

Cold Turkey

Hello, my name is Rob, and I'm an addict. I'm not alone. Millions of Americans, my brothers and sisters, your brothers and sisters, my coworkers, your cousins in Arizona, are affected by this addiction or know someone that is. I consider myself lucky; I'm recovering, I have a plan; I have my steps. Each swing of the pendulum is another opportunity to succeed, to prove my own self-worth. Anyone familiar with the plan knows that you have your good days, your bad days, and your downright crappy days. Thankfully, I have a support system.

The most important lesson I've learned during my recovery is that nothing is menial. People that offer you just a little bit are not your friends. People like me are your friends. People like me know that quitting cold turkey is the only way. People like you can be people like me—if you listen. Please listen.

I'm sure now that my parents didn't know the harm they were causing. Doesn't matter. I can't blame them anyway. Personal responsibility is the only way to defeat addiction. Like most stories, it starts with a beginning; it starts at a speck of an airport in rural Southwest Virginia. Only seven-years old and as impressionable as carbon paper, I swung around Dad's legs on the black, bubbly tarmac, trying to keep from touching the cracks. They reminded me of obsidian volcanoes. The people around me were shouting funny rhymes and phrases. "Clinton and Gore, out in four!" I echoed. My dad looked down and smiled at me. We stalked the sky patiently until a small, generic plane circled down, landed, and taxied in front of the crowd. Two tall, white men emerged one after the other with their arms and hands frantically waving in the air. The crowd swayed drunkenly. Cameras flashed. All around me, chew cans stared at me from the back of broken in Wrangler and Rustler jeans. I followed Dad through the grove of people, dodging legs as tall as myself, emerged, looked up, and quickly recognized one of the men from the

plane. It was Moses. Well, he had played Moses. But he was still Moses to me. I stretch my arm out toward him, hoping he would notice me. He did. He shook my hand and told me something encouraging, I'm sure. George Allen held on to his coattails (and would all the way to the Governor's mansion in Richmond, Virginia for his four-year term) as Moses made his way through the crowd. In the car on the way home Dad told me how proud he was seeing Charlton Heston shake my hand. It felt good.

It did feel good. Before I knew it, I was doing lunch with pill-popping hypocrites: I couldn't wait to tune in to Rush Limbaugh's show everyday. I would get out Mom's radio, make a PB&J sandwich, and enjoy learning about all the evil, stupid, evil people in the world. Rush would say, "Ditto." I would say, "Ditto." Before I even needed deodorant, I knew all about the liberal bias of the liberal media: Republicans were good; Democrats were evil. Mom and Dad doted on me. It felt good.

By the time I was in high school, I was hooked on that feeling. At the peak of my addiction, I insulted a pack of evil Democrats a day. Rush had taught me how easy it was to end an argument: "You're a liberal idiot," I would say. How can you argue with that? Some tried. "You're so dumb that I can't even argue with you," I would retort. That ended it.

I wasn't addicted to crack, crank, weed, speed. It wasn't even just talk radio that I was addicted to now. I had added the dangerous stuff: I developed a need to argue, to win, to appear right—even if it meant that the best solutions, the things that would make the world better, lost. I had a problem, but I couldn't admit it:

"Abortion is *always* murder," I interjected, interrupting the intense conversation underway in the cluster of desks to the left of me.

"You really believe that?" asked the girl in the tie-dyed t-shirt.

“Yes, only God should decide who lives or dies.”

“What if she’ll die?”

“Pregnancy happens when you have sex. Shocker, I know.”

“Wait, but what if the woman was brutally raped?”

“Sometimes life isn’t fair—”

“YOU are absolutely intolerable! Do you have a sister?”

“Yes.”

“How old is she?”

“Well, my youngest sister is 12. My oldest—“

“Good! So say that your little sister gets raped, becomes pregnant. Then what?”

“I don’t know. I think she would carry—“

“But what if she didn’t want to. Would you force your sister to have her rapist’s child?”

“No, I wouldn’t force her to—“ That’s all I could say. She was right. And man was she right. My little sister meant the world to me, and I knew that this girl had pushed me into a gray area I had tried so hard to pretend didn’t exist. I wanted to scream at her and call her names. My hands were shaking, and my heart was popping out of my chest like the Whack-a-Mole game at Chuck E Cheese’s. I had to leave the room. Later that year I pounced on her citing evidence of weapons of mass destruction and proven links to Al-Qaeda when she argued with me about invading Iraq. It felt good...for a while.

