A spirituality of connectedness for an addictive culture

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Suspended reality

THE ADDICT, NO MATTER WHAT THE ADDICTION, is in a state of suspended reality, for reality is experienced as too intolerable to face. In most cases it is the fear of unendurable pain, sometimes physical but more often psychological. To face such pain is, it would seem, to risk annihilation or a sense of shame so deep that despair would be inevitable. Sometimes, however, the feared reality is an overwhelming premonition of meaninglessness or emptiness which, if faced, would render life no more than a sterile desert to be trudged through without hope. The addict suspends reality by seeking refuge in a substance or emotionally induced trance in which he or she experiences an adrenalin-charge that promises much but is essentially and cruelly mendacious. The trance is as treacherous as the flight from reality which induces the addiction in the first place.

Contamination

It is this permeating poison of deceit, evasion and false hope which can easily contaminate all those whose lives are touched by the addict's behaviour and way of being. They too, if they are not securely anchored will, like the addict, lose their bearings and become swept up into a world of denial, obsessionality and hopelessness. It is well known, for example, that the families of alcoholics spend an inordinate amount of energy concealing the reality of their home life from the outside world. The children in such families are frightened because of the unpredictability of their environment and they grow up seeing themselves as lonely and stressed and often trapped in jobs where they merely play out a role.[1] Not infrequently, too, children of addicted people, because they are keen observers but poor interpreters, think of themselves as in some way responsible for the addict's plight and are plunged into guilt feelings and a sense of their own worthlessness. The same crippling self-denigration can also afflict adults, be they parents or partners, who are close to the addict. They punish themselves with the belief that if only they had behaved differently or offered more support, the addict

would not have the need to seek solace in the addiction. What is more, the addict is often only too ready to reinforce such self-accusatory thinking. The alcoholic, for example, will tell his wife that he only drinks because she nags or the workaholic will berate his family for their gross extravagance which alone obliges him to work so hard.[2]

Culturally approved addictions

The workaholic is the representative of a whole host of addicts whose addiction is not immediately manifest because it does not lead to behaviour which is recognizably outside the norm. Indeed, it is such forms of addiction which the culture induces and even commends. The emergence of what might be termed 'culturally approved addictions' has massive implications for those afflicted by the addict's behaviour, for their suffering can be made to seem not only inappropriate but also reprehensible. They are made to feel guilty because they have a personality which apparently resists the obvious requirements of the modern world and its concomitant 'virtues'. The wife of the alcoholic or the parent of the adolescent drug-abuser may feel guilty because of their powerlessness or their sense of having failed the addict, but they are unlikely to blame themselves for feeling negatively about the addiction itself. This is not always the case, however, where a 'culturally approved addiction' is at the centre of their misery.

Sheila's husband is a very successful head teacher of a large comprehensive school. He is much respected by his colleagues and admired widely in the community. OFSTED, the schools inspectorate, has given his school a glowing report and he has recently been invited to join a prestigious 'think tank' around the theme of leadership in schools. Sheila, however, is on the verge of despair and pours out her agonizing dilemma to her counsellor:

> We never see him these days. The children might just as well not have a father. I can't remember the last time that we relaxed together and we haven't had sex for months. But he is so committed to his work and obviously so successful. I know it's wrong for me to complain. He's basically such a good man, he earns a wonderful salary and we don't lack for anything. And he was so proud when that OFSTED report appeared in the press.

Sheila, it is clear, is married to a workaholic who is abusing her and their children through neglect, but she feels guilty that she is so dis-

tressed by his behaviour which is, it would appear, legitimized by excellent results, and thoroughly approved of by the Department for Education and Employment.

Paul's predicament is, on the surface, very different, but there is a connection. He has recently discovered, to his horror, that his wife has fallen victim to the increasingly widespread addiction of 'shopaholism'. In his first counselling session he relates the trauma of his discovery:

> I thought she was buying rather a lot of clothes and we seemed to have a new table-cloth for every day of the week. But when she told me she had run up bills of over £10,000 I simply couldn't believe it. I don't know what we're going to do and I've already cancelled our summer holiday. But I find it difficult to blame her. There's no stigma now, is there, to being in debt, and instant gratification is encouraged by almost every circular that comes through the door. And there are more and more shops opening twenty-four hours a day and you can scarcely move for shoppers on a Sunday in the city. And she tells me all her friends – whoever they are – do the same thing. I almost feel a moral prig getting on my high horse about it – but we're in bad trouble, there's no doubt about that.

