

Secular responses to addiction



Highland Views

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Columnist

As a chaplain in jails and on the streets, I moved among countless men and women whose addictions ruled or ruined their lives. Oftentimes, these addictions were causes of the unwise decisions that landed a person behind bars or behind bushes without homes.

I mostly counseled and conversed with people struggling with drugs or alcohol, but there are many forms of addictions. People seeking the rush, the thrill of some altered state of consciousness and “higher” feeling — an escape. Yet as most of us find out in life, the “highs” can lead right down to the “lows.” What goes up, must come down.

Someone gets high and they hurt another person or they hurt themselves. The human toll is immense, costing lives and resources that should wake us up to the troubling fact: We live in an addicted culture (think opioids).

This isn't just a poor person's problem. Addiction to power, self-image and shopping, in our endless accumulation of “stuff and things,” makes us sick.

Pat was an alcoholic. Joe was a drug-gie. Jen was both. Each was a smart, gentle person — until they used. They would help others or volunteer to clean our drop-in center. But they couldn't stay “clean” and were judged “unclean” so they were locked up, out of sight, in a dirty cell.

They may have been “SOS” — Stuck on Stupid — but they weren't stupid; they just needed a way out.

Unless people get help while they're locked up, chances are they'll be back out using. “Using.” There's a word to

think long and hard about. What's being used and who's being used?

The revolving door of the jails, shelters and addictions themselves spin around and around, just like the lives caught, trapped, used.

We all know that addiction is a disease. We see how it infects everyone around. But thankfully there are ways to end the destruction and begin the healing, when people finally decide they are killing themselves and harming others — they admit they're helpless. They “hit bottom” as some put it.

Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous have been around a long time and work for many people. I have friends who are in recovery and I know “the program” keeps them going — sometimes keeping them alive.

I brought the AA Big Book or “Each Day a New Beginning” devotional into the jail when someone requested it.

It may not be common knowledge that there are alternatives to these faith-centered recovery programs. There are good programs and treatments without “higher powers” and religion-based support.

Though AA and NA say a person does not have to be a person of faith to “do the program,” that it is “God as we understand God,” many of the “12 steps” direct a person to God in some form. This is fine, for many people. But the language excludes those who are nonbelievers.

Secular AA, SMART (Self-Management and Recovery Training), SOS (Secular Organizations for Sobriety) and Rational Recovery are among the options addicted persons have.

One lively discussion I led in jails focused on Father Leo Booth's 1991 book, “When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction and

Abuse.” Booth, an Episcopal priest, defines religious addiction as “using God, a church or belief system as an escape from reality, in an attempt to find or elevate a sense of self-worth or well-being.”

It was amazing to discuss this among inmates of diverse races, beliefs and economic levels. Most had never considered religious faith as another addiction that needed “recovery.”

Religious addiction is often unrecognized but can lie beneath and even generate other addictions.

Take guilt. If a person is told for years they are a “sinner” — forgiven but constantly having to ask forgiveness — they may feel they can never be good enough to please an unhappy, strict Father in the sky. This can lead them to turn toward destructive behavior.

Or take belief itself. A person may have doubts or feel they no longer believe the “right” things. On top of the guilt, there is fear of punishment. The lower in hell someone feels, the “higher a heavenly high” they crave — hard to break free from that cycle.

There's another aspect to religious addiction that may be overlooked: repeating the same words or behaviors over and over without thinking — the mind is unplugged or on pause, while praying, singing, reciting or going to a service. If these become compulsive — “I HAVE to do this!” — addictive behavior emerges.

If we can recover our reasonable selves and take the honest steps — 2, 12 or 20 steps — toward health, we can choose responsible freedom.

That sounds like sobriety, sanity and good sense.

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