

This Kennedy Believes Only the Addict Can Save Himself

By Bill Wilkerson

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LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA – I’m sitting opposite a member of the Kennedy family and we’re not talking politics or, for that matter, the Kennedy family itself. At least not directly.

Christopher Kennedy Lawford looks more Lawford than Kennedy. His father, the late actor and rat-packer Peter Lawford, lives in his face and, our conversation reveals, in his heart – a space he shares with President Kennedy’s younger sister, Pat – Chris’ mom.

Pat Kennedy died last year. Peter Lawford, more than 20 years ago. Divorced in life, the couple has been reconciled in their son’s memories and love of them both.

“Wisdom through open suffering” is what Chris Lawford says he learned from conquering his addiction to drugs. His story is that of a drug addict crest-fallen from great advantage who climbed out of a valley of self-destruction – just in time.

He tells that story with striking candor, humor and insight in his 2005 memoir “Symptoms of Withdrawal” published by Harper Collins.

Meeting for lunch in a nifty Santa Monica restaurant, the Broadway Deli, Chris talks about his battle with addictions – the lessons he’s learned, the learning that continues.

He says he takes calls from addicts close to the edge and tries to help. But no one else can save the life of an addict, he says, only an addict can do that.

In his early 50s, an author, actor, big handsome guy – heads turn as he enters the restaurant. Even in shorts and loose shoes, he walks with the regal bearing learned or inherited from America’s royal family.

Sober for 21 years, he is “unconditionally committed to serving others” but don’t interpret that to mean any political ambitions. In fact, getting sober, taught him to defy what others expect of him and to listen to his “authentic self.”

No small feat in the family called Kennedy.

Chris admits that the experience of writing a book about his life of addiction and recovery revealed a fair bit about himself and his relationship with his famous parents. He says his “heart softened” for both of them.

Peter Lawford starred with Judy Garland and Fred Astaire in the vintage musical, “Easter Parade” among other movies that have both endured and faded in the history of Hollywood cinema. Lawford became permanently famous for his adventures with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr.

Meanwhile, Patricia Kennedy was the intense Kennedy family loyalist. On the night President Kennedy was elected, she hesitated to invite her husband on-stage because he still wasn’t really a Kennedy. Peter Lawford and Pat Kennedy split when Chris was a kid.

Chris, who graduated from law school, is a passionate public speaker – powerful at the podium – and represents the Caron Treatment Centers in his advocacy for recovery from addictions. I first met him in Toronto.

His cousin, Congressman Patrick Kennedy – son of the last son of the patriarchy, Senator Edward Kennedy – fights hard for the rights of the mentally ill on Capitol Hill. Chris and Patrick work different sides of the same street.

For Chris, the non-politician, the biggest recovery lesson he learned is quite revolutionary when you consider he is the offspring of famous families immersed in politics and show business: that is, stop worrying about what other people think of you.

BW: You speak in your book of “learned wisdom.” Are you a wiser person?

CKL: I only profess a greater understanding of myself.

BW: How long have you been sober? What’s the biggest prize of sobriety?

CKL: I have been sober 21 years. There is great freedom in the spiritual understanding that is necessary to stay sober.

BW: Is this a wholly self-centered experience?

CKL: Not at all. Compassion for others flows from one’s knowledge of himself.

BW: You were born into fame, privilege and money –

CKL: These things can get in the way of higher purpose.

BW: In your book, you seemed to be a rebel without a cause except your parents. Fair comment?

CKL: More or less. But writing the book softened my heart about them and I came to see them as victimized by their own lives. My dad had a good heart, a sweet guy

at the core. But he was not up to the world he lived in.

BW: You talk about listening to your authentic self? Explain that.

CKL: To me, it means getting rid of feelings that make you afraid of what someone else will like or not like about what you want to do. It means not censoring or editing yourself all the time.

BW: Quite a challenge for someone with a family steeped in politics and show business.

CKL: Especially when you consider that listening to your authentic self can mean having the ability to not look good.

In sobriety, Chris Kennedy Lawford says experiencing pain is “fantastic.” Not because he likes it. He doesn’t. But because it is reality. And reality gets lost in the haze of drugs.

The “post-craving” phase of an addict’s life, Chris says, “offers enormous opportunity if you choose to see it that way. I chose to because I had to. I already reached the last house on the block. I had nowhere else to go.”

“Staying sober,” he says, “is a matter of constant vigilance. Society cannot save an addict’s life. Only the addict can do that.”

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(Sidebar: Lessons Learned)

SIDEBAR

TEN LESSONS LEARNED
Themes of Discovery and Recovery
From “Symptoms of Renewal”
By Christopher Kennedy Lawford

Learned Wisdom

Pain as a Source of Power

Serving Others

Compassion flows from Self-Knowledge

Change the World, Change Yourself

Progress and Reform Start from Within

The Authoritative Self

The Ultimate Listening Skill

Need from Want

Learning to Distinguish One from the Other

Absolutes are Limiting

Adjust to Life as One Sees It.

True Motives Will Be Revealed

A Reason for Being Honest

From all Experience, We Learn Something New

A Fundamental Awareness

Defy Others If Need Be

Find Yourself

Struggle Honestly

Perfection Never. Possibility Always

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