

# Testimony and Transformation. Addiction, Meaning and Spiritual Change.

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Testimony transforms witness, in which the heart,  
mood, emotions and understanding are involved.

Wessel Stoker, *Is Faith Rational?* 108

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interaction between meaning and transformation in the specific context of addiction. The paper takes a narrative approach focusing on religious conversion testimonies of former drug addicts. In order to understand the processes of the construction of meaning and spiritual transformation among recovered drug addicts, we have to see how they craft narratives about their addiction experiences and conversion, how they tell these testimonies to themselves and to others, and ultimately how these testimonies become convincing to them.

Addictions often develop in response to life crises or trauma and identity loss (Dayton, 2000; Najavits, 1998; Najavits, Weiss & Shaw, 1997). Research has also shown that spirituality is important for change and identity development in the recovery process. Experiences of spiritual transformation, including religious conversion, can be an important element in the coping process that is inherent to recovery (Brent & Mc Govern, 2006; Ng & Shek, 2001). In posttraumatic growth research spiritual transformation proves to be one of the key dimensions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2006; Ganzevoort, 2009), offering a form of healing for troubled persons. Although the connections between several of these key terms (trauma, identity, addiction, recovery, spirituality) have been investigated, there has not been much direct attention to the role of testimonial in reconstructing a viable narrative of the self, accounting for trauma, addiction, and conversion, and embedding this narrative in a particular social and spiritual context.

The intersection of addiction and spirituality in our research also builds on clinical insights. In the treatment of addictions, the Alcoholics Anonymous “12 steps”-model has proven to be an invaluable approach. It was shown to be effective not only for alcohol dependency, but also with other addictions. The Minnesota Model, based on AA-principles, is by now widely accepted in a variety of contexts. Interestingly, this approach has strong spiritual overtones and highlights the importance of a transcendent, higher power. Although this is usually understood as referring to the AA-group itself (Murken, 1994), the AA-principles closely follow the spiritual models of conversion and faith development. Similarly, religious organizations offering drug rehabilitation programs often emphasize the spiritual dimension and encourage spiritual involvement. Many conversion stories can be found involving such a spiritual turn in overcoming addiction. Apparently, parallels can be drawn between the process of developing and overcoming addiction and the process of conversion. These parallels regard identity development, relational belonging, existential meaning and lack thereof, reconstructing the self, spiritual transformation, and witnessing to others about the changes in the self.

Addiction is here seen primarily as a psychological disorder related to the problematic construction of one’s narrative identity. Conversion influences the (re)construction of this narrative identity and the restructuring of the relationship between self and others. Testimony is understood as the performance of one’s narrative identity for a particular audience. It lends new credibility to the narrative that had become questionable because of the addiction. Spiritual transformation is seen as an adaptive mechanism that helps former addicts to cope with psychological conflicts and create meaning and a reconstructed self-narrative.

Experiences of spiritual transformation, like religious conversion, can thus be an important element in the coping process inherent to recovery. In the context of conversion and addiction research testimony is the *biographical reconstruction*, or *renarrativization*, of one’s life, where the subject actively reinterprets past experiences and self-conceptions from the vantage point of the present, in such a way that it redefines the relationship with self and others.

Based on ongoing research by the present authors, this paper explores how former drug addicts construct meaning and experience spiritual transformation. More specifically, we will look at the role of conversion testimonies as the narrative performance of conversion. Furthermore, we want to see how testimonial discourse functions as an interpretative framework in terms of which former drug users live and organize their experiences. Understanding testimony as a performative discursive practice allows insight into the strategies former drug addicts employ to negotiate their identities and meanings in the recovery process. Therefore, this chapter focuses on questions of how recovered drug addicts seek to give meaning to their lives through testimonial discourse, and how they construct their testimonies with regard to spiritual transformation. In other words: how can telling one’s testimony contribute to the (trans)formation of a new identity?

Therefore, in this chapter we will proceed as follows: after describing how conversion functions in the life stories of two former substance abusers, we will give particular attention to the hermeneutics of testimony. In the second part we will look at conversion as a narrative construct in religious identity that brings self-transformation for the former drug addicts.