The new capitalism

Both Sheila and Paul, in different ways, have partners who have fallen victim to a culture which is increasingly obsessed with work and subject to the all-pervasive influence of unbridled consumerism. The two are closely related. As progressively the world moves towards a global economy and multinationals become more powerful than governments, there comes about a fearful interconnectedness where everyone is essentially a consumer or a producer, or in most cases, both. What is more, the demands of this global 'new capitalism' require that workers become increasingly adept at reinventing themselves in the interests of an ever-changing economy. In his spine-chilling book, *The corrosion of character*, the sociologist Richard Sennett spells out the personal consequences of work in this new order.[3] He shows a world where there is an increasing threat to those aspects of experience which in the past have determined a sense of identity and the integrity of character. These he sees as being largely dependent on loyalty and commitment, the pursuit of long-term goals and the disciplined practice

of delayed gratification for the sake of future ends. The new capitalism, however, is impatient and focuses always on the immediate moment and the short-term opportunities for gain and profit. In such a context, institutions constantly break apart, procedures are redesigned almost daily and loyalty or commitment are seen as obstacles to progress. The search for identity takes place on shifting sands where the reference points have no durability. It is perhaps scarcely surprising that in such a vacuum, a kind of existential terror sets in, accompanied by an inner emptiness which is the hallmark of despair. Sennett sees this as the breeding ground for perhaps the characteristic neurosis of our age – drivenness. Both Sheila's husband and Paul's wife, in their different ways, have fallen victim to precisely such drivenness over which they have less and less control. The workaholic seeks to bolster his sense of identity and self-worth through ever greater achievements while the shopaholic attempts to satisfy a desperate need for security and attention through possessions and the simulated love of courteous shop assistants.[4] Sennett has a telling description of the driven man (or woman), which portrays starkly the nightmarish inner world of those who are caught up in the 'culturally approved addictions' of our contemporary society:

> The driven man does not conform to the old Catholic images of the vices of wealth, such as gluttony or luxury; the driven man is intensively competitive but cannot enjoy what he gains. The life history of the driven man becomes an endless quest for recognition from others and for self-esteem.[5]

In essence, of course, the plight of the 'driven' person is no different to that of the conventionally labelled addict. The workaholic, the compulsive gambler, the drug addict are all seeking to escape from the same intolerable pain of meaninglessness, worthlessness and self-contempt. Much the same can be said, incidentally, of those who are now compulsively hooked into the technological wonders of the internet and the instant world of the e-mail and computerized communication. The mobile phone addict seeks constant assurance that someone is there on the other end to hear that the train is running two minutes late or that it is raining. The constant checking to see if messages have been left comes from the same need to be wanted and acknowledged, while the compulsive internet-surfer hopes to find meaning and stimulation in the limitless range of information at his or her fingertips, much of which is facile, dangerous or simply erroneous.

The threat to identity

For those close to the addict, whether culturally approved or culturally denigrated, the potential contamination effect is the same, even if the manifest outcomes are different. The wife of the alcoholic may be physically assaulted or battered, the parent of the heroin addict deceived, verbally abused and robbed, those close to the workaholic ignored or abandoned, the families of gamblers or shopaholics reduced to penury, those who live with television or internet addicts condemned to loneliness and a permanent absence of communication. Whatever the particular sufferings for the addict's family and close associates, the psychologically lethal poison is, as I have suggested above, the same. The addict and the addictive behaviour constitute a major threat to the other's identity and can infect him or her with the same sense of worthlessness and meaninglessness which prompt the addictive behaviour in the first place. It is this insidious, psychological poisoning which can destroy those who are involuntarily caught up in the addict's life and against which they must protect themselves at all costs. In a world where it is increasingly difficult, as we have seen, to establish and retain a sense of identity and integrity in the face of the insatiable demands of a global consumerist economy, this is no mean task.

The acceptance of powerlessness

To feel powerless is the common experience of those whose lives are linked to that of the addict, and powerlessness is known to be a primary factor in causing the exacerbating stress. It is precisely the repeated experience of being totally incapable of effecting change in the addict's condition which leads to despair. For counsellors and others it can become maddeningly incomprehensible why, this being the case, so many people choose to remain with addicts and thus to submit themselves to a life of constant stress and despairing frustration. It is difficult sometimes to escape the suspicion that a kind of psychological masochism is at work which is ultimately healthy for neither helper nor addict. Just as in many cases there can be little chance of recovery for a drug addict who remains in the drug culture surrounded by fellow addicts, so for the addict's 'significant other', it is argued, there is often no solution but to sever all contact if sanity and a semblance of normal living are to be preserved. Addiction destroys and addicts, in turn, can become destroyers from whose clutches it becomes imperative to escape. And so, parents may cut themselves off from children, wives flee from husbands and friends disappear in the night.

