is both the victim of others and at times of his own human weakness, yet at the end of the story he emerges as a man who can act with maturity, integrity and wisdom.

---

18 Robert J. Schreiter, "Reading Biblical Texts Through the Lens of Resilience," in Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (eds.), *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, Semeia Studies 38 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 193–208. Further studies of resilience in biblical and theological perspective may be found in Nathan A. White and Christopher H. Cook (eds.), *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

19 Kathleen O'Connor, *Genesis 25B-50* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2020), 7; See further, David McLain Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

20 As Leon Kass suggests in *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 510, the story known as 'Joseph and his Brothers' is really the story of the legacy of Jacob and the national perpetuation of the way of Israel." The origins and dating of the novella are still a matter of debate. For an overview of the discussion see Konrad Schmid, Thomas Römer and Axel Bühler (eds.), *The Joseph Story Between Egypt and Israel* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

21 See for example, Caralie Focht, "The Joseph Story: A Trauma-Informed Biblical Hermeneutic for Pastoral Care Providers," *Pastoral Psychology* 69:3 (2020), 209–33; Fred Guyette, "Joseph's Emotional Development," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32:3 (2004), 181–88. On the Joseph novella as trauma literature see Caralie Cooke, *Discovering the Religious Dimension of Trauma: Trauma Literature and the Joseph Story* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

Readers are first introduced to Joseph when he is in his teens. His mother has died but he is his father's favourite. We learn that he tells his half-brothers of dreams in which they bow down to him, and takes a bad report about them to their father. Resentment and bitterness build up against him. One day they gain their revenge by throwing him into a pit and selling him to Ishmaelite merchants who happen to come by. Jacob is told that his favourite son has been killed by a wild animal. We next meet Joseph in Egypt where he has become Potiphar's slave. Recognising his leadership and administrative talents, Potiphar makes him head of his household. All goes well until Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph. Though he resists her advances he ends up in jail, accused of attempted rape. In prison, his gifts are recognised once again. Interpreting Pharoah's dreams, he predicts famine and advises that Pharoah prepare for this by storing up food. He is now appointed as Pharoah's second-in-charge, administering the land, and does his job so well that when the predicted famine comes, there is plenty. So it is that his brothers come looking to buy grain, and in fulfilment of Joseph's youthful dreams, they bow down before him. After some time, Joseph reveals who he is to them, and the family is reconciled.

From this brief synopsis it will be obvious that Joseph's life is marked by both great privilege and great suffering. His childhood and adolescence are paradoxical – happy in some respects but unhappy in others. Certainly, he is gifted, but in his immaturity he comes across as spoiled, arrogant and naive. Youthful mistakes will mark the rest of his life. His brothers are so resentful and jealous that they attempt to murder him (he would have died in the pit had he not been sold). Joseph is the victim of intense cruelty, betrayal and rejection.

In adulthood, his talents ensure that he becomes immensely powerful. But he is still a slave, and his vulnerability is highlighted in the episode with Potiphar's wife. Joseph acts with integrity, but it is his voice against hers and he ends up in jail. When his brothers arrive we see some emotional response in him as he confronts the past with all its pain and rejection and he has to consider how best to respond to his calculating family. He is vulnerable, but he has his own flaws and weaknesses. His treatment of the Egyptian people during the famine, for example, is highly questionable, as he makes them give their produce to the state and pay to have it back.

3.1 Resilience in the narrative

Joseph's life, then, as depicted by the storyteller, is characterised by many very difficult experiences. This is a story of dysfunctional family, abandonment,

and betrayal. Nowadays we would speak of Joseph's youthful experiences as "adverse childhood experiences" which had repercussions throughout his life.[22] There is also considerable trauma in adulthood – injustice, grief and reversals of fortune. Nevertheless, Joseph is able to grow and mature, and ultimately to forgive and be reconciled with family members who have caused him such pain.

At this point, some general remarks can be made about how Joseph shows resilience as he builds up his life following severe trauma. Perhaps most obvious is his ability to make the best of very bad situations. He sees opportunities and makes use of them – both in Potiphar's house and in prison. Secondly, he makes use of his gifts – as dream interpreter, administrator and organiser – and gets himself noticed as someone who is worth having around. He works hard, and in a sense, work becomes his rescuer. In enslavement and even in imprisonment, meaningful work and responsibility helps him to survive in an impossible situation, even if ultimately he is at the mercy of the whim of his owner. Third, he does not allow his experiences of betrayal and hurt to incapacitate him – in other words, he does not adopt a victim mentality; we do not see him wallowing in his victimhood or blaming others for his predicament.[23] Rather, he takes responsibility for himself, even when his situation is highly precarious and when he encounters further hardship and injustice. Lastly, we note that he has the ability to plan ahead – most notably when he stockpiles enough grain to feed Egypt during the years of famine. Such long-term thinking not only gains him a position of responsibility, it also saves many lives and is a source of revenue for his master.

