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ALCOHOLISM'S UNNATURAL HISTORY

ALCOHOLISM IS NOT A 'HEALTH' ISSUE, BUT ONE OF PERSONAL AND EXISTENTIAL PAIN. RECOGNISING THIS WOULD FORCE US TO ACKNOWLEDGE ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL METHODS OF DEALING WITH ALCOHOL ADDICTION

Watching former Tasmanian premier Jim Bacon on TV, resigning himself to continuing a course of palliative care for lung cancer and urging young Australians not to be 'idiots' and smoke, reminds one that there is such a thing as addiction. Bacon prefers to say he was stupid rather than addicted. And this is to a substance that is not mind-altering!

This example gives us an interesting view of how we deal with addictive substances on a social and personal level. Addiction is a problem for the late modern world because it questions the very basis of consumption and choice. In a wider social world, choice is everything; for the addict, choice can be death. Yet the Australian response to addiction is marked by ambivalence, particularly in the case of addiction to alcohol. Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the serious nature of this social problem, the attitude to one of the most successful ways of dealing with alcoholism — through Alcoholics Anonymous — is often one of downright antagonism. As a sociologist who reads the literature on addictions and problematic drug use, I often wonder why — and here I will try to unravel the mystery.

The most prominent narrative of addiction in the last few years in Australia and other places is the narrative of social construction. This narrative presents drug use as an integral part of the social world and cuts it loose from biology and physiology. Addiction only exists if there is a stigmatised role of 'addict'. Without this deviant category there would not be a notion of addiction. Thomas de Quincey wrote about his seventeen-year addiction to opium and even lengthier time with laudanum. He could write so openly because there was no notion of addiction as a stigmatised social category at the time, but what he described was addiction nonetheless.

There is also the postmodern, discursive view of addiction as an extension of social constructionism. Discourses of addiction, in this view, are part of the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary power and knowledge. The addict is part of the 'web of power' that plagues him/her into networks that constrain and limit the individual. This is a particularly abstract notion of addiction that rarely admits to the material reality of the individual body, or even the social body. This narrative comes not from the sociological study of the experience of addiction, but cultural studies research on written texts such as the book What's Wrong with Addiction by Helen Keane.

These narratives of addiction often merge and become entangled in academic discussions. Combine these with the antagonism-towards-the-disease model of addiction that is sometimes — erroneously in my view — linked to Temperance and Prohibition and we might get an idea of why AA and its models have had such bad press, particularly on the social welfare Left. Take a typical example from a major textbook called Drug Use in Australia, in which one chapter refers to the AA model of addiction as the grand narrative of the 'alcoholic as sinner'. The evidence the authors present is one person's reported statements in an AA meeting from another academic text! Another chapter presents it as a disease model of addiction — but nowhere in the text is any of the large-scale and in-depth studies of AA referred to.

I would argue that the fundamental fact about alcoholism must be that this problem lies in the individual body as much as the social body and it is experienced as a highly individual pain. This pain is materially real and cannot be explained away as a form of discourse, amenable to the linguistic contortions of postmodernity or dismissed as simply a social construction. Alcoholics are different from non-alcoholics. The difference is not easy to distinguish — it only really becomes apparent in its most extreme manifestations — but it is there. I cannot say that my first drink of alcohol changed my life — I cannot even remember it — but I know plenty of alcoholics who say just that. They remember their first drink and how it made
them feel. For some who always believed they were different or outsiders, their first drink made them feel part of humanity. For others, their natural shyness disappeared and they became loquacious and humorous. Again others just drank themselves into a stupor from the first moment because they hated the world so much and never seemed to leave this state, at least not until the pain became too great and they permanently left this world.

The sociologist Norman Denzin, in his opus *The Alcoholic Society*, wrote that every alcoholic he talked to drank 'to escape an inner emptiness of self'. Of course, many of us experience an inner emptiness at

many times of our lives, but what Denzin talks about is an emptiness which is a constant. For Denzin, the 'alcoholic self' is constantly in search of fulfilment through alcohol, but alcohol just pushes the alcoholic further away from him/herself and all others. No drug or cognitive therapy produces permanent ful-

ment — only sobriety through the experience of like-mind others. One could suggest that the divided self produced by alcoholism precedes the first drink, and an existential pain must exist which is married to some physiological and biochemical response to alcohol. There is some genetic component, but what is it and how it works is not understood, and it is unlikely that any pharmaceutical therapy can ever offer a solution — though medical experts, along with pharmaceu-
tical companies are always hinting at the possibility. For Denzin, the answer to the individual alcoholic's pain is the community of others, specifically the community of alcoholics. He is talking, of course, about Alcoholics Anonymous.

A parallel world

Many years ago, I worked as a youth worker in what was known as the Community Youth Support Scheme. We worked out of an old house, but there was one room that we did not use and which was generally locked. One day I had to go in to do something and I felt that I had stumbled on the meeting room of a secret order, like the Masons. What struck me at first was the terrible odour of tobacco (this was in the days when we could smoke absolutely anywhere) and then I noticed the banners on the wall. They were full of strange language which included the terms God, higher power and surrender. It looked to me as if I had fallen through a hole in the floor and found myself in a parallel world. My stoned friends and I lived off jokes about it for years.

