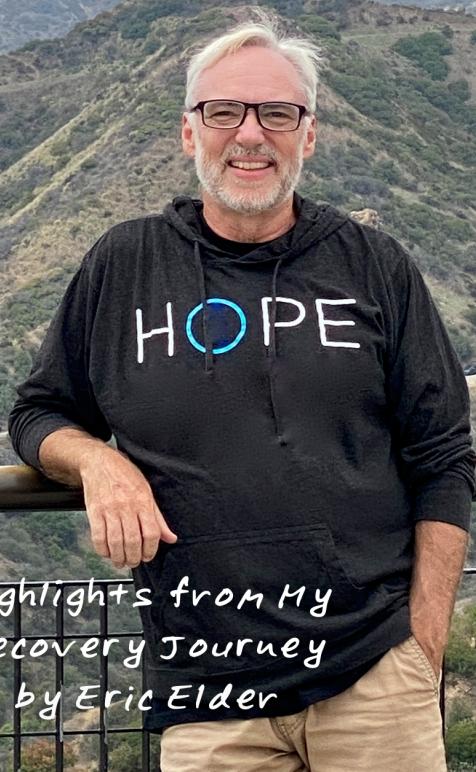


# Breaking the Power of Unhealthy Attractions



Highlights from My  
Recovery Journey  
by Eric Elder

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Highlights from My Recovery Journey*  
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# Introduction: Grateful

Hi, my name is Eric. I'm a grateful believer in Jesus Christ, and I'm in recovery from unhealthy attractions. By that I mean that I love people, and I love connecting with people. But once in a while, I find my attractions approaching the edge of what I consider to be healthy for me or for them. At that point, I know I need to pull back and do a heart check or sometimes take more drastic measures to turn my unhealthy attractions into healthy actions.

Praise God, He's broken the power that those unhealthy attractions have held over me, and I have not acted out on them in over 37 years, ever since I put my faith in Jesus Christ! But I still notice from time to time that my attractions can get closer to the edge than I want them to. My good friend Tim Wilkins, who encouraged me to come to recovery meetings two years ago, tells a story about a man who interviewed for a job as a chauffeur to drive a Rolls Royce.

The owner of the Rolls pointed to a brick wall nearby and asked each candidate how close they could drive to the wall without scratching the car. The first candidate said, "I

could drive within a foot of that wall and not damage your car.” The second said, “I could drive within six inches of that wall and not damage your car.” The third said, “I don’t know how close I could get to that wall. But if I were driving your Rolls, I’d stay as far away from it as I could!” Guess who got the job?

Even though I have not acted out on my unhealthy attractions in 37 years, I have had to learn how to stay as far away from that wall as I can, while also learning how to maintain solid friendships that meet my legitimate needs, but in legitimate ways. I know this is possible because God has promised us in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.”

I’d like to share with you five highlights, five defining moments, that have helped me since I started coming to recovery. The journey has been truly remarkable.





## **The Blue Chip**

The first defining moment is symbolized by this BLUE CHIP. In our recovery group, you come forward and take a blue chip when you want to work on something in your life, whether it's leaving something behind or starting something new. I've heard that some of us come to recovery to lose things and others to find them. For me, I have done both.

This blue chip represents losing my pride and walking forward to say, "I need help." I had just come off one of the greatest highs of my life, having just produced, directed, and performed in a Christmas musical I had writ-

ten. I had gathered over a hundred others to help me perform the show at the Streater High School Auditorium. This was in December of 2021.

I felt like I was hitting on all cylinders, using all my creative gifts to create and produce the show and ministering to people along the way as they ministered to me by helping me fulfill a lifelong dream. The show was a success, reaching about 1,500 people over the weekend with the life-changing message of Jesus Christ through a fun and touching Christmas musical.

Three days later, I got COVID. It wiped me out for the next year of my life. For the first few months, I could hardly move more than an hour a day. I went from one of the most productive times of my life to one of the least. And for my personality type and giftings, being productive is extremely important, not only for my desire to achieve results and accomplish tasks, but also for the feedback I receive and the strokes I get from doing so.

After the show, I was achieving nothing and accomplishing nothing. I was giving nothing and receiving nothing. My health was deteriorating in other areas as well. My diabetes

was already getting out of control going into the show. After getting COVID, it was hard to even take a breath from moment to moment. And my interest in living at all was waning. I knew I needed help, not just physically, but spiritually, emotionally, and relationally.

One friend suggested a recovery group. Another suggested a spiritual director. And another suggested medical help. I did all three.

I called a friend to see if he'd like to come with me to the recovery group. He was struggling with his own issues, and I felt better about taking someone with me than going alone. A few weeks later, my friend got another job that prevented him from coming. My cover was blown! But I was getting so much out of the meetings that I decided to continue coming.

