

# My Name Is Lou

by Bill Mason

He sits alone in his car with the barrel of a loaded gun in his mouth, financially ruined and emotionally beaten by his last bet — a 25-cent gamble on a Nevada slot machine. At 40, he is a husband, the father of two and a very successful sales manager, but none of that matters. He wants to pull the trigger, but can't. Why? "It was fear that I would screw it up, become a physical vegetable ... laying in bed with all that craziness going on in my head. And that would be pure hell," he explains.

Meet him today and the man who wanted to kill himself four years ago will look you squarely in the eye and, without hesitation, introduce himself, saying: "My name is Lou and I'm a recovering compulsive gambler." A member of Gamblers Anonymous, Lou now describes his life with words such as *new*, *rich*, *exciting* and *meaningful*. "I live the kind of life I only dreamed about when I was gambling," he observes. "I love life so much today I can't even imagine that that was the same person."

The life Lou loves so much is very different from the one he was living. His compulsion left no room for faith, destroyed his family and robbed them of their financial resources, including two homes and a condominium. "I live a lot more humbly now," he explains. "I used to have a lot of stuff, but wasn't happy ... I don't need 'things' to feel good about myself anymore. I feel good about myself from the inside out." The marriage could not be saved, but Lou enjoys a good relationship with his children and grandchildren. With a sparkle in his eye and a raised eyebrow, a soft smile and subdued tone, he reports, "I'm part of their life, and they're part of mine." Lou also found his faith in God.

Lou lives with his girlfriend in an older, gray, single-story tract house in a middle-class neighborhood in Fullerton, California. The first thing you notice when entering his modestly furnished home is about 40 boxes stacked neatly next to the kitchen table. The boxes contain automotive magazines, which he collects, sorts, and then sells at swap meets. "I enjoy doing the magazines because I can be outdoors, talk to people about cars and work on my tan," he says. The money is incidental; he is successfully self-employed as a broker for major photo labs in Orange County and a marketer of trade show exhibit booths.

The reference to a tan is accompanied by a broad smile; Lou was born with his brownish bronze complexion and intense brown eyes. His graying black hair is combed back, well kept, of medium length and holds a natural wave. Lou leads an active life that helps him stay trim.

Lou's fight for his own life began the moment he placed the barrel of the loaded gun in his mouth. Emotionally devastated but unable to end his pain, there he sat in the parking lot of Whiskey Pete's, a third-rate gambling hall in a barren desert just east of the California-Nevada

border. During that January weekend in 1987, Lou had a single win of \$24,000 playing keno and subsequently ran his winnings up to almost \$40,000. His “big lick,” a gambling term for a run of good luck, soon soured; he lost all but \$50. He left Las Vegas, but on the way home couldn’t pass up Whiskey Pete’s. He lost another \$40 playing blackjack. “I walked out with \$10 because I was determined that I was going to go home with some money ... I got in my car and drove to the end of the parking lot, and I had to turn around.” Lou continues, “I cashed in that \$10 and played quarter slot machines. The bet that broke me was that last 25 cents ... I walked out to the car and wanted to kill myself.”

His fight reached its decisive moment the next morning. “Waking up with the realization that I wanted to die but was too chicken and asking, ‘Where do I go from here?’ — that was the bottom,” he recalls.

Lou answered his own question by seeking help from those who understood, and that’s when his life started to change. Looking back, it is difficult to imagine this is the same man.

Even as a boy, Lou felt different. He thought he was adopted and that what was going on inside of him wasn’t going on inside of other people. Lou felt left out; when they were picking baseball teams he was often the one last picked. “I was always trying to fit in,” says Lou. “Even when I was accepted, I didn’t feel that I fit in.”

Feeling isolated, Lou found ways to get the attention he needed. He found himself in trouble with the teachers at school, in part because he adopted the role of class clown. “People laughed when I cut up, and I felt a little better,” he explains.

