

# Sounds From the Street

## Episode 16: Father Tom Weston - A Day at a Time

*Transcribed by: Joseph Doyle*

**Tom Weston (Guest):** The image I use sometimes for addiction is dancing with a gorilla. You're not done dancing until the gorilla is done dancing. So if you're clean and sober today, it means the gorilla has let go. It doesn't mean you outsmarted it. If the gorilla has let go, get out of the cage

**Adam Kampe (Host):** That's Jesuit priest Father Tom Weston and this is sounds from the street where we talk about homelessness and related issues. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. Addiction be it drugs, food, or alcohol doesn't discriminate based on age, tax bracket or occupation. It affects people from all walks of life. That doesn't exclude members of clergy. Though it's safe to say one of the most vulnerable populations are people living on the margins, especially the homeless. Born in San Jose', California, Father Tom Weston was retained as a Jesuit Priest in 1978. After a long battle with his own addiction, Father Weston has been clean and sober for forty years. In fact, he's dedicated his life to leading retreats and workshops all over the country, and the world for those in recovery. In the fall of 2015 I met Father Weston after his Saturday mass, in his hometown of Oakland. Overlooking the beautiful Lake Merritt, we sat on a bench and talked about addiction, recovery, how to manage recovery, the Jesuits, and more. So you're going to hear some traffic in the background, please forgive that. He started off our conversation with an analogy about of addiction.

**TW:** When the gorilla has his arms around you, the gorilla's in charge even if you're taller or smarter. It kills a lot of people, but the ride gorilla is a thrill. It's fun, it's exciting, you laugh harder than you've ever laughed. The adrenaline rushes and hopefully you won't die this time. If you're clean and sober today, it means the gorilla has let go. It doesn't mean you've outsmarted it, or you're smarter than it, the gorilla has let go. Get out of the cage. Don't go back in the cage even when you hear the music, cause you will. I have a friend in Las Vegas who doesn't want to dance with the gorilla, but every so often he wants to pet it, just a little bit. I get that.

I am one of those addicts; you will meet addicts who will say, oh I haven't bought a drink or a pill ninety years. It occurs to me all the time. I'm one of those guys who thinks about it, I notice other people drinking. Not all of the time, but regularly I was out with some friends a few years ago and we were at a fancy restaurant with table cloths and silverware, and their specialty was double and triple martinis. Now that's magic.

[Music]

**TW:** These other guys in recovery, we were going to go to a meeting of some kind, They're eating their food. I'm watching the martinis being delivered like a cat watching someone eating a tuna fish sandwich.

Dinner was done. I don't know what I ate, or if I ate. When we were done I said to my pals we gotta get out of here. I can't stay here. There's no time for dessert. And they just got it. It was an obsession, and I get that every so often. So i'm that kind of an addict. What i've learned is if I don't say that out loud i'll be ashamed. And if I don't say that out loud, i've got secrets. If i'm going to be keeping secrets I get sneaky. When i'm starting to get sneaky I might as well buy a six pack. It's full disclosure. It's a day at a time. It's relief. It's not willpower I've been given a daily reprieve from the worst of my crazy. Reprieve is a word only being used by governors. I keep that pretty clear in my head.

**AK:** Reprieve you said from the worst of your crazy.

**TW:** Worst of my crazy. Self destructive, Self obsessive, you're in my way. The worst of my crazy. We want to go faster and have more. Unfortunately that means that you're going to be dead, but oh well. The second step of recovery talks about being restored to sanity. All I did in therapy a couple of times, and it's hard to come up with a description of what sanity is. It's about being a living human being; a real person with thoughts and feelings, with relationships, creativity and work. With addiction, the end of the road of addiction is isolation and self loathing. One of the programs refers to jails, institution, and death. Those are the big three as where we end up. I'm one of those guys. Addict, alcoholic, absolutely. I'm clean and sober today, but I am not fixed, I am not saved, and i'm not enlightened. I'm one of these guys who does this a day at a time.

[Music]

**TW:** When I think about drinking or running away from home or robbing banks. The mental trick I have learned is: I don't do it today, but I can do it tomorrow. And for some reason that has worked for forty years. As soon as I say, "Oh well, i'm not doing it today, I can do it tomorrow," I relax. Ok that works. And you'd think that i'm smart enough to see that, but it works. I just find it very effective. When someone talks to me and they say, "I'm five years clean and sober, I have everybody, and i'm thinking of robbing a bank and going to an opium den and never coming out," my response is. "Well of course" "Of course what a great idea, let's talk about this." Instead of, "What's wrong with you?" "Shame on you," you shouldn't have these thoughts. I have those thoughts. And there is someone who has been there, talked to someone who has been there. That's the genius of twelve steps stuff. The addict talks to the addict, the bulimic talks to the bulimic, the compulsive overeater to the compulsive overeater. We church folk can do this, we who know everything distain those who know so much less. We can treat people very badly. Patronizingly, contemptuously, arrogantly. Instead of saying oh no where brothers under the same skin.

