



Psychospirituality of Addiction

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Introduction

I am grateful to respond to the invitation to offer some critical reflections on the psychospirituality of addiction. My reflections in this article come in large part from a presentation I made to the regional Illinois Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Professional Certification Association (IAODAPCA) Spring Conference held March 25, 2002, as well as insights from the theological students I have taught in a course titled "Ministry to Persons and Families Struggling with Addictions" at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

Multiple scientific studies and research have concluded that addictions are complex illnesses with a wide variety of interacting factors coming into play. No one factor or cause has been determined. Nevertheless, one crucial aspect that is often neglected is the interaction of psychological and spiritual factors in our understanding of addictions. In this paper, I will examine the pervasive nature of addictions in our world and highlight the soul sickness that underlies the addictive process. After examining the nature and extent of addictions as soul sickness, I will explore several psychospiritual issues that underlie the dynamics of addiction that may help pave the way to more effective recovery and relapse prevention.

The Problem

I would venture to say that whether or not we are struggling with an addiction or compulsive

behavior, we probably have been touched personally by addictions because of their prevalence in our families, society, and wider culture. So too, a growing concern in seminaries and among priests and religious men and women is the impact of addiction in our families, communities, and church. As Howard Clinebell noted in his book *Understanding and Counseling Persons with Alcohol, Drug, and Behavioral Addictions*, "Addictions constitute one of the most widespread and costly problems of contemporary society. Indeed it is a rare person or family whose life has not been impacted directly or indirectly by some addiction."

In this technological age, addictions are growing at a phenomenal rate. We live in a modern age of rapid change and technological advances that promise relief, happiness, and satisfaction for life's many hungers. It is a culture that actively promotes pain avoidance. In our fast-paced world we have little time to reflect on our lives or to be with friends and family. We consume more and more but taste less. We buy more goods and yet are left wanting more. According to research by Patrick Carnes, one of the fastest growing addictions today is cybersex and other Internet addictions. In my own counseling, I see more and more children and adults impacted by addictions of various sorts. The cover story in the June 2001 issue of the American Psychological Association's magazine, the *Monitor*, was on addiction. This article reported that drug, alcohol, and tobacco use is the cause of more deaths, illnesses, and disabilities than any other preventable health condition and seriously undermines America's family life, economy, and public safety.

Many of the students in my addiction course at Catholic Theological Union come from countries outside the United States. They have reminded me of how much the knowledge and awareness of addictions is important for their future ministry and pastoral work. For one student from Kenya, it was concern for the epidemic problem of sniffing glue by street children. For another student from Mexico, cocaine addiction and drug trafficking were a key pastoral issue. Whether here in the U.S. or abroad, addictions present a worldwide problem of devastating proportions.

Whatever the experience, we seem to live in a world in which there is no shortage of compulsive and addictive behaviors. Indeed, ministry to persons and families who struggle with addictions is a crucial need in the church today and one that continues to grow as new forms of addiction are added to the mix. There is a fast-growing community of recovering persons in a variety of twelve-step groups throughout the United States and abroad. All ministers would benefit, it seems, from knowing more about the dynamics of these various addictions, especially from a psychospiritual perspective, and how to best minister to the thousands of persons and families affected.

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Lost Souls

The spirituality of addiction is a spirituality of possession where the person has no real being or is a lost soul, disconnected from self, others, and God in a profound way. Indeed, if we trace the origins of addiction, we see that the word addicted comes from the Latin prefix *ad*, which means “to” or “forward,” and the past participle *dicere*, which means to “say” or “pronounce.” This old notion meant a formal giving over or

delivery by a sentence of the court, such as when surrendered to or obligated to a master. Though this more formal legal sense drops out of contemporary usage, still, the addict in a very real sense is someone who is delivered over to a master. Gerald May in his book *Addiction and Grace* describes addictions and compulsions as enslavements. Psychologically, May states that addiction uses up desire, sucking life energy into specific obsessions and compulsions, leaving less energy for other people and pursuits.

In my own work with persons struggling with various addictions, I have seen first hand the real loss of freedom as the addictive substance or behavior claims possession of their time, their thoughts, and their relationships. Clearly, they lose their sense of freedom and in a real way are claimed by the objects of their addictions. So through their own acts, addicts *ad-dict* themselves, they cease to become one’s own. They are left feeling restless, frightened, insecure, self-centered, anxious, and psychologically and spiritually bankrupt.