### **Stories of Addiction, Conversion, and Identity**

Before we explore the concepts in more depth, we introduce two short biographies which will function as main case studies of our analyses in this chapter. These cases will serve in the following sections to provide examples of the ideas to be introduced.

#### *Mirjam's story*

Mirjam is the youngest of five children in a Dutch, Christian, middle class family. When she turned 6 her brother started sexually abusing her, which continued until she was 12. Initially, she did not really understand what went on but, when she turned 8, she thought: "What is happening here? What is going on? This is not OK." She was afraid of her brother and did not feel safe at home. Most frightening of all was that she never knew when it was going to happen again.

In the aftermath of the abuse Mirjam did not trust people anymore. She felt it easier to "hide" behind a big mask. She was confused, did not know where she was or what she was doing. "I was totally lost." Although she felt distanced from them, she had some friends with whom she would have some fun. She feels positive about that, "because if you don't have any peers, you'll feel abandoned and miserable."

Mirjam went to high school, but she had many problems there. Because of her intelligence she had enjoyed privileges at the elementary school, but this was no longer the case. She became very stubborn and held no respect for authority. After school she joined a gang where they smoked pot and drank alcohol. Mirjam mistrusted everyone. She often felt angry and sad, interspersed by moments of excitement and even happiness. Because of her experiences, and the development of a lesbian identity, Mirjam felt she needed to create more space for herself outside the social confines of home and school. This was exactly what she found in the gang.

Another factor contributing to his choice was her remaining fear of her brother. She thought: "What can I do to manage this problem? Maybe I will join a gang with people he is afraid of." In those years Mirjam's brother worked at a pub that attracted many criminals, and he was afraid of them. This drew Mirjam toward them and to the hard drugs they were involved in. Mirjam felt that drugs calmed her down and helped her cope with her personal problems. Her substance abuse increased over time and she became involved in criminal activities. As she did not feel safe at home, she used to sleep in the streets or squats in Amsterdam.

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At that point, Mirjam reached the decision for a radical change of life. Two weeks later she was enrolled in a rehab program that included trauma therapy. It was there she had a religious experience. In the first week of therapy she walked down the hallway and thought: "I cannot succeed, not on my own and not this way. I have now given up my survival tools and I am as vulnerable as possible. I should have faith that from now on, everything will improve, otherwise, I will die." Mirjam experienced an epiphany, realizing that God cares for her.

During the time at the clinic Mirjam attended an Evangelical church on a regular base. She was touched by the patience of the pastor towards people. However, because of her sexual orientation, she felt she was not fully accepted, which made her very sad. Given these experiences of rejection and exclusion, she started to look for a more liberal church.

After 15 months in the rehab program Mirjam returned to the "real" world. She found this exciting, especially as she had no idea how people would judge her. Mirjam went to a private school to finish her education and decided to devote her life to a religious career. According to her, there are two significant religious experiences in her story. The first is that she was taken care of when she went through hell. The second is that there was a new road, a new beginning, for her. These experiences have become central to her life story. She concludes that faith has given her a new identity and changed her as a person.

#### *Luka's story*

Luka was born in the early 1970s in a Serbian atheist and communist family of artistic intellectuals. His father was a famous artist and a professor at the art academy, and his mother was a professor of language and literature. Luka says that his childhood was tense and insecure since his parents used to live a bohemian life. The relationship with his father was cold, lacking in necessary attention, and was characterized by a strong feeling of rejection. He had a somewhat better relationship with his mother, but he felt ashamed and angry over her alcoholism. His parents divorced when he was 11. Although he spent very little time with his father, those occasions represent the most beautiful memories of his childhood.

After his parents' divorce, Luka lived with his mother who had no control over his life. Luka was neither punished for his sometimes problematic behavior, nor aware of the consequences. He had learning difficulties and became aggressive at school. Around the age of 14 or 15 Luka became interested in music and assembled his first punk-rock band. Within the punk subculture he was strongly influenced by anarchist philosophy. Having started taking soft drugs at age 13, Luka took heroin intravenously for the first time at age 16. His first fix, he said, was like something he had longed for his entire life. Heroin brought him a sense of security and ease. At the age of 21 Luka became a heroin addict with all the withdrawal symptoms.