[Music]

**AK:** And for someone who may hear this who has no idea of what a Jesuit. what that means. Can you give a thumbnail summary sketch of what that means to be a Jesuit, the tenants of being a Jesuit Priest are?

**TW:** It's part of one of the communities in the Roman Catholic Church. The Benedict has been around for fifteen hundred years. They worked out a lot of the kinks. The Franciscans and the Dominicans have

been around for about a thousand years. Jesuits have been around for about five hundred years. We were teachers, educators, scientists, and innovators. We're Priests, we're brothers, The largest groups of Jesuits in the world are North American, Canadian and US. We have universities and high schools. The second largest group is the Indians. Lots in Africa. We're very much an international community. We're trained to think outside the box and we're trained to ask questions. We're trained to be flexible and adaptable. We think justice is really important, we think faith is really important, and we think a real faith does justice. We're very involved in working with disadvantaged people, poor people. We look at social structures, it gets us into some real trouble sometimes. Pope Francis is a member of our community. I'm a big fan of his, he thinks like a Jesuit. Let's think about this differently instead of coming up with the same three answers, let's ask some different questions. One of the things I love about him, as he was in Argentina doing all sorts of stuff. He has good friendly relations. He has good friendly relations with the Rabbi. When he went to Jerusalem, they went with him. So that's doing it right.

[Music]

**AK:** Just to tie this back into the community that I'm primarily talking to is men and women who are homeless or who were formerly homeless. I'm curious if based on your years of experience working with addicts if there is a way in which you could talk about mental health and addiction in light of those who are living on the margins or in between shelters.

**TW:** One of my Jesuit friends said, "If you are an alcoholic in a way it's so much easier because you have a label." Heroin addict, alcoholic, people can hear to word and get some information about it. What if you're just a misfit? What if you just don't belong? What if convention just eludes you? You can end up very marginalized. I think there's a lot of marginalized people who have homes, but sure a lot don't. It can be isolating, it can be shaming, One of the things about alcohol, and a lot of narcotics is they really work for a while. If I'm in anguish or uncomfortable, I can take something and feel relief. And for a while it's helpful, then it's not very helpful. I heard someone once say, "Alcohol did something for me long before it did something to me." It's your friend that betrays you. It's your lover that throws you out. That which could give you some mercy, some kindness, some relief, begins destroying your insides. And so you can end up on the street. I have several friends through church connections, some Jesuits, in recovery and the population they love is the homeless. The honesty there, the reality, the connection, the vitality, the dignity. Instead of looking at homelessness and abstraction, they know homeless people and their friends. And that's wonderful. So I think all of my fears, anxieties, and resentments multiplied when I was drinking and using. And in recovery I've gotten to find the common human denominator. I have gone to homeless shelters with groups of people in recovery. It's like a group of people in recovery going and having a meeting.

And what you discover is, "Oh my god we have all of these things in common." It takes the fear away and the isolation away. And I think the community of homeless people is sort of forged in desperation. And desperation can be a great gift. If I'm desperate enough, I can make changes if I'm desperate enough. I can make friends, if I'm desperate enough I can say "Hello." And acknowledge the common humanity of broken people. We're all broken people,"Hello." My brokenness might be a little different than someone else's, but it's that fundamental humanity that we embrace. I am much less fearful than I was when I began my recovery. I still have lots of fears and weirdnesses. But again a day at a time. There are some

people who come in and pray with us in the morning, and these are homeless people. There was a fellow who hung out here a lot and he died on the street. We buried him, everybody knew him. We don't want to build walls we want to build bridges. And I understand a lot of the work I do precisely. I'm building the bridges.

**AK:** There's a talk you gave that I think is how I got introduced to you through a good friend of mine at work. His father was an alcoholic and passed away and he knew my family. He's been going to Al-Anon meetings for as long as I've known him. He sent me a link to your talk at Stanford.

**TW:** All these stressed out Stanford geniuses you know?

**AK:** Yeah. My favorite part about it is the title. *We're All Surrounded by Crazy People*.

**TW:** Even if you're alone in the room alone, you're surrounded by crazy people.

**AK:** And what part of what struck me, that's an immediate way to put up a wall, you see someone on the street and there's often an assumption. They're all bums, crazy, or their all unstable. One's got mental health issues. Meanwhile we're all a little bit nutty. It's just so easy for people to put up these blinders to folks who are living on the street. You mention a few different things people do in light of addiction and the roots of addiction. You mention three things that are harmful.

