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# Women's Voices

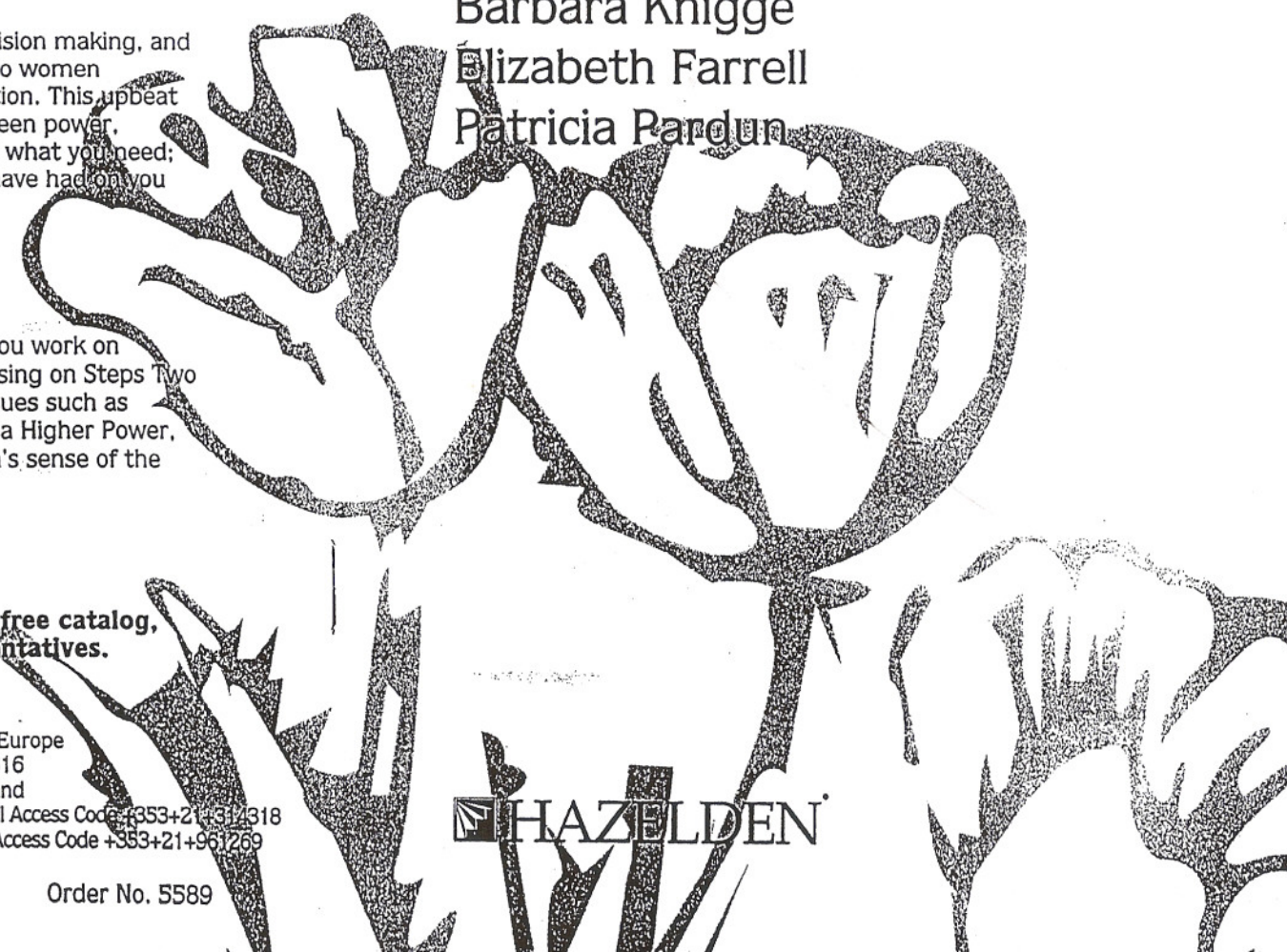
*Our Process of Recovery*

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## Introduction

We each have a mind, a body, and a spirit. When we were born, we were unaware of anything but these three elements. The mind, the body, and the spirit each have a part to play in our wholeness: The mind interprets all that the body experiences, and it expresses what the spirit knows and feels. The body houses the mind and the spirit. The spirit is our wisdom, our guide for living, and we are most in touch with it when we are living in the moment, which was once our natural state.