In his late twenties Luka married a girl who was also addicted. They were both involved in criminal acts. After three years of a troubled marriage, Luka decided to divorce her. His late twenties were the darkest period of his life, and he used drugs in large amounts. The civil war in former Yugoslavia was raging, and the country was isolated. Heroin, however, was easily available like never before and became an anesthetic to escape from the difficulties of life.

Suffering from bad health, chronic hepatitis C, and physical and mental exhaustion, Luka was at the end of his strength at the age of 30. This proved to become a turning point for him. "One morning the police took me to prison while I was in an abstinence crisis. Then I realized I was tired of doing drugs. I told myself that I would never go through this again. I could not go back to addiction and everything... I was mentally deranged, I had a bad memory, I was full of fears, somewhat paranoid – in a very complicated mental and physical condition.... They told me at work that I could not stay there until I become well again. My mother let me stay with her, gave me a bed to sleep in, and told me I had to change my life. I was in debt financially, and I did some criminal acts because of which the prison sentence awaited me. I felt empty within, and I was tired of such a life. I simply could not find more money to buy drugs.... There was a turning point when I came to God, alone, without having gone to church or talked to other people. I told him I wanted to live with him [God], and that I did not want to take drugs any more. That was my prayer to God on Christmas 2001. I have never taken drugs since then."

Not long after that Luka met people from the rehabilitation centre. These included an acquaintance he used to buy drugs from 15 years earlier. This time his former dealer told him about God, and how he had managed to recover from his addiction. Luka was convinced by this powerful testimony of a former drug dealer who had changed radically. Luka went through the rehabilitation centre program and completed it successfully. In the first few months of rehabilitation Luka prayed a lot and talked to other people. Now, eleven years after the rehabilitation, Luka works at the rehabilitation centre helping other drug addicts to get rid of their addiction problems. Luka remarried, this time to a girl who had also completed the rehabilitation program. They now live together and have two children. Although he still suffers from some medical consequences, Luka describes himself as a successful man who is motivated to fight for life, both for himself and for others. He also sees himself as a useful member of society who helps drug addicts. After 16 years of addiction, Luka has not taken drugs for 11 years now, and he has never felt compelled to revert to using.

These two stories highlight some of the recurring themes in the life stories collected in the research. Like many others, both Mirjam and Luka describe a childhood of abuse and/or neglect. These (sub)traumatic experiences are interpreted in the narratives as significant antecedents of the addiction. Added to them is the factor of the availability of drugs, sometimes connected to the example of parents and peers. The conversion itself is narrated as occurring at a rock bottom moment, where the person has no other choice

than to change radically. This does not mean that there is an instantaneous religious experience, nor that the decision to change is immediately interpreted in religious terms. That may happen at a later moment. The further future is defined to no small degree by this radical and religious decision. Both Mirjam and Luka decide to rebuild their life into a religious or helping career.

Differences between Mirjam's and Luka's stories have to do with the different contexts they come from. The research project includes three samples: one of autochthonous Dutch participants, one of migrants in the Netherlands, and one of autochthonous persons in Serbia. This comparative approach will allow us to study the construction of meaning in the interaction of (sub)traumatic experiences, addiction, recovery, spiritual transformation, and cultural and societal influences on the processes of coping and the attribution of meaning. Influences include the civil war, collective trauma and consequent erosion of moral values in Serbia that contributed to an epidemic of drug abuse. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, narratives of addiction more often refer to individual trauma than to collective societal instability. Migrants' stories tend to include either collective trauma, as in the Serbian sample, or individual trauma, as in the Dutch sample (partly depending on their geographical background), but with the additional experience of migration. Another influence is the differing roles of religion in these cultures. Whereas the Netherlands shows a steady decline of a formerly strong religious presence, the last fifteen years in Serbia portray a process of de-secularization and revival of formal religiosity and neo-traditionalism, as well as a rise of evangelical Christian churches. Background cultures of the migrant sample tend to have a consistently high level of religiosity. Finally, the samples differ with regard to the societal stances toward drugs with the Dutch society expressing liberal social policies, and Serbia imposing an authoritarian approach and a strong prohibition of drugs, together with an increase in the addiction rates.