As a therapist who over the years has had many dealings with the relatives and friends of addicts, I have no doubt whatever that such a radical severance is sometimes life-preserving. In those cases where an addict's partner is, for example, in grave danger of violent physical or sexual assault, it is clear that to stay around is to court possible physical annihilation. There are instances, too, where verbal and emotional abuse are so ferocious that the addict's intimate runs the risk of being so crushed that recovery will take years and may never fully be achieved. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in such cases, the person who remains to be so abominably abused has already lost almost every vestige of self-respect and has bought into the addict's twisted perception of them as worthless and useless. There is, however, a further and equally powerful argument in favour of radical severance. To leave the addict can, in fact, be – from the place of apparent powerlessness – a liberating act of love. It is at one and the same time a statement about the 'leaver's' valuing of self and a refusal to permit the addict to perpetrate yet another act of abuse which may, one day, add intolerable weight to an already heavy load of guilt. To leave the person you love out of self-love and a deep desire to alleviate their subsequent guilt is, I would suggest, an act rooted in a spirituality which, because it accepts powerlessness, can be transformative. What is more, such a spirituality is the surest guarantee of the continuing ability to accompany those who seem to have forfeited every right to accompaniment. The person who leaves the other within the context of such a spirituality does so not as an act of abandonment or desperation (understandable as that may be), but as a means of retaining connectedness while withdrawing physical presence for a space.

The spirituality of connectedness

The connectedness which I am suggesting makes it possible to accept powerlessness and to transcend it, is of an altogether different order to the involuntary interconnectedness of the provider–consumer entrapment of the global economy. This is a connectedness which enables a person to feel anchored when all around is turbulent and when, as is often the case with those close to addicts, there is vilification and rejection from those who have the greatest power to wound because they are the most loved or their love is the most desired. To withstand such a buffeting and the agonizing sense of impotence which often goes with it, there needs to be an assurance of a deeper validation which is not dependent on the responsiveness or psychological health of another

human being, however precious and significant. For the devout Christian, the notion of surrendering into the arms of God and finding assurance and validation there can be profoundly restorative as long, that is, as God is perceived and experienced as unconditionally loving and devoid of anger and judgement. It is my own conviction that the amazing popularity in recent years of Julian of Norwich and her *Revelations of divine love* lies precisely in her perception of the all-lovingness of a God who does not forgive because he has never accused in the first place.[6] This is the God with whom the experience of connectedness is a mighty defence against the rejection of others and the inevitable tragedies of life. For the non-Christian, too, Julian offers hope because she sees in humankind an essential nature which has never been separated from God and never can be: in humanistic terms it is not difficult to translate this into a belief in the infinite value of the human being at his or her core. To be truly connected to one's innermost being is to find there – contrary perhaps to much of the apparent evidence – someone who is worthy of the deepest respect and love. Such connectedness is the prerequisite for the self-love which is the very antithesis of selfishness, for it flows from an acceptance and internalization of the unconditional love at the heart of the cosmos which, for the Christian, is the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

This connectedness with the essential self where God is to be found is the cornerstone of the spirituality of which those close to addicts of all kinds stand in urgent need. For many, however, such self-love will elude them because they have so often felt alienated from others and have not experienced membership of the human family. Indeed, it may even be that the addict is the first person with whom they have felt a real relationship and they grieve for something which now seems to be slipping from their grasp. Such people desperately need to discover that they are welcome in the human family; they need to experience, in the words of the liturgy, that 'although we are many, we are one body'. Because life with an addict has often meant secrecy, defensiveness and shame it is not always easy for those close to addicts to stretch out to others, and it may be that the first halting steps will be to a doctor, priest or counsellor. It is these professionals who often have the immense privilege of welcoming an alienated person back into the world and of enabling them to find the courage to seek companionship and nourishment in the wider community. A Christian community which lives its faith as the Body of Christ can be the context in which connectedness with the human family can be rediscovered or perhaps truly experienced for the first time.