As we began to grow and develop, from infants to adolescents to young women, we collected information from outside ourselves—our parents, schools, the media, and various cultural and religious sources. We each had a wide range of life experiences: Some were good, some were bad, and a lot were in-between. For some of us, the experiences may have included physical abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, poverty, and loss. From those experiences, we learned profound fear, insecurity, and loneliness. As our sense of wholeness of mind, body, and spirit began to deteriorate, we became aware that we needed protection. Without consciously understanding why, we began to feel a sense of loss. We forgot that the happiness we were born with was inside us, and we began to look outside ourselves for that happiness.

The search to heal our losses and find happiness proved fertile ground for the birth of an addiction. The addiction then was an innocent and misguided attempt to find protection, to create a sense of

wholeness, and to reunite our mind, our body, and our spirit—in other words, an attempt to fill the emptiness. The addict part of us began to look in many directions for those answers: drinking or other compulsions, relationships, work, or family.

In recovery, we find out that the answers have always been within us. By living in the moment, we begin to understand that our spirits are our guides to living fully. We begin to heal and find happiness by reuniting our mind, our body, and our spirit. We begin our journey back to our natural state, taking with us all that we've learned along the way. The addiction that was once a protector against the fear and insecurity of our lives doesn't work anymore. Addiction was about survival, denying our feelings, and searching for happiness; recovery is about living our lives and feeling our feelings.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to help restore hope to any woman struggling with addiction and to help her see that she *can* change her life. Reading these women's stories can help you start on the restoration of your hope, and thus on your journey from addiction to recovery.

We have included the stories of women who have made the journey from addiction to recovery. In their stories, you will see the separation of mind, body, and spirit and the creation of their addictions. You will also see in their recovery process the reunion of mind, body, and spirit and the unique strength and compassion that we share as women.

#### What is addiction?

One way to look at addiction is as a habit that one obsesses about and eventually surrenders to. Many

of us have been conditioned to believe that our happiness and well-being come from outside ourselves. If we believe that alcohol, drugs, gambling, or any other compulsive behavior is the means to this happiness and well-being, then we will devote and surrender our lives to these things as a means to that end. Using mood-altering substances can become a habitual and obsessive way of life. In this obsessive state of mind, we forget that happiness comes from a direct, meaningful connection with our inner spirit, which has always been within us.

For many women, addiction has been a means of survival . . . a way to avoid pain from various abuses. This is complicated by the fact that traditionally, women's role in society has been to take care of others' needs before their own and to find happiness and fulfillment through relationships, such as being a mother, wife, partner, employee, daughter, and so on. We have not been encouraged to discover and take care of ourselves first, and when we do so, we are often viewed as selfish and self-centered. When we struggle to find a balance between caring for others and caring for ourselves, we often look to alcohol, drugs, or other compulsive behaviors as sources of comfort and understanding. Addiction, from this perspective, is an innocent search back to that spiritual connection through which we experience happiness.

#### What is recovery?

In the process of recovery, we uncover and reclaim our natural state. We *recover* our spiritual connection—through which we recover our connection with our inner spirit, or our still, small voice within, which guides our path to happiness. To experience

recovery, it is imperative that we realize *our power is within* and that *we have the capacity to change our lives*. Our recovery is not dependent on things outside ourselves.

Many of us have gotten negative messages about who we are and what we need from our various life experiences. We believed the messages that said “We are not as good as . . .,” or “We will never be able to . . .,” or “In order to be whole, we need a man . . . alcohol . . . sex . . . money. . . .” These are just a few examples of the messages we have believed to be true and that we need to let go of in our recovery process. Recovery, then, is an illumination of who we are underneath these negative beliefs.

In the recovery process, we learn to live, not just to survive anymore. We start listening to and acting on the guidance of our spirit within. In the process, we reclaim our power, self-worth, and self-respect. We embrace ourselves and our connection with the spirit.

