

Taming the Serpent

First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis

April 6, 2014

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You can be free. Liberation is possible, and this church can help in your liberation. The serpent of addiction does not have control over you. Seek the freedom of the mind and body.

People, throughout the ages, have longed for freedom. The freedom to do what is right, and freedom from what keeps us hooked, trapped or bound to suffering. In the words of the hymns we sing today, you can hear the promise of freedom as shaped by the experiences of people in this country facing literal slavery and prison. We Unitarians certainly want all people to be free from those realities. Beyond that, the centrality of freedom to the Unitarian Universalist tradition goes back to the days of heavy handed ecclesiastical control of congregations and the merger of Governmental powers with official Christendom. These circumstances impelled our emphasis on freedom of the individual conscience in religious matters to affirm what is true and right, and the freedom of each congregation to govern itself, and the centrality of character development within the free-religious life. But the notion of spiritual freedom goes much further back than that, back to the letters of the Apostle Paul who wrote of freedom in Christ, and to the epistle of James, which speaks of the “perfect law that gives freedom”. These Christian writers were drawing upon words from the Jewish Psalms and prophets, and from the central image of liberation upheld through Passover within the Jewish faith.

Other religions also have liberation as a central theme, for it is a universal human longing: to be free. This is both a practical matter, and a spiritual one. Now, some might say that addiction is merely a practical problem, one to which theology has nothing to add. At a certain level, this is true. Some persons, who are living life awash in drugs or alcohol, can one day just decide they are going to give up that expensive recreation, and to experience a clearer life. Other people can break an addiction by going through a well-structured detox program. But others find themselves free for a while and then get hooked, or trapped, again by addiction. How to break the presence of such chemicals in your life is one thing, and being free from addiction is another. As Jim noted in his sharing this morning, he had to break from alcohol and then he had to face a deeper dependency. The first could be done at once. The second must be continued, one day at a time, for your life.

This reminds me of a story, you might have heard it, about an alcoholic who goes to a bar every day after work, orders three beers, then drinks them all before leaving for the night. One night the bartender asks, “Why three?” The man says, “I have two brothers. Since we were young we always drank together, each ordering a round so that we always drank three. Now, both of them have joined AA and no longer drink, but I keep up the tradition.” Then one night, the man comes in and orders only two beers. The bartender gets worried and when he brings the beer he asks, “Why only two; did something happen to one of your brothers?” The alcoholic shakes his head. “OH, no, no, they are fine. I just decided, only for myself, to give up drinking during Lent.”

Self-control is undermined by self-deception, and the human mind has a high capacity for self-deception. Thus, treatment for chemical dependency is pretty straightforward and practical. However, the issue is not only the reaction the person has to a stimulant, but the spiritual and psychosocial habits and hungers that underlie the dependency. During the past few decades, we have expanded our understanding of the structure and chemical nature of the brain. The neural pathways are complex, and the brain is changeable, what scientists call “plastic”, but a way of summarizing the situation is to refer to the amygdala as the “reptile” or Serpent brain. This regulates the most fundamental and unconscious pleasure and pain stimulus responses in our minds. These pathways are so ingrained that when the very cognitive, “human,” brain gets involved, the best it can do is justify the action already chosen by the serpent within. That is why community is so essential, as a source of support, encouragement, but also clarity of perception. A community of support expands and empowers you to overcome the serpent brain, tame it, and integrate its power into your life. The so-called “higher power” to liberate you can be found in your own mental habits, as well as in the community you keep around you.

To summarize: Chemical dependency, is a diagnosable and treatable condition. It includes a compulsion to seek a chemical or behavioral stimulant, often unconscious or against reason, and an increased tolerance for the source of the stimulation, multiple failed attempts to quit, a physiological and psychological suffering when the stimulant is withdrawn, and the fact that the seeking of the stimulation has deleterious effects on your life, causing harm to self or others. You can break the presence of a substance in your life at a practical level. But to change your life, and eliminate the habits of mind that drove you to the addiction requires more. It requires admitting that your life has become unmanageable that you are controlled by the serpent of addiction and not by the habits that bring freedom of mind and soul. This pattern was described by *Michelle Deakin*, who wrote *an article* for the UU World Magazine in 2004. She describes Denis Meacham:

“He was a successful man of business, founder of his own publishing company. He was a college professor with degrees from Princeton and Harvard. And he was an alcoholic, struggling with a compulsion to drink around the clock. He couldn't leave his house without a drink. He was plagued by night sweats. He found himself in bars at 8:30 in the morning to fortify himself for the day's work.”

His wife finally helped him get into a detox program, but when he came out of that in 1988 he found that his Unitarian Universalist church did not offer support for a recovering alcoholic. Often they did not understand his experience, and some did not want to understand or talk about his needs or experience at all. So he began to develop UU addiction ministries and is now a UU Minister, recently retired after serving UU congregations and the liberal-religious *Center for Addictions Ministry* in Massachusetts.

Part of what got in the way for congregations helping him was sociological. People did not want to be associated with something they felt “happened to other people.” But the problem was also theological. , Theology is the way one thinks about the powers of the world and our existence. Theology responds to questions such as: “What am I, what is in control of my life, how should I live and how do I know what is good or not?” In the late 20th century Unitarians often saw addiction as a mere failure of will. But we need a deeper understanding of craving so that we can

tame it. This is where I find Buddhism helpful, and why we shared with you this morning words from Pema Chodron (read the full teaching [here](#)).

