

“The Real Cause of Addiction”
Sermon by Rev. Amanda L. Aikman
South Fraser Unitarian Congregation
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READINGS

“A Prayer Addressing All Hungers” By [Debra Smith](#)

We are hungry

that feeds more than bodies

We are eating our daily bread
and bowing our heads
and yet we are hungry

We are hungry for help
Help us oh you who apportion the
funds
Find in your hearts the child who you
were
who would share with a friend
free and friendly
Lead us not into meanness

We are thanking the farmer
and the farm worker
and yet we are hungry

We are speaking in spaces
for food that is healthy
and still we are hungry

For we are the hungry
We want the loaves
and the fishes
the water
and the wine
of sweet justice for all

We are tiring of slogans that say
Feed the Children
and mean feed the children
leftovers

We are hungry

We are hungry for something

SERMON

Do you love someone who is an addict? Whether the addiction is to drugs, alcohol, or behaviors such as gambling or pornography – addictions are so widespread in our society that it almost goes without saying that there is scarcely anyone whose family or social circle has been untouched by addiction. In my years in ministry, I have sat with so many people in grief and despair because a loved

one – often a child – has been lost to drugs. Great parents, with other kids who are not addicted. Tragic, confusing losses and damage.

It is now a century since drugs were first banned in North America -- and all through this long century of waging war on drugs, we have been told a story about addiction by our teachers and by our governments. This story is so deeply ingrained in our minds that we take it for granted. It seems obvious. It seems manifestly true. But what some researchers, and investigative journalists such as Johann Hari, have found is that almost everything we have been told about addiction may well be completely wrong -- and that there is a very different story waiting for us, if only we are ready to hear it.

What causes some people to become fixated on a drug or a behavior until they can't stop? How do we help those people to come back to us?

If asked about what causes drug addiction, we would probably answer – “drugs.” It seems so obvious.

Imagine if you and I and the next twenty people to pass us on the street take a really potent drug for twenty days. There are strong chemical hooks in these drugs, so if we stopped on day twenty-one, our bodies would need the chemical. We would have a ferocious craving. We would be addicted. That's what addiction means.

This view was “injected” into our thoughts in part by a famous TV ad. You may remember it. It related a famous experiment that was done with rats. The experiment is simple. Put a rat in a cage, alone, with two water bottles. One is just water. The other is water laced with heroin or cocaine. Almost every time you run this experiment, the rat will become obsessed with the drugged water, and keep coming back for more and more, until it kills itself.

The ad explains: "Only one drug is so addictive, nine out of ten laboratory rats will use it. And use it. And use it. Until dead. It's called cocaine. And it can do the same thing to you."

But in the 1970s, a professor of Psychology in Vancouver called Bruce Alexander noticed something odd about this experiment. The rat is put in the cage all alone. It has nothing to do but take the drugs. What would happen, he wondered, if we tried

this differently? So Professor Alexander built Rat Park. Rat Park was a lush cage where the rats would have colored balls and the best rat-food and tunnels to scamper down and plenty of friends: everything a rat could want. What, Alexander wanted to know, will happen then?

In Rat Park, all the rats tried both water bottles, because they didn't know what was in them. But what happened next was startling.

The rats with good lives in Rat Park didn't like the drugged water. They mostly shunned it, consuming less than a quarter of the drugs the isolated rats used. None of them died. While all the rats who were alone and unhappy became heavy users, none of the rats who had a happy environment did.

At the same time as the Rat Park experiment, the Vietnam War was going on. *Time* magazine reported that heroin was "as common as chewing gum" among U.S. soldiers, and indeed, some 20 percent of U.S. soldiers had become addicted to heroin there. Many people were understandably terrified; they believed a huge number of addicts were about to head home when the war ended.

But in fact some 95 percent of the addicted soldiers simply stopped once they were back home. Very few had rehab. They shifted from a terrifying cage back to a pleasant one, so they didn't want the drug any more.

Professor Alexander argues this discovery is a profound challenge to our usual views of drug addiction. It is a challenge to the right-wing view that addiction is a moral failing. And it is a challenge to the liberal view that addiction is a disease taking place in a chemically hijacked brain. In fact, he argues, addiction is an adaptation. It's not you. It's your cage.

After the first phase of Rat Park, Professor Alexander then took this test further. He reran the early experiments, where the rats were left alone, and became compulsive users of the drug. He let them use the drug for fifty-seven days -- if anything can hook you, it's that. Then he took them out of isolation, and placed them in Rat Park. He wanted to know, if you fall into that state of addiction, is your brain hijacked, so you can't recover? Do the drugs take you over? What happened is -- again -- striking. The rats seemed to have a few twitches of withdrawal, but they soon stopped their heavy use, and went back to having a

normal life. The good cage – the cage with interesting activities, a variety of food, and plenty of social interaction -- saved them.

This new theory is such a radical assault on what we have been told that it feels as if it cannot be true. But, as journalist Johann Hari says, “the more scientists I interviewed, and the more I looked at their studies, the more I discovered things that don't seem to make sense -- unless you take account of this new approach.”

