

'I CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION'

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I settle down to write this piece with a strong cup of black coffee at my side - wondering with wry humour how much this simple action is about choice, habit, addiction...

I'm extremely satisfied to find a link between the two topics I'm passionate about - forgiveness, and my latest fascination in addictions. Opposites, one the other's shadow, the relationship is clear: addictive behaviour is about inflicting pain, punishing self and/or others; part of forgiving is realising there's no longer need to.

'Today we're going to look at habits and addictions,' my tutor's voice announced, during year one of my counselling training. 'I've always been an addictive person,' I laughed flippantly, and

slightly proudly, to whoever was sitting on my left.

What a truth that was; how little I understood by it. Some years later, I balked at the use of any labels with the words 'am' or 'have' in front: she is an alcoholic; he has OCD, she has PTSD. Diagnoses implied stuck for ever, defining identity. Now I concede that labels are useful so long as they allow the possibility for change. Just as I use tenses to bring awareness to a client's process, so the subtle shift in distinguishing 'who I am' from 'how I behave' can indicate

massive movement towards liberation and well-being.

I can own addictive tendencies, recognise I'm drawn to using certain substances and behaviours in times of stress, and can tolerate a certain amount of not-having and not-having-yet, which means facing and feeling the emptiness I believe underlies all addictive behaviour. Food has usually been my own filler, from starving ('gotta be thin by Friday,' as if that'd solve all my self-esteem issues by making me instantly desirable,) to stuffing as a way of disposing unwanted goods (choc, cheese etc).

Addiction: (I ended a recent piece on Forgiveness with the words 'quick fix'.) 1:- the pull of attention to a substance and/or behaviour that I pin my hopes on to make it all better, to fix it. 2:- the purpose being to avoid the 'it' (often not identified as pain, let alone what pain) that demands to be made better, too painful to acknowledge, far too painful to experience. 3:- this avoidance is experienced as craving the substance and/or behaviour (gambling, drink, fags, uppers, downers, sex, starving, bingeing, hoarding, spending, smacking, rage, misery, excitement, exercise, love - the list is infinite, since it's anything at all, including what we think of as healthy, done to excess, including not-doing.) The empty hole screams 'fill me.' 4:- sometimes, which is an addiction in itself, a torturous revisiting that hole over and over again without resolution: the binge-

starve cycle that solves nothing, simply affirming the learned belief 'I deserve this hell, I did something so bad.....' 5: - confusion between being and doing: 'was it something I said/did?' sinking into the deep shame of 'it's who I am; being me is so bad I shouldn't exist, but as I do I must suffer.' 6: - an 'I can't survive without it' focus on the fix-it, which represents the original life-death struggle, and questions the right to exist, of self and/or others; confusion between being and doing represented by lack of distinction between feeling and acting.

Addiction - a cry from the heart covered up by layers of symptomatic behaviour.

Time for another cup of coffee, my third and last today... and come back empty-handed from the kitchen realising the healthy alternative to address the 'I want' that seeps in as I write about emptiness is to take a break and physically move to shift energy and become more present.

So much for the behaviour and the drive that energises such behaviour. How to work with myself and clients? To address the behaviour without exploring the driving energy is just another attempt to fix. It (CBT included) simply won't work long-term, any more than willpower alone. The very nature of addiction resists attempts to be fixed: any amount of anything, help included, will never be enough. Appetite is insatiable, for the simple reason that the original

hole cannot be filled, the original missing care cannot be had. What can be had, though, is care now. The risk is in digesting rather than rejecting it, for care is what activates, de-suppresses the original hurt. How to manage the craving becomes possible only by gently redirecting the longing to its source, registering the grief and anger that accompanies such lack of what was needed; and gradually relearning to trust that the therapist's care doesn't have strings.

Time to take a look at the genetic content of addiction. Can addictive tendencies be inherited? Why not, whether by gene transference and/or from being on the receiving end of addictive behaviour. The latter is another form of the cycle of abuse whereby the abused takes in feelings of the abuser and goes on to dump them onto another - the classic bully dynamic. I wonder whether repeated behaviour, including addictive, can be genetically encoded, and while I'm speaking from scientific ignorance that would make sense to me. However, if experience can be encoded, surely it can be decoded; surely what I'm born with genetically doesn't exclusively have to rule my life any more than what I've experienced.

Freud's Oedipus theory clamours for mention. I understand it as a story of jealousy, regardless of who's related to whom, and who knows. Of course children want to play sex with their parents; children like to experiment, need

to explore. So long as boundaries around behaviour are held, and the jealousy / possessiveness understood, no harm is done. This is the adults' responsibility, always. If the central role of parents is to encourage their babies and growing children to separate, to learn to distinguish between their selves and others, then forcing them to get ahead of themselves in any aspect and/or holding them back amounts to using the child to 'fix' residual child-needs of the parent - and passes on the emptiness (absence of self is the result of such take-over) that addictive behaviour is desperate to avoid/fix. Narcissistic tendencies (been swotting up my myths!) surely stem from this kind of early upbringing.

The child needs to be allowed to hate as a vital part of the separating process, supported by the parents' consistent loving - not confusing how to manage difficult-to-deal-with behaviour with 's/he's a difficult child and should be punished.'

The parent who punishes ie turns child and hates back, hits the very core of the child's being. Rather than feeling guilty-bad about behaviour, the child feels ashamed of who s/he is. Hating is a wretched state for a child, angry and isolated; how important it is to be welcomed back rather than punished. No doubt the parent wasn't privileged to experience being allowed to hate safely either. This parent is likely to both push away, then cling - anything to avoid re-feeling his/her own

painful separation experiences. The beliefs being acted on are both 'if I attach, I'll have to feel the pain of separation, so better to remain detached,' and 'if my baby grows up, a part of me is lost... I don't/can't exist without...' The terrifying belief 'I'm not complete' is evident in everyday life, represented by compulsive shopping, eating, smothering relationships.

The jealous/terrified parent clings on, absorbs the child's self to complete her own; the child may turn adult before daring to risk leaving, for fear of losing him/herself because that's what s/he's learned will happen. S/he may settle for partial autonomy or not separate at all.

My work with clients is often about the struggle to separate from a fearful mother, frequently including use of food, fags, sex and alcohol to plug the pain, the behaviour a distraction as well as a signpost to the pain that needs attention.

And then I wonder about the ones who get little empathy or understanding - the ones who are addicted to violence, even to killing in an attempt to feed the monster their pain turned into. It seems obvious to me that serial killers are killing their

mothers over and over again; or children who seem to have what they had stolen, or never had - innocence, love. (More closely related than many dare think to the pouring of a third cup to the coffee, or the purchase of another handbag.)

I believe therapy is essentially about replacing punishing 'no's with the compassionate setting of boundaries, all the while making sure the behaviour signposts rather than distracts from the central pain. This process itself is what allows the longing of what was missing to be increasingly tolerated, doing whatever it takes to maintain contact with present time, and thus the adult gradually takes charge of the screaming child, who in turn feels safer for being contained.

To be able to do this, a big part of my work is to acknowledge, with the support of my supervisor, the child-fears in me that can get activated by cancelled appointments and endings, and to contain the urges to cling to or punish clients who prepare to leave. Which in turn allows me to forgiving/lovingly manage whichever part, however 'difficult,' the client brings, and to rejoice in and encourage their development towards autonomy.

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