

Book Review
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Gripped by Gambling, by Marilyn Lancelot, published by Wheatmark, Tucson, Arizona, 2007, 220 pp., \$19.95, ISBN: 978-1-58736-770-0.

Marilyn Lancelot presents a personal account of her experience with gambling beginning when she was 53 years old, imprisonment at age 60 and recovery. This book covers her story in eleven chapters. It begins with a Foreword and Acknowledgements. It ends with pictures of her and her family. Marilyn gives insights into the addiction of gambling. While relating her own story, she shows how easy it is to become addicted to gambling and how devastating the problem can be to one's character, reputation, family, employer, and livelihood.

The Foreword contains comments from Arnie Wexler and Don Hulen. Arnie was a former director of the New Jersey Council on Compulsive Gambling. He and his wife have developed a consulting firm to help educate the public about this problem (www.aswexler.com). Don served as the Director of the Arizona Council on Compulsive Gambling (www.azccg.org). Arnie states, "I think this book will help people understand that although compulsive gambling is a devastating addiction, you can recover and live a productive and wonderful life" (p. vi).

Chapter one reveals the personal feelings Marilyn had whenever the police arrived at her home to arrest her. She was embarrassed and did not want to be handcuffed in front of her grandson, Tyler. She shares her thoughts and experiences as she was torn from her family because of her gambling addiction. One thought she expressed: "I am a mother, and look what I've done!" In detail, she describes the procedures she endured during the arrest including being frisked and strip searched. She showered, was finger printed, photographed, and placed into a cell. The grim reality of her gambling addiction was impressed upon her mind, body and spirit. She describes her family's desperation to get her out of jail immediately and her fear while being there. She relates how she became addicted to gambling. She admitted a previous addiction to alcohol, but she had remained free from its grip for more than twenty years. **She was never told that it was possible to substitute one addiction for another.** She relates in detail how she embezzled a little more than \$300,000.00 (p. 40) from the fertilizer company she worked for. She began to weave an intricate web of lies to her employer and to her family. Altogether, she had seventy-one felonies against her. She could be given anywhere from 2 to 24 years in the Arizona State Women's Prison or, she could get probation. Her lawyer advised her to sell her home and pay back part of the money she had stolen. She did this and paid back \$125,000.00 (p. 38). She had four weeks to move, just two weeks before Christmas.

Chapter two describes the changes that the reality of her arrest and the charges against her would bring. She desired to begin treatment toward recovery. She started with a call to Gamblers Anonymous. She soon discovered that there were no meetings in Yuma. She decided to move to Phoenix and begin her recovery there. She was not received well at the first meeting she attended which was dominated by men. She did begin to learn about her addiction. The Gamblers Anonymous book followed a twelve step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. She began by answering twenty questions designed to identify the extent of her gambling problem. She answered seventeen of the twenty questions with a **yes**. Her answers revealed that she was a gambling addict. She was determined to get treatment and recover. This quality stands out as a fundamental reason for her success in overcoming this addiction. She describes her trial at length and the verdict: two years at the Arizona Department of Corrections, the balance of restitution to the victim: \$178,049.25 to be paid in monthly payments of \$100.00. She

figured it would take 148 years to pay her victim back and she was about to turn 61 (p. 38). She was sentenced on May 9 and spent Mother's Day that year in prison. Throughout this book, Marilyn reveals the truth about the costs of gambling. They go far beyond the money involved. She also realized that she would be in prison during her own mother's burial.

In chapter three, Marilyn relates how she learned to cope in prison. She recalled telling her children long before her own incarceration that the prison was "where they sent bad people." Upon seeing the prison she made a mental contrast between the bright lights of the casinos and the depressing surroundings of the prison. She vowed never to forget how the hundreds of trips to the casinos led her to this desolate place. She reveals the people she met in prison and relates how she got along with them. She was able to secure a job at the Facility Management Office and worked outside the prison during the day. She also filed for bankruptcy (pp. 60-61).