The connectedness with self and with others will provide the anchorage which will enable those close to addicts to continue their accompaniment even if, in some cases, self-love demands physical separation for a while. From day to day, however, it may well be that disciplined attentiveness to other aspects of the created order will foster an equally life-sustaining connectedness. Trees, flowers, countryside, animals, special places, beautiful buildings, music, literature – all can have their part to play in the cultivation of a spirituality which can transform the sense of powerlessness into an awareness of infinite resourcefulness, and the hell of loneliness into the realization that we are members one of another. It is Julian of Norwich who also teaches that good comes out of evil and it is not perhaps altogether fanciful to see the prevalence of addictions in our culture as an invitation to the Church to discover anew its vocation as the healing community which in the face of fear, fragmentation and evasion offers the hope of connectedness to the indwelling God, to others and to the whole created order.

The Church as the unconditionally accepting community

Powerlessness, guilt, self-denigration, anger, grief, hopelessness, shame, alienation, loneliness, despair – it is difficult to imagine a more lethal line-up, and yet such states of mind are the daily experience of those who are swept up into the world of an addict whom they love and for whom they care. If the Church is to be a source of healing for those in such profound distress it must eschew every possible hint of judgement or condemnation. The paralysis which afflicts many of those close to addicts is reinforced most particularly by corrosive feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Healing, if it is to come, must begin with a restoration of self-respect and a release from guilt feelings which are usually inappropriate in any case. Sadly, however, the Church is all too often experienced, both by some within it, and certainly by the vast majority outside of it, as a guilt-inducing institution which exerts a 'carrot and stick' morality buttressed by an unbelievable fairy-story about crucifixion and resurrection. On Easter Day, 2000, such widespread perceptions were given shape in a hard-hitting article by a leading columnist, Joan Smith, in the *Independent on Sunday*. Perhaps the fact that the article appeared on Easter Day gave it an added poignancy, but its general tone and theme articulated, I believe, the perceptions and reactions of many people in our society.[7] A few

quotations – appalling in their implications – serve to make the point only too forcefully:

> . . . the vast majority of us no longer go to Church . . . This is a very good thing. Whatever the denomination, religion is a mixture of myth and superstition that provides a woefully inadequate basis for the kind of morality we need in a modern democracy . . . The problem for the churches, of course, is that they have a pessimistic view of human nature. They do not believe in altruism. They think everyone needs to be threatened and cajoled into behaving well . . . There is a famous picture of Pope John Paul II sharing a balcony with General Augusto Pinochet, The Beast of Santiago, a mere 14 years after the coup . . . in the United States, immorality has become synonymous with extra-marital sex, while evangelical Christians eagerly support human rights abuses such as the death penalty, keeping lethal weapons at home and, in extreme cases, attacks on abortion clinics.

It is difficult to imagine a view of the Church more divorced from the kind of community which I believe can hold out hope for those who both need and yearn for a spirituality of connectedness. Those who have lost touch with the core of their own beings – if they ever had such contact in the first place – and feel ashamed in the presence of their fellow human beings, require unconditional acceptance and the assurance that they are both infinitely beloved and capable, in their turn, of great loving. As a therapist I know – as far as anything is knowable this side of the grave – that it is lack of self-love which lies behind the greatest evils in private and public life and in the affairs of nations. It has been my wonderful – and I sometimes feel somewhat exceptional – good fortune to find in the Church a community which has shown me by word and deed that I am infinitely loved by God not in spite of my sinfulness but in my sinfulness. Not to love myself with equal intensity – which has nothing to do with selfishness – is to throw God's precious gift back in the face of the giver. If the Church is to be a community of healing for those who struggle with the sufferings inflicted by the desperate behaviour of addicted loved ones, it has to be the place where the profound and unconditional acceptance and understanding can be found which spring from the love of those who know that nothing can separate them from the God whose noblest creatures they are. Again, Julian of Norwich tells us all we need to know if we are to be the community where the spirituality of connectedness can work its healing and redemptive miracle: 'We are his bliss, we are his reward, we are his

honour, we are his crown. And this was a singular wonder and a most delectable contemplation, that we are his crown.'[8]

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NOTES

1 M. Callingham, 'The ACoA fact-finder', *Addiction Today* vol 11, no 61 (November/December 1999), pp 17–19.
2 P. Evans, *Driven beyond the call of God* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999), p 33.
3 R. Sennett, *The corrosion of character* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).
4 S. Mayes, 'I need to shop and shop and shop and shop', *Woman's Journal* (November 1995), pp 59–61.
5 R Sennett, *op. cit.*, p 105.
6 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of divine love*, trans Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 1998).
7 J. Smith, 'Belief does not make you moral', *The Independent on Sunday*, no 533 (23 April 2000), p 25.
8 Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p 216.