Harold Doweiko, a psychologist who has worked for many years in the addiction recovery field, has indicated that substance abuse disorders are symptoms of a spiritual disease and remind us that the Greek word for the soul, *psyche*, is the root of the word, psychotherapy. So with regard to addiction, in a very real sense we can speak of psychospiritual recovery from addiction as involving soul therapy. Crucial to the addiction recovery process is the integrating of psychological insights into a program of recovery that fosters the person’s spiritual growth.

Misdirected Spiritual Search

Carl Jung stated that craving for alcohol was really a search for wholeness or union with God. The Latin term for alcohol is *spiritus* and, he remarked, “You use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison.” Addictions often have been viewed in such existential and spiritual language, as Lee Jampolsky so aptly notes: “Addiction is fundamentally a misdirected spiritual search that is rooted in a fundamental belief that I am not OK the way I am and there is a void that needs to be filled and something external to myself will fill this void.”

Victor Frankl concluded that substance abuse might be a response to a loss of direction within the individual. It is a spiritual search for peace in a world of restless anxiety. The alcohol, drug, work, or sexual behavior provides a temporary sense of relief and feeling of control that the addict desperately seeks. The addiction tells us we can have it now, a message reinforced in the wider culture in a wide variety of ways every day. Howard Clinebell notes that the insecurity and emotional malnutrition bred by an anxious, violent, and competitive society has resulted in many damaged orphans of the spirit. Bill Wilson, one of the cofounders of Alcoholics Anonymous, referred to alcoholism as a soul sickness or a form of spiritual bankruptcy.

One way that twelve-step recovery speaks of spirituality is getting out of oneself and beginning to order one's life in relationship to a higher power. Sandra Schneider captures this fundamental understanding when she (1986, 1990) describes spirituality as the "experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives." Addiction is one state of being, albeit misguided, that also seeks meaning, peace, and transcendence. Addiction is misguided because it seeks to replace God with objects or attachments that command our allegiance. At the heart of the addictive process is a restless spirit that is seeking answers but has set off in the wrong direction. The path is an outer-directed search that denies one's true self while caught in the web of idolatry and self-deception. Indeed, denial is the hallmark of the addictive process.

The problem with addictions is that they seem to work, at least for awhile, for many persons. What do you mean they work? How could something so destructive to the person, family, and friends being seen as working? By seeming to work, I mean that there is a reward, a payoff, a benefit, a way to deal with life's stresses, pain, and unpredictability. Recently, a client of mine shared how he knew that alcohol was destroying his life but yet was convinced he couldn't imagine a world without alcohol. Alcohol had been his most reliable friend. As someone fearful of intimacy and very lonely, alcohol allowed him to feel like one of group and even the life of the party.

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Those who struggle with compulsive and addictive patterns often will describe their addictive substance or behavior in relational language such as "Alcohol was my friend," or "I could always rely on this drug to be there for me." Caroline Knapp in her autobiographical account of her addiction to alcohol describes her drinking as a "love story." "Yes; this is a love story...I loved the way drink made me feel, and I loved its special power of deflection, its ability to shift my focus away from my own awareness of self and onto something else, something less painful than my own feelings." She goes on to talk about her love affair and relationship with alcohol that grew gradually through the years until it became a central part of who she was.

Compulsive use of alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, work, or the Internet may all serve as a temporary solution to feelings of shame, loneliness, depression, or hurt feelings. However, the paradox of addictions is that the more we seek relief, the more we find misery, and the more we are fed, the more hunger we feel. Augustine put it well when he said that our hearts are restless, until they rest in Thee. The search for peace, relief, and contentment in drugs, alcohol, food, work, sex, and the Internet provide a false temporary escape that masks the real dilemma of the empty lost soul within. These disordered attachments are none the less attachments. They seek to fill a need or void deep within us but ultimately leave us spiritually empty.

My belief is that we cannot fully understand the road to recovery until we see that these addictions and over dependencies serve a deep need that is still unmet in the person. This need at root is deeply psychospiritual. The problem is that with addictions the person regresses often to a more childlike state of maturity in this false or

misdirected search for the transcendent. Sober life demands far too much for immature persons, and they may often be tempted to relapse where the demands are minimal and pleasure is injected quicker. The challenge for men and women of faith is to offer a countercultural message of peace and serenity through a radically different approach. A message that is too often unproclaimed is that real joy is in the long, bumpy, and winding road!

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The Road to Psychospiritual Recovery

Now that we have explored the nature of the problem, I would like to propose some psychospiritual issues that may help guide the recovery process along the long and bumpy road for the recovering addict and those affected by addictive systems.

