

BE AN EAGLE, NOT A CHICKEN

By Fr. James Schwertley
The Blue Book, Vol. XLVIII, 1997
Jacksonville, Florida

This is the thirtieth anniversary of my participation in the NCCA. My first meeting was back in 1967 at Houston, as a young priest. I marveled at all the old guys around there, now I am one of them.

Actually Father Pfau is the one who inspired me to come into the program. I was in the seminary down in Conception Missouri, run by the Benedictine Monks. When I studied there for the Archdiocese they used to provide magazines in the library. Instead of being upstairs pondering the imponderable, I was down there looking at these magazines. In a Look magazine there was an article about Father Pfau. It was about his spiritual journey and how he got into the program and how he started the National Clergy Council on Alcoholism. So my curiosity was aroused, and I went and did some research on the phenomenon of alcoholism and read some books by John Ford and went to see Ray Milland in "The Lost Weekend." (That was the entertainment down there for the weekend.) But the title of my talk today is Be An Eagle Not A Chicken. It's based on a parable I heard once and I've embellished a little.

It goes like this . . . There was a farmer who was a very spiritual man and he loved the land, had a nice little farm, raised chickens. It wasn't like one of these big conglomerates that they have now. He was one of the few survivors of a small farm, and he enjoyed his work. Being very spiritual, he liked to go out in the morning and meditate in the meadow. As he was walking around one morning in the dewy lushness of the early morning, he noticed in some brush a large egg and he looked up into the tree and tried to discern where the egg came from. (He was a discerning person.) He noticed a large nest up there, and he concluded that it came from an Eagle's nest and apparently this egg had fallen out. He was a little reluctant to just let it lay there, and he wanted to return it to its mother because eagles perform a very important function in nature. But he was reluctant to do that because the human smell left on the egg would cause the adult eagle not to sit on the egg and then it would die and diminish. So then he took the egg back to his own chicken house and he put it where the hens periodically sat on the eggs. As the eagle egg was a little bigger than the chicken eggs, he was a little concerned that maybe the mother hens would notice that it was lumpier than usual and not sit on it. But to his joy — chickens aren't very bright so the mother hen sat down on the egg just like nothing happened. And ultimately all the eggs hatched! The little chicks came out and the eaglet was already bigger than the chicks and with kind of a hooked beak. And soon after birth it had that no nonsense look that eagles have! So the little eagle immediately became the head of the pecking order in the junior section of the barn yard. They all followed him around like locusts, and this was noted by the farmer that this eagle was different and he already looked like he was pondering something beyond this barn yard — and I suppose he was. And so the farmer watched carefully, and he thought he would give this eagle a little name in deference to his no-nonsense look — he named him Schwarzenegger! (Master of the no-nonsense look.) So the little chicks and eaglet grew up and ran around the barn yard, and occasionally something would startle them and then they'd flutter their wings a little bit. This little eagle was growing faster and becoming more decisive. This was noted not only by the farmer but by Rex Rooster, King of the barn yard. Rex was a lot like King Herod back in the Scriptures. He was able to discern that one day this eagle would grow up in a few years and take over his position as King of the barn yard. He was always watching for this so he would bully the little roosters who might eventually take his place. Then one day up in the sky flew a large majestic bird, flipping his wings very confidently, soaring in the air and moving off into the horizon. All the little chicks didn't pay much attention to him, they were pecking at the ground like they always do — but Schwarzenegger noticed this bird flying up there! He went to Rex Rooster and said to him: "Mr. Rooster, what is that bird I saw up in the sky?" Rex looked down at him, hovered over him menacingly and said, "That's an eagle, king of the air but never forget I'm king of the ground." And so little Schwarzenegger said, "Oh, I'd like to fly like that. It's so wonderful to be able to get up and fly in the air. I notice none of us can get up very far. We can go a little bit and then we come back down. Oh I'd sure like to fly like that." So Rex hovered even further over little Schwarzenegger and said, "You can't do that — you're a chicken not an eagle!" Now little Schwarzenegger's heart sunk. Then the instinct began to reassert itself. The next day he felt like flying again and he saw one of the eagles soaring above. He said, "I have to do that." Then he remembered the words of Rex Rooster, "You can't do it — you're only a