In these different contexts narratives of addiction, conversion, and recovery may be given their particular shape. Our interest lies in the ways testimonies of conversion are constructed by former drug addicts and the role of these testimonies in their recovery. We are interested in their spiritual transformation, especially at the level of their narrative presentation. Drug addicts' conversion stories can be seen as adaptive efforts to resolve psychological conflict and create a new self-narrative. For recovered drug addicts sharing their testimonies is an opportunity to reinterpret and reconstruct their past, plan their future in the framework of the new religious (canonical) language and, consequently, construct a life story as a typical conversion story. Therefore, the main reason to focus on conversion narratives, rather than on the experience of conversion itself, is that the performance of conversion narratives is central to the efficacy of the conversion. Inasmuch as the testimonial narratives are located before specific audiences (congregations, cultures), they are cast in particular ways to use the symbols and canonical language of the intended audience. The result is a

richly textured account of an individual's autobiography as it relates to larger religious and cultural stories (Roof, 1993, p. 297-310).

### **Hermeneutics of Testimony**

The notion of *testimonio* – testimonial narrative – features prominently on the agenda of the human and social sciences (Randal, 1985). The reason for this is, in part, the fact that “*testimonio* intertwines the “desire for objectivity” and “the desire for solidarity” in its very situation of production, circulation, and reception” (Beverley, 2005). A *testimonio* is a narrative, spoken or written text in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts (Beverley, 2005, p. 547). According to Beverley, “its unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or significant life experience” (Beverley, 2005, p. 547).

In every fellowship meeting of *Alcoholics* and *Narcotics Anonymous*, as in many faith-based rehabilitation programs, individuals have the opportunity to give a personal account of their experience with God. This testimony is a central “technique of the self” (Marshall, 2009), and the principal mode of creating a new identity and collective belonging. Testimony as practice of the self “involves acts and experiences of faith whose focus is on interiority, enacting in various forms processes of self examination and giving an account of oneself” (Marshall, 2009, p. 129).

The perspective of testimony also offers rich resources for understanding the nature of conversion, the prototypical form of spiritual change. For Rambo, personal testimony is a common method for the public display of commitment. He defines testimony as “the narrative witness of a person's conversion and it entails two interacting processes: language transformation and biographical reconstruction” (Rambo, 1993, p. 136). This psychological perspective can be broadened with a social-psychological view on group engagement. Conversion then can be seen as the reconstruction of the self around a new center of meaning, as the adoption of a new rhetoric or language system, and as a new form or degree of affiliation to a specific (religious) group. Therefore, testimonial talk is always socially constructed by use of the canonical language of the particular religious community. In this sense, testimonies, as scripted and discursive modes of speaking, are informed by a theological framework that reflects an implicit theology of the converts. Testimonies, therefore, form the basis of the convert's “new spirituality” and theology. These three processes come together in a person's testimony.

The opportunity to testify before an audience, George Jensen notes, can be a deeply liberating experience. In many faith-based programs “stories are told at the meeting; they are ritualized, performed, created, as one embodied voice stands before others” (Jensen, 2000, p. 1).

Giving testimony of conversion and addiction is essential to the process of recovery and to the group dynamic. Therefore, the testimony serves to

reconstruct biographical information, integrating the convert's and religious community's story. It is also the performance of a new social identity which is the result of a successful conversion.

Likewise, in contemporary philosophy, the term *testimony* is used as a label for the spoken or written word, when this purports to pass on the speaker's or writer's knowledge and experience, conveying factual information or other truth. From the perspective of philosophy of religion, Stoker describes the Christian faith itself as a testimony to Transcendence. According to him, such a testimony has two poles: on the one hand, a manifestation and proclamation of Transcendence and, on the other, the human being as a witness of what he or she has seen, heard or experienced (Stoker, 2006, p. 102). For Stoker, testimony to Transcendence concerns being a witness, "giving an answer to the manifestation and proclamation of religious Transcendence" (Stoker, 2006, p. 118). Thus, testimonies function as dynamic, discursive devices in which converts stress the presence and active involvement of Transcendence in everyday life (Klaver, 2011, p. 282).

Despite the wide variety of views on testimony, a single proposition is widely accepted: testimony is the assertion of a declarative sentence by a speaker to a hearer or to an audience (Coady, 1992; Fricker, 2004; Graham, 2000). In this sense, *testimonio* might be seen as a kind of speech act that sets up special ethical and epistemological demands. Therefore, testifying, or giving testimony, is a linguistic action, and testimony is its result, an intelligible speech act of telling.

