

# Being Human: addiction as catalyst

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*Great great grandson of Charles Darwin and one time heroin addict, William Pryor, argues that, whatever it is, addiction is not an illness, and can be a catalyst in the search for what it is to be truly human.*

My name is William. I am not an addict. I do not have an illness; in fact I'm very well for an overweight 59 year-old ex-heroin addict. But in 1975 I was one of the first to be admitted to what was then the first Hazelden clone in Europe, Broadway Lodge, to have my unhappy relationship with heroin and alcohol 'treated'. Since then I have chosen to abstain, completely, from psychotropic substances.

Last November, my addiction memoir was published, and I am more than happy that *The Survival of the Coolest* is not only resonating with readers in increasing numbers, but is currently being developed as a feature film.

The writing of the book started me off on what, I can now see, will be a life-long attempt to understand addiction, to answer the question I was so often asked: Why? The hobbyhorse I wish to exercise in this article is the idea that the roots and the solutions of addiction are everything to do with what it is to be human in a rationalist, consumerist culture and very little to do with pathology or revivalist Christianity of the 1930s.

## ***Avoiding Pain***

Addiction serves a purpose in addicts' lives and, when that purpose becomes redundant, then the addiction falls away. At the root of all addiction is pain, just as it is at the root of being human; a pain that is especially prevalent in this consumerist age, in which meaning, love and a coherent, stable self are very hard to come by.

Humanistic psychologists from Erich Fromm to Alice Miller and Dorothy Rowe describe the foremost of these pains as having its roots early in life, when a child is unable to achieve separation from its mother because it is not 'seen' as a separate individual, capable of being loved. The child then spends the rest of its life searching for ways to be loved and being angry that it is not. One could say that addiction is a love substitute.

But there is another, deeper pain. At root it is the ache of being an isolated, separate self, struggling to find a satisfying purpose. Some call it loneliness, others depression or frustration, still others, longing. Non-addicts learn how to accommodate these uncertainties of being at an early age — since they have been loved, their sense of self is robust enough to absorb the shocks, frustrations and betrayals of life. For addicts, the attraction of the euphoria that pre-empts addiction is that it blocks out all those uncertainties. But that euphoria soon disintegrates into the sordid agony of addiction. A long chain where one pain subsumes, masks and helps us avoid the next, and so on and on. One could say that addiction is chasing a tail it can never swallow.

## ***The Purpose of Addiction***

My key idea here is that addiction itself has a *purpose*: to be a catalyst that spawns a richly creative, if dangerous, life. Out of the ashes of self-destruction can arise the

phoenix of a being, comfortable in his own skin, unafraid to be fully human. One could say that addiction provides a rich opportunity to search for the meaning of life.

It strikes me that the addiction and drug policy industries, the readership of this magazine, are, at root, engaged in working with the way addiction brings the addict face to face with the danger and uncertainty of life. In that very danger can be found great riches, as Alan Watts understood when he gave one of his books the title *The Wisdom of Uncertainty*. For recovery from addiction is nothing if not a move from the certainty of a recurring hell to the uncertainty of fully human life. It sees itself as an industry dedicated to healing an illness, but unlike any other health business, a large proportion of its practitioners also regard themselves as still having the self-same illness they help others to recover from. What if we imagined this illness to be that of being human?

### ***The Sin of Illness***

In the 1930's Frank Buchman, a controversial American revivalist minister, developed a new way of bringing people back to Christ that became known as the Oxford Group after he came over to England and converted many undergraduates from that city. Buchman's process revolved around conversion in small and intense groups in which members would confess all their sins to each other. When, back in the States, alcoholics joined in the confessional conversion groups, they were able to abstain in numbers not achieved elsewhere. This was a miracle – the healing power of conversion to Christ. (It should not be forgotten that in 1938, the year before the AA Big Book was first published, Buchman changed the name of his organisation to Moral Re-Armament, later becoming an admirer of Hitler<sup>1</sup>.)