Beginning at 7 or 8, Lou’s future was foreshadowed when he played marbles. When he won, he would give back some of the marbles so he could keep playing. “It was more important for me to play than to win,” recalls Lou. Early on he started taking “dare bets.” For instance, he sometimes jumped off a building or over a hedge for money. The broken arms and ribs that were the occasional result of his destructive, negative behavior did not deter him. “It was the feeling of competitiveness and having money on it that I was addicted to.” Lou then adds, “Right out of the gate I liked that feeling, and I wanted to keep it going ... I was gambling even as a young boy.” At times it worked — Lou felt accepted, but it would not last.

Lou grew up with a mother who was a compulsive gambler. Behind the gambling “there was a very angry, bitter lady,” and her addiction supported a jaundiced view of the world. Lou recalls, “I never knew who was on my mom’s s--- list, and it changed every day.”

Although Lou admits that being raised in this environment had an affect on him, he does not accept any causal relationship between his mother’s addiction and his own. “I was predestined to be a compulsive gambler,” he explains. “That’s just how I came out of the factory.”

As an 18 year old, Lou had all the dreams and aspirations of that age; he also began gambling in a serious way. Equally important, he had not learned how to develop and maintain a

meaningful, long-term romance — a lesson he would not learn until after his divorce. Lou simply “stopped growing.” To drive the point home, Lou recites that at 42 he was two years into his recovery program and in the middle of ending his 24-year-old marriage. He continues, “I’d sit alone in restaurants watching couples talking ... I honestly did not know what they had to talk about.” When Lou decided to wake up and control his gambling habit at 40, he “felt like Rip van Winkle” — like he had “been asleep for 22 years and had to learn all over again.”

Gambling wasn’t Lou’s only addictive behavior. In high school, he began drinking. “Getting high was fun,” he recalls. “I enjoyed it. I felt accepted. I could be all the things I wasn’t when I drank.” About three months before his entry into Gamblers Anonymous, Lou entered Alcoholics Anonymous. He’s been sober ever since.

With his compulsive behavior spinning out of control, an emotionally stunted Lou entered adulthood.

The first few trips to Las Vegas were made to “see a few shows and have some fun.” The fun included gambling. It started out innocently enough; Lou never intended to become a compulsive gambler, but he was no match for the well-orchestrated enticements. Before long, the shows — and eventually everything else — became irrelevant: Lou grew to crave “the action.”

Lou carried his adolescent feelings of inadequacy and isolation into adulthood. He was his own enemy, and his self-assessment confirmed his imagined inferiority. “I would compare myself to what I perceived others to be,” he remembers. “When I do that, I always come up short.” Like his mother, those perceptions tainted his world, thereby separating him from the very thing he most wanted — to be accepted. “I felt like this spaceship beamed me down into these people, and that there was some way I could get even with them,” he says.

Lou did some sports betting, but his passion was for blackjack and keno, and he had “systems” for both. He preferred the casinos of Las Vegas, particularly Caesar’s Palace and the Barbary Coast, whose opulence and scintillating action played to Lou’s ego. This was Lou’s world, the place where he would seek his self-esteem and the acceptance he yearned for.

Gambling also became Lou’s vehicle for getting even with “the other people.” He thought he would feel better about himself if he had “enough money, a big enough car, the right house, and the right woman.” Gambling, Lou thought, would provide those things; in addition, they would allow him to compare favorably with others. With those elements in place, he would be accepted, and he could then claim his self-esteem. All of this would put Lou “in control” of his own life, which was a vital issue for him. For Lou, gambling had one other advantage — it was quick: “I didn’t want to work for the things I wanted and I didn’t want to go to school. I wanted them overnight.”

Initially, it worked very well. Lou “loved the feeling” of both winning and playing; success was possible in Las Vegas. Lou felt better, but also found that no matter how he felt inside, he was accepted at the tables in whatever role he wanted to play. He received free drinks,

meals, lodging and limousines. His ego having been properly massaged, he gambled even more. Something else occurred that didn't happen anywhere else for Lou: "The things that were bothering me, ... all the problems I had, they started going away when I gambled," he explains.

However sweet it was, he would soon be living in a nightmare. When the money dried up, the people who accepted him disappeared. And what remained was an undeniable truth: The feeling Lou loved was the birth of a monster called an "adrenalin rush," a blind euphoria as powerful and addicting as any drug-related high. It would eventually consume him, driving him to sacrifice the material facade that was to have given him a sense of equality. When his family's resources couldn't provide the needed cash, Lou would write bad checks, embezzle funds from his employer, and deal in drugs. His problems were not going away — he just couldn't see them.

