

When Too Much is Not Enough

Drugs and alcohol may sound like an odd topic to talk about at church on Sunday morning. We are talking about addiction today for two reasons. One is that it affects so many people. Addiction touches all of our lives in some way or another. If you will indulge me for a moment, I'd like everyone to close their eyes.

Now keeping your eyes closed, raise your hand if you have had a close friend struggle with addiction.

I'd like you to raise your hand if you or someone in your immediate family has struggled with addiction.

Raise your hand if you have a co-worker who has dealt with addiction.

Now raise your hand if anyone close to you, family or friends, or co-workers, children, spouses, any of the above who have dealt with addiction.

Keep your hands up, and I'd like everyone to open your eyes. I would estimate 4 out of five hands are up. That is honestly even more than I expected in this little exercise. Thank you for helping make my point.

Addiction affects all of our lives. In different forms, it is a part of every family. I hope we can remember that in this discussion and any discussion about addiction. It is not something that happens to awful people. Quite the contrary, it is an awful thing that can happen to anyone. "Addiction is an equal opportunity affliction affecting people without regard to their economic circumstance, their education, their race, their geography, their IQ, or any other factor (Sheff, 178)."

It can affect anyone, and by the show of your hands, you already know that. We also should be clear that addiction is not something that anyone chooses. Sure, a person chooses to use a drug or alcohol for the first time. But for many people, it is that one moment, that one choice, that sucks them into a disease. After that experience the reaction is automatic, natural. Some psychologists say that the genetic predisposition can

make drinking or using drugs so automatic, it's like an infant's inclination to suckle. Addiction is a disease and no one chooses disease.

For some reason that point is very, very difficult to get across. The stigma against this particular disease is unlike any other. If you're child had cancer, for example, the support for your family would flood in from all directions. But because of the stigma of addiction, people often keep it quiet; they struggle alone. Sometimes addicts or their families do eventually turn to other family members or friends for support. But even there they often run into judgment and condemnation.

Addiction is not something that anyone seeks out. It is an affliction that **happens to** some people. It **happens to** many people, and that's why we are dealing with it here today. It is a very real and often covered up problem that deserves a compassionate response.

The other reason that I chose to talk about addiction in worship today is that addiction is at its core, a spiritual thing. It takes on the big questions in life, who are we, what do we have power to change, who do we love and how do we love them. It takes on all of these big questions and makes a mess out of them, especially for families.

Families are torn apart by addiction, that's no secret. Part of that is the incredible fear for the safety of the ones we love. The fear and confusion are overwhelming. Another price that families pay is financial. They pay tens of thousands of dollars, exhausting all available resources and going into debt for therapies that may or may not work. And finally, families are torn apart as the addicted person they love, becomes a stranger, not the individual that they have come to know and depend on and love. In a perverse way, addiction has the power to literally transform an individual, even the most intimate of relations can turn into complete strangers.

A good deal of my inspiration from this sermon comes from a recent book, a memoir by David Sheff, titled, "Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's

Addiction.” We hear the author writing of his addicted son, “I know every part from watching him and living with him and being close to him, and yet driving [in the car] to Oakland I look at his sullenness and anger and vacancy, his retreat and his turmoil, and I think, Who are you?” (Sheff, 126)

“Who are you?” what a terrifying question to ask of one’s own son. That is what fascinates me, and scares me about addiction from a spiritual perspective. The power that it has is so fundamental. Addiction has the power to transform an individual. In a matter of months, this loveable and promising teenage boy, turned into a sullen stranger. And that’s just one example.

I have talked a lot about the pain of addiction, and the burden that it lays on families and communities. We also should spend some time talking about recovery. Addiction is an awful disease, but we should also acknowledge that countless brave men and women have learned to cope with it.

Perhaps the most common thing we know about recovery is AA, or alcoholics anonymous. And then there are all the offshoots, from over eaters, to gambles anonymous. This simple organization has revolutionized the way people seek treatment and support. AA is a simple program with an amazing history. And then of course, there are the 12 steps. They hold some great suggestions, not just for addicts, but for all of us.

The core of the 12 steps is being honest with one’s self and others, and finding some peace through a spiritual life. That’s it; it’s a pretty universal concept, and defiantly one in line with our own tradition. I want to talk about the twelve steps of AA for a minute. There is some amazingly preachable material there. It is very spiritual stuff.

- My very condensed version of the 12 steps goes like this:
- Admit that you cannot control your addiction or compulsion;
 - Recognize a greater power that can give you strength, some call it God;
 - Examine your past errors with the help of a sponsor or friend;

- Make amends for these errors;
- Develop a spiritual discipline to help you keep on the path;
- And help others that suffer from the same challenges as you.

Now it is true that AA and the 12 steps are built on very traditional Christian theology. But what I'm more interested in is the concepts that the 12 steps provide for us as Unitarian Universalists.

The first step is admitting that we have no control over addiction. This is tough, admitting the limit of our power. Especially as Unitarians, we believe so strongly in free-will, in a person's ability and responsibility to choose right from wrong. But we are talking about addiction, a disease, not something that is chosen but something that is thrust upon a victim. For addicts it must be profoundly liberating to recognize a lack of control over the disease.