I didn't take a blue chip right away. I was so overwhelmed, I didn't know what I wanted to work on. I started jotting down things that were weighing on me. There were seven! But the one that came to the top of my list was my struggle with unhealthy attractions. I was longing for intimacy and starting to feel out of control. I had lost my wife of 23 years to cancer in 2012. I had lost a couple of potential relationships since then. And I had given

up on dating or any future relationship as the pain of losing those I loved was too much for me to take. Four weeks after I started coming, I decided to walk forward and take a blue chip.

It was humbling to walk to the front. Just eight months earlier, I was leading a production that involved many in the room, many who saw me as a producer, director, and pastor. It was embarrassing. I wondered what they would think. I wondered what they thought I was coming forward for. I feared for what they might fill-in-the-blanks with in their own heads. But when I picked up that blue chip, I took it home and wrote the date on it with a Sharpie. I knew this was a significant date. I knew that admitting I had a problem and getting help was going to be half the battle. And it was. From that day on, when I took this blue chip, I started my upward journey toward healing and recovery.



## **The 36-Year Coin**

That leads me to my second defining moment, represented by this coin. This is a 36-YEAR COIN to recognize what God had already done in my life in setting me free from acting out on my unhealthy attractions. I heard one night that the chips were not only for one month or two months or one year or 10 years, but went up to 40 years. I asked our leader if she thought it would be healthy for me to take a 36-year coin sometime, as I had never celebrated that accomplishment in that way.

She said yes, that it was not prideful, but an honest recognition of a milestone in my life worth celebrating. She didn't have a 36-year coin that night but said she would get one.

I went to Kentucky that weekend to experience a revival that was breaking out at Asbury University. I had been at that same campus 30 years earlier at a conference dealing with unhealthy attractions. At that conference, during worship, a man sitting next to me reached over, put his hand on my shoulder, and said he had a word from God for me. He asked if it was okay if he shared it. I said yes.

The question on my heart at that conference was if someday I might trip up and fall back into acting out on my unhealthy attractions. I wanted to learn all I could to prevent that from happening. When the man sitting next to me shared his word from God for me, he said, "You will never go back to what you once were. You will never, never, never, never, never go back." It was the answer to the exact question on my heart.

He continued, "Satan doesn't need to get you to sin to get you off track from God's call on your life. Men will give you many opportunities. Don't take them. Take only the ones God gives you." In that moment, I knew what

he said was true. I knew I would never go back to what I once was. Not in a prideful way, but in a confident way. His words shifted my focus from the fear of falling, to following my calling; making sure I didn't just do good projects, but God's projects. Those words freed me to live the life I am living now.

Now I was back at Asbury, praying about that 36-year coin I might receive. I walked into that same auditorium, and during worship, a man sitting next to me put his hand on my shoulder and said, I have a word from God for you. Is it okay if I share it? I said yes.

I was stunned. I had just told my son who had come with me the same story from 30 years earlier that I just told you. We both knew this was significant.

The man said, "There are songs on your heart God wants to bring out to share with the world." He had no idea I had just produced this musical featuring 25 songs I had written and wanted to expand globally. I had actually been in talks already with a couple from Asbury who lead their theater department about helping me finesse my musical for a larger, worldwide audience.

When the man finished speaking, God spoke something else to my heart. He said, "I

want to finish the work I began in you 30 years ago.” I knew he was talking about the remnant of my unhealthy attractions, as they were beginning to feel out of control. I knew there was still work to be done. I said, “Yes, Lord. Finish the work. Finish the work. Finish the work.” When I looked up, the man was gone.

The next Monday night, I walked forward and received my 36-year coin that our leader had ordered for me. It was a helpful contrast to the blue chip I had taken a few weeks earlier. Remembering what God had already done in my life gave me the boost I needed to take the next steps He was calling me to take: to finish the work He had begun in me. As David says in Psalm 77: 2, 10-11: “When I was in distress, I sought the Lord... Then I thought, ‘To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out His right hand. I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago.’”





## The Nickel

The third defining moment is represented by this NICKEL. I found it on the ground next to my car the night I had just finished doing my “Step Four” Inventory with my sponsor. It was a difficult but healing session as I listed specifics about people and situations where I had been hurt and people and situations where I had hurt others.

At one point in the conversation, I brought up that I was still struggling with some unhealthy attractions. I told my sponsor that even though I had not acted out on them, I had entertained them in my mind. I have nev-

er struggled with porn and for now 37 years have never struggled again with acting out. But in my head, in my fantasy life, I sometimes entertained my attractions and how they might play out.

During this downtime after getting COVID, when everything around me was so bleak, my energy was so low, and my resistance was even lower, I found myself entertaining those fantasies more and more. I was attracted to people who were not mine... and never could be mine. They were either married or the wrong age or the wrong gender. Some were movie stars and some were from long ago, including my late wife. I felt some of this was okay, to have this fantasy life from time to time. It wasn't really hurting anyone, was it? Especially when recalling intimate memories with my wife. What could be wrong with that?