chicken — not an eagle!” Then the urge came back again — “I’ve got to try that!” So he went out to the edge of the barn yard where there was a little ravine. He thought that maybe if he jumped off that ravine and flapped his wings as hard as he could — maybe he would take off before he hit the rocks below! So he went out to the edge of the barn yard and perched at the edge and looked down and realized how high it was. All of a sudden those words came back to him. “You’re a chicken — not an eagle!” So he backed off. In his heart welled up the old instinct again that would have soared him up out of the nest sooner or later. He stood on the edge and what do you suppose he did? (Actually that’s the end of the parable.) It’s one of those parables that let you decide for yourself how it comes out. Is there going to be a crushed eagle down on the bottom there — or is there going to be one flying off! The great likelihood in that parable would be that he would have made that great leap of faith because the eagle instinct is strong!

Now, we human beings are like eagles also. But we’re different in the sense that we have more of a capacity for self-doubt — for absorbing negative feedback. So as a result we often don’t do things that we’re afraid to do for fear of failure or for fear of rejection. Yet, we being humans have a hunger and thirst for more! In the words of St. Augustine, “More, more — the cry of the human soul, less than all cannot satisfy man.” Victor Frankl who wrote, *Man’s Search For Meaning*, indicated that the innate dynamism inside of a human being, which we believe is put there by God, gave the people in the Concentration Camps a chance to survive because of focusing on some sense of purpose. Maybe it was to help the other inmates in the Concentration Camp — or maybe it was just to outlast the tyranny of the Nazis.

Maybe it was a religious motivation. Those who found meaning and dedication were able to survive the horrors of the Concentration Camp, Frankl wrote.

I believe chemicals are “man’s search for meaning” also, but a faulty one — a false God. We know, too, as people in religious life, that these drives are really a search for God — though misguided. So I believe God has called us to be eagles. The words of Isaiah the prophet: “I will mount you on wings of Eagles, you’ll run and not grow weary. You’ll walk and not grow faint.” Way back in the Old Testament, God was affirming this creative potential within individuals. Though He knew it would be difficult for them to maintain, given the sin and negativity around them.

So in real sense I don’t believe it’s just rhetoric to say that we’re called to greatness. The desire not to drink for a person who is an addict is an example of the call to greatness. How many people do we know personally who have been called to a much greater level of human greatness as a result of just that simple desire? How many of us have attained certain ideals through the desire to be better and to improve? We have the power to fly! To have a life that goes somewhere instead of being stuck on the ground, just putting around! But we must be willing — therein lies our part of the covenant. We’re called to rise out of the barnyards of life. Those recovering from addiction are the ones who have indeed risen from the barnyards of life!

The 12 Steps, the 12 Traditions and Slogans are a frame-work and a foundation for that. Our founders, Bill W., Father Pfau are ones who did that. One of the old NCCA members, James Mullen, who died a few weeks ago at 97, did it. It’s a call to overall spiritual greatness. There are a lot of people around who have rare talents which allow them to be great in some way. Bill Gates and Warren Buffet have a great skill in accumulating money. Bill Clinton has a great skill in campaigning and debating. In that he exceeds any President of the century, except maybe John Kennedy. He conveys confidence, optimism and is so articulate, it’s really impressive. He would have made a good angel in a Passion Play, if you really didn’t know him! I would submit though that the talents that 12 Steps help us to develop, the spiritual greatness that is possible through the program, is greater than any singular talents, like Bill Clinton’s or Gates’ or any people with outstanding skills that may or may not be great men. In fact, even though many Presidents were not great men all around, maybe Abraham Lincoln would come the closest, many of them had feet of clay. I think a good example of all around greatness was John the Baptist. He certainly had those talents of charismatic leadership that would allow people to flock to him and have him convey these revolutionary ideas and feed their spirits. But his spiritual greatness eclipsed his other skills.