"Something happened," recalls Lou. "I don't know exactly when, but those feelings that I got when I was gambling — I wanted more of them. And the funny thing is, when I started winning some money, it was never enough." Two forces were at work: First, Lou was hooked on the feelings that came with the action; this is the force of addiction. Second, the action couldn't provide enough money to buy the "things" he needed to feel good about himself, but that's what he wanted it to do; this is the force of self-doubt.

Lou describes the self-doubt: "I won that money ... but I still felt there was something wrong with me. I wondered, 'What could it be? I know: I need more money ... I just don't have enough stuff.' So I gambled more." At one point, Lou dreamed of winning enough money to drive home in a new Corvette; when he had enough money for the Corvette, he wanted a Ferrari. The need for ever-increasing amounts of money and things gave Lou a practical reason to continue gambling.

As the disease progressed, he entered the critical phase. The money and the things it would buy ceased to be important. Lou describes the force of addiction: "I was into gambling for the feeling I was getting, that adrenalin rush, that feeling of being powerful. That's what I was chasing ... I did whatever I could do to get the money to gamble — and it didn't matter whether I won or lost, I wasn't going home until it was gone."

The action was Lou's drug; it was also very expensive. During the last 20 years, Lou's annual earnings have been between \$50,000 and \$120,000, so he made good money working while he was gambling. Nevertheless, neither his family's resources nor his own earnings could feed his habit, and winning only created more demand. Win or lose, he had to feed the habit, and it mattered very little how he acquired the cash.

Lou had an employer who trusted him; he was a good employee who did his job well — but Lou needed cash. The company had credit cards, and Lou used them to get cash advances so he could gamble in the Las Vegas casinos. Initially, he tried to control the amount of money he put on the credit cards, and he thought he would win enough to pay it back. A change took place, however, in both his behavior and attitude. Lou recalls, "I was maxing out \$1,500 credit limits on

my company credit cards with every single trip ... And the thought in my head was, ‘Those people owe it to me. They don’t treat me real well.’”

Covering his embezzling was difficult, but it worked. Expense reports were falsified. When Lou did need to pay back “borrowed” funds to his employer, he wrote a bad check and then embezzled more funds to cover the bad check.

When Lou ran out of his own money, neither his friends nor relatives would loan him any more. Then he ran out of money he could embezzle from his employer. Lou now turned to dealing drugs, including marijuana and cocaine, as a source of funds. His customers were primarily those involved in casino and nightclub life. He characterizes his drug-related activities as “not major,” but felt a need to carry a gun for protection. Speaking of the gun, Lou notes, “It also fit into the image I wanted for myself ... living on the dangerous edge.” The gun Lou carried for protection is the same gun he turned on himself in the parking lot of Whiskey Pete’s.

Each new, desperate act, even when it was illegal, brought a new and more compelling high. “I felt that adrenalin rush the most when everything was gone and I had to work to get it back. I had to scam. I had to scheme,” he explains. “When I was out of money, I wasn’t out of action. The rush was in coming up with a lie for the wife, a lie for the boss, embezzling money to cover bad checks and then writing checks to cover the money I embezzled.”

Lou did not begin with a desire to end up where he was. It started innocently enough, but he was now consumed by the monster to which he had given birth. People and relationships were worse than irrelevant — they were in the way. Lou could be in a casino surrounded by hundreds of people he knew and gambled with, and still he was alone. The efforts of relatives and friends who loved and tried to warn him only wasted his time.

Lou’s family fared no better. His intentions were good in the beginning, and they came with promises. He wanted his son and daughter to see Disney World, and he wanted his wife and children to have expensive things. The good intentions faded and the family became a burden he shed by “showing up every once in a while to keep the family satisfied.” The family couldn’t talk about what was happening because, Lou says, “It would set me off and I would do more terrible things.” He never directed any physical violence toward family members, but he once threw his son’s bicycle through the living room picture window, following a series of gambling losses, after finding it in the driveway.