Chapter four develops her life-story before gambling. She took up writing a journal as therapy. The task forced her to examine why she gambled. She remembered being told, "We use our addictions to escape realities or painful issues from as far back as our childhood." She had been sexually abused as a little girl. Her father was strict and sometimes mean to animals. Both of her parents drank and fought often. She witnessed her father beat her mother. Her mother divorced her father and then she began drinking again. She lost custody of the three children and Marilyn found herself back with her father and his new wife. One of the saddest days of her life was when her family moved to Maine—away from her mother. She had an inferiority complex that lasted into her thirties. She married David and began a family. David was away most of the time and the marriage became strained. Both of them began drinking. This led to alcoholism. Eventually she divorced her husband after nineteen years of marriage. She had five children to raise by herself. She remarried, but after only three years together, her husband was killed in an automobile accident. She and her family moved to Yuma, Arizona and there she met Tony Garza. It was Tony who introduced her to Las Vegas (p. 80, 81). In Vegas, she began playing the nickel slots and after depositing six nickels, she won her first pot. She was excited. She married Tony but the marriage lasted only ten months. After the divorce, she began drinking again. But, she did not attend the casinos again at that time. Two weeks after the divorce, she connected with Tommy and he moved in with her. Then, in November, 1982, she once again went to Vegas and gambled. She won at the slots and she became hooked on gambling. Gambling became a regular habit and she soon didn't care if she won or lost—she just wanted to gamble (p. 87). After eighteen months of gambling, she was out of money, her credit cards were maxed out and she began receiving letters demanding payment. At that moment, she started to plan how to embezzle money from her employer. One Friday afternoon, she wrote herself the first check for \$287.54. She told herself she would pay the money back, but she never did. She told herself she would pay the money back when she won, but she never did. Her check writing continued for the next seven years and every year she embezzled more money. Her addiction worsened. Sometimes late at night she took chances running frantically from one casino to another behind the buildings in the alleys. She fixated on the number 7. She often told herself, "You can't win if you don't play." She scheduled her life around gambling. She became possessive of "her" slot machines. She relates her panic on one occasion when she lost one of the checks she had written to herself and later recovered it. She developed an elaborate embezzling scheme (p. 89-90). She became a notorious liar. She lied to everyone, including herself. She was gripped by gambling!

Chapter six describes her life in prison. "Each day in the prison yard was a learning experience" (p. 106). Marilyn sought early release from prison and obtained it. Her mandatory

release date was May 15, 1992 (p. 112). Her temporary release date was March of 1992. She did the paper work and waited. Holidays were lonely times in prison. On January 11, 1992, she celebrated her one year anniversary in Gamblers Anonymous. She talked of getting out of prison and someday coming back to start a GA meeting.

Chapter seven focuses on Marilyn's release from prison. When she saw her family, she whispered, "Thank you God." She went home with her family and began anew. One of the first steps she made was to find a job. She was turned down on her first job interview because she was a felon. Her gambling addiction was now interfering with her future employment. Soon after this, her son, Graham, died. She did not have the money for the funeral and could not afford a bouquet of flowers. However, others helped her and she was able to bury her son. She started classes at a community college. A year later, when she filed her taxes with the IRS, she found that she owed over 175 thousand dollars. The IRS put a levy on her checking account. She sought and obtained a release from the levy. Marilyn relates the threat of the loss of her job at the state after five and a half years when the supervisor discovered she had been a felon and had embezzled money. She relates, "My life was messed up again, and I knew my crime would haunt me till the day I died" (p. 132). Her supervisor retained her.

In chapter eight, Marilyn discusses female gamblers. One of the reasons she had for writing this book was to give women an insight about gambling addiction from a female perspective. There are few books available on gambling written by a woman for women. Two months after her release from prison, she started a GA meeting for women in Phoenix. The first women's only meeting was held, June 19, 1992 at her apartment. The women developed topics that relate especially to women (p. 136). The women had different goals, different definitions for success and gambled for different reasons. Often, women gamble to escape, while men gamble for power (p. 136). Marilyn relates what a typical women's meeting would be like (p. 138-146). Most women are escape gamblers. They play slot machines, bingo, or video poker and gamble for relief from a problem or pressures in their lives (p. 147).

Chapter nine is a recap of Marilyn's experience with gambling and her recovery from gambling addiction. "While I gambled, I thought gambling relaxed me. When angry, I thought it calmed me down, and when I was happy, I celebrated by gambling. Gambling became my coping mechanism. By attending meetings, I learned how to replace that *coping mechanism* with *coping skills*" (p. 150). After her first GA meeting, she never returned to the casinos. Her recovery grew out of her commitment to change her life for the better. She gives a list of words used in the GA program and definitions for them. Altogether, there are nineteen words or phrases that are defined. Words like: abstinence, acceptance, addict, addiction, changing fear to faith, choices, communication, denial, filling the void and others. She gives seven suggestions for "working the program" (pp. 160-161) that are very helpful.

In chapter ten, Marilyn provides articles by counselors and gamblers that appeared in past issues of *Women Helping Women* newsletter. The first eight letters included were written by recovering compulsive gamblers or their families. These are worth reading for helpful insights into the problem of gambling.

Chapter eleven concludes the book with an update on Marilyn's life today. In the year 2000, she purchased a home in Sun City. She has rebuilt her life and enjoys a variety of activities. Eventually she was able to start a GA program at the Perryville prison. In April, 1999, the *Women Helping Women* newsletter was started. She has established a presence on the web and invites other women to communicate with her about their gambling problems. She was able to meet the owner of the company that she had embezzled money from and apologize to him in

person. She has taken important steps to rebuild every aspect of her life. She takes up the question, "is gambling harmless entertainment?" She writes, "In gambling, one player wins at the expense of others. The bigger I win, the more the others have to lose" (p. 202). Of course, there are always many more losers than winners. Speaking of the casinos, she writes, "they offer alcohol, allow smoking, and encourage gambling. It's an addict's paradise" (p. 202). Marilyn's concluding thoughts reflect wisdom gained: "I can't go back and make a new start in my life, but I can make a new ending." There is always hope for a new life! For more information go to: grippedbygambing.com.