But as I talked with my sponsor and brought up each of these situations, I knew they were unhealthy. I told him I no longer wanted to live in a fantasy world. I wanted to be where my feet were, to live in reality. I wanted to be present in this life that God has given me. And even though I wasn't doing anything wrong outwardly, I knew that I was

treading on shaky ground. As James says in James 1:13-15: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

James knew that the battleground was in our thought life, not just our outward expression of it. And I knew from Jesus that lust in our hearts for those who are not ours is just as grievous as acting on those lusts.

My sponsor asked if I was ready to pray and lay those fantasies down. It seemed simple enough when he said it. But the implications were huge. My fantasy life was the only place I found that level of intimacy anywhere in my world. Without that, I would have no intimacy at all, certainly not on that level.

I said I could pray with my head, because I knew it was the right thing to do. But I also said, “I don’t know if I can give it up in my heart. The implications are too big.” I said I wanted to do it but didn’t know how. And I didn’t see anything on the other side of giving it up.

I had given up on the idea of marriage and dating five years earlier. A relationship was not on my radar, nor was it my desire. The pain of losing someone I loved was just too great for me to take that risk again.

So giving up my fantasy life meant giving up on any future intimacy at all. Still, I prayed with my sponsor, at least with my head.

I went out to get some dinner before returning to the church that night for Wednesday worship. At dinner, I called a friend who had walked with me through some of these struggles before. I told him my dilemma, and he said he would pray for me.

When I walked back to my car to head back to the church for worship, I saw this nickel on the ground. I felt God said to pick it up and read what it said. I thought, "I know what it says: 'In God We Trust.' Blah, blah, blah, I know I need to trust in You. I want to, but it's just so hard."

Again, I felt He said to pick it up and read what it said. So I reached down and picked it up. It was a newer Jefferson nickel, and it had one word on it in large, cursive letters. The word was "Liberty." God said, "Eric, it's not what you're giving up that's important. It's what you're going to get when you do give it

up. You'll get liberty. You'll get freedom. And you'll be able to walk forward in the fullness of the life I've called you to live."

That word shifted my focus from what I would lose to what I would gain, even though I didn't know what was on the other side of that prayer of surrender.

I went to worship that night and paced back and forth during the first few songs, holding this coin in my hands. I knew if I was going to lay down these fantasies, I would have to lay down each of the specific people I had been entertaining in my mind that were unhealthy. Five names came to mind. I looked at the nickel in my hand, representing five cents. I knew what I had to do.

I walked forward during the last song, tapped the shoulder of my sponsor and another friend who had recently been set free from some related struggles, and I asked if they would pray for me. I said, "I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to do it." I lay down on the floor, face down, with my arms and the nickel out in front of me. I prayed to God to help me do what I couldn't do on my own. The guys I tapped and many others started praying for me while the worship continued around me.

When I finally stood up, I felt free. I knew I would still have a ways to go to walk it out, but I knew I was headed in the right direction. I had prayed not only with my head, but also with my heart. And for that, I was thankful.

And that leads to the remaining defining moments, represented by these two remaining coins.



## The Euro Coin

One is a gold and silver EURO COIN I got when I was in Italy last spring. I was telling the guys in my recovery small group about my victory of laying down my fantasy life when I asked them when we would get our final chip! I'm a perfectionist and like to set goals and complete them. It frustrated me to think that I would have to keep taking chips for the rest of my life! But I knew this side of heaven, I'd always have things to work on.

That's when I got this coin in Italy as change for something I bought. I noticed an

image of da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" engraved on it. Some say this image epitomizes the perfect man. When I saw it, I thought of Jesus, the only true Perfect Man that ever lived. I realized that when God looks at me, He sees Jesus, not me, because I put my faith in Him 37 years ago. Jesus had already forgiven me of my sins and washed me whiter than snow. I thought, "There IS a final chip! And I've already received it, all those years ago, when I put my faith in Jesus!" This doesn't mean there's not work still to do. But it does mean that He'll help me finish the work! As Paul says in Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."





## **The 1-Year Coin**

The fifth defining moment is represented by this 1-YEAR COIN. I had initially planned to go to the recovery group for just a few weeks to check it out with my friend. But after I started seeing the progress in my own life, I decided to keep going. Whenever I felt I could stop going, God would bring up another issue in my life that needed work. So I decided to keep going for at least 1 year. One year later, I was amazed I was still going every week, plus I had started and finished a Step Study on another day every week for several months with a smaller group of guys where some of the

best breakthroughs and friendships happened. I realized recovery doesn't happen in a moment or a day, but is a continual process of bringing our lives before Jesus. I especially loved the verse where Jesus says, in Matthew 6:34: "So don't be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time." It's hard to live in my past and hard to live in my future. But I can definitely live where my feet are, taking one day at a time.

I can't help but shake my head in wonder as I think about all that God has done for me. It's like Paul said in Ephesians 3:20-22, "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

I couldn't have believed ten years ago where I am today. I couldn't have believed it five years ago. I can still hardly believe it today.

Yet here I am. Thank You, Lord, and thank you to my friends at my recovery group, for walking me through such a huge and meaningful season of my life. Their prayer and

care, meals and hugs, and friendship and love just make me want to keep coming back. I'm forever grateful.

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