1. From a Lack of Conscious Awareness to a Spiritual Awakening and Living Consciously in the Now

One of the great spiritual truths is that awareness in the present moment allows us a glimpse of eternity. We can race through life or seek refuge in all sorts of false comforts, but ultimately some of life's deepest treasures are found in the presence to life, whether a sunset, a friend's support, or the play of a child. Most of these gifts can be lost, not because they don't exist in our world but for failing to notice them. I recall one recovering person telling me, “Its amazing how I can just enjoy the little things of life today.” This person went on to describe how these miracles were always there, but he was blinded by the restless anxiety of his compulsive drinking and unable to see what was always so near. It is the addict's preoccupation with the past and the future that blocks awareness and

responsiveness in the present moment. Conscious living in the now allows one to live life on its own terms. It means that one feels pain and fear but also joy and serenity.

Living consciously allows us to actively and creatively participate in the beauty and sorrows of life without the cloud of substances that would dull our experience. Ultimately, this greater awareness can lead to a gradual spiritual awakening. Indeed, twelve-step movements began with the first drunk having an awakening through a profound “spiritual experience” while detoxifying at Towns Hospital. Later Bill Wilson's conversation of shared pain and shared hope with another alcoholic, Dr. Bob, eventually led to the journey of recovery for millions of alcoholics worldwide. In the *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson highlights the spiritual solution that has led to personal transformation in these words:

The great fact is just this, and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows, and toward God's universe. (p. 25)

The psychospiritual journey and the search for meaning involve a revolutionary new way of seeing oneself, others, and one's higher power. Addicts seek pleasure in substances and activities outside of themselves and fear solitude and contemplation, which only confronts them with their emptiness within. Psychospiritual recovery involves coming to a radical new awareness that allows one to live more fully in the now.

2. From Self-Deception and Control to Humility and Letting Go

Control is often rooted in my inability to accept myself as I am, and the more insecure I feel, the more I need to control my world. Patrick Carnes in his research on sexual addiction notes that one of the primary beliefs of the sexual addict is that no one could possibly love me for who I am. Rather than confront these feelings of shame and self-loathing, the addict instead engages in a spiraling down cycle of preoccupation with his addictive behavior that only leads to

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further shame and low self-worth. Denial and self-centeredness are two hallmarks of the addictive process. For the addict, this often leads to a double life, or a Jekyll and Hyde existence, and a world surrounded in fear and hiding from the light of truth.

Being honest is one of the most difficult things for a life built on denial. These psychological defenses, whether denial, rationalization, or projection, are aimed at protecting underlying feelings of inferiority, fear, guilt, and shame. The individual addict uses substances or behaviors to numb or narcotize internal pain and attempts to force their will on the universe. The individual who is focused on self-centered needs wants what he wants when he wants it. Bill Wilson aptly notes in the *Big Book* of AA, “Selfishness and self-centeredness...is the root of our troubles and...driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate” (p. 62). Substances provide an escape by giving us feelings of self-confidence and the illusion of strength and may have tremendous appeal to those who are submerged in powerlessness, shame, disappointment, frustration, and self-rejection.

Psychospiritual recovery involves bringing the light of truth to shine on the mask, persona, and false self the individual addict hides behind. The acceptance one feels in twelve-step recovery groups often provides such an opportunity. Early in recovery the addict’s resistance is often at its peak, and that is why most relapses occur within the first six months of sobriety. But gradually through asking for help and attending twelve-step meetings, the recovering person realizes he or she need not go it alone and finds it easier to surrender the tight grasp of control.

Humility is recognizing our fundamental need for others and God. The addict no longer

feels the need to be at the center of the universe but becomes one among the many. This in turn allows him to move out of self-centered fear and reliance on self to reliance on others and his higher power. He or she in turn is able to become more compassionate with his or her own limitations. Humility is not thinking too much or too little of oneself but a more realistic acceptance of who we are with all our strengths and limitations.

3. From Fear to Trust

What often holds the addict off from seeking help is not necessarily that they feel life is going well, although denial may allow such masking for awhile. The deeper reality may be that it is frightening to imagine what life would be like without their addiction of choice. For those struggling with compulsions and addictions, fear and anxiety are intolerable realities that must be avoided rather than the normal realities of living in a world of loss, change, and ambiguity. The alcohol, drug, work, food, gambling, addictive relationship, or Internet addiction all tend to numb our awareness of these anxieties and tensions.

What is missing is the courage to face one’s fears openly. Recovery involves gradually coming to face both one’s fears and life on life’s terms. In other words, to recognize that to be human is to live embracing one’s fears but without despair. Fear is a natural human experience, and the need for a basic trust in the universe is never outgrown. However, it becomes apparent that doubt, despair, and disillusionment combine to make the individual vulnerable to temptations offered by anything that seeks to ease the suffering. The root of despair is in the need for control or security. The addict fears surrender to an absolute or higher power as a loss of control of having his or her own way.