Recovery hasn’t been easy. Like a jagged rock smoothing out in the bottom of a swift river, my denial faded and I started to see the addiction for the harm it caused. I made a sincere effort to be a better person, but there were times I fell off the wagon. I can admit that. But by the time college rolled around, I had been clean for almost a whole year. No more cable news, no

more lunches with Limbaugh, and no more telling others they are wrong just to win an argument. I had adopted Oliver Wendell Holmes philosophy on life: “The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins.”

The world has been changing around me faster than you can say, “Yes, we can.” What used to be an hour or so a day of watching television—mostly spent fiddling, twisting, bending, stretching, and even holding an imperfect contraption of aluminum foil and wire hangers—has burgeoned into television purloining our time, our physical fitness, and our minds. This might not be so bad if we allowed our time to be taken by the History Channel (This is my guilty pleasure), but we’ve allowed better-dressed used-car salesmen to swindle us out of our reason and, in turn, our humanity. The real axis of evil is the son that killed his father and married his mother: cable news, the perfect combination of insanity, fact, and hysteria. Objective takes on the real news stories that once filled our black-and-white papers now share time with a small, crowded ticker at the bottom of a frame that is 95% devoted to the coverage of Michael Jackson’s funeral. Cable news has become a mix of Entertainment Tonight and the Rush Limbaugh Show. This concoction of ammonia and bleach (I’ll let you decide which is which) has injected chlorine gas into our political ecosystem.

Cable news isn’t harmless drivel, and the decisions made by our country are not benign. Just ask the civilian casualties in our expensive wars. Just ask the millions of uninsured waiting for care, slowly dying. Just ask the senior citizen worried about her retirement. Just ask the overtaxed and overworked. Or you could look in your own community. Did you not see it on the ticker? No? All right, I’ll just tell you myself. My girlfriend and I are taking care of her nephew, and as a precursor to sitting down to watch and discuss President Obama's address to Congress, I asked him what he thought about Obama's school speech. Much to my horror, he told me that he

had watched “Charlotte's Web” in another room while some of the other students watched the speech. The letter sent home from the school district in which we live said to send your child’s school a note if you didn't want him or her watching the speech, and the child would be excused.

The alarming part is that I'm one of the people raising him, and I knew that none of us had informed his school that we didn't want him watching Comrade Obama. More distressing still is that his teacher had sent home a permission slip for the speech, which we dutifully signed and submitted. His teacher let a fourth-grader decide between watching the president of the United States of America talk and a kid's movie (I choke back a thesaurus of bile as I write this).

I'm not a Democrat, Republican or a Libertarian: I'm just a patriotic American. My parents taught me that I should question the person but always respect the office—something I hope to pass on to my nieces and nephews and my own children (one day). What should have been a moment to strengthen our youth (a speech about staying in school, doing the right thing even when it's difficult, *etc.*) became another lesson altogether. The public school system taught our school children to do the easy thing, the fun thing. This is the product of the radical political environment in which we now live.

I should clarify that I don't blame the teacher—even if she did screw up—because she should not have been put in this situation in the first place. I thank her for trying. The school district should have ended this nonsense in their letter. They should have called the crazies' bluff by saying, “Fine, keep your kid out of school for the day, and when you see that President of the United States’ speech wasn't anything dangerous, the fault lies with you for being an easily influenced mind.”

So, whose fault is it when these frivolous squabbles happen? I would like to blame Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN, but I can't (Remember that whole bit on personal responsibility

earlier?). It's my fault, and it's your fault. They may create their own news, distract us with entertainment news, and allow radicals to muddle simple political affairs—manufactured controversy—but they can't exist without their addicts. Yes, Fox News, ACORN is likely a corrupt organization. Yes, MSNBC, automatic rifles don't belong at health-care debates, not since the Civil War, at least. And, yes, CNN, Michael Jackson was one of the greatest performers to ever live. Enough.

And then came the politicizing of the Internet. Sure, the Internet has improved society in ways that we could have never imagined; yet, we can't forget that it also brings a dead-beat boyfriend to the dinner table. Any quack job can publish his or her own work instantly, regardless of fallacies of logic or weak cost-benefit ratios. There is no Czar for Internet content. I'm okay with that. It would be unfair to ground those of us with critical thinking abilities just because some of us just can't pass up the easy fix.

What I'm asking you to do is to quit giving cable news an audience. Quit forcing your religion on people unless their actions hinder your right to worship. Quit adding a digit to the visitor counter at that radical blog spot. Quit insulting people in order to gain the upper hand in an argument. Stop today. Stop now. Stop cold turkey.