Thus, as a sociologist and a materialist, feminist and atheist, my first AA meeting — which I attended as a non-alcoholic — came as a shock to me. I imagined it

had to be a cult, that it produced automatons who were close to born-again Christians. For me, the answer to alcohol and drug problems was to sweep away poverty and inequality; the social and personal body were indistinguishable — what was good for one was equally good for the other. After listening to the unmediated stories of pain, anguish and redemption, I came to believe that I was wrong. Not that poverty and inequality should not be swept away, but that alcoholism would be swept away with them.

However, I did meet many stalwarts of the Left in those AA meetings and stalwarts they stayed. I know academics, unionists, politicians, writers, folk singers, musos from the 1970s who regularly maintain their sober conditions through AA. To get to this position and stay in AA, these people had to cross a line that would have been unimaginable, and the only explanation can be the intense, existential pain they experienced when they drank.

Many, whatever the drug of choice had originally been, ended up drinking themselves into oblivion. It may only have been because alcohol was the cheapest and most freely available. There are many paths into addiction and many different categories of addicts. In the end, I never truly understood what they were doing or what they were feeling. I could not understand, ever. I am not like them. I do not feel their pain, I could never cause pain to people the way they did, and nothing I do could ease their suffering. I suspect this is one of the reasons there is such a distrust of AA and its notion of alcoh-olism — that alcoholism produces a different category of individual, one not amenable to the niceties of living in the world as non-addicts might do.

But I do know people who are like them. They come together in rooms (no longer smoke-ridden) and recite a prayer at the end of their meetings. Most of them have found some kind of religious understanding; many are still atheists; but all have some form of spiritual ful-

iment. Those meetings are more egalitarian than almost any other community they may belong to, although sexism and racism still exist to some extent.

Here people seek to change the way they live in the world and it is a change in morality, as much as in alcohol consumption. We may find the way that television has taken up this public confession distasteful, but the AA meeting is not an episode of *Oprah* — it is not a mediated televisial experience. To the same extent as any conversation, it is unmediated. It also demands an ethical understanding of individual experience. Obviously some people are better at it than others. An old AA saying is that a sober horse-thief is still a horse-thief.

There are many well-known people who admit to membership of AA. Even in death, however, many people's friends and relatives often refuse to acknowledge the importance of AA in their lives. It is as if
acknowledging AA is a recognition that some things (like sobriety) are more important than motherhood or friendship or other social roles.

Why are we so reluctant to recognise this state of addiction that some people find themselves in? There are strong cultural and economic forces that make alcoholism almost impossible to speak about. To recognise it would mean having to do something about it. In Australia at the moment, it would mean having to deal with the availability of help to overcome the problems of drunkenness, and it would mean facing up to the key issue of whether it should be portrayed to any degree as a 'health' issue. While it has health consequences, it is not a health issue; it is an issue of personal and existential pain. Even after his public humiliation, Democrats leader Andrew Bartlett would not admit to an alcohol problem. He called it instead a 'health' problem. More people are now willing to admit to problems with depression but few mention that they have been compulsively drinking a depressant for most of their adult lives. They are happy to admit to Prozac but not the sobriety (or lack of).

It is more than likely that it is a cultural distrust of AA, its religiosity and its American influence, that keeps many antagonistic to it. Ultimately, one of the most powerful arguments in AA's favour is that it works. A sixty-year follow-up by the writer George Vaillant — carried out fifteen years after the release of his *The Natural History of Alcoholism*, which looked at American men with clear alcohol problems in the 1940s — found that those who were still alive were most likely to be abstinent.

Beyond that, most alcohol-related problems in Australia are not connected to alcoholism or addiction, but to drunkenness and its consequences. Indeed, alcoholics or chronic heavy drinkers make up between 5 and 15 per cent of the drinking population. Mixed with aggressive forms of masculinity, drunkenness contributes to all forms of violent crime, from the minor altercation in the pub between drunken bulls, to domestic assault and then to deaths of all sorts. It does not matter whether it is used as a form of excuse or 'time-out' — without the intoxicating effects of alcohol, violent crime would be much reduced.

Large and small epidemiological studies show quite clearly that the cheaper and more readily available the alcohol is, and the greater the number of alcohol outlets, the greater the problems that exist. Some cultural factors may ameliorate or enhance its worst effects, but the reality is that humans, especially those in societies which are based on endless consumerism, will endlessly consume alcohol and other intoxicating substances. Attempting to minimise its most harmful effects without dealing with supply is to park an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. I am not saying we should not provide the ambulance, but we cannot pretend that it is anything more than that. It is here that the abstract nature of academic discussions combines with libertarian constrictions of personal choice.

Resistance, then, to the restriction of the supply of alcohol means that we are really unable to effectively deal with the worst aspects of alcohol consumption.

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