One recovering alcoholic stated that he never could relax in his own skin and was always running, restless and unsettled. Many of those who struggle with addictions have described this profound state of alienation from themselves and others. The restlessness is partially rooted in the fear of facing oneself honestly. To confront the illusionary self in the mirror of truth can be a terrifying experience for the compulsive or addicted person.

Psychospiritual recovery is the movement out of being lost, isolated, alone, afraid, and without meaning and purpose, to an inner-directed hopeful search for serenity and peace rooted in the best spiritual principles of love, community, and intimacy with self, God, others, and nature. One gradually discovers he or she is no longer disconnected, fearful, and restless but aware that life is precious, and each moment brings the potential for deeper spiritual awakenings.

4. Immediate Gratification versus Healthy Asceticism

Fulfillment paradoxically comes through healthy asceticism, sacrifice, and surrender. It comes not from seeking more but by being at peaceful and content with less. The more we fill ourselves, the more we take, the more empty we become. Discipline is feared by the person struggling with an addiction, and self-centeredness and impulsive behaviors are often seen as hallmarks of the addictive process.

In spiritual traditions, human attempts to receive and respond to grace are called asceticism. The word comes from the Greek *askeo*, “to exercise.” It refers to all authentic intentions and efforts we make toward fulfilling our deepest desires for God. Asceticism, according to Gerald May, is our willingness to enter into the deserts of our lives, to commit ourselves to the struggle with attachment, to participate in a courtship with grace. We need God’s grace to help us through the deserts of addictions. Discipline and asceticism get a bad rap, but the truth is healthy discipline makes us freer.

Psychospiritual recovery involves a radical shift in perception that begins to see self-discipline and healthy asceticism as essential on the road to true and more lasting peace and serenity. This spiritual message has been at the heart of the world’s great religious and spiritual traditions.

5. Perfectionism versus Acceptance of Limitations

False pride often can become a wall behind which the addict hides. It is necessary to give up the search for perfection. Spirituality is less about getting it right all the time and more about realizing that pain, struggle, and mistakes are an

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essential part of living. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum, in their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, use the analogy of baseball to remind us that like baseball, errors are part of the game of life. Unfortunately, perfection has lost its real meaning. The real meaning of perfection is wholeness or to be complete or whole. To be whole is to accept one’s own limitations as well as strengths. At the heart of the spirituality of the twelve steps is a genuine acceptance and acknowledgment of one’s strengths and weaknesses.

What has eluded the addict is that false notions of perfection have led to hard inner judgments, shame, and never feeling good enough. Lewis Presnall, in his classic book *The Search for Serenity*, states, “No one can be at home in his own heaven until he has learned to be at home in his own hell.” The full appreciation of inner serenity is achieved only after having to come to terms with one’s own weakness, limitations, and shortcomings. Indeed, the sixth and seventh steps of the twelve steps of AA deal precisely with the psychospiritual process of owning one’s shortcomings and humbly asking God to remove them.

6. From Never Enough to Gratitude

Lee Jampolsky, in his article “Healing the Addictive Mind,” notes that scarcity is a

predominant belief in American society that we are always lacking something. This addictive philosophy of “not enough” leads us into endless pursuits to fill this perceived void. Much of our emotional pain comes from what we feel we lack, so we search for endless relationships to fill the void. The media reflect this idea to us in countless commercials that tell us what product will help fill the emptiness and make us whole. One of the telltale signs of early recovery from addiction is that the addict begins to speak more from a heart of gratitude than scarcity. Gratitude is a fundamental awareness that one has received a gift, and this radical change in perception is a filter that begins to shape one’s experiences in later recovery. One person in recovery for years put it this way: “If it never gets any better than this, I will take it.” It’s the secret of learning real acceptance and gratitude despite the ups and downs life may bring. It is the story of the prodigal son or other biblical narratives of mercy that depict the experience of radical transformation when one feels a part of the human community again.

Whenever I meet or work with recovering persons who seem to be doing well, I’m struck by the gratitude that seems to well up from within them. It seems to flow out of a center rooted in one who is deeply aware of a profound gift. It doesn’t seem that the gratitude is tied to material riches, although life for many addicts may indeed improve financially in recovery, but rather in a transformed perspective on life that gives them a new vision for living. Recovery in addiction is all about a radical shift in perception that allows seeing what before was blind to us, as the hymn *Amazing Grace* points out. The grateful recovering addict realizes deeply that what was received was a gift—one that was nothing, if not pure grace.