#### Ruth on celebrating her recovery . . .

It's time to celebrate the person I'm becoming. I see my life as a continuum, and this thing called recovery is moving me into a new dimension. I don't know what it all means, but I am willing to take the risk to see where it leads me.

So far, it means giving up much of what I know and trusting the unknown. It means quieting down on the inside and letting my senses guide me. It means that I don't have to go it alone anymore, that there is support along the way. Recovery means searching for the “it” in life, knowing what is right for me. It means living life fully, being aware of and in touch

with my mind, body, and spirit. It means activating all my potentials and allowing myself to feel, experience, and enjoy all that has been given to me.

I'm aware of a new sense of freedom within. I am finally free of the internal conflict that addiction created. I no longer have the moral, ethical, and intellectual battles within myself to defend my addiction. I can be honest with myself, and I can live comfortably with myself. I'm most aware of the freedom of choice that has been restored to my life—simple choices, such as choosing a restaurant for the quality of its food, and not its drink, or choosing to spend time with friends because they are friends, not because they drink too.

I now know that my “little voice” is my wisdom and my higher power. This is what brought me to recovery, what keeps me here, and what guides me in the process. This little voice no longer has to scream to get my attention, because now I'm finally listening. Now that I know I can trust this voice, my future seems less overwhelming. I have discovered the “it” for which I have been searching, and “it” is within myself.

#### Liz on appreciating other women . . .

My journey in recovery means feeling good about myself physically, mentally, and spiritually. Physically, I feel more relaxed, and my stomach problems have disappeared. Mentally, my mind is quiet, and I am able to listen softly to myself and others. Spiritually, I feel reawakened and excited about life.

Recovery has given me the opportunity to practice a new way of living. I feel free of worry and anxiety,

and I am aware of a growing inner peace. Being with other women who understand what I'm going through is helping me the most. Recovery is truly an eye-opening experience for me. I'm enjoying the sharing, wisdom, and acceptance from the women I'm meeting in this process. I have learned a new appreciation for women, which has given me the safety to explore the woman in me.

My journey has allowed me to let go of negative thoughts, beliefs, and secrets that used to enslave me. I'm taking risks, I'm letting others know the "real me," and it feels good. I can feel I'm growing more and more each day. I'm no longer afraid to ask for what I need, and I ask for help regularly. I need to remember that I am human and that it's okay to feel and cry sometimes. Most of all, I need to remember to have fun!

#### Emily on liking Emily . . .

Recovery means accepting myself more every day. It means feeling good about myself and being able to look myself in the mirror and like what I see. It is knowing that I do my best and that every day I'm becoming more of who I want to be.

I have found peace of mind by letting go and accepting that I cannot control people, events, or outcomes, but I can decide how I want to think and act in regard to these things.

I often felt that I was different from others, but in recovery, I have learned how much we are alike. I no longer feel so alone. It is as important to me to be supportive of others as it is for me to be supported.

Abstinence is essential in order for me to be aware of myself and what is going on around me. I used to long for altered states, but today I am happy in my natural state.

To me, recovery means living—and being grateful for that. I welcome life and all its opportunities.

#### Kate's story

*Kate grew up in a family where the father was an alcoholic who was gone a lot. As a "good little girl," she did well in school and got a lot of attention for her success. The family valued looking good on the outside and not letting others know about any problems.*

*Kate, now forty-five, started drinking when she was twenty-five. She never drank when she was pregnant, but after her two children were born, her drinking increased to three or four times a week. By the age of thirty-six, she drank almost daily and began using alcohol to sleep. There was a lot going on in her life besides drinking during those years, and she found herself becoming more and more depressed.*

*Kate began seeing a therapist to sort out her feelings. She went to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings for a while, tried to stay sober but couldn't, and eventually gave up her therapist and the meetings.*

*After that, her anxiety increased, she withdrew into herself, and she drank even more. Eventually, she went back to her therapist, who prescribed antidepressants and urged her to attend chemical dependency treatment.*

## Kate's recovery journey

I had been treading water for years. I was blocked by my inability or unwillingness to let go of my addiction. I could quit—that was easy—but I could not surrender. I knew that's what I needed to do if I was going to feel better, and I was feeling pretty awful. I had trouble at first admitting and accepting that I had a drinking problem. After all, what was "a nice girl like me doing in a place like this"? Being an alcoholic was just not okay with me.