Pema Chodron works within a Tibetan teaching tradition. She writes of *shenpa*, the urge to cling or reject. It's a quality of experience that everyone knows well. Some call it "attachment" but it is more than clinging. When she talks about *shenpa*, she implies not only an urge to get something, the urge to drink, for example, but also an urge to push something away, to avoid feeling uncomfortable. *Shenpa* is only desire but also aversion. She wrote, "At the subtlest level, we feel a tightening, a tensing, a sense of closing down. Then we feel a sense of withdrawing, not wanting to be where we are. That's the hooked quality. That tight feeling has the power to hook us into self-denigration, blame, anger, jealousy and other emotions which lead to speech and actions that end up poisoning us."

Pema Chodron gives the example of complaining. We fall into the habit of being negative and judgmental about something because it makes us feel superior instead of helpless. But what has happened is that the serpent has chosen for us our actions. We have become addicted to the feeling of being a complainer. So addiction is not just about drugs and alcohol. For any addiction Chodron describes the process of taming the serpent, in terms of the "Four Rs": recognizing, refraining, relaxing and resolving. She explains these as recognizing the *shenpa*, refraining from scratching, relaxing into the underlying urge to scratch and then resolving to continue to interrupt our habitual patterns like this for the rest of our lives." In Christian theology, this would include seeking God's Spirit as a higher power that helps us with these four Rs. In Buddhist teaching, it is our inner Buddha nature that guides and empowers us. In both, it is the sangha or the religious community that extends that power beyond of our own will and strengthens the power within us.

The other day I was listening to Radio Lab. This is a creative program on public radio about various scientific topics. Yesterday they shared stories of how one small thing can change everything. The story that seemed perfect for this sermon was the story about a German nursing-home.

This was a place where they were housing and caring for people with dementia. These people could sense that their world had changed for them, that much had been lost, but they could not often understand exactly how that change had happened. Dementia can cause great confusion and anxiety, a feeling of being trapped or out of place, and a deep desire to escape back to a place that makes sense. The persons in this nursing home would often get confused about where they were and would want to escape. Sometimes they would take a bus. One got more than twenty five kilometers away before being found again. Usually when people wanted to "go home" the workers in the home would tell them "no, you live here now." The people might become angry, upset, and even violent and need to be sedated or locked in a room. This was never pleasant.

Then one day someone got the idea of putting a fake bus-stop bench outside the facility. It looked exactly like any other bus-stop, but no bus ever came there. Sometimes it was useful for catching someone who was trying to escape. They would notice that someone was missing and then find them out on the bench, just waiting. Then, a nurse or caretaker would come and sit

beside the person until they were ready to return inside. After a while, they began to use the bench as therapy. If someone wanted to go somewhere else they might say, “Let’s go out and catch a bus.” The suffering person and their nurse would sit outside, in the proper clothing for a change, and wait.

The first thing that happened, of course, was that the person with dementia immediately calmed down; they knew there was a chance of escape from their suffering. Then, after they sat listening to the birds, or a cold breeze in tree branches, they would forget why they were sitting there, forget that they longed for some other place. The “here and now” became acceptable. Eventually, their companion would invite them in for tea and everything was fine. Now, you might protest that this was a lie, this story of a bus that would come and take them to freedom. But Truth was in that story. The truth was that the person could be free from the place of fear and the feeling of a prison. One very important point was that the imaginary bus changed everything for that place. Everyone, from the nurses up to the administration, began to think differently about the home and the nature of their work. They too had been liberated from suffering.

Thus our theology of liberation must include the fabric of the community. The serpent is the part of the mind that drives us to cling, to attach and to suffer. It cannot be utterly destroyed, or not easily anyway, but instead must be managed or tamed. A person can make choices to break from the object of attachment, the focus of the addiction, but then then must go deeper to find the roots of clinging, craving and aversion. The power to tame and temper clinging, or *shenpa* is a higher power than mere will. For some, it is encountered as a very personal God. For others, it is the dharma, or Buddha nature. For others, it is the organic presence of health in human community and action. Find this source, use it to tame the serpent of addiction in your life.

There is an old German saying: *Die Gedanken Sind Frei* (‘dee gedanken zint fry’), meaning thought, or mind, is free. This sentiment about spiritual freedom was set into a folk song, and that song was then translated into #291 in our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*. It is a lovely bit of poetry that summons the nature of thought, and the essential freedom of the spirit, soul, or mind:

“*Die gedanken sind frei*, my thoughts freely flower. / *Die gedanken sind frei*, my thoughts give me power. / No scholar can map them, no hunter can trap them, / no one can deny: *Die gedanken sind frei*.

My thoughts are as free as wind o’er the ocean, / and no one can see their form or their motion. / No hunter can find them, to trap ever bind them: / my lips may be still, but I think what I will.

A glimmering fire the darkness will brighten; / my soaring desire all troubles can lighten. Though prison enfold me, its walls cannot hold me: / no captive I’ll be, for my spirit is free.”