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Addiction and The Paradox of Change

In 2016, Suicide was the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, claiming over 45,000 lives, or nearly 125 people per day. That's over two times the number of people murdered (nearly 20,000 lives) in that same year. According to the Centers for Disease Control, drug overdoses accounted for nearly 73,000 deaths in 2017. That number represents a 10% increase from 2016. To put that number into perspective, it's like taking a flying a commercial 727 airliner filled with 200 people and crashing it into the ground every single day.

That statistic causes me great angst and my reaction to it is a simple, yet complex, question: What was missing? What was missing in that person's life? What was missing in that person's security? What was missing in that person's self-concept (the idea of how we look into our self, see the "man in the mirror", how we fit into our relationships, and how we see our future)?

As a therapist, I've heard a lot of stories about overdosing. I've heard how some have survived and how some have not. I've watched how people grieve the loss of a loved one. I've heard how some were "accidental" and I've heard how some were purposeful. Death by overdose saddens me.

The trouble with looking at addiction through the lens of death is death alone is too concrete. It's too absolute. And, for some, it's so far-fetched that it's unrelatable.

Invincibility, the idea that something will not happen to you, is a deeply rooted problem in addictive thinking. I liken it how many teens and young adults think they're not going to get pregnant and then suddenly they get the call and hear the words, "I'm pregnant."

People become addicted for a variety of reasons. Some are born into it. Some are conditioned for it. Some are captured by it. We can generalize addiction all day long and we do so to help better understand it. Addiction ranges in type and intensity. Some are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Other addictions include shopping, sex, or even negative thinking.

Addiction is unique to each person experiencing it. Which is why there truly is no one size fits all approach.

Some people enter recovery because they know that without it, they are going to die. But there are also a variety of reasons why people enter recovery. Some are forced. Some are convinced. Some are motivated by events, family, or an emotional experience. Some are looking for a break. Some are faking it. Some are real. Some have no idea - they just know that what they've been doing isn't working anymore.

There are certainly beacons of light to help guide one into a life of recovery – no matter what one's addiction is. The 12-step approach is one of those lights. I have preached to many people over the years about how the 12-steps are a philosophy, best defined for me as the "study of the knowledge of living."

"Choosing" recovery is a debatable concept. The loss of control or manageability of one's life because of addiction is certainly not, however. There are two types of people in this world, in my opinion: those that are power-less and unmanageable, and those that are power-ful and manage-ing.

Regardless of our circumstances, how our minds operate, the families we are born into, or the bodies we've been given, one thing I've learned as a therapist is we generally feel better, gain confidence, and experience greater safety and security when we have a brighter sense of direction and greater number of options in life. The 12-step approach to recovery is that direction and its community of people following its principles provides those options.

The public misunderstands addiction as being a choice and willful conduct of doing "what one wants, when one wants." That one can simply "choose" to stop being an addict. This idea of choice, however, can also get mixed up in the life of addiction. Certainly if we were free sleep when we want to sleep, eat when we want to eat, have sex when we want to have sex, and so on, choice would not be a point of discussion. But we can't (at least we shouldn't). We are human beings separated from the freedoms of living like an animal.

So when I question what is missing as I mentioned earlier, I do so to emphasize why I think efforts to treat fail. Treatment, whether you're talking about treatment received from a doctor, therapist, sponsor, program, spiritual director, life coach and so on, is where what is missing begins. What is missing? It's the identification of the paradox of choice.

Google the word paradox and you'll find an interesting quote saying, "A paradox is the truth standing on its head to attract attention to itself." There is paradox in the ideas of surrendering to be empowered, being power-less to embrace being power-ful, and not getting what you want when you want it but always getting what you want in the end.

That's the purpose of treatment. That's the result of recovery. It is in the paradox of realizing what is missing is nothing. That we already have the power within ourselves, given perhaps to us by a higher power of our own understanding, to change. To let go. To forgive. To make amends. To heal. To help others. And ultimately, to die but to die instead knowing we have purpose and passion and people...people that we love and that we know that we know that we know love us.

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