What was new was Buchman's discovery of the power of group dynamics – later adopted by both Mao Tse Tung and everyone from Esalen to Gestalt, the Forum and EST. The founders of AA had been members of the Oxford Group, and when they were asked to leave because they were beginning to dominate the meetings, they simply secularised the teachings, making the powerful group confessional process their central miracle generator. In a weakened and confused state, you confess to your fellow addicts and develop your faith that the higher power that is the Group will tell you the truth, will confront your shit and guide you onto the selfless high ground of sobriety. As long as you stay within the boundaries of the Group's dogma, the miracle works, but put one foot outside and the 'illness' will grab you.

And they do guide you to that sobriety, diligently and unquestioningly buying into the Buchmanite philosophy of the Big Book, reinforcing the message at every step. What 'works' is as much the threat that living outside the doctrine is to risk the 'hell' of indulgence, as it is the sobriety itself, 'white-knuckled' or not. It is true, the programme 'worked' for me, in the sense that I stopped using and went through my four steps. But then I began to question if this sobriety is either happy or fulfilled, if the enforced reliance on dogma and peer pressure isn't just another addiction.

The notion of sin central to the Oxford Group was re-invented by AA as 'illness'. "This illness," they confess to each other at AA meetings, "had me licked." Your sins

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<sup>1</sup> Buchman was later to write the memorable line: "I thank heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler, who built a front line of defence against the anti-Christ of Communism."

have caught up with you. Your only hope is confession. And confession needs an enemy that isn't us, devils that have taken us over. It's OK: the illness made you do the dreadful things you did — it wasn't really you.

### ***21<sup>st</sup> Century Witch-Hunting***

One of the many 12-step double binds is the moral imperative that it is pointless and somehow distasteful to criticise the programme, to delve into the theory, when it quite plainly 'works'? Yes, I stopped using thanks to the Programme, and it might seem utterly ungracious of me to criticise what works! But the purpose of this double bind is to stop people escaping, using the very real fear of relapse into the full-blown sickness as the jailer. The truth needs no such defending.

Let me be clear: I challenge 12-step-ism because it traps people in a cultish, joyless dogmatism. Its simplicities are too narrow; its fear of living too ingrained; its craving for certainty too obsessive. The group therapy that AA, and later Hazelden, developed from Buchman's discovery is unquestionably a powerful way to help addicts adjust when they wish to stop their destructive behaviour. I simply ask that it be freed from its suspect roots and developed.

Psychiatry is no better. Addiction is no more an illness than are grief, depression, lack of attention, homosexuality, single-motherhood or genius, all of which psychiatry has regarded, at one time or another, as illnesses in need of surgical, electrical, pharmacological, committal and other drastic interventions.

To regard addiction as an illness is to oversimplify how its sociological, psychological and spiritual dynamics work together. Medicine and psychiatry, because they notice changes in the neurochemistry of addicts, say it's a disease of the brain, while 12-steppers must accept it as holy writ. Once you know you've got this abstract illness, you can never get rid of it. We are all sinners. But both models are, at best, red herrings and, at worse, 21<sup>st</sup> century witch-hunting. Everything we do changes our brain chemistry – does this mean all our behaviour is determined by our biochemistry? We all sin – does that mean we cannot redeem ourselves.

### ***Let Your Clients Go***

But I do not intend my hobbyhorse to be a rant, a tilt at the windmills of the 12-step model and bio-psychiatry. They do their best. I question why we can't move on, develop more holistic attitudes. Treatment could be regarded as a process of bringing travellers safely back from dangerous (but necessary) journeys beyond the known universe of accepted morals and mores.

The point is this: addiction is an opportunity. It is humans who get addicted out of fear of the darkness within, and not drugs that are addictive. Legislators, tabloid newspapers and policemen have dug themselves into an absurd and very destructive hole with their War on Drugs, which has never protected anyone from anything, only created vast bestiariums of corruption, crime and unnecessary suffering. The undoubted spirituality to be found in the return from addiction is equally available to all human beings. The more attempts are made to defend and codify this spirituality in peer-pressure enforced dogma on the one hand and neurochemical myths on the other, the less is it available. The recovery industry could recover its humanity and let its people go; go into the fullness and risk of being human.

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