4. Building up resilience in recovery

Seeing opportunities, making use of gifts, avoiding "victim mentality" and planning ahead will help anyone to be resilient in the face of considerable adversity and fluctuating fortunes in every-day life. There are, however, some particular aspects of the recovery journey to which I believe the Joseph nar-

22 Roberta Waite and Ruth Ann Ryan, *Adverse Childhood Experiences: What Students and Health Professionals Need to Know* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

23 On victimhood mentality see for example, Rahav Gabay, Boaz Hameiri, Tammy Rubel-Lifschitz, Arie Nadler, "The Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood: The Personality Construct and its Consequences," *Personality and Individual Differences* 165 (2020), 1–11.

rative can speak. Here I shall address the following: learning to cope with emotional "triggers"; developing healthy relationships; coping with injustice and adversity; and the role of spirituality in recovery.

4.1 Coping with emotional "triggers"

In the early stages of abstinence, the experience is one of discomfort. Neurological changes mean that in the latter phases of addiction the substance is taken simply to feel normal (rather than to get "high" or feel intoxicated).[24] Once the drug has been withdrawn, the person is feeling far from normal. As the person learns to live without the substance and learns to adjust, craving reduces. Eventually, the person's thoughts are no longer dominated by making sure the next drink or hit is available: it becomes easier to get through each day without it.

Nevertheless, it is important not to become complacent. Certain circumstances can pose great challenges to the abstinence that has been achieved over weeks, months and even years. In particular, emotional "triggers" pose a great risk for people in recovery. The term "triggers" refers to events, objects or places which make a person want to use drugs or alcohol again. It is a crucial part of recovery for each individual to learn what these triggers are. Triggers will, of course, vary from person to person, but there are some common ones. For example, people or places associated with previous drug use, the smell of alcohol, or simply seeing drug paraphernalia can be triggers for many.[25]

One of the most potent triggers is emotional distress. It is the default of someone in addiction to respond to any emotional upheaval by taking their drug of choice. When things go well – celebrate with a drink or a hit. When things go badly – do the same to help get through. This way of thinking can remain for many years, even after several years of abstinence. Of course, some things can be managed – carefully avoiding old haunts and groups of friends, for example. However, family tensions and relationship problems can also be a major source of emotional distress and be a trigger for relapse. The stress of facing one's past and the attempts at reconciliation can stir

---

24 Judith Grisel, *Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction* (New York: Doubleday, 2019).

25 Rebecca Williams and Julie Kraft, *The Mindfulness Workbook for Addiction. A Guide to Coping with the Grief, Stress and Anger that Trigger Addictive Behaviours* (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2012).

up memories of hurt and resentment which can severely test the resolve to steer clear of drugs and alcohol.

According to Aviviah Gottlieb Zornberg, "[t]he story of Joseph in Egypt is a history of his continued, desperate attempts to re-member himself, to integrate the broken pieces of his identity."[26] Joseph has spent the time learning to live with loss and past trauma, and by the time his family come to Egypt he has repressed his memories of the pain.[27] Of course, he has not forgotten, but has made efforts to ensure that these memories do not dominate his life and hinder his ability to succeed. Very often, recovering addicts must learn to do the same. The pain of the past remains, but it cannot be allowed to become debilitating. They must learn to live with memories without letting them become overwhelming.

Contact with family members, however, can arouse complex emotions and desires which are difficult to handle. When Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt, they do not recognise him. Seeing them brings back memories of the dreams he had of them as a youngster, and presumably of their hostile, ultimately murderous, response. Little wonder that he speaks harshly to them. Eventually it all becomes too much, the pretence of haughty detachment breaks and Joseph has to turn aside to weep. "Just as Joseph has reached a point in his life where he prefers not to be reminded of his past," Sarna writes, "he is forced to confront it by the rush of events."[28] Joseph has a choice. Either he runs away and gets someone else to deal with the brothers who have turned up, or he confronts the matter head on. He chooses the latter.