As the addiction progressed, Lou’s wife experienced a growing fear. She finally coped with the fear by denying there was a problem. “The extreme denial lead to the adoption of enabling behaviors which,” according to Lou, “further aided my compulsive behavior.” She gave Lou money, and when he returned home after being gone for two days, it would be almost as though nothing had happened. Her need to deny kept her from wanting to know the truth. When Lou stopped gambling, her behaviors did not change.

After Lou and his wife had been in their respective recovery programs for two years, the marriage ended. When it ended, Lou's ex-wife said to him, "I sometimes wish for the old days, when you were gambling, because at least we were together." As he recalls that incident, he shakes his head and sighs, "That's pretty sick. We were never together."

Lou's analysis of his marriage failure seems inconsistent. He acknowledges that his wife "had to develop dysfunctional behaviors to mesh" with his, and that he failed to provide his share of nurturing. But he also says, "There's no guarantee that relationships work in life. My relationship is what it is with my wife because it is what it is, *not because I gambled*." Lou entered his marriage with a gambling problem, and things may have been different had his wife not needed to become dysfunctional; nor was gambling the only addiction.

There were other unhealthy behaviors occurring simultaneously with the gambling. One was the previously cited abuse of alcohol that led him to Alcoholics Anonymous just three months before entering Gamblers Anonymous. The other behavior involved women.

Lou had affairs during his married life, although they were "always dysfunctional relationships." When he was gambling, they were convenient. As his gambling consumed more of him, prostitutes were added. "As a gambler, prostitutes were perfect," Lou recalls. "There was no emotional involvement and they took no time from gambling." The problem was, he began to think he "could buy love," and when he didn't have the price his self-esteem took another tremendous blow. He stopped seeing prostitutes when the gambling ended, but the affairs continued until he met his girlfriend.

In his childhood, Lou had tasted "the action" while playing marbles; it was a feeling he continued to enjoy. The self-doubt he carried into adulthood, the alcohol abuse that began in high school, and his inability to be intimate all provided the ideal environment for the seductive call of the action. Lou heeded the call, and the action turned on him. He was ultimately required to sacrifice all he had — and more. Lou was trying to satisfy an appetite that was insatiable. The pace was frenetic, and the man who needed to be in control was completely out of control; it could not last. On Jan. 28, 1987, Lou's world came to an abrupt end in the parking lot of Whiskey Pete's. Financially ruined and unable to get another fix, emotionally devastated with no one to turn to, and wanting to kill himself but unable to do it, Lou was truly alone.

Lou wanted to stop gambling, and in a desperate attempt to reach out for help, he turned to Gamblers Anonymous. He was introduced to a 12-step recovery program and paired with a sponsor. He has not placed another bet.

Gamblers Anonymous was not an unknown to Lou. His mother entered the program in 1980. She never went back to gambling. The "angry, bitter lady" died in 1986 "at peace with herself, her family and the rest of the world," says Lou. Reflecting on the change, he observes, "I saw a miracle in her life, but I was so far into my disease that I couldn't recognize the miracle was possible for me."

Lou's addiction had been growing for a long time. He needed help to get through the withdrawal. The sponsor was the first contact in what became a network of people that would always be there when Lou felt like he couldn't make it through another day. His sponsor also helped him work through the recovery program.

The 12-step recovery program is a series of steps a compulsive gambler must apply to stop the disintegration and begin recovery. The steps are characterized by Gamblers Anonymous in its own literature. "Since these steps are basically spiritual, their practice can become a highly rewarding experience ... They reflect the practical experience and application of spiritual insights ... Their greatest importance lies in the fact that they work," the pamphlet states.

To apply the 12 steps, Lou accepted six basic principles. First, Lou was powerless over gambling — that his life was completely unmanageable. Second, there is a higher power, God, and Lou had to place control of Lou's life into God's hands. Third, he had to be honest with himself and others. Fourth, he must make restitution and/or amends wherever possible. Fifth, he had to be vigilant. Sixth, Lou had to give himself to a life of service.

The remorse Lou felt was "crushing" when he stopped gambling. The application of the principles he had accepted provided relief.

