

“Addiction and Recovery”
by Rev. Ann Schranz
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Unitarian Universalist community minister and poet Ric Masten said in the poem read as the opening words (“This I Would Say to Graduates” that he learned early on to begin his remarks to high school students not by going for a laugh but by telling the truth – that he has “terminal” cancer and that, for eleven years, his son was a crack addict. For Ric Masten, poetry is trying to put a line of language around pain and puzzlement. The pain and puzzlement of his son’s problematic substance use ranks right up there with the pain and puzzlement of Ric’s own terminal illness.

I have listened to several parents *outside this congregation* speak of their heartbreak when a child is addicted to drugs or to alcohol. I selected “Addiction and Recovery” as the topic for this morning because I have been haunted by the agony of these parents, parents who have had a child in and out of rehab several times, in and out of jail several times, in and out of psychiatric wards several times, and in and out of the office of a county coroner – that one time. To be haunted is, in a sense, to be “stuck.” For me, this sermon marks an inner shift from being haunted by memories of conversations with these parents to being motivated *by* them to act. I am motivated to help strengthen this congregation’s capacity to minister to and with people whose lives have been touched by addiction. (Statistically, the lives of more than half the people in any congregation of any kind have been touched by addiction.) More generally, I am motivated to help strengthen this congregation’s capacity to minister to and with people living in a variety of challenging life situations. Check out next month’s newsletter for a notice inviting volunteers for a new “Caring Connection” group.

I have met a fair number of Unitarian Universalist ministers, though I have not met the Rev. Dennis Meacham. Through his recent book, *The Addiction Ministry Handbook: A Guide for Faith Communities*, I feel as though I know him because, through his words, I know some of what he has been through, and I see the ripples in the water that he has set in motion within Unitarian Universalist congregations. Rev. Denis ended up in a detoxification/rehabilitation hospital after a downward spiral of around-the-clock drinking that lasted for years and left him unable to go on with life without help. “The day I hit bottom marked the beginning of an odyssey of recovery, discovery, and new life,” he writes.¹ “While addiction has physical, psychological, and social consequences, recovery is essentially a spiritual undertaking,” he

¹ *The Addiction Ministry Handbook: A Guide for Faith Communities*, Denis Meacham, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2004, p. vii.

continues, “– a journey of reconnection to one’s true self and deepest values, as well as to others and to the life force.”

Whether or not we (or a loved one) struggle with addiction, we all have the challenge of managing our attachments. “Each of us can be placed at a position along the continuum between no attachments and addiction in regard to the things that are important I our lives,” writes Rev. Denis.² “One in five of us will become dependent on a chemical substance in our lifetime. Others of us move back and forth along the continuum in our relationships to substances, behaviors, people, and possessions. We achieve spiritual recovery from addiction when we learn to maintain attachments that are freely chosen and life affirming,” he continues. “In so doing, we avoid enshrining attachments that threaten our most deeply held values and that can obscure our inescapable need to live with both the pleasures and the uneasiness of our humanity.” We come together in religious congregations, in part, to learn how to take in the pleasures and the uneasiness of our humanity with some measure of grace.

Focusing upon recovery for a moment -- What works? The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (and other 12 Step programs) have an impressive track record in helping people turn their lives around. 12 Step programs have saved the lives of countless people. Let us be grateful for life preservers of whatever shape or color! A life preserver is a life preserver, and the shape and color are beside the point . . . and yet . . . Shape and color matter. 12 Step programs present a special challenge for non-theists, including some Unitarian Universalists, who do not believe in God, as God is commonly understood in this culture. There is no getting around it: 12 Step programs are framed in theistic terms. For example, Step 3 is “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” Step 11 is “We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

The “as we understood Him” qualifier opens a little space, but, even so, God is conceptualized as a person, and God has a gender. What is someone to do who does not relate to common interpretations of this language? I ask this as someone who deeply respects the power of theology and philosophy to help make our lives better – or to make our lives worse. Theology and philosophy matter. They help us make sense of our lives, or they get in the way. As an aside, I dream of a congregation where people engage each other about theology and philosophy on a regular basis – say, at coffee hour or in a new, yet to be designed small group ministry setting or – scandalous as this may be – before committee meetings or board meetings. “What is your take on power, Higher Power, powerlessness, and surrender?” we might

² Ibid., p. 23.

well ask each other, for it matters. We might well ask “What is your take on power, Higher Power, powerlessness, and surrender?” not out of idle curiosity but because – truth to tell -- we seek comfort for ourselves or for our loved ones (or we seek challenge for ourselves or for our loved ones).

What is a non-theist to do when his or her life is out of control, and the most successful path to recovery is a 12 Step program? For someone in immediate physical, emotional, social, legal, or spiritual trouble on account of substance abuse, I suggest that the best answer is “go to meetings” and forget about fine points, medium points, and blunt points of theology. 12 Step meetings are one of the few places in society where people are honest, really honest, about their lives. It is easy to be caught up in appearances, to want to put on a happy face, to keep up with the Joneses, to highlight areas of competence and talents and to downplay annoying “growing edges” and vulnerabilities.

Not only are 12 Step meetings one of the few places in society where people are really honest about their lives, 12 Step meetings are one of the few social spaces where virtually everyone who wishes to speak has a chance to do so, without competing for the floor or competing for attention. It is interesting to note that the decline in attendance at the services of mainline religious denominations correlates with the increase in attendance at 12 Step meetings. It may be that 12 Step meetings are the quintessential small group ministry for the 21st century. And what does that say about us and the society and culture in which we live?