Nevertheless, instead of revealing who he is and effecting immediate reconciliation he embarks on a series of cat and mouse games with them – accusing them of being spies, setting them up as thieves, putting Simeon in jail and insisting that they bring Benjamin to him. There are differing opinions as to Joseph's motivations here. Sternberg thinks he is taking revenge on his brothers, while Sarna holds that he is testing them to see if they regret

---

26 Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books 1995, 273).

27 For a psychologically based study of Joseph's response to trauma, see Meira Polliack, "Joseph's Trauma: Memory and Resolution," in A. Brenner and F. H. Polak (eds.), *Performing Memory in Biblical Narrative and Beyond* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2009), 72–105.

28 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis The Traditional Hebrew Text with new JPS translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 291.

their actions and have reformed.[29] We will return to this later, but for the moment it is noteworthy that Joseph does not act impulsively when he sees his brothers – he takes time to think about what he will do. If he is testing them, it may be legitimate. It could be naïve to assume that they would be pleased to see him again: shame and guilt can cause people to react angrily and defensively. There is wisdom in his reluctance to be open straightaway.

4.2 Developing healthy relationships

It is well recognised that learning to have healthy relationships is a vital part of recovery. In fact, according to Earnie Larsen, this is the second part of recovery after learning to live without drugs or alcohol.[30] A crucial part of helping people in recovery is to provide an environment in which they can develop positive relationships which will promote and value their growth.[31] Many recovering addicts find that they must deal with the damage done by and to existing and previous relationships, for example with families, spouses, partners and friends. As Joi Andreoli says in her book *The Recovery Cycle*, "[r]elationships become a major focus of attention in recovery. This focus can take a downturn into negative, obsessive and dysfunctional thinking. This kind of focus, with an old, scratched lens, can threaten sobriety."[32]

The Joseph story illustrates the lengthy and painful nature of working through emotional responses to painful family circumstances. There may be further pain even when there is good will to make things work on all sides. If learning not to react impulsively is a crucial part of developing resilience, so too is the need to be able to reflect on how one's actions affect other people. Many recovering addicts have to learn that their actions have had damaging effects on their families, and that there may be lingering pain and hurt. Some become fixated on the pain and rejection that they have experienced and can be resentful of what they perceive to be unjust treatment, say by former partners. This is common when there are children involved. Memories of loss, feelings of guilt and shame, and stimulation of old tensions

29 M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 288; Sarna, *Genesis*, 293.

30 Earnie Larsen, *Stage 2 Recovery: Life beyond Addiction* (London: HarperOne, 2013).

31 Sarah A. Buckingham and David Best (eds.), *Addiction, Behavioural Change and Social Identity: The Path to Resilience and Recovery* (London: Routledge, 2017); Harris, Smock and Wilkes, "Relapse resilience."

32 Joi Andreoli, *The Recovery Cycle: A Practical Guide to Loving your Sober Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 37.

and resentments can make family relationships very difficult indeed. There is a need to learn to live with these intense emotions without resorting to emotional anaesthetic.[33] Recovery programmes tend to focus on this, and Christian programmes in particular have much to say about God's forgiveness and acceptance which can be foundational for the recovery process.

Forgiveness is, of course, central to the Joseph story. He must forgive his brothers for what they did to him when he was young. But his forgiveness is not immediate: when his brothers appear, it takes some time before his suspicion and emotional turmoil give way to an acceptance of the situation. We are reminded that forgiveness is a process and not an instantaneous decision. Moreover, it is not just Joseph who needs to forgive. Jacob must do so too. His sons, Joseph included, have put him through a great deal of pain. The brothers also to acknowledge their sin and forgive themselves. In their alarm at the possibility of being accused of theft they reveal lingering shame and guilt at their treatment of Joseph.

While it is good that this is recognised and articulated, the family as a whole will not become resilient if the past is allowed to dominate.[34] Moreover, the precarious nature of forgiveness and reconciliation is reflected in the fact that immediately after Jacob's funeral, the brothers express the concern that now that their father is dead, Joseph might take revenge.[35] Reconciliation is just the beginning: old tensions remain. There is a responsibility on all sides to work hard at maintaining relationships and sometimes deep feelings and difficult personalities can make this very complicated indeed. Resilience is not simply an individual matter – families and friends need to develop it too if they are "to grow through adversity and disruption."[36]

4.3 Coping with the complexities of life

As well as learning to cope with immediate hazards such as emotional triggers and family tensions, people in recovery need to be able to cope with the mixed fortunes of everyday life. This includes learning to live with painful memories. It is well established that childhood trauma is closely related to

33 On shame and alcoholism, see James R. Nelson, *Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 133–37.

34 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 218.

