

Teaching Addicts

From May, 2016 to April, 2017 I taught inmates at the Socorro County Detention Center (jail). Almost all of them were, by their own admission, drug addicts or alcoholics. In addition, some were mentally ill. Here I'll describe what I did, why I think it was helpful to the inmates, and how it compares to other work with addicts and those who are suffering.

Teaching critical thinking

I started by distributing copies of my big textbook *Critical Thinking*, going over some of the material and then asking the inmates to read the chapter and do exercises back in their pod (cell block). That didn't work: they didn't have the habit of reading and doing homework on their own, though they certainly had the time.

So I switched to using my smaller textbook *The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking*. It gives the basic ideas of the larger text but with fewer examples and no exercises. Each chapter is short, and most can be covered in one class of 45 minutes. I would explain the material bit by bit, going around the room asking the inmates to read parts. This made them pay attention to those parts, involved them in the class, and encouraged them to read out loud. Some struggled with reading, and I encouraged them to work together in the pod, helping each other. Then I would distribute exercises that we would do in class, each inmate in turn reading an exercise and all contributing to answering it.

Many inmates liked this. I judged this not just because they returned for class, since any diversion from the horribly boring routine of jail was welcome to them. Rather, more than a few were excited that they could begin to think clearly, to reason, to reflect on what they and others believe. They found that they are not stupid.

The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking and the exercises present a collection of skills, building one on another. The rigor of the book is crucial. Other texts encourage students to "listen carefully," to "respect the other person," and "to interpret what the other person says charitably." Those are hopeless as guides for how to reason well. They are consequences of learning critical thinking, not the basis of critical thinking, and leave students groping for rules and feeling that they have to be a "good person" to think clearly.

Choices

When I first started, and often since, I was told by people who were sympathetic to the inmates and wanted to encourage me:

They aren't bad people, they just made bad decisions.

This was always said in a sympathetic tone. But it's the basis on which to blame the addicts. They had a choice. They didn't have to end up in jail. Now they must pay. There is no empathy for their suffering; it's justice.

But it's wrong. They didn't make bad decisions. They didn't make any decisions. Asked in exasperation "But what were you thinking?" the only truthful answer they can give is "I wasn't thinking."

Rarely do addicts have a choice. They know no other way. The choice is often to face the horrors and kill yourself or to take a drug, to take many drugs to blot out all, to forget and to feel good—if only for a little while. Until they can't stop taking the drug, not to feel good but not to feel bad from the withdrawal. If you blame them for their addiction, then you have never suffered, you have never felt so bad that another day is impossible. Drugs are not

the problem for them—they're the solution. Punishment and threats are nothing to them. It can't be worse than how they feel when there is no drug. We must offer better.

But they had the choice not to start. Yes, when they were eighteen or twenty, or even twelve they experimented, just as you and I took a beer, or cadged a cigarette, or smoked a joint, or even snorted a little. We didn't get hooked; they did. I took morphine for three days when I had surgery and then I stopped, with a day of unpleasant side-effects. If I'd taken it for a week, I'm sure I would have stopped. Others take morphine for a week for a bad back, and they're addicted. Blaming someone for having bad brain chemistry is irrelevant if not wrong.

Besides, how often do we make choices? Did you make a choice to eat another potato chip from the bag lying open on the table? Did you make a choice to drink the beer someone handed you at a party? Did you make a choice to drive the usual way home? Habit guides us, for life would be impossible if we tried to think through every action. We'd be paralyzed. Yet sometimes we need to stop and make a choice. Critical thinking helps us make choices for what is important, to learn new habits.

As the inmates learned to think critically, they began to reflect on what they believe and on whether they should believe what someone else says. They learned how to justify their beliefs and revise them as they learn more. These are skills they need in order to make decisions, indeed even to stop and recognize that a decision needs to be made.

Once I said something stupid in class, hoping the students would challenge me. Then I asked them if they believed it. Most said no. One inmate said nothing. So I asked her why she didn't raise her hand. She said, "Because if I did, you'd ask me why I don't believe it." They were learning.

In critical thinking we learn to look for unstated assumptions. Why do you believe this? Why do