

Sobering America

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PRESIDENT BUSH'S ASSERTION IN HIS STATE OF THE UNION address for 2006 that "America is addicted to oil" was, for many, about as startling as the notion that the sun rises in the East. Nevertheless, these five words are arguably the most useful declaration this President has made during his tenure in office. Those of us who work with and study addiction are well aware that for addicts the initial admission – the letting in – of the idea that addiction is somehow involved in their difficulties is a huge step; one which greatly enhances the possibilities for sobriety.

This is true even though this initial "admission" may be a stalling tactic. When growing mountains of evidence make wholesale denial insupportable, addicts often do an about-face, embrace the label – and then define the concept in such a way as to ward off ideas and actions that might actually threaten their addictions. Indeed, Mr. Bush completed his sentence by observing that the oil we're addicted to "is often imported from unstable parts of the world." This is a bit like an alcoholic suggesting that their real problem is that the only convenient liquor store is in a bad neighborhood. And his next sentence made it clear that the President fails to grasp the deep significance of his seminal pronouncement, when he declared that "The best way to break this addiction is through technology." In the world of addictions treatment such thinking is called "changing seats on the Titanic." This evocative phrase refers to a pattern of changing the *focus* of addiction, without addressing the underlying *fact* of addiction.

But regardless of suspect motives and flawed understanding, President Bush has done us a great service by putting the discussion of America's addiction on the table. As a sober addict and a professional working in the field, I would like to contribute a few thoughts to this conversation.

△ There are two possible uses of the word "addiction." One refers to a physiological dependency, the other to a devastatingly intimate psychological and spiritual entanglement. The first version grabs us by the throat; the second invades our being. Both apply to America's relationship with oil today. While the physiological crisis sets off the most dramatic alarms, the second version is more pernicious over the long run, because our core experience of identity is at stake. My comments here are concerned with the latter usage.

△ Oil is but one aspect of our country's addictive quagmire. America is saturated with addiction. Addictive consciousness and behavior permeate not only our personal lives, but our recreations and entertainments, our spiritual and religious communities, and our conduct of business and politics. Institutions such as the criminal justice and penal systems, overwhelmed with the victims of addiction, are themselves riddled with addictive process. Quite aside from the chemical addictions, addictive life patterns place an escalating burden on our health delivery systems. And in the larger world, addictions to hatred and righteousness feed a "war on terrorism" – which feeds the addictions to hatred and righteousness that

feed terrorism, in a classical display of the self-amplifying crescendo of addictive progression.

Δ Addiction is human nature writ large. We are full of longings, and we love shortcuts. Addiction beckons to us when we discover what seem to be shortcuts to the fulfillment of our deepest longings. We live in a time when such transformative shortcuts are more sophisticated, potent, and ubiquitous than ever before in human history. So we are sitting ducks for the Great Lie of addiction: That control and manipulation are the appropriate – indeed, the necessary – means to achieve personal fulfillment. This conviction leads us first into hubris, then, through descending stages of ethical deterioration and personal degradation, to the wasteland of estrangement and despair that is the legacy of hubris – the legacy of addiction. This is the human predicament. From *Gilgamesh* to *Pinocchio* to *The Lord of the Rings*, our literature and our legends revisit this tale. Today the story of addiction is being written across the face of the globe. The destiny of our species, as well as the larger biosphere, is at stake.

Δ Every journey into sobriety begins with an event called “hitting bottom.” It is often imagined that hitting bottom involves some critical mass of situational catastrophe. In its essence, though, hitting bottom is when you are no longer willing to live with the person you have become. This is a time of disintegration. I can’t fully explain why some people emerge from this disintegration and move into sobriety, while others never do, but I’m sure that grace and humility are involved in that equation.

Δ There is an indispensable “No” residing in the heart of sobriety. Sometimes it seems to be straightforward: an alcoholic doesn’t drink, a heroin addict doesn’t use heroin, etc. Most addictions, however, don’t lend themselves to unambiguous definitions of abstinence. For people addicted to food, work, sex, exercise, spending, etc., the “No” is more nuanced. But in any case, the bedrock of sobriety is saying “No” to the strategy of control as an avenue to fulfillment. And this is as true for the chemical addictions as it is for behavioral addictions. Alcoholics who take a resolute stand against drinking, but are still embedded in the control attitude, are known as “dry drunks,” and they are notoriously narrow-minded, intolerant – and unfulfilled.

Our nation has had a problem with saying “no” for quite some time now. The last time America practiced abstinence in a heartfelt way was, interestingly enough, the last time we were in a war that met the constitutional requirement of being declared by Congress. This war was declared in early December of 1941, days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In a short time rationing was established, limiting food, gasoline, and manufactured goods, and Americans were contributing to scrap drives and buying savings bonds to support the war effort. No such spirit of sacrifice and restraint accompanies today’s ostensible “war on terrorism.” Instead we are consuming so frenetically that in 2005, for the first time since the Great Depression, the U.S. savings rate for the entire year was in the red.

THE CARTOONIST WALT KELLY FAMOUSLY OBSERVED, “. . . we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us.” The soul-gripping version of addiction acquires its ability to make us our own worst enemy by commandeering the very experience of “self.” As the Japanese maxim has it, “First the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes the man.” We are, as a nation, taken. To borrow a phrase from the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous, America is an “extreme example of self-will run riot.” We are drunk behind the wheel, with not only the rest of the international community, but the traumatized biosphere of earth itself, along for the ride. To be sure, we are not alone. The American model of the “good life,” addictive to the bone, has become the cultural standard for large parts of the world. But this could be turned to advantage, if we come to terms with our addictive predicament, and begin to model sobriety.