Conversion testimonies then can be understood as a discursive practice of self-performance in which converts give evidence of their spiritual transformation through public confessions (testimony) of their past life and their present situation. These conversion testimonies, as they are retold orally and composed as autobiographies, become the paradigms by which people interpret their lives (Rambo, 1993, p. 158). In the context of recovered drug addict converts, these testimonies help individuals in a new way to construe a new religious identity, and help them to cope with the past as something that could be both overcome and redeemed. In particular, they enable new forms of conduct that offer recovered drug addicts ways of extricating themselves from a spoiled identity. In this sense, conversion testimony functions as mechanism of reinforcement and commitment (Cartledge, 2010, p. 17).

Here we can benefit from Paul Ricoeur's (1979) seminal essay, *The Hermeneutics of Testimony*, which was among the first to explore testimony as the distinctive Christian hermeneutic. In this article, Ricoeur tries to analyze testimony from a semantic perspective, providing language and terms to describe the philosophical and theological aspects of testimony. Ricoeur tries to show that a philosophy of testimony can only be a hermeneutic, that is, a philosophy of interpretation (Ricoeur, 1979, p. 143). He argues that interpretation of testimony is a twofold act, an act of consciousness of itself and an act of historical understanding which is based on signs that the absolute gives of itself. According to Ricoeur, "the signs of the absolute's self-

disclosure are at the same time signs in which consciousness recognizes itself” (Ricoeur, 1979, p. 143). Therefore, the hermeneutics of testimony arise in the confluence of two exegesises – the exegesis of historic testimony of the absolute and the exegesis of the self in light of the criteria of the divine. The expression and/or transformation of the self, in light of the criteria of the divine, is of great importance for our research. Thus, in the context of addiction and conversion research, we define testimony as the discursive performance of telling and retelling one’s personal narrative of addiction and conversion (God’s engagement) in former drug addicts’ lives. As such, it is a responsive and creative expression of faith.

Also, for our purpose here, it is important to note the two elements Ricoeur describes: *testimony-confession* and *testimony-narration*, which are present in conversion testimonies. Former drug addict converts are engaged in testimony-confession when they declare that the power of God helped them to be free from drugs. Testimony-narration consists of the associated narrative of how they gained that testimony and what the significance of that testimony is. Stating that God delivered them from drugs will always be tied into a narrative of salvation in Jesus Christ or, in the words of Ricoeur, a narration of “the acts of deliverance” (Ricoeur, 1979, p. 134). If we examine the ways in which the experience of conversion is described in testimony, we see that the individual invariably presents this “spiritual moment as an intensely powerful and private dialogue of the self with the self, yet one in which the individual recognize him- or herself as being in the grip of a power that goes beyond the individual, a power that reveals itself in an imperious fashion, demanding that one cede or capitulate” (Marshall, 2009, p. 147).

### **Addiction, Conversion Testimony and Recovery**

Many authors argue that human beings are routinely involved in redefining their autobiography and self-identity in the light of new experience (McAdams, 1993; Giddens, 1991). Bruner gives an explanation of how the process of change from one story to another takes place. According to him, it is the perceived inconsistency, between the previously accepted story and the new situation, that leads us to reject or question the old narrative, and it is the perceived relevance of the new narrative to our own life situation that leads to its acceptance (Bruner, 1986, p. 153). We argue that conversion can be thought of as a specific spiritual example of this common process. Therefore, from this conversion perspective, as we already mentioned, testimony is *biographical reconstruction*, or re-narrativization of one’s life, whereby the subject actively reinterprets past experience of self-conceptions from the vantage point of the present, in such a way as to change the meaning of the past for the subject (David & Machalek, 1983, p. 266). In those regards, as Berger and Luckmann have reminded us, conversion experiences generally involve dramatic transformations of a person’s social reality. They wrote that “the old reality ...must be reinterpreted within the legitimating apparatus of the new

reality. This involves a reinterpretation of past biography *in toto*" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 179).