I didn't understand why I drank. Compared to other people, I had nothing to complain about. I had everything—a nice home, a good job, a supportive husband—and my children were doing well. Still, I was unhappy, and I was desperate to find out why. So I continued in treatment and began identifying with the other women in group. Through the process of sharing feelings and experiences, I began to see myself in them. I began to discover *me* and how to heal myself.

In some ways, my life is like an older house in need of repairs, and those repairs are under way. I've started repairing the foundation in places called trust, self-worth, acceptance, truth, and joy. Like all construction, this process of discovery and recovery is creating debris—some things just aren't useful anymore, like the pretending, the false bravado, the lies, and the masks. Some of that stuff was destructive, but oh-so-hard to discard—like the alcohol, the illusion of control, the reputation of achievement, and the myth of perfection. Then there's the stuff that I need to save, like my sense of humor, my willingness to work, my belief in myself, and my relationship

with my higher power. I've found a profound respect for women—in who we are and what we can be to and for each other. Today my house feels like home.

Daily I ask to become more genuine. I've been given freedom and a sense of peace, and I am beginning to feel safe. I'm free to be a woman I can love.

## From Kris

To my addict:

It's time for me to reclaim my life. You were manipulative, but I had hopes that you might be a friend. In the beginning, you dulled my pain, but later you became cruel and ugly. I was so young and scared when you first entered my life. You saw my shame and offered relief. The stronger you grew and the more I depended on you, the more out of control my life became. For a while I locked you away, but it wasn't long before you came back with a vengeance. The shame was so intense that I curled up in a corner and waited to die. Finally, I heard a tiny whisper of hope within me. I rose and confronted you.

So here I am, alive and fighting back. I can't control that you live inside me, but I can keep you from trashing my life. Every day I am sober, you lose power and I gain strength. My choice is to live.

Empowered,  
Kris

## From Gretchen

Dear Addict:

I'm in the painful process of putting you aside in order to make room for the new me that is

waiting to be reborn. I'm unsure of this rebirth and where it is taking me, but I feel drawn to explore it. I hope that by embracing it, I will gain self-acceptance, confidence, and inner peace.

You really make me mad! At first you brought me comfort and never let me down. I learned to trust and lean on you, but later you betrayed that trust and me. You took the life, and light, out of me mentally, physically, and spiritually. I felt dead in my emptiness.

I gave you such power! I let you consume me. Even when you weren't in my life, I was fighting to keep you out. When you were in my life, I thought you made me whole, but you deceived me.

I'm putting you aside now with more confidence than at any other time before. I've tasted serenity, and this is where wholeness resides. This is what I have always wanted, and I finally know how to get it. My search has been redirected to a new way of living that does not include you, and I am already well on my way.

Good-bye.  
Gretchen

#### Anne's story

*Anne grew up as the only child of a prominent family in a small community. Her mother was ill for much of her childhood, and Anne learned at a young age that if she needed something, she'd have to get it herself. She tended to be overly dependent in her relationships, because she feared being abandoned and alone. So she learned to take care of others' needs and ignore her own.*

*Alcohol helped Anne deny her lesbian feelings and go along with the norm. By the time she was in*

*college, she was drinking five or six times a week, usually to get drunk. During this time, Anne had her first relationship with a woman. They had met at a bar, and drinking was part of their social life. The relationship was short-lived.*

*Later, when Anne was working on her master's degree, she was in a relationship with a woman who didn't drink very much. Anne's drinking then decreased. Toward the end of this relationship, however, Anne started drinking more, and when her partner started complaining, Anne left.*

*It wasn't long before she became involved with another woman who worked in the same field she did. She drank the way Anne did and also brought pot into the relationship. For the next ten years, they devoted themselves to each other and to their careers, but eventually their addictions brought the relationship to a point of crisis.*

*Anne started therapy to work on relationship issues and discovered that she had been sexually abused as a child. During this process of healing, she saw how her addictions had been one way for her to survive the pain. She wanted to change her life but didn't know how. Anne met with her therapist and a chemical dependency counselor for several months before deciding to begin treatment for her addictions.*