He was able to discern when nobody else had at the time that the Messianic Kingdom was not going to be a military one, but was going to be a spiritual one. When Jesus came there at the river to be baptized, he knew who He was. But then he recognized that he was the Messiah because of his great openness to the spirit. I was over in Israel visiting once. The house where he came from, Zachariah and Elizabeth’s house, was a large place. Certainly he wasn’t born poor, and yet he was a great spiritual leader. He was a member of the Essenes, that spiritual community down on the Dead Sea. He came out responding to the call of God and

started doing these baptisms which required a lot of personal empathy and concern for people individually. He was open to the new ideas of what the Messiah was. He showed a humility, a lack of inflated ego which is very rare among people with great talents. He had the courage to confront the Queen even though he knew it would probably mean his life. It was no accident that Jesus said; "He is the greatest man born of woman." I believe those qualities exemplified by John the Baptist are also possible for us to develop in our lives, maybe not to that extent, but the potential is there. To go far with those things like openness to the spirit, openness to new ideas, compassion and concern for people, humility, courage and a dedication that some of us exemplify in our own lives is rare. The more important qualities, which are the gifts of the program which the Slogans, the 12 Traditions, and the 12 Steps emphasize, give us a foundation for developing.

The problem is developing these qualities of greatness to which we are called. The Rex Roosters in our lives can hinder our process in those Steps. Most of us have had people who said, "you can't do it" — "you'll never amount to anything." Or maybe we're our own Rex Rooster, we put ourselves down, too hard on ourselves. We know that when we develop co-dependency there's a lot of fear involved. Often it results in perfectionism which is an impossible task to deal with because perfection is not a human trait. We can get close but not, to perfection.

Eagles sometimes push reluctant chicks out of the nest and we need someone to push us, to encourage us to move forward, and those in the past that have done so have been singular in our lives. Many unfortunately don't get that privilege of having someone who has helped them, has encouraged them to make that leap of faith — in this case recovery. Because all of life is a recovery from the effects of original sin. Usually it's pain, psychological or spiritual pain, that is the motivator. Ann Landers, a bit of a modern prophet, once said; "Without pain, where would courage, loyalty and mercy be?" There would be no need for it. I believe Father Joe Martin often emphasized that too. "Be grateful for pain, because without it none of us would be here." He was referring to people at the recovery talk. Philosopher William James once said; "Before there is a great spiritual experience there has to be a deflation of depth." Some kind of in-depth deflation to move us out of our fear and the feeling of just being a chicken in the barn yard, and out into a place where we can fly. That happened with St. Paul and St. Augustine and dramatically changed their lives. And it has with some of you folks also. I noticed just looking on my past life that the main things I've been able to do with life have been preceded by pain, by deflation, by some kind of setback that motivated me to do something different. I remember as a real small kid I had big ears, had these large ears that looked like open Volkswagen doors. I had a lot of insecurity. So I was pretty nervous and sucked my thumb a lot and as a result I got buckteeth. I looked like that guy on the cover of Mad Magazine, Alfred E. Newman.