Thumma sees conversion as a *core identity construct*, in which both conversion and identity experiences lead to important changes in the lives of individuals (Thumma, 1991). Similarly, Beit-Hallahmi defines conversion as "a perceptible change in one's religious identity – a conscious self-transformation" (Beit – Hallahmi, 1989, p. 114). Bailey Gillespie (1979) points out that both the experience of religious conversion and of personal identity formation have profound effects on the actual perception of the meaning of life. Moreover, religious conversion can help relieve a sense of psychological crisis, because it can provide meaning in the face of meaninglessness, and identity integration when confronted with circumstances that cause individuals to question their sense of identity (Beit – Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). With specific reference to drug addiction, some authors have argued that religious conversion gives a new identity to rehabilitated drug addicts that enable them to begin a new life (Ng & Shek, 2001). Snow and Machalek (1983) call this *embracing a master role* in which the subject sees a full integration of the new religious identity with all other identities, the subordination of all other identities to the new religious identity, or the elimination of other identities incompatible with the new religious identity.

It is, however, not only the personal identity that is reconstructed in the conversion process. As we indicated earlier, conversion has to do not only with reconstructing the center of one's identity, but also with finding new language and affiliating oneself anew with a social group. These two elements are directly connected to one's social identity, or, in other words, to the intended audience of the life story (Ganzevoort, 2012). A successful narrative reconstruction entails all three elements. More than that, the integration of the three elements is essential for a plausible new narrative identity. The language and canonical stories of the group one wishes to belong to, the reinterpretation of past events and the performance of the story before the new audience together make for a viable new story.

This is why, in the process of identity construction, testimonies play an important role. They perform the narrative reinterpretation of one's past before the audience of one's future, adopting the language and canonical models offered by the audience. For former drug addicts, telling and retelling their testimonies is an opportunity to reinterpret and reconstruct their past and plan their new future in connection with the group they want to be part of. Consequently they construct their life story as a typical conversion story (Popp – Baier, 2002). Denzin argues in his book, *The Alcoholic Society*, that testifying at AA articulates the transition between two selves: "the old drinking self of the past...and the new nondrinking self of the present and future" (Denzin, 1993, p. 310). In this narrativization of the self, storytellers describe their former addiction-self and the new self they are struggling to become. In the light of this, Miller and McCrady use the term "passionate testimony," that provides an alternative representation, or script, which

enables the addict to take pride in his/her status as a former or recovering addict (Miller & McCrady, 1993).

At this point, it is useful to mention that the conversion testimony creates a new social identity, and non-shaming role, that replaces the identity of the "criminal". This means that the convert not only finds a new position vis-à-vis the religious group, but also with regard to wider society. Moreover, conversion testimony allows someone to move from a life of addiction to one in which (s)he has interpretative control over his or her life, "warding off the stigmatizing labels that are applied externally by replacing them with a religious identity and universe of discourse" (Shadd, Louise & Kathryn, 2006, p. 174). The conversion narrative, then, may function as a source of shame management that creates a new social and religious identity and enables the person to develop stronger self-esteem (Shadd, Louise & Kathryn, 2006, p. 161). In Luka's case study, for example, the conversion testimony helps to cope with shame in several ways. The testimonial narrative creates a new social identity that replaces the labels of "criminal" and "junkie," and eventually positions him as a caregiver. Telling and retelling the testimony can therefore be seen as a narrative coping mechanism. The new testimony brings purpose and meaning in life, turning drug addicts into agents of God.

When people "switch worlds" and adopt a new religious and social identity, they need to find a new audience, with new significant others, who are willing to endorse the new narrative identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The central component of successful recovery from addiction is acceptance of that new identity narrative by his or her significant others, who may or may not be the same people as before. As Biernacki correctly recognized, non-addicted others must come to accept the abstainers as ordinary people who are no longer addicted, and "act toward them in terms of the new, 'ordinary' identities that they present" (Biernacki, 1986, p. 142). Social stigma and exclusion can be a huge barrier that must be overcome if former drug addicts are successfully to stop using drugs and transform their lives. Buchanan and Young (2000), in their empirical research, provide examples of how the process of stigmatization, marginalization and social exclusion, lead to chronically relapsing drug use.