#### Anne's recovery journey

*When I first stopped using, I was terrified that the pain would be so intense that I would go crazy and never come back. I couldn't imagine life without alcohol or pot. I saw few choices, if any, for the future, and everything in my life felt completely out of control.*

Recovery has given me hope for today and the future. I feel that now I really *do* want to live with vitality and passion. Recovery means that I have all kinds of choices that I didn't see before. Recovery means living in the moment, being open and honest with myself and others, and learning how to trust again. It means that I can feel sadness and pain and still survive, without going crazy in the process.

I am learning that people will be there for me, if only I ask. In receiving acceptance from others, I have learned to believe that I deserve and have the right to be happy.

As a result of letting go of my negative thoughts and beliefs, I am experiencing new freedoms. Recovery has taught me that the thoughts and beliefs from old, negative programming get in the way of listening to my inner voice and my deepest feelings. It has been tremendously freeing to feel again.

I am feeling better physically—I don't have hangovers or feel sick or humiliated. It has been freeing not to take aspirin for headaches every day and antacids for stomach pain. My productivity at work has improved, and because I'm letting go of guilt and shame, my work also has more meaning.

My recovery has allowed me to take the risk of letting others know who I really am in relation to my lifestyle. I now understand that if people don't accept my lifestyle, it's their problem . . . and I don't have to feel guilty for who I am. Most of all, though, I will continue to look at self-definition instead of letting my family and significant others do that for me.

I am learning to let go of fear, insecurities, and self-defeating behaviors. I am also letting go of the fear of abandonment, which in turn has brought me closer to the people I consciously feared would leave me. This has been an incredible discovery and one that has brought a great comfort to my life. In this process, I have become aware of relationships that are destructive and bring out the worst in me. I choose not to get involved in those kinds of relationships anymore.

My perfectionism was a major reason for my unhappiness. It contributed more than anything to my sense of failure. I no longer work twenty-four hours a day in order to feel productive and successful. I take time for myself, and *I don't have to be perfect*.

I still need to stop intellectualizing everything to death so that I can make room for and focus on my spirituality, which is the essence of my recovery. This means that I must reconnect with my love of nature, be still, and listen from within.

As for you, Addict . . . well, it is extremely difficult to face you head-on. You took me over and surrounded, engulfed, and smothered my very existence. You have had a strong hold on my life and have taken me on a wild, crazy, death-defying ride.

I'm not denying that we didn't have some fun together. You filled me with confidence, made me feel like I was smart, funny, and popular. You helped me through painful relationships, deaths, and other hurtful experiences. You were like a soothing friend, consoling me and helping me bury any feelings that surfaced. All these reasons and more make it hard

for me to let go of you. But the truth is that eventually you brought me to the brink of disaster.

In order for me to survive, you must go. I know I can't rid my life of you completely, but I can keep you quiet, if I trust myself and let go of your lies. The biggest lie you ever told me was that *you* were not the problem. I don't believe your lies anymore, and I am not going to let you have the rest of my life. I have lost so much to you already.

I deserve a happy life, and I am going to have it. You are not going to destroy me anymore. When you get restless and bored and think that you can take me over again, think again! I'll be here to meet you—head-on.

#### Leslie's story

*Leslie, twenty-four, comes from a large Native American family and is one of nine children. Her chemically dependent and abusive parents divorced when she was twelve, and Leslie was raised by her father. The family moved a lot because he kept losing jobs. Leslie and some of her older siblings eventually dropped out of school to work and help out with family expenses.*

*Leslie felt unwanted after her mother moved away. In high school, she discovered that alcohol helped her feel confident and connected. She made friends. Leslie had learned not to express herself at home so as not to rock the boat. Drinking gave her permission to let go and express herself, to be angry, sad, silly, or happy.*

*Leslie drank at every opportunity—about three times a week—getting drunk and often passing out.*