But I think there's a liberating message here for all of us here, not just addicts. Admitting we don't have complete control can be a very powerful spiritual experience for anyone. I don't know about you, but sometimes I do the wrong thing, knowingly. Sometimes I miss the mark. Now I'm not talking about original sin. I'm not caught in a cosmic tug of war between God and the devil. But there are times in life, when I am drawn toward, and do things that aren't right, knowingly. There are times when we don't measure up, we don't do what's right. We are not in perfect control and it's so liberating to admit that. We don't have complete power over the way we respond to the world. That's step number 1.

AA also depends on the idea of a higher power. Actually traditionally AA talked about God. But more recently that language has transformed into a "higher power." It doesn't matter what your higher power is, they say. Just so long as you recognize that there is something larger than yourself in the universe. It may be a moral order, it may be God, it may be beauty, it could be anything. AA recommends embracing the idea of a

higher power, something bigger than yourself, and when you can embrace that larger truth, it becomes a source of peace.

Well that's just about the best description of UU theology that I have ever heard of. When I talk about having faith in God or your highest ideals, this is exactly what I am talking about. Keeping an eye on that higher power that is bigger than yourself, that truth, whatever it is, that good in the universe that offers you peace, and encourages you to be a better person. These 12 step folks are onto something and it isn't just for addicts.

There is another piece of spirituality in the 12 steps that we as UU's never talk about, but that I think is so profound and important. That is confession, speaking honestly about what you have done wrong in your life. One of the steps in AA is to come clean about how you have wronged others, confessing to your higher power, and confessing to at least one other person.

We tend to think of confession as an oddity of the Catholic tradition. Other Christian groups have long given up the practice, but people need to get the truth off their chest sometimes. This is not just a Catholic thing. This is a part of being human, part of living a life that contains a few mistakes. We all need to confess sometimes.

When I interned as a hospital chaplain for a short time this was one of the biggest surprises. Over and over again patients confessed to me. Some were Catholic; most were not. Some of them were atheists. They confessed not because I asked them. They just volunteered information that they hadn't shared with anyone. For a young minister just out of school it was pretty overwhelming. Some told me about affairs, or about not treating their family well. Some told about scamming money from others. It was amazing. In those brief moments in a hospital room with a stranger who would not judge or condemn, confession poured out of patients like water.

Confession, or simply being honest with your situation is a huge part of recovery. We have all heard this reference, "Hello, my name is John. I'm an alcoholic." People in

AA state over and over why they are there, and it works. One of my favorite lines that I picked up from the AA world in preparation for this sermon was, “You are only as sick as your secrets.” I think it is a pretty standard AA concept, but I love it. It offers something really powerful. “You are only as sick as your secrets.”

Confession is about getting your secret off your chest, sharing the truth with someone else, not only for the sake of feeling better, but also for the sake of changing. Because only when it is out in the open can we confront the truth and change it. Only when we identify a problem honestly can we begin to heal.

The final piece of the 12 steps that I want to talk about today is developing a spiritual practice. Actually in AA they specify prayer or meditation, but there is a vast array of spiritual practices that can help us connect with our highest ideals, our higher power. How many of you have a regular practice that reconnects you to your sense of the divine or your core values? I don't care what it is, prayer, meditation, running, yoga, quilting, walking in nature. Let's see some hands, this isn't something to be ashamed of. If you don't have something that you do on a regular basis, I suggest you find something, SOMETHING, even if it is just coming to church regularly. I don't care what it is, but having some regular activity that connects you with the divine can be life changing. In fact that's what Alcoholics Anonymous has banked on for seventy years.

Addiction is deeply religious stuff, and the largest, most successful model for dealing with addiction offers a spiritual answer. Actually, I shouldn't say that they offer an answer. That would be misleading. They offer a journey of recovery, because in all honesty, there is no final answer to this disease. Alcoholics anonymous and the other offshoots have been hugely successful programs. But a big part of their success is that they don't offer THE Truth, THE final answer. Like Unitarian Universalism and like this sermon, there is not final correct answer that solves all problems. The case is never closed. Recovery is not a destination, but a journey. There is no really clear universal cause for the awful affliction, and there is no universal cure.

Often families of addicts turn to knowledge for solace. They try to learn everything they can about addiction and cures. They ask “What exactly is this thing we’re fighting? What caused it, and what is the best way to fight it. What should we have done, and what should we do better in the future.” Knowledge may bring some level of comfort, but in all honesty, there are still no complete answers about addiction.

Of course, medical experts, friends and family will offer endless suggestions and treatments. What you should have done differently, how this could have been prevented, how you should let your loved one hit rock bottom, how you should watch him or her like a hawk, how you should let them live and learn, how complete sobriety is the only way to recover, how they must learn to integrate a realistic life of social drinking into their lifestyle. Everyone has advice; everyone has an opinion.

But what is really needed is so much simpler. What is really needed is an open ear and a compassionate heart. Individuals dealing with addiction and their family members don’t need more advice. They need compassion, they need you to just listen.

And who knows if that will be enough. Recovery is not a perfect finish. It is one more step, one more day on the journey. Like I said, this is not a sermon with an easy answer, a package that ties up neatly with a bow. In fact it ends with no answer at all. It ends with an invitation to listen.

-AMEN-

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