35 Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988), 82.

36 G. E. Richardson, "The Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58:3 (2002), 307–21.

substance abuse later in life. As David Lisak and Paul Miller note, "[a]mong the common psychological legacies of childhood trauma is PTSD, the symptoms of which often lead abuse victims to seek relief through self-medication – the consumption of mind-altering drugs and alcohol that deaden feeling, alleviate fears and anxieties, and provide temporary states of artificial euphoria."[37]

However, as they also note, any short-term relief is soon outweighed by additional problems which accrue from substance abuse. In recovery, the pain of the past must be faced as well as the fallout from further damage that has been done during their time of active addiction. This emotional pain can be overwhelming and be a major cause of relapse. For the recovering addict, then, a major task is to learn to live with painful memories without resorting to drugs or alcohol to provide an emotional painkiller.

Another task is to learn to live with difficulties which arise during the process of recovery: difficult relationships and unfair treatment, for example, can be hard to handle. Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife can be a rich resource for reflection and discussion. Just when life seems to be improving, he becomes embroiled in difficulty once more – this time because of Zuleika, who tries to seduce him. Joseph's resistance brings no reward but rather a term in prison. The reason given for Joseph's resistance is deontological – adultery is a sin against God.[38] For some readers, this may be enough. Others, however, will benefit from thinking about why the rule is there in the first place. Learning to think about the consequences of one's actions can be a major step in the recovery process. What would have happened had Joseph given in? Who would have suffered? Such questions can help people begin to think long-term rather than impulsively. There is another, perhaps more difficult lesson to consider: injustices happen, even when we try to do what is right. Although Joseph obeys God, he still finds himself in jail, falsely accused. This too can be a useful talking point as people consider the reality that doing the right thing may not always have the result that we want.

The realisation that human relationships are seldom straightforward can be a source of great distress and bewilderment to people in recovery.

37 David Lisak and Paul M. Miller, "Childhood Trauma, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Substance Abuse and Violence," in P. Ouimette & P. J. Brown (eds.), *Trauma and Substance Abuse: Causes, Consequences and Treatment of Comorbid Disorders* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), 73.

38 Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary Press, 2015), 217.

There can be a naïve expectation that sobriety on their part should mean that wounds will be healed, and relationships restored without effort. An important aspect of recovery is to develop some understanding of human nature: dualistic thinking (believing people to be either all good or all bad) and naïve expectations can be sources of disappointment and deep resentment. Biblical narratives know well the complexities of human nature. As Robert Alter notes, "the biblical tale, through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us again and again to ponder complexities of motive and ambiguities of character because these are essential aspects of its vision of man, created by God, enjoying or suffering all the consequences of human freedom."[39]

In fact, Joseph himself – the man who has been held up as a paragon of virtue in both Jewish and Christian tradition[40] – is all too human. His emotional turmoil translates into sometimes strange behaviour towards his brothers. Accusations of theft against them instigate anxiety and fear, and his demand to see Benjamin causes his father unnecessary anguish when he thinks that he is going to lose Simeon and Benjamin as well as Joseph. Could not Joseph have prevented such family distress? His behaviour is, in part, redeemed by his generosity to them in the long run. He does not allow a desire for revenge to have the last word.

Unfortunately, however, his generosity is not matched in his treatment of the Egyptian people. True, he stores up grain and brings prosperity to the land, but the people end up enslaved and exploited, having had to sell all their property to Pharoah in order to survive (Gen 47:20–22).[41] Of course, as a slave, Joseph has to protect himself, for his fortunes could be reversed in an instant. Nevertheless, from our twenty-first century perspective, his exploitation of the people seems morally reprehensible. Joseph, therefore, falls off the pedestal on which he has been placed by so many commentators. However, for this we can be grateful, for, from a pastoral viewpoint, exploring the behaviour of flawed characters in Biblical narrative can be instructive and healing. Assisting people to read the text in the light of their own experience

39 Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 24.

40 Mark Sheridan and Thomas C. Oden (eds.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament II Genesis 12–50* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); Maren Niehoff, *The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Jewish Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

41 O'Connor, *Genesis 25B-50*, 241ff. For a more positive view of Joseph's economic policy, see John Goldingay *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 564.

can help develop self-awareness and foster the ability to maintain healthier relationships.