*At seventeen, Leslie left her father's house and moved in with friends. She got her GED and later went on to trade school. During that time, she didn't drink as often, but when she did, she got drunk. At nineteen, she met and married her husband, and a year later they had their first child. Leslie had stopped drinking while she was pregnant and breast-feeding, but later she began drinking again to cope with her husband's drinking and abusiveness and the stress of her new job.*

*Within two years, and following the birth of her second child, Leslie decided to leave her husband and move in with a friend. She had stopped drinking during this pregnancy, but she began to drink again when there were complications with the divorce. Her drinking steadily increased, affecting her job performance, and she was eventually confronted by her employer. In treatment Leslie decided to work on healing old wounds, understanding her anger and guilt, and becoming a better parent and person.*

#### From Leslie

Dear Addict:

Old friend, it seems we haven't seen each other or shared much lately, but it doesn't mean I have forgotten you. When we first met, I was hurt, confused, and angry. I reached out to your open hand, and you said, "Come walk with me." Together we found fun, conversation, laughter, and good times with friends, and you covered up my hurt. You helped me control the feelings I had of indifference, intolerance, and confusion. You covered up my anger by making me arrogant, defiant, and sarcastic.

You took from me many new opportunities by making me spend time with you in the bars, away from myself, my family, my kids, and my job. I have paid a heavy price to have you as my friend. I traded humility, gratitude, compassion, understanding, and patience for your lies. Your promises only fed my ego. I wanted to believe you, but found these promises to be empty and false.

Finally, in my despair, I began to see your deception. This is where we parted ways. I am ready to say good-bye to you now. I do believe you meant well, but I'm taking my life back. I don't choose your path any longer, but I will remember you always.

Good-bye, old friend.  
Leslie

From Natalie

Dear Addict:

The more I used you, the more miserable my life became. I held my feelings inside, and you helped me to do it. With you, I could hide my anger, sadness, and loneliness. I could lie and cheat, and I would push people away so we could be alone together.

Yes, you did make me forget who I was for a while, but now I remember. I am living a new life day by day. I promise myself daily that I will be happier without you and that I am better off burying you. We have been separated for thirty-five days now, and my life is fantastic. I am free of all your favorite leftovers, like anger, fear, worry, hangovers, shakes, DWIs, poor work performance, and just plain crap! I don't

miss you at all. You are no longer an obsession, and I have peace. You are like the dead worm at the bottom of the tequila bottle—you drank yourself to death. You fool!

Not missing you at all,  
Natalie

From Mary

Dear Addict:

I have tried for many years to understand you and regain control of your presence in my life. Where I lost control I am not sure, but I do know that I gave it over to you. I am supposed to respect your power and recognize your strength, but this is where I wrestle with you. I cannot respect anything that is so close-minded and selfish.

Your existence is dependent on me, since you live through me. You cannot think on your own or exist on your own. Your voice only exists in me. I am the only one who hears you. You think you know what I want, and you think you know what I need. But you are wrong.

I'm giving you notice: You are being evicted from me and my world. I will tolerate your presence no longer. Find a new place to live, because you are not welcome here anymore. Our relationship is over. Today, I know how to keep you out of my life. I can tell you that I will not drink today, so you cannot have control. I will not isolate today, so you can't wait for me in the dark. I will be honest today, so you can't fool me, and I will not be a traitor to my hope. I can tell you today that I want to live, which means that you have to die.

For me, there's only today; for you, there's always tomorrow. Remember, this is the extent of respect I will have for you.

Your ex-landlord,  
Mary

### Nicole's story

*Nicole grew up in an African-American family that valued authority, was very religious, but did not allow for creative expression. Even though there were many rules and expectations, she didn't find much personal or spiritual direction.*

*Nicole began experimenting with drugs and alcohol around the age of eleven, along with two of her older sisters. She liked both the feeling chemicals gave her and the idea that they were "bad." They were also a way for her to rebel against authority*

*As she got older, she was attracted to friends who liked to drink, do drugs, and party. She started dating at fourteen, primarily boys who used drugs and alcohol as she did. At fifteen, she dated someone who introduced her to cocaine. When she used it, Nicole felt excited, on top of the world, and indestructible. She couldn't afford cocaine very often, so her use was limited until after she graduated from high school, when she found other ways of paying for her habit. Nicole also drank and smoked pot occasionally, but cocaine quickly became her drug of choice.*