How can we, in our private lives, as American citizens, and as members of the human family, begin to dissolve the illusions and shackles of addiction and grow into sobriety – into authentic fulfillment, and conscientious stewardship of our precious Earth? We need to explore these questions together, for we are all involved; none of us are bystanders. But here are a few pointers. I warn you in advance that they are not glorious or heroic. Sobriety is a humble undertaking.

Δ *Walk the walk.* There is no substitute for personal example. I spent the better part of two decades trying to fix the world while I was, myself, increasingly entangled in addictions. As a result my efforts at social and political reform were, at best, severely compromised. Individual addicts pursuing sobriety are encouraged to ask themselves, “What’s my part?” This is a wonderfully double-edged question. It can be read, What’s my part? Or, What’s my part? The first rendering indicates our areas of responsibility; the second promotes humility by reminding us that we play but a limited role.

Still, as small a part as you may feel you play in the great flow of worldly happenings, when you turn aside from the cultural mainstream you send out ripples that magnify your influence. You are one of the three hundred million cells that make up the body politic, the cultural corpus, of America. One sober cell can help detoxify dozens – or hundreds – or thousands or millions – of cells steeped in the poison of addiction. As well, sober addicts have long recognized the axiom that we enhance our sobriety by giving it away. This does not mean stalking people with evangelistic fervor; it does mean being available to demonstrate, through words and behavior, that there is a life-enhancing alternative to the ever-tightening downward spiral of addiction.

Δ *Don’t try to get “all better by Thursday.”* People often recognize that they are addicted to, say, alcohol, marijuana, food, sexual acting out, cigarettes, shopping, video games, chat-rooms, and television. It is too easy, contemplating a list like that, to go to our graves mired in our addictions, because we feel that once we begin saying “No” in one area, we must suddenly become consistently virtuous and healthy across the board. Such a prospect is, of course, unimaginable – and therefore undoable. In such cases the following incisive advice is recommended: deal with the addiction that’s killing you the fastest. The (very) good news is that

sobriety is contagious not only without, but within. Above we saw that manifesting sobriety is influential for others around us. It is also influential within us. If you are investing in sobriety with respect to the addiction that's "killing you fastest," you're going to find that this sobriety begins to spill over into other addictive areas of your life. The balance will shift gradually, gradually – until, over time, you will realize that your life has become profoundly changed for the better.

Δ *Don't try this on your own.* At the heart of every addict is a loner. The addict feels like "It's me against the universe." – that it is unsafe to truly disclose themselves, for disclosure compromises control, and control is, as we've seen, the very heart of addiction. Sobriety doesn't work, then, as a do-it-yourself project. Sobriety emerges out of experiences of identifying with others in settings of fellowship and community where personal authenticity is sought rather than avoided. Is it challenging to find like-minded others with whom you can collaborate in the work of sobriety? Yes; but not as difficult as we imagine when we are tucked away in our own self-imposed isolation. Every sincere effort is rewarded – albeit sometimes the reward is to cross one option off the list of possibilities.

SO WHAT ABOUT AMERICA? IF WE THINK of our country as an entity that is struggling with addiction, as we have every reason to do (thanks, again, to George Bush for the "heads up"), how can we fit the above ideas to our nation's plight? For starters, my personal list for the top three addictions of America – the addictions that are killing us the fastest – are, Oil, Militarism, and Fundamentalism. ("Fundamentalism" here includes political as well as religious fundamentalism, characterized in every instance by self-righteousness, intolerance, and a total lack of humility.) They are in no particular order, because they are inextricably woven together. You may have a different list. Your list might focus on the ways in which our civil discourse has become so permeated with denial, rationalization, and ranting disrespect that we can't reason coherently among ourselves. Or you may list the ways in which we are raising our children to be addicted – to food, toys, games, television, violence, etc. Or you may observe that the addictive spending that results in a negative savings rate for us as a citizenry is paralleled by the addictive spending of our own government, currently going into debt at a rate of over two billion dollars daily.

It is not all that important how we might shape our list, because however we catalogue it, the overall picture is of a society in the later stages of addictive progression, where the reasoning processes are essentially disabled, and decision making is almost exclusively in the service of the implacable black hole of addictive craving.

The good news is, this dire state of affairs offers us what is called among sober addicts the "gift of desperation." Enough of us may conclude, to paraphrase the hitting bottom description earlier, that we are "no longer willing to live with the nation we have become," and begin to invest ourselves in the work of exploring and promoting the possibilities for sobriety. (This, of course, is quite different from conventional political reform activities founded on righteousness and partisan attacks.) We may move toward a redemptive transformation of America, begin to open ourselves to the possibilities of a truly global community of nations and peoples – and in this way "walk the walk," and become, again, a nation embodying principles that serve as a beacon for humankind.

The bad news, of course, is that we might not. But I know that every addict who ever got sober felt, at one point, that it was utterly impossible. And there are millions of us today. I offer this six-word encouragement that has been helpful in my personal and professional efforts to advance sobriety: Surrender control; practice love; accept responsibility. Every effort on behalf of these principles shifts us away from the deadly cul-de-sac of addiction, and toward realizing the luminous possibilities of our presumptuous, precocious species.

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