

MANNA *in the wilderness*

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DRUGS, ADDICTION AND SIN

by Jeff Dietrich

In ancient Greece, there was a class of people, called the Pharmakoi, who served an important, but dubious function. The purpose of this class was to serve as a cure for social distress. The Pharmakoi were a subclass comprised of criminals, handicapped, and physically deformed outcasts who were kept in ready supply in the event of natural or man-made disasters. In times of social distress, a group of Pharmakoi were rounded up and led to the city gates, where after various rituals were performed the sins of the community were projected onto them. They were then beaten, stoned and cast out. They were made into scapegoats designed to unite all of the good citizens of ancient Greece, making them feel more connected to one another, and more secure.

Of course, today we are so rational and pragmatic that we look back with disdain at such barbaric rituals. However, the basic tendency to use scapegoats, to project all of our “sins” onto the other, has not gone away; it is alive and well in our contemporary social structures. Not so long ago it was the Jews who filled this role; today it is drug addicts, more specifically African American drug addicts.

One recent award-winning book gives us remarkable and compassionate insight into this critical problem. The Canadian doctor Gabor Maté, in his book, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, looks at the same issue through the lens of the medical science of brain development.

Although Dr. Maté works in Canada, the population he serves in Vancouver bares an uncanny resemblance to our own Skid Row population in Los Angeles. Along with hard-core scientific research, the book contains numerous poignant personal profiles that could easily have been drawn from the LACW soup lines.

Almost without exception, every hardcore substance abuser, says Maté, has suffered from severe early childhood trauma: such as abandonment, nutritional deprivation, battery, and rape. In response, the brain adapts in a survival mode that almost inevitably precipitates addiction in later life. Because the adult human brain is so large it would be impossible for a baby’s head to pass through the birth canal if its brain were fully formed in the womb, as the brains of other mammals are whose young are far more independent than humans soon after birth. Therefore human

beings are more profoundly, and for a much longer period of time dependent upon close nurturing attachment to the mother than other mammals are.

If an infant does not receive extensive breastfeeding, cuddling, loving talk, the baby’s brain becomes significantly impaired. And if the mother is depressed, fearful, or angry, the baby’s brain is impaired. When Dr. Maté was an infant in 1944 Nazi-occupied Budapest, his mother called the doctor for advice

considerable research regarding the chemical impact on brain abuse and deprivation is revelatory. Apparently, we do not just “get over it.”

“Happy, attuned emotional interactions with parents stimulate a release of natural opiads in an infant’s brain,” says Dr. Maté. “This endorphin surge prompts an attachment relationship and the further development of the child’s opiate and dopamine circuitry. On the other hand, stress reduces the numbers of both opiate



ILLUSTRATION BY T. BRINTON

because her baby cried continuously. “Of course I’ll come,” the doctor replied, “but you should know all of my Jewish babies are crying” (p.241). Babies cannot speak, but they can feel the tension in mother’s arms and body.

“The three environmental conditions,” writes Maté, “that are absolutely essential to optimal human brain development are nutrition, physical security, and consistent emotional nurturing. Human connections create neural connections...the child needs to be in an attachment connection with at least one reliably available, protective, psychologically present, and reasonably non-stressed adult...Infants of stressed or depressed parents are likely to encode negative emotional patterns in their brains. The majority of chronically hard-core substance dependent adults lived under conditions of severe adversity that left an indelible stamp on their development. Their predispositions to addiction were programmed; their brains never had a chance” (p.194-196).

For those of us who believe that human beings are creatures of agency with free will, and that once we are adults, we should just “grow up and get over it,” the

and dopamine receptors. Healthy growth of these crucial systems—responsible for such essential drives as love, connectedness, pain relief, pleasure, incentive, and motivation—depends therefore on the quality of the attachment relationship. When circumstances do not allow the infant and young child to experience consistently secure interactions, or worse, expose him to painfully stressing ones, maldevelopment occurs” (p.198).

Without the attachment relationship, an infant does not develop the dopamine receptors that are essential to forming good relationships in later life. The deprived infant will develop its own means of self-comfort, thumb sucking, rocking...the tendency is that in later life, that child will substitute things for relationships. And in its essence, says Maté, “addiction is the substitution of things for relationships.” In the case of the hard-core addict, these things are drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling. For those of us who grew up in more “normal” households, they might be an addiction to shopping, fame, power, compulsive work, prescription drugs, (See Dietrich, continued on back page)

(Dietrich, continued from front page)
alcohol, or tobacco.

According to Maté, we all have an addiction problem; there is no “normal” in historical urban civilization, but most especially there is no “normal” in our contemporary compulsive capitalist consumerist society. Our entire economy is predicated upon the commodification of desire. It is based upon urging consumers to fill the unfulfilled needs of early childhood maldevelopment with things—cars, boats, luxury tours, expensive homes—rather than relationships. For the hard-core substance abuser, whose early childhood abuse was more deeply inscribed than we might ever understand, the intensity of this lack screams for relief.