4.4 Spirituality

Spirituality plays a large part in many people's recovery journey. What this means for each individual will vary, but here I am thinking of a sense of the transcendent, of something beyond ourselves. In his memoir, AA's founder Bill Wilson gives an account of a profound spiritual experience he had which was foundational for his journey of recovery.[42] Not everyone will have an experience like Wilson's but the development of "self-transcendent values" which give meaning and purpose has been identified as an important aspect of resilience in recovery for many.[43] It is known too that being part of a community which shares values is vital not only for social support but also for learning new patterns of behaviour.[44]

At first sight, there seems to be remarkably little concern with religion or spirituality in the Jospeh novella. As Sarna notes in his commentary on Genesis, this story contains nothing in the way of the miraculous and God "never openly and directly intervenes" in Joseph's life. Nevertheless, "the secularity of the story is superficial, for the narrative is infused with a profound sense that God's guiding hand imparts meaning and direction to seemingly haphazard events."[45] It is made quite clear throughout the story that God is involved in the proceedings, even if not obviously so. The narrative is famous for its paucity of religious language, but it is clear that Joseph maintains his family's religious worldview as an exile in Egypt, and that this helps him to make sense of his experience. The names he gives his children demonstrate this, as does his insistence that his ability to interpret dreams comes from God, not himself. His faith in God helps him to find meaning in his trauma,

42 Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Official "Big Book" from Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book* 4th ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2013), 1–16.

43 See further, Alcoholics Anonymous, *The Official "Big Book"*, Appendix 2; Claudia Russo, Daniela Barni, Ioana Zagrean, Maria Agnese Lulli, Georgia Vecchi, Francesca Danioni "The Resilient Recovery from Substance Addiction: The Role of Self-Transcendence Values and Hope," *Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology* 9 (2021), 1–20.

44 Laurence Borras, Yasser Khazaal, Riaz Ahmad Khan, Sylvia Mohr, "The Relationship between Addiction and Religion and its Possible Implication for Care," *Substance Use and Misuse* 45:14 (2010), 2357–410.

45 Sarna, *Genesis*, 254.

enabling him to see the possibility that God can bring good out of human evil.[46] In other words, his religion helps him to find meaning and purpose in his experience.

The story presents Yahweh as present and active, albeit in the background, as Joseph endures betrayal, cruelty and exile. God is not always acknowledged as present in his sufferings. In her study of the novella as trauma literature, Caralie Cooke sees Joseph's experience in terms of the "loss of an assumptive world" – in others words the loss of all that gave him meaning and security in life. In the midst of this trauma Joseph builds a trust in a God who can turn the most wicked of human behaviour around for good. "Indeed," she says,

> Joseph's assumptive world has broadened to the point where he can now recognise the role of God in his life in the past even when he was not aware of it while the traumatic event was taking place. In this sense, the religious dimension of Joseph's rebuilt assumptive world offers hope: God is active in the world even when someone is not aware of it.[47]

This perspective can be helpful for people who are trying to live in abstinence. Besides the many losses which have been endured as a result of addiction (family breakdown, homelessness, loss of career), the attempt to live without the substance brings about the loss of the "assumptive world" that reliance on drugs and alcohol provides. In fact, the realisation that they have been ensnared by a trickster slave-holder is in itself a trauma. If recovery is learning to live without a substance which has become all-controlling in their lives, a large part of pastoral care might be to help the person see that God has been, and continues to be, active in their lives, and can even work for good through them, even when though this is not immediately evident.

4.5 Resilience and growth

It was mentioned earlier that resilience entails much more than simply "bouncing back" after trauma and difficulty. It also includes the idea of moving forward, learning from experience and maturing. The narrative provides

46 Meira Polliack, "Joseph's Trauma: Memory and Resolution," in A. Brenner & F. H. Polak (eds.), *Performing Memory in Biblical Narrative and Beyond* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press 2009), 72–105; See further Mignon R. Jacobs, "The Conceptual Dynamics of Good and Evil in the Joseph Story: An Exegetical and Hermeneutical Enquiry," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27:3 (2003), 309–38.

47 Cooke, *Discovering the Religious Dimension of Trauma*, 156.

evidence of such growth in Joseph's life. While we cannot claim to be able to trace this in a linear fashion, we can catch glimpses which suggest maturing through experience. He grows from being a naïve, spoiled and arrogant young man who brings bad reports about his brothers to their father into one who is willing to concede that he might not be right. In adolescence he persists in telling his brothers about his dreams, causing resentment in the process.