When Lou admitted his powerlessness, acknowledged that God was in control and depended on God to help him with his shortcomings, Lou was no longer alone. Although raised as a Catholic, he found his faith in Gamblers Anonymous. With a new sense of energy and purpose, he stood at the threshold of a meaningful life.

Describing his relationship with God today, Lou says, "My God is forgiving and loving. He speaks to me through others. I go to higher power meetings in Gamblers Anonymous where we discuss how God works in our lives. I pray twice a day. I humble myself before God and ask what his will is for me today, and then I make sure I'm open to the answer. With his help and the help of those around me, my problems are not insurmountable. I see miracles in my life."

He now took a financial and moral inventory of himself. The financial examination was a matter of record and recall. The moral inventory was the key; it was a deep probe into his soul, requiring the courage to face some ugly facts about his own weaknesses and the harm he had done to himself and others. In both cases, the result was clear: An incredible amount of damage had been done, and there was a great deal of restitution that needed to take place. Knowing he could not do it alone, and drawing on his newly found faith and friends, Lou began to rebuild.

Lou next made a list of all the people he had harmed. He now had to face those people, admit the wrong and do whatever was necessary to restore what he could.

It must have come as quite a shock when Lou went to his employer and admitted what he had done. For two years Lou had done an excellent job as sales manager, and he had never been caught or suspected of embezzling funds from his employer. His employer was a sensitive man who wanted to believe in Lou and his desire to change. Lou's employer did not fire him, nor did

he press charges. He did take away Lou's company credit cards. When Lou needed to be reimbursed for business expenses, he had to provide detailed receipts. Lou paid back the money he embezzled within the first year and continued to work for the same company for another three years. Lou never completely regained his employer's trust, nor did he expect to. "I did not disclose what I had done because I expected to be welcomed back with open arms," Lou says, "I did it because I have to be honest and make restitution. If I don't, I'm told by experts that I'll go back to gambling."

Lou considers himself trustworthy today. He has paid back all gambling debts. When he borrows money for legitimate purposes he always pays it back. Lou knows it's his actions that count.

The people to whom Lou dealt drugs were likely pursuing their own self-destruction, but he has not forgotten them. With a slightly subdued tone that reveals some discomfort, Lou admits, "There are some to whom I will never be able to make restitution, though they're on my list. If I ever meet them and can make restitution, I certainly will. The important thing for my recovery is that I'm willing to make restitution."

The "lifetime of not being there and depriving them of a husband and father" caused a great deal of anger and distrust in Lou's family. These were the people with whom it was the most difficult to reconcile, but he had to try. Lou not only had to be honest, but they needed to know that he was truly sorry, that what they saw was not imagined, and that they were not to blame. He has had some success.

Lou and his children love each other deeply. Lou is welcome in his children's homes. They know he has faults, but they also know, by his actions, that he is trying very hard to be a good father. "I think they respect me," says Lou. "I can't make up for everything, but I'm available when they need me."

On Sunday mornings Lou attends a sunrise service on the beach with other members of Alcoholics Anonymous. After the service, Lou rides his motorcycle "a couple of hours up the coast" to spend time with his son and grandchildren. The meeting provides a spiritual lift, the ride provides a sense of freedom, and the visit provides a much needed connection for all concerned. Lou also baby-sits for his son.

Lou takes his daughter out several times a month, typically to see a show and have dinner. This gives them an opportunity to have some fun and talk to each other. She was the most difficult person for him to reconcile with because, according to Lou, they're so much alike. For a very long time, she carried a great deal of resentment over what happened. Lou indicates that she "has a very compulsive personality" and a great fear of gambling and alcohol. Speaking about the fear, Lou says, "I don't know if her fear will keep her away; my mother's problem frightened me, but it didn't stop me. I can only hope." But Lou does more than hope — he stays close.



Lou keeps in touch with his ex-wife. He has tried to make amends and continues to offer her his friendship. Lou knows that not everyone will forgive or trust him, and he can accept that. “It doesn’t feel good, but that’s part of the price for recovery,” he says.