**TW:** It's the rules of the family. It's from Claudia Black's book *It Will Never Happen to Me*. Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel. We're not going to talk about the alcoholism, the family, or the mental illness in the family, or your oldest brother's suicide. We're never going to talk about it. We're not going to talk about the fact that we were sexually molested by Uncle Louis. There are things that we just don't talk about. In my family we didn't talk about cancer, alcoholism, depression, we don't talk about those things. Or of course sex, don't talk about that. Quite literally those were the three things we didn't talk about in my family. The one thing we did talk about in abundance was food. It was the immediate go to topic. It's a real interesting thing we don't talk about them, their shame. There's secrecy. We don't trust people with your feelings or your thoughts, or your secrets, or your vulnerabilities. Don't let people know you're vulnerable. You can't trust them. Don't air your dirty linen. It's best if you just don't feel anything because if you feel, you're going to feel lousy. In a group like AA, people say, "My name is Fred and I'm an alcoholic," Why do people keep repeating that? Because it's really shameful. If you're not careful the shame sneaks back. You start to get used to it. It becomes a "Badge of Honor," Alcoholic, Drug addict, jailbird. 'Yaay!' And to learn how to trust some people, and you learn the whole language of feelings and they come and go. "Sad" is important for me to learn. "Angry" because I was never angry. I wasn't angry, I was right which is cleaner.

A lot of stuff in recovery world is about grief because there's so much of it. Culturally we don't talk loss. I'm very grateful to Elizabeth Kubler Ross for writing the first books on death and dying by Doctor Elizabeth Kubler Ross. And that's where I began learning the vocabulary of loss. People who are homeless have lost a lot and it can be very shaming. I was talking with a physician in Berkeley, she ran the Methadone Clinic in Berkeley. She's not a romantic, things are pretty straight forward. And she said

when a heroin addict starts to get clean, he visits a lot of empty places, and I love that image. The sadness that comes up, the anger that comes up. There's a lot of empty places.

**AK:** You just mentioned grief as a part of recovery. Grief is a part of recovery and sorrow is useful.

**TW:** I guess what I needed to know is if you're alive, feelings come and go. I think my fear was that there would be one feeling and it would never change. But feelings come and go. I can feel sad and it doesn't kill me. I think it took me ten to fifteen years for me to learn that. I don't panic when I'm sad. I've had a couple of very good therapists and a couple of very good friends. And they would point things out to me like certain subjects would come up and I would hold my breath and change the subject, which is a lovely avoidance.

**AK:** I do that all the time.

**TW:** Little kids can do it so well, it gets in the way when you're sixty eight. I'm better at noticing when I'm holding my breath, and I'm better at noticing when I change the subject. There's a Jesuit principle about grown ups make choices, you have to make choices and do changes. It is never a good idea to make decisions when you're upset, if you're really high or really low this is not a good time to make a decision. If you have to make a decision when you're upset, there's a series of things to do to make you calm first. You might make a seven day retreat, get calm, get peaceful, now make the decision. You need some serenity to make decisions. What do I hold on to? What do I adapt to? What do I say no to? There are things I cannot change. I heard this guy in Texas say, "Here are three things I cannot change." "I cannot change the past." "I cannot change the truth," "I cannot change you."

[Music]

**TW:** Which is just revolutionary. I have wasted a lot of energy trying to change people. Like my parents for example, if I just tried harder. And you can't change anybody. What can I change? I can change three things. I can change my thinking, my behavior, and my attitudes. That's what recovery is focuses on. My thinking, my behavior, my attitude. So you learn to try harder and do more. And you have to learn some self care.

[Music]

**AK:** That was Father Tom Weston, a Jesuit Priest working with those in recovery since 1976.

[Music]

**TW:** "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

**AK:** With a quick google search, you can see some of his powerful talks online. You can find out where he'll lecture next. To learn more about *Street Sense*, the non-profit media center dedicated to create economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness go to [Streetsense.org](http://Streetsense.org). To hear more

“Sounds From the Street” go to [Streetsense.org/audio](https://streetsense.org/audio) or on *Soundcloud* or on the podcast app *Sticher*. Please keep the conversation going on *Facebook* and *Twitter* @StreetsenseDC. *Street Sense* runs an educational series of public forums. You can catch the next one on the criminalization of homelessness. February, 11th at 6:30 PM at the *Church Of The Epiphany* 1317 G Street Northwest.

[Music Credits]

**TW:** I’m Tom Weston, and you’re listening to *Sounds From the Street*.