However, later, when he is asked to interpret Pharoah's dreams, he is able to say that he does not have the ability to interpret but to listen to God (Gen 41:16). When asked to interpret his fellow prisoners' dreams he is careful to say that he is not speaking for God. This suggests a change in Joseph which McConville describes as "learning a kind of wisdom and insight more profound than the interpretation of dreams. The certainties of the dream interpreter are in contrast to the hesitation of the responsible man, as he handles a hard situation in which not only public affairs are at play but his own deepest being."[48] The mature Joseph knows that dreams are God's business and not his. He knows that they and his gift of interpretation have divine origin. He has learned that there is something beyond himself.

But growth in spirituality cannot be simply for the edification of the individual. As Bill Wilson observed, awareness of the transcendent must lead to an awakened concern for others.[49] The move away from the preoccupation with self is the hallmark of maturity. In the world of Alcoholics Anonymous, this has led to the development of sponsors, mentors with "lived experience" who are able to accompany and guide others on their journey of recovery. In the Joseph narrative, Joseph himself grows from favourite spoiled child to one who can assume great responsibility. He is able to pick himself up after profound injustice without wallowing in self-pity or becoming consumed with thoughts of revenge. His maturing is evident in his concern for his father

48 J. Gordon McConville, "Forgiveness as Private and Public Act: A Reading of the Biblical Joseph Narrative," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75:4 (2013), 635–48, at 648. Some commentators see the development and transformation of Joseph in the story. See for example, Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 418; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 523; Cf. Michael V. Fox, "Joseph and Wisdom," in Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr and David L. Petersen (eds.), *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception and Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 231–62. Cf., however, Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), who thinks that his character is depicted as consistent throughout.

49 See Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City: Hazelden, 1979).

and his eventual willingness to forgive his brothers. And it is perhaps most obvious when, after Jacob has died and his brothers fear that he might now exact revenge, he can say "Fear not, for am I in the place of God?" (Gen 50:19) As Marilynne Robinson notes, he can now see "beyond a human conception of justice which still shapes his brothers' fearful expectations."[50] Ultimately this wisdom leads to reconciliation, the restoration of the family and the prevention of further violence and hurt.

5. Conclusion

I have been proposing that the Joseph narrative can provide a valuable resource for helping recovering addicts to develop resilience in their attempts to live without drugs or alcohol. It is well known that resilience cannot be taught.[51] However, it can be modelled and learned through personal example and story.[52] Drawing on the psychology of resilience as well as recent work on trauma and resilience hermeneutics, I have suggested that several of Joseph's experiences may be seen as analogous to those of many who are, or have been, caught up in addiction. Joseph's example of using one's gifts, working hard, avoiding victim mentality, and thinking long-term are useful to all of us as we face adversity in everyday life. But the story also contains elements which are particularly relevant to people in recovery: these include learning to resist the temptation to act impulsively, acknowledging painful feelings, coping with injustice and the rough and the smooth of life, living with the complexity of human relationships. The story also illustrates that forgiveness and reconciliation are not and cannot be instantaneous, and the role of faith in rebuilding life after the loss of one's assumptive world. In his journey toward maturity, Joseph provides a model for resilience despite, and indeed, because of his flaws. His is truly a story in which "the undoing of trauma and evidence of resilience can be found."

In my experience this narrative can be fruitfully used in formal pastoral counselling sessions or in group Bible study. Reading the story of Joseph's experience has enabled people in recovery to open up and tell their own stories. Pastoral counsellors and group facilitators (along with the others in the

50 Marilynne Robinson, *Reading Genesis* (London: Virago, 2024), 230.
51 Phebe Tucker, "What is Resilience?," *Psychiatric Times* 38:7 (2021), 9–10.
52 See, for example, the collection of essays in Anna Maria Fraile-Marcos (ed.), *Glocal Narratives of Resilience* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

group) can become "story companions" who learn from the narrative and from one another.[53] Engaging with it, in private study or in group discussion, will help people in recovery to develop the resilience they need to be able to bounce back and move on from the setbacks which will inevitably come their way.

Marion L. S. Carson
Glasgow City Mission, 20 Crimea Street
Glasgow G28PW, Scotland
marion.carson@glasgowcitymission.com

53 Scheib, *Pastoral Care.*