In contrast to a non-theist in *crisis*, what is a non-theist in *recovery* to do; that is, what is a non-theist in long-term, stable recovery to do? Someone who perhaps owes his or her life to a 12 Step program, though the shape and color of the theistic life preserver can no longer be ignored? I suggest that liberal religion (whether liberal religious theism or liberal religious non-theism) has something to offer to 12 Step programs so that even more people can be reached and helped.

In my experience, religious liberals are quick to criticize religious conservatives, yet they are slow to take upon themselves the discipline of articulating their own religious insights. Granted, articulating any complexity is hard. Yet the relative ignorance of many Unitarian Universalists about our own theologians and philosophers is embarrassing at best and harmful at worst. For example, 12 Step programs talk about surrender to a Higher Power. This Higher Power is most often interpreted as a fairly traditional God, though it might be interpreted as the power of the group or in some other manner. I wonder how many people struggling with problematic substance use might be helped if they knew that, from the point of

view of theologians in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, “surrender to God” might well mean *limited surrender to a limited God*?

Limited surrender to a limited God. Dare we go there? Dare we go there, regardless of our personal beliefs, in the service of the many for whom the traditionally interpreted 12 Step framework is not authentic spirituality? The late Charles Hartshorne, in his book *Omnipotence and other Theological Mistakes* writes, “I introduce, with a minimum of criticism or argument, six ideas about God which have been held by a great number of learned and brilliant philosophers and theologians through many centuries and in many religious traditions, but which I and many others, including some distinguished modern theologians and philosophers, have found quite unacceptable.”³ According to Hartshorne, the six mistaken beliefs about God are these:

- 1) God is absolutely perfect and therefore unchangeable.
- 2) Omnipotence
- 3) Omniscience
- 4) God’s unsympathetic goodness
- 5) Immortality as a career after death
- 6) Revelation as infallible

And Hartshorne is a *theist!* I wonder, can we non-theists stretch ourselves to try to influence theistic religious settings to benefit those who are caught “betwixt and between” theism and non-theism? Once recovery is long term and stable, it may not be good enough to speak of a Higher Power “as we understand Him.” At that point, perhaps we have an obligation to “meet people in the middle,” speaking from our own religious insight but not remaining there; instead, stretching ourselves in terms of theology and philosophy as we invite others to stretch themselves in terms of theology and philosophy. In the great scheme of things, I believe that Unitarian Universalists may have a modest though important role to play in shaping the theology implicit in 12 Step meetings.

Earlier, I mentioned a “limited God” (Hartshorne’s “theological mistake” of God as omnipotent). What about “limited surrender”? Here I draw from the work of Unitarian Universalist theologian and seminary president the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker. In the book *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, she makes the case that surrender to the will of another (whether the other is Divine or human) *must have limits*. She draws from her experience as an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse. She draws from seeing a connection between the rationales given for domestic

³ *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*, Charles Hartshorne, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, 1984, p. 1.

violence and the rationales sometimes given for the violent crucifixion of Jesus, and she draws from her knowledge of Christian church history. For half of its existence, the Christian church did not worship a child-abusing Father God. The Rev. Rebecca draws from all of these areas to declare that *too much surrender is a bad thing*.

She writes, “Both our capacity for connection and our capacity for separation have to be cultivated into responses that are life-giving and life-sustaining. The power to hold and the power to let go, to connect and to disconnect, each of these powers can be used for good or for ill. Ethical maturity learns the difference and knows the right time for each. Neither power [neither the power to connect or surrender nor the power to disconnect or refuse to surrender] can be [considered] as an absolute good without risking harm.”⁴ In the tangles of congregational life – where we entangle ourselves and where we disentangle ourselves -- we are trying to learn the right time for connecting with each other and the right time for disconnecting from each other. We are trying to learn limited surrender to a limited Higher Power, for indeed, there is a power greater than ourselves that can restore us to sanity.

In closing, the life strategies of people in long-term, stable recovery are similar to the life strategies endorsed by leading experts in stress management, according to Rev. Denis. Let us think about ways we might organize congregational life to better support these 10 life strategies.⁵

- 1) Attend to good nutrition.
- 2) Maintain a schedule of regular exercise.
- 3) Cultivate a hearty sense of humor.
- 4) Be honest.
- 5) Cultivate at least one healthy, passionate interest.
- 6) Commit to altruistic activity.
- 7) Undertake a daily prayer or meditation practice.
- 8) Cultivate the practice of being present and fully awake to life.
- 9) Cultivate an awareness and receptivity to the transcendent in life. (In other words, head for the deep end of the pool!)
- 10) Participate in the life of a caring community.

This community is a caring community, and there is a place for you in its life. There is a place for you here, not just in terms of what you might receive, but also in terms of what you might give. In this religious setting, we bring our whole selves – not just the “spiritual” or “religious” or “social justice”

⁴ *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, Beacon Press, Boston, 2001, p. 197.

⁵ *The Addiction Ministry Handbook: A Guide for Faith Communities*, Denis Meacham, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2004, p. 33.

oriented parts of ourselves. We bring our whole selves. Here, we can stretch and grow, heal our spirits and heighten our impact on the world outside these walls. May it be so!