Here's one example of an experiment that is happening all around us, and may well happen to you one day. If you get run over today and you break your hip, you will probably be given diamorphine, the medical name for heroin. In the hospital around you, there will be plenty of people also given heroin for long periods, for pain relief. The heroin you will get from the doctor will have a much higher purity and potency than the heroin being used by street-addicts, who have to buy from criminals who adulterate it. So if the old theory of addiction is right -- it's the drugs that cause it; they make your body need them -- then it's obvious what should happen. Loads of people should leave the hospital and try to score smack on the streets to meet their habit.

But here's the strange thing: It virtually never happens. As the Canadian doctor Gabor Mate explains, the vast majority of medical users just stop, despite months of use. The same drug, used for the same length of time, turns street-users into desperate addicts -- and leaves medical patients unaffected.

In a recent talk, Dr. Mate dedicated the evening to the memory of a woman he called Serena. One of the many faces of addiction on the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, she was a young woman ravaged by severe sexual abuse, neglect and dysfunction, and her death, in Maté's words, is indicative of a massive failure of society, science and compassion.

Reflecting on Serena's death, Dr. Mate said, "This is not a war on drugs. This is a war on drug addicts. We ask ourselves why people give up their lives, their relationships, their connections in this world, for the pursuit of a drug. Addiction can never be understood if looked at through the lens of moralism and judgement. It's time as a society we ask not: 'Why the addiction?' But: 'Why the pain?'"

The street-addict is like the rats in the first cage, isolated, alone, with only one source of solace to turn to. The medical patient is like the rats in the second cage,

the friendly Rat Park. She is going home to a life where she is surrounded by the people she loves. The drug is the same, but the environment is different.

Dr. Mate traces most addictions back to deprivations and abuse in early childhood, which inhibit the developing brain from growing the ability to produce its own natural drugs. Dr. Mate says the first five years of life and even the environment in the womb can dictate a predisposition to addiction, and uses recent studies to connect stress, abuse and lack of love and attachment to deficiencies in our ability to create endorphins and dopamine -- necessary chemicals in our bodies that give us both pleasure and pain relief.

Maté claims it is no coincidence that emotional and physical pain is interpreted in the same place in the brain and leads us to self-medicate when we are lacking these receptors. He suggests addicts are not addicted to the substance at all, but rather to their own brain chemicals.

This gives us an insight that goes much deeper than the need to understand addicts. Professor Peter Cohen argues that human beings have a deep need to bond and form connections. It's how we get our satisfaction. If we can't connect with each other, we will connect with anything we can find -- the whirr of a roulette wheel or the prick of a syringe. He says we should stop talking about 'addiction' altogether, and instead call it 'bonding.' A heroin addict has bonded with heroin because she couldn't bond as fully with anything else.

So the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection.

This has huge implications for the century-old war on drugs. This massive and destructive war is based on the claim that we need to physically eradicate a whole array of chemicals because they hijack people's brains and cause addiction. But if drugs aren't the driver of addiction -- if, in fact, it is disconnection that drives addiction -- then this makes no sense.

Ironically, the war on drugs actually increases all those larger drivers of addiction. Johann Hari went to a prison in Arizona -- 'Tent City' -- where inmates are detained in tiny stone isolation cages ('The Hole') for weeks and weeks on end to punish them for drug use. He says, "It is as close to a human re-creation of the cages that guaranteed deadly addiction in rats as I can imagine. And when those

prisoners get out, they will be unemployable because of their criminal record -- guaranteeing they will be cut off even more.”

There is an alternative. You can build a system that is designed to help drug addicts to reconnect with the world -- and so leave behind their addictions.

This isn't theoretical. It is happening. Sixteen years ago, Portugal had one of the worst drug problems in Europe, with 1 percent of the population addicted to heroin. They had tried a drug war, and the problem just kept getting worse. So they decided to do something radically different. They resolved to decriminalize all drugs, and transfer all the money they used to spend on arresting and jailing drug addicts, and spend it instead on reconnecting them -- to their own feelings, and to the wider society. The most crucial step is to get them secure housing, and subsidized jobs so they have a purpose in life, and something to get out of bed for. They are helped, in warm and welcoming clinics, to learn how to reconnect with their feelings, after years of trauma and stunning their feelings into silence with drugs.

Since total decriminalization in Portugal, addiction has fallen substantially, and injecting drug use is down by 50 percent. I'll repeat that: injecting drug use is down by 50 percent. Decriminalization has been such a manifest success that very few people in Portugal want to go back to the old system. The main campaigner against the decriminalization back in 2000 was Joao Figueira, the country's top drug cop. He offered all the dire warnings that we would expect from, say, Fox News. But he now says that everything he predicted had not come to pass -- and he now hopes the whole world will follow Portugal's example.