In reading Dr. Maté’s book, one could come away with a sense that all victims of early childhood abuse will inevitably become addicts or that hard-core drug users can never overcome their addictions because of irreparable damage.

However, the truth is that there are many victims of abuse who do not go down the road of addiction, and there are many addicts who have been able to overcome their addictions. Nevertheless, what I think Dr. Maté is asking us to recognize is that those who do overcome their addictions are immensely heroic people struggling against, not only their biological neurological and psychological impairments, but against the burdens our punitive economic and criminal justice systems places upon them.

Dr. Maté urges us to look upon drug addicts not as reprehensible criminals or weak-willed degenerates, but rather that in “the dirty underside of our economic and social culture...We should see our failure to honor family and community life or to protect the children; we see our failure to grant justice to the [poor]; and we [should] see our vindictiveness towards those who have already suffered more than most of us can imagine.”

What we are compelled by Dr. Maté to realize is that drugs and addiction are not the sole provenance of poor and marginalized people; statistics confirm that all classes of people use drugs. In his book,

Dr. Maté, quotes Jesus: “Stop judging, take the plank out of your own eye before you try to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye.” If we are to deal realistically with the problems of drugs and addiction, we have to begin to admit that it is not a problem with black people or poor people or criminals. It is a problem that is shared by all of us, a problem that needs to be approached collectively in a spirit of national repentance. I do not expect that to happen anytime soon.

So, in the meantime, I will settle for the moderate goals of Dr. Maté: supportive housing for addicts, safe injection sites, the decriminalization of drugs, and free medical quality drugs to addicts. One of the great stories that Dr. Maté tells is about Dr. William Stewart-Halsted, who for decades was the Director of Surgery at Johns Hopkins Institute. And he was a lifetime morphine addict as well. He was a great surgeon who lectured and taught and reformed the very practice of surgery and he daily used morphine for most of his adult life (p.325). We have to remember that the legal drugs of alcohol and tobacco kill more people than all the illegal drugs combined.

Here at the Catholic Worker, daily we see the effects of the War on Drugs in our Skid Row neighborhood with petty dealers and addicts “jacked up,” harassed, and arrested. We see thousands of police man hours devoted to protecting the rest of society from people who are essentially

**PRAY FOR
PEACE
IN OUR
WORLD!**

(FOR
TAB)

*Rosary:
Fridays,
8 a.m.*

the poorest of the poor. We thus unequivocally call for the condemnation of this hypocritical War on Drugs that is nothing more than a war on the poor, specifically on African American poor. We call unequivocally for the decriminalization of all drugs and the immediate release of all nonviolent drug addicts and dealers.

Should we take such a reasonable, though unlikely course, we could release 75% of our incarcerated inmates, close three-quarters of our prisons, reduce

crime by at least 50%, and reduce our police force and budget by the same amount. If we take the profits and crime out of illegal drugs, we could restore sanity to the drug mafia nations of the world, resurrect the U.S. from her mass incarceration nightmare, returning her once again as a land of the free.

Dr. Maté shows us how we have created a malicious and punitive system that projects the sins of the righteous and upright citizens onto the most vulnerable members of our society. Just as the ancient Greeks projected their own sins onto the marginal Pharmakoi, sacrificing them as scapegoats to “cure” civic unrest and promote unity, so do we project our “sins” of addiction on to contemporary marginal drug addicts seeking a “cure” for social unrest and impetus for unity. The word Pharmakoi derives from the same etimological root as pharmacacy, which means a strong drug that can be either a cure or it will kill you. If you take too much of the drug it can become a poison. Some would argue that unlike the ancient Greeks we have already over imbibed.

Jeff Dietrich is a Los Angeles Catholic Worker community member and editor of the Catholic Agitator. Jeff recently had his book, Broken and Shared: Food, Dignity, and the Poor on Los Angeles’ Skid Row published by Marymount Institute Press (available from tsehaipublishers.com or (310) 258-5460). This article is edited from the article printed in the August 2012 Catholic Agitator.

The Ediger Memorial Interfaith Celebration of Active Nonviolence

Sunday, Sept. 23, 3-8:30 p.m.

Islamic Society of Nevada

4730 E. Desert Inn Rd., Las Vegas
Presenters: Vincent Harding, Kathy Kelly, Mary Litell, Rae Abileah, Ahmed Younis, The St. James Catholic Church Gospel Choir. Dinner provided. For info call: (702) 646-4814 or www.nevadadesertexperience.org

PLEASE JOIN US:

Wednesday-Saturday*, 6:00 a.m.:

Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

Wednesday-Saturday*, 6:30 a.m.:

Breakfast served to the poor & homeless.

*closed on fourth Saturday of month

Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. - noon:

Hospitality Day, we invite 20 homeless men home for showers, to wash clothes, and to have a great lunch.

Thursday, 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.:

Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Court-house, 333 Las Vegas Blvd. S.

Thursday, 10:30 a.m.:

50 Bag lunches delivered to homeless.

Third Saturday of month, 8:00 a.m.:

Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

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