The addict's reconstruction of such narratives of the past provides the necessary basis for the addict to discover meaning in his or her struggle with addiction. The recovering addict's new religious identity not only needs to be developed, it also requires positive reinforcement experiences that demonstrate the benefits of being drug-free and encourage the former addict to feel good about herself or himself (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2002). Often addicts interpret their addiction testimonies as God's will which led them to salvation. A new testimony brings a new understanding of addiction as a gift or opportunity. This is all the more true when the audience supports and endorses the testimony. Justifying the experience of addiction with meaning and purpose in this way can be seen as a coping strategy. For some people this may not be an adequate coping strategy, but it helps them to cope with stigma and shame and to construct their new identities.

In our two case studies we see that Luka's and Mirjam's conversions are *sudden*, or *crisis* types of conversion. Many authors highlight the importance of a specific "turning point" when one stops using drugs, a point at which the decision to give up drugs is taken and/or consolidated (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2002, p. 155). According to Shaffer and Jones, this process is often experienced as a life crisis where the addict recognizes that his or her lifestyle must change if he or she is to regain control" (Shaffer & Jones, 1989, p. 169). This decisive moment is variously described as an "existential crisis" (Waldorf, 1983, pp. 237 - 280), an "epistemological shift" (Shaffer & Jones, 1989), "an epiphany"<sup>1</sup> (Denzin, 1989, p. 141) or as hitting "rock bottom" (Maddux & Desmond, 1980, pp. 15-25). This kind of existential crisis or turning point is an essential step to recovery from addiction (McIntosh & McKeganey, 2002, p. 5). In the case of Luka and Mirjam, this happened when they ended up in the prison or the rehab clinic. This crisis event also can be understood as the beginning of their conversion. In Luka's story, it is clear that both coping and conversion are processes of change, in which the individual experiences a transformation in either a mental or a spiritual (or both) sphere, through finding a way out of crisis. His crisis experience was an antecedent of conversion and occurred under pressure. Crises life events (*parental divorce, addiction, war*) forced Luka to confront his limitations and stimulated religious resources to resolve problems.

On the level of narrative, this critical junction in the story serves to make plausible a dramatic shift in the story, accounting for both the past and the present. In these case studies the conversion testimony works as a form of shame management and as a coping strategy in several aspects. The new narrative creates a new social identity to replace label of a criminal and junky. By telling his story Luka coped with his guilt and shame. His message is: *I am not as bad a person as I was*. He says:

*"I would describe myself as a successful man. I am successful in the sense that I am a man who has a family which functions normally. I am also successful since I work in an association which helps drug addicts. I help others, and I think I am a useful member of society. I am happy with my life. I see myself as a person motivated to live a new life, to fight for life, for my family, for myself, for others. I am ambitious, and I have my aims and goals. To cut a long story short, I am a man happy with his life."*

The new narrative identity brings purpose and meaning in life, turning Luka and Mirjam into agents of God. The new narrative provides them with a new language and new roles vis-à-vis their respective audiences. Their testimonies are the narrative performance through which this reconstruction is achieved.

In Luka and Mirjam's search for meaning, and their struggle with addiction, they are constantly interacting with other individuals and groups. The

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<sup>1</sup> Epiphany in the sense of Denzin as "a moment of problematic experience that illuminates personal characteristics and often signifies a turning point in a person's life". (Denzin, 1989, p.141).

rehabilitation community in which they converted helps them to find meaning in times of crisis. The cases of Luka and Mirjam illustrate how their identities are influenced by the social context, coping and religion. For example, Luka's conversion narrative is constructed in the context of his interaction with the rehabilitation program which he has joined. His self-understanding is formed in his interaction with the new religious group. Therefore, Luka's story underlines the important role that social context plays, in the coping process, by supporting the new narrative. Luka achieved his goal telling others that there is hope to recover from addiction. He says:

*"My life vision is to help fight against addiction in Serbia by being involved in the rehabilitation centre work and by helping young people to abstain from drugs. My vision is also to share the Gospel with the people in my town and in Serbia, especially with my friends."*

Luka and Mirjam's identity are entirely reshaped and their life stories got a new meaning. By reinterpreting past and future in a direct interaction with a new audience, they were able to develop a new narrative for the present. This new narrative proved to be a plausible and viable alternative story to live in. Their testimonies are the performances through which they rehearsed their new identity and entered into a new relation with their audience.

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