*Even though her cocaine use remained steady during those years, Nicole completed college. Her relationships were disastrous and always related to her chemical abuse. Finally, living on the edge became too much for her, and at twenty-four, she entered her*

*first treatment. As soon as she completed the program, she started using cocaine again and was introduced to crack. The intensity of her addiction grew, with greater consequences. Nicole was unable to hold jobs, her relationships were out of control, and she began to steal and lie to support her habit, a pattern that continued for about two years, until her family intervened.*

*Nicole entered inpatient treatment for the second time and followed that with a three-month stay in a halfway house. It was at the halfway house that she got encouragement and guidance to pursue a career. The day she left, Nicole vowed she would never use crack cocaine again. She kept that promise. But sometime later she started to drink because she didn't believe that alcohol was a problem for her.*

*Nicole was able to get a good job using her educational background. She controlled her drinking for a while, but her relationships continued to be unhealthy, which eventually caused her to drink more to medicate her pain, confusion, guilt, and shame. She began to see what she was losing because of the choices she was making. Nicole wanted a family and saw that her lifestyle was not going to provide that. She felt hopeless and undeserving. Then her father died unexpectedly, which pushed her over the edge, and she overdosed on drugs and alcohol. She was taken to the hospital by a friend, and after a few days, she asked for help and entered treatment.*

From Nicole

Dear Addict:

I thought I said good-bye to you two years ago, but you showed up in the form of alcohol. You

took me by surprise and snuck back in. I got involved with a man who also had some ties with you, and my dependence on you increased. You whispered that we could be having some fun together. I believed you. Before I knew it, we were back together, and I realized how much I had missed you. We had had such good times in the past, and I wanted to have more of them.

But it wasn't long before I started feeling used and misguided by you. You started taking more than you were giving. So once again, I'm looking at how cunning, baffling, and powerful you are, and how very, very patient. You took over my mind, and I can't allow that to go on any longer. You aren't any fun anymore, and you must go.

I realize that abstinence is the only answer. I must change all of my old behaviors and patterns that include you. I deserve a better life, and I'm getting that, now that we've parted. This new life frees me from your bondage. I am beginning to accomplish some of the dreams and hopes that I thought were lost long ago. I am living my life one moment at a time, and I'm letting go of your haunting whispers.

See ya.  
Nicole

Susan sends her thanks

To all of you:

I came to this place feeling alone and sad. I felt I was bad, and I didn't want you to know. I was surprised when you greeted me with understanding, openness, and love. With each passing day of moments shared, we found strength in each other, and hope and joy knew no bounds.

All of you, dear women, have helped me let go, face my fears and addictions that had kept me closed off from myself and the world. My time with you has been a gift, and I thank you. I will cherish the wisdom and love you've given me, and the memories we've shared are in my heart and mind forever. I love all of you.

Forever in spirit,  
Susan

### Reclaiming our lives

We have just talked about the most important resource we have: our wisdom, our voice within. In listening to this wisdom, we find the paths to our happiness. We have learned that addiction is created out of a need to fill ourselves up. In our innocence, we look outside ourselves to fill that need, all the while losing ourselves in the process. When we give way to our negative beliefs about ourselves, our relationship to the world, and our insecurities, we give the addiction more power. As the addiction becomes more powerful, the separation of mind, body, and spirit becomes much more evident.

In the stories and writings just shared, we have witnessed the process of addiction and the recovery from it. The *capacity* to recover from addiction resides within us, and the *opportunity* to recover from addiction rests in each and every moment. We learned that recovery means reclaiming all parts of ourselves—mind, body, and spirit. We saw that recovery is individual and that each woman has her own voice, her own answers, and her own healing process. We learned that recovery meant letting go of the addiction, as well as the negative thinking and

beliefs that go along with it. We saw that by listening to our wisdom/spirit voice, we were empowered to make better, healthier choices for ourselves. We saw that recovery can be uncomfortable at times, but that getting through it will strengthen us as women. We learned that we can create our own happiness from the inside and restore ourselves. When we stop using alcohol or drugs, we take back our lives and begin living life to the fullest.