7. From Isolation to Community

One member of a twelve-step group reported to me that his recovery meant an end to what he described as a life of “isolation.” He described being isolated from himself, others, and God and lived in his own world. Recovery has been a long and at times painful process for many, but one which has gradually led to the awareness that real joy in living comes in and through real

communion. Seeking recovery from addictions is a crisis that forces one out of hiding and into the light of truth. What makes this recovery possible is the hope that is born out of the twelve-step community. One person in recovery for several years put it this way: “I’m glad there is a place I can go and share how I feel and not feel judged.” Healing comes through connecting with others, albeit a sponsor in the twelve-step program or another member of the group.

Research seems to support this psychospiritual dynamic of isolation to communion with others as key to long-term recovery. Oliver Morgan, in his article “Addiction and Spirituality in Context,” cites research by Hennessey-Hein (1995) that studied persons with an average of 19.5 years in recovery. She noted dynamics such as a “gradual perceptual shift” from an isolated self to a self-in-relation, a shift from self-destructive behaviors to life-enhancing ones, and the beginnings of a “new life.” The recovering women she interviewed spoke about spirituality as being more “connected” to others and to a presence or source of power that fueled continual growth.

Twelve-step recovery groups state in their promises this crucial idea of leaving isolation and drawing closer to others. As described in the *Big Book* of AA, they offer shared experiences of strength and hope and discover such promises as “a new freedom and a new happiness...no longer denying the past or wishing to shut the door on it, they see how their experiences can benefit others...uselessness and self-pity will slip away and they gain insight into their fellows.”

Addiction is a shame-bound disease. It hides and avoids the light of truth. God’s action in our lives calls us to face the darkness without fear, to come into the light and experience forgiveness and transformation. At the root of recovery is a courageous journey out of self-centered preoccupation toward genuine care for others. This happens through a beloved community. Recovery involves coming home to the center of one’s deepest truth, of reclaiming one’s deepest identity in communion with others and with the God of one’s understanding.

Ego is a problem for those who struggle with addictions. Ego is the sum of all our

identifications, and with substance abuse the attachment is to the substance, the greatest love of all. The problem of the ego is the need for control. The more insecure we may feel, the more compelled to try to control our world. We may become gods unto ourselves. The twelve-step form of spirituality recognizes a psychological and spiritual truth: To be fully human is to live in relationship. The isolated “I” finds hope by recognizing the need for community. This is why the first of the twelve steps states that “we” are powerless, not “I.” It is a reminder that the way out of alienation and isolation is in a supportive and accepting community, not through one’s own resources alone.

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Conclusion

In sum, psychospiritual recovery from addiction involves a fundamental recognition that at the heart of the addictive process is a lost soul traveling down a path seeking peace and an absence from life’s pain, yet ultimately destined for greater alienation from self, others, and God. At the root of the compulsive and addictive pattern is a self that feels incomplete, insecure, and lacking adequate resources to cope with life’s many changes, losses, and challenges. The direction of that search is clearly misguided by false idols or attachments that promise quick answers to life’s complexities and suffering. Hope lies in recognizing these psychological and spiritual maladies that plague the lost soul.

Those most vulnerable are those whose histories suggest a compulsive pattern. Shame is often at the root, and healing involves a gradual psychospiritual recovery process of acceptance and forgiveness rooted in humility. Defenses like denial and projection make any intervention

challenging, but to confront lovingly is to model the depths of true caring. This form of “tough love” means that ministers and others who seek to offer healing will have to take the risk of rejection and misunderstanding in the interest of truth, justice, and mercy.

The challenge for seminaries, churches, and other pastoral ministers is to remain creatively involved in the ministry to persons and families struggling with addictions of all sorts. This ministry will involve being able to witness, live, and proclaim a counter cultural message of true peace rooted in love, tolerance, forgiveness, and mercy. The church can assist by modeling in their own lives a healthy form of relationally motivated asceticism that offers a spiritual way through the desert of pain and isolation toward our home with others and God.

There are multiple creative ways to minister, from incorporating addictions into homilies, to offering church space for twelve-step groups, to pastoral counseling, to working toward prevention efforts and systemic change. Whatever the way, those preparing for leadership ministry in the church today must be adequately trained to both recognize and begin to heal their own compulsive behaviors, as well as minister compassionately to the many persons and families impacted by addiction. An attitude of openness that sees the addictive journey as a misguided spiritual quest will leave one better equipped to respond in non-judgmental and more effective ways.

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