The problem with that was that it tended to make me "bully bait." I remember a lot of them in the neighborhood hovered around me like flies around rotten fruit. A gang of them chased me home one day. I was terrified. My father noted my abject fear and he said; "Son, we're going to give you some boxing lessons." I said, "Where are these?" He said, "Down at the Athletic Club, they teach boxing down there. We're going to get you so you can defend yourself." I was a lazy kid. He said, "Look you want to have a bodyguard going to school every day?" So I took boxing down there and I was motivated by that pain and fear of never knowing if a bully would pop out from behind a tree. I was as nervous as a mouse at a cat convention, just walking home. The boxing coach took me and this other taller kid named Norm and he said: "Now we're going to teach you the fundamentals." Have you ever seen that movie, The Karate Kid? It was just like me, only boxing not karate! He taught us these moves and it was a very anxiety producing thing because I wanted to get some real fancy punches in like John Wayne did in the movies. All he would let us do for three months was throw left jabs at the small bag and big bag. He said: "Learn how to throw the left jab and then I'll show you some of this other stuff." I noticed after taking boxing and doing this stuff down there after three months, I hadn't seen any bullies. I think what happened instead of walking like a grazing animal, I began to walk more jauntily because of the confidence that was building up as a result of that discipline of learning how to box. Then one day one of them jumped from behind the tree — I remember it well — nasty kid from another school. He said, "Schwertley, you little fart. I'm going to pull those ears right off your head." I remembered the instructions from my boxing coach. He said, "If anybody challenges you, don't wait if it looks like violence is inevitable, strike first!" So I just automatically zinged out a left jab and hit him right in the nose, perfect right in the nose. It sounded like a ball hitting a bat, (crack)! Blood flew out of his nose and he ran away! The word quickly got around; "Watch out for the runt with the big ears, he'll sting ya." What that did for confidence! Later on I grew up, sort of, and I got into Creighton Prep, a big high school in Omaha. I wanted to play football, but they kicked me off

the team (Creighton Blue Jays) because I was too little, and was then put down on the Creighton Prep Canaries, kids under 100 pounds.

Then I saw a Charles Atlas ad in the back of a comic book. You know, the one where he has sand kicked on his face by this big bully and then it shows the next beach season he's back — bigger than the bully! This is it, the old hunger for power and majesty came out again. I felt like an eagle. So I decided to buy a Charles Atlas course. I saved up nineteen bucks. I figured by Fall I would probably gain fifty pounds or so and all I have to do is these exercises. Atlas says its like tigers of the jungle that's how they get big — they do this dynamic tension. The first day . . . was the most painful day of my life, this stuff was no fun! But I persisted because I wanted to get off the Canaries and into the junior Blue Jays team. But I realized that time moves slowly and by the Fall I had only gained ten pounds and it wasn't enough. I persuaded my father to get me some weights because I found out when you use the weights you get bigger and better muscles! So I started lifting weights. The discipline that came from boxing was translated to the weights and was able to develop a muscular body and win some lifting and muscle titles. It became a good hobby, but I became obsessive about it, excessive; compulsive about it for a time but it began to change me into more of an eagle and less of a chicken. Pain was the motivator, not noble ideals. When I was at Creighton University I was doing this lifting all the time down in the basement. By the end of my second year at Creighton I was developing biceps, they looked like eggs. I was about 160 pounds. I heard that weights made you muscle bound. I said, I'd rather be a muscle bound hulk than a well coordinated runt! I was looking at these muscles one day (I developed an inflated ego) because they were bigger than the average kid's. I was flexing my muscles one day, in front of the campus church. All of a sudden a voice interrupted me, "Schwertley!" Oh hell, somebody saw me being vain. I looked down and there comes Father Paul Smith, 300 pound, 5'8" Jesuit. He looked just like Friar Tuck. He had a voice just like him, eyebrows touched in the middle like kissing caterpillars. Then he said, "Schwertley," and I said; "Yes Father." I really felt embarrassed. You just don't like to be seen doing something vain. He said, "Schwertley, you've got to start throwing your weight around this campus just like you do in that cellar or you're going to flunk out of this school in one more semester." "Flunk out, what do you mean, I've got a 'D' average." "You've got to have a 'C'; you must be the only kid on campus that doesn't know that!" So I really had to focus intensely. Plunge into academics like the eagle leaping off the cliff — I almost got brain strain studying the next semester. I finally pulled things up enough to be bailed out and not flunk out of school. The pain and fear of flunking out was a motivator to make that leap of faith into academic.

Some years later when I was in the seminary I experienced a great fear of giving speeches. So I joined ToastMasters. It was harder than going into boxing lessons. But, using fear as an incentive, motivation developed to build speaking skills. Later took dancing lessons to gain confidence at social events. These ventures were scary at first, like the eagle on the edge of the cliff.