This isn't only relevant to the addicts we love. It is relevant to all of us, because it forces us to think differently about ourselves. Human beings are bonding animals. We need to connect and love. But we have created an environment and a culture that cut us off from connection. The rise of addiction is a symptom of a deeper sickness in the way we live -- constantly directing our gaze towards the next shiny object we should buy, rather than the human beings all around us.

The writer George Monbiot has called this ["the age of loneliness."](#) We have created human societies where it is easier for people to become cut off from all human connections than ever before. Bruce Alexander -- the creator of Rat Park -- says that for too long, we have talked exclusively about individual recovery from

addiction. We need now to talk about social recovery -- how we all recover, together, from the sickness of isolation that is surrounding us like a thick fog.

This new evidence isn't just a challenge to us politically. It doesn't just force us to change our minds. It forces us to change our hearts.

*We are hungry for something
that feeds more than bodies*

Loving an addict is extremely hard. I was talking to a parishioner the other day, who was in tears telling about her thirty-something son, who has a disastrous gambling addiction and has stolen from her.

It is always tempting to follow the tough love advice -- tell the addict to shape up, or cut them off. Their message is that an addict who won't stop should be shunned. But in fact, that will only deepen their addiction -- and you may lose them altogether. The challenge, then, is to tie the addicts in your life closer than ever -- to let them know you love them unconditionally, whether they stop, or whether they can't. Protecting yourself, setting limits where you must, but loving them.

Dr. Nora Volkow, one of the most prominent drug addiction researchers in the U.S., says that not only love, and connection, but also an interesting, meaningful, stimulating environment make people less likely to turn to addictions.

Volkow thinks that drugs and other addictive habits tap into some of the deepest forces within us—our lust for newness, our yearning for vitality and the deep-down thrill of being alive. "We all seek that intensity," she says. "There's something very powerful about that."

This urge to connect to the world and learn from it is more important than mere pleasure, says Volkow. It's part of the most basic force in behavior: the will to live. It's not automatic, she points out. Seriously ill or very depressed people can lose the will to survive. "What is the motivation we all have to be alive, to do things?" she asks. "It's not pleasure. Our lives would be so much simpler if we were motivated just for the sake of pleasure." Meaningful interaction and a sense of purpose give us that motivation.

If you connect to the world in a meaningful way, and have more chances to get excited about natural stimuli, you're less likely to need an artificial boost. "If you don't get excited by everyday things in life, if things look gray, and the drug makes things look extraordinary, that puts you at risk," she says. "But if you get great excitement out of a great multiplicity of things, and intensely enjoy these things—seeing a movie, or climbing a mountain—and then you try a drug, you'll think: What's the big deal?" For those lucky enough to be surrounded by sharp minds and stimulating experiences, drugs are just nowhere near as interesting as everyday life.

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As shown in the exhaustive studies conducted by the researchers who wrote the book *The Spirit Level*, all manner of societal ills can be directly correlated to the amount of economic inequality in the society. Comparing industrialized nations' rates of drug use, there is a dramatic correlation – Japan, where there is very little economic inequality, has very little drug use. The United States is way, way far away on the opposite end of the scale. Portugal has a similar amount of inequality, but a much lower index of drug use. Canada is high on both indicators.

We are, indeed, hungry – craving – something that feeds more than bodies. And this is where our communities of faith, our communities of whatever type that promote meaning, are, if we choose to make them so, a bulwark against drug abuse and addictions of all kinds.

The real adversary in the drug war is not drugs. It is poverty – but not just poverty, for there are many poor countries where drug use is not at all a problem on the scale that it is here in North America. The enemy, then, is poverty in the face of abundance. The enemy is economic injustice.

The adversary is not drugs. It is loneliness – our fractured society. How many people do I know who have climbed to the top of the economic ladder and bought their dream house on acreage, and then nearly perish from loneliness. How many people do we all know who are inhibited by pride or stubbornness from reaching out for the connection we all so desperately need.

The adversary is not drugs. It is the fact that all too many of our young people – whether living in inner-city slums or soulless suburbs – grow up in unstimulating

environments where meaning and purpose are absent, as are parents, enriching activities, and love.

*We are hungry for something
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Liberal religious congregations provide some of the very best antidotes for all these ills. Company, support, social action programs and other meaningful activities. You have just voted to work on issues of poverty as your congregation-wide social action focus. What could be more meaningful and useful than that? Above all, we offer spirituality for not only believers but also atheists and agnostics – spirituality, which means the experience of connection with something larger than the self, which is worthy of reverence. In an era when people are leaving the traditional church in droves – in reaction to the contorted and corrupted version of Christianity that is so prominent in our consciousness – in this era, we must make it known that our congregations offer not the soul death of prejudice and fragmentation and loneliness, but the soulful life of acceptance, caring, justice, and connection to something larger. And we must assure the continuation, the flourishing, and the health of these beloved communities.

This is something that is worthy of our efforts, our devotion, our life energy – something that heals and connects us in life-giving ways even as it helps to heal our hurting world.

*For we are the hungry
We want the loaves
and the fishes
the water
and the wine
of sweet justice for all.*