Because Lou has applied the 12 steps, he is now able to build good relationships. Lou prayed for a woman in his life, but was content to live alone if that’s what God wanted. “I could never hope to find a woman on my own who would put up with my schedule,” Lou says, “or who would understand compulsive gamblers and alcoholics. Then I met Sandy. She is a member of Gamblers Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous. She’s the second most important thing in my life.” They have a good life together and support each other in their recovery programs. They bowl, go to movies, take short trips and engage in many other activities. They have a lot of interaction with other friends and couples; however, two nights each week are reserved for Sandy and Lou to be together, exclusively. Nothing is allowed to interfere with those two nights — not even recovery program meetings.

The most important thing in Lou’s life is recovery because, he says, “If I don’t have that I don’t have anything else. The other things I’ve been blessed with are only important if I’m sober and abstinent. One slip, and I could lose it all.”

Lou knows he must remain vigilant, taking it day by day. He also knows he needs the strength and support that come from associating with other recovering compulsive gamblers, including regular attendance at meetings. He attends three or four meetings every week. These two principles work together and help him stay in recovery. A normally buoyant Lou quietly recounts an experience that made that point clear to him: “I had a friend who was in Gamblers Anonymous when I came into the program, and he was a police officer. He was real concerned when I told my story in therapy about the gun. He came up to me and asked me, ‘Do you still have the gun in the car?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I do.’ He said, ‘Well, take it out of the car. Don’t carry it.’ Something about the way he said it — I did it, and I didn’t carry it anymore. Two years later, that same man, my friend, pulled up behind his duty station and blew his brains out.”

Even today Lou still occasionally compares himself to others; but, most of the time, he doesn’t come up short. He also has the ability to be compulsive about other things; he’s struggled with food. “I can become obsessed over anything,” Lou says. “The ‘ism’ doesn’t matter.”

Rendering service is a critical part of Lou’s recovery, and that means working with other recovering compulsive gamblers and alcoholics. By noon on any Thursday, he has been up for about seven hours. At 5:30 a.m. Lou opens a meeting of the Thursday Morning Steppers, a weekly higher power meeting organized by Lou for recovering compulsive gamblers. Most people won’t arrive until 6 a.m., by which time Lou will have the hot coffee and bagels waiting. “I can’t stay sober and abstinent without working with alcoholics and compulsive gamblers,” Lou says. “When all else fails and I don’t think I can make it, I work with a newcomer. By doing

that, I stay on course.” Lou shares his experience, strength and hope, thereby helping others to be strong and successful.

The Thursday Morning Steppers meeting ends at 7:15 a.m., and by 7:30 a.m. he is usually helping someone else; one morning it was a friend who had car trouble. Although his primary focus is on service to those who share his diseases, he looks for opportunities to serve wherever they can be found. His experience has taught him that when he is serving others, the outward focus enables him to see his problems more clearly. An invigorated Lou is then able to handle the real ones, while the others simply disappear.

By nurturing faith in God and living by precepts consistent with that faith, Lou has found his self-esteem. His self-esteem has allowed him to enjoy life and the relationships that make it a rich and rewarding experience. He knows his weaknesses and relies on God to help him overcome them; he has strengths and the wisdom to know God will enlarge them as he serves others. Lou has earned the trust of his associates and those closest to him, including Sandy, his son, and the grandchildren. The daughter’s trust in her father is not yet completely restored; Lou will patiently wait.

During an interview, Lou was asked to assume that he was going to die in 10 minutes, but that he would be given one last opportunity to see and speak to any individual he chose. He was asked who that person would be and what he would say. After a long, silent interval, he gently replied, “It would be any newcomer to Gamblers Anonymous.” With a tear glistening in the corner of his eye, he continued, “My message would be, ‘Gamblers Anonymous works, and it can work for you. I know, because it worked for me.’”

Lou selected a newcomer — not a close friend, not one of his children and not Sandy, nor did he opt for another bet. When you remember that 95 percent of all newcomers have another gambling experience, that’s a remarkable statement. It says something about his commitment to service and his confidence in the relationships he’s established since he entered recovery. It suggests that, were he taken, those closest to him would *know* he loves them. With that knowledge in place, Lou is free to extend help to one in need — the kind of help that only he and others like him can provide.

Perhaps Lou doesn’t realize just how far he has come.