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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

For a fallen surgeon, a higher power

“What Went Wrong?” originally appeared March 21, 2004

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Less than a decade ago, David Arndt was a rising star. He had a Harvard Medical School degree, a thriving practice as an orthopedic surgeon, and a nice place in the South End with a Saab parked outside. Then, in the summer of 2002, while performing complicated spinal surgery, Arndt walked out on his patient -- who was lying on the operating table, anesthetized and sliced open -- so he could go cash his paycheck. The incident made headlines around the world. After that came a downfall that was breathtaking in its speed and sordidness. The brilliant surgeon lost his medical license, saw a serious drug problem barrel out of control, and before long found himself facing a raft of criminal charges.



Today, home for the 49-year-old Arndt is a federal prison in Fort Dix, New Jersey. Yet, he says, “I’m a better and happier person.”

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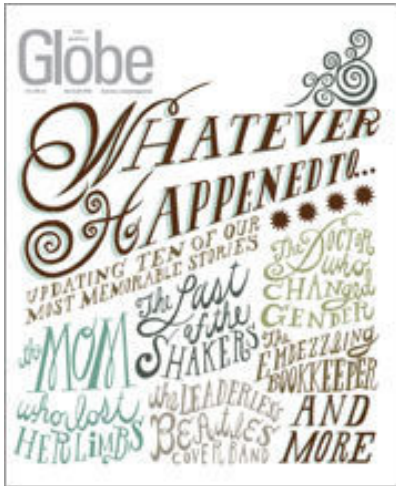
REMORSE David Arndt with close friend Dr. Betsy Watson, when she visited him in prison last year. "He wants to be a contributor to society," she says.

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do that.”

Even after he began funding his meth habit by dealing drugs, even after federal marshals arrested him outside his home, he says, “If you had asked me, ‘Do you

At the time I was researching my 2004 story on Arndt, he had already fallen pretty far. Yet in our interactions he sought to assert the kind of control he was used to in the OR, dressing me down as though I were his scrub nurse and giving me reading assignments as though I were his intern.

Today, Arndt comes across as a changed man. He begins our nearly 90-minute phone interview by apologizing for how he had treated me back in 2004. I tell him that’s not necessary, but he persists. Where arrogance was once his defining characteristic, he now seems fueled by an equally high-octane mixture of reflection and contrition.

He talks most easily about the raging addiction to methamphetamine, a drug he had used for some time but which eventually consumed his life. When a colleague had insisted he go for substance-abuse counseling, Arndt admits now, he smoked meth in the car before heading up to his appointment. When he walked out on patient Charles Algeri during surgery at Mount Auburn Hospital, his life was, in his word, “insane.” Yet he believed he was still in control. He says his drug addiction had put him into such financial straits that when he abandoned Algeri for the bank, “for some reason it made sense for me to

have a drug problem?’ I would have told you, ‘Absolutely not.’ ” It would take more than a year in jail, he says, and the intercession of one man, before he began to confront the reality of the mess he had made.

Fort Dix is the sixth facility where Arndt has done time for his 10-year sentence. He may yet be transferred once more before his release, which, because of good behavior, is now scheduled for 2012. He likes his quarters in the low-security Fort Dix, where he shares a large room with 11 other inmates in a former Army barracks. But he says his most lasting interaction behind bars came relatively early on, at the Norfolk County Correctional Center in Dedham, when he met prison chaplain Rabbi Sol Goodman. As his withdrawal from methamphetamine began to lift, Arndt, who had grown up a nonreligious Jew, found himself thirsty for knowledge about ancient Jewish traditions. “It occurred to me that I’d made a shambles of my life,” he says. “It might make sense to try following someone else’s rules.” [Continued...](#)



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