When I became a priest I encountered some difficult pastors. I thought my first pastor had paranoid schizophrenia. I had taken a mental illness course back in the seminary in the last semester and he fit in that category. I told the Bishop, and he didn't seem too impressed. He said, "Oh paranoid schizophrenia, you don't want to combine those." The Bishop said he'd take care of that problem. He didn't. He moved me! He probably thought I was a carrier of paranoid schizophrenia! I was assigned to a priest who was a friend of the Bishop. But the old pastor had heart trouble, and he'd become depressed. But I was able to diagnose him too because I had notes on depression also. It's called reactive depression, reacting to the trauma of developing heart trouble. He was a very macho guy. I think it really disturbed him that he had this condition and his parish began to decline and he didn't realize what was going to come about. I was afraid to say anything — I couldn't go back and tell the Bishop; "Hey, here's another sick guy. He's got reactive depression." I was like an unwelcome guest in the rectory. He had this older lady who was his housekeeper and they just didn't like me. I realized that I had a character defect that had to be worked upon. It was a tendency to avoid talking about sensitive issues. I would try to manipulate — not by demanding or threatening — I would just avoid talking about things. So the second pastor and I were trying to manipulate one another. If something didn't go right, he'd pout. And he had a lot of reason too because he was a very perfectionist guy and I was not very task oriented. I would pretend like nothing was wrong. He'd pout, I'd avoid him. He was trying to make me more efficient, I was trying to make him think I was a nice guy not rebellious. We both failed, because manipulation is self-defeating.

I realized after a year I was getting sort of paranoid, fearing he would report me to headquarters. Then one day there was really a low point! He was in his back room and I was in the front room and an official from

the Chancery came! They went into the back room and I heard them talking; “They’re talking about me.” I concluded. So I sneaked down the hall to find out what they were talking about — what my fate would be. The floor creaked, so he knew I was coming and I heard him get up and say; “Just a minute.” Then he slammed the door. I knew I was doomed! Four years a priest and I was doomed! Instead he just pouted for two days.

I decided to take a communications course and learn how to confront, rather than avoid. It seemed like when you start doing stuff and use pain as a motivator it seems like it impels you to take action — not to just withdraw and become passive. So I took the course and now I’m ready to confront him. But he was transferred. I was going to see him later and talk about the situation, but he died. He was always one jump ahead of me! I felt like I was regressing into chickenhood once again. I’d stood on the edge and backed off, postponing the needed intervention.

Right after that we got a fairly normal Pastor. His only oddity was that he always had the phone by him at night so he wouldn’t miss any calls. The next Pastor was an alcoholic. I went into avoidance again for about a year. The other assistant Pastor finally said something and we decided to take a risk and tell the Bishop. By then I was going to the Clergy Council on Alcoholism conventions and so I was able to use some of the materials I learned here and what they did at other places. This time the Bishop responded and sent him to treatment. It was a great personal experience for me to go in and tell him how I felt about it before he left. It was like the eagle leaping off the cliff and flying. It felt great even though he was angry about it. Later he got well and died sober. It was another leap of faith for me, motivated by the pain of being in an alcoholic rectory.

The experience of confronting and not avoiding the alcoholism was growth producing and grew out of past painful experiences that motivated me to take action instead of avoiding. We all have plenty of opportunities to face challenges. We’ve probably passed up a few of them in our lives — But others will come. But if in the near future or distant future that you’re out on the edge of the cliff of some sort and you are challenged to take a leap of faith and do something creative, remember the story of the eagle and the chicken.

Instead of stepping back and failing to do whatever creative thing that challenges you — step out to the edge and say to yourself, “I’m an Eagle not a Chicken!” And make that leap of faith. Allow the painful consequences of avoidance to motivate you to action instead of passivity or moral paralysis. By the grace of God, we’re all potentially eagles. But we can also choose to be chickens, roaming around in the barnyards of life instead of soaring freely toward even greater ventures.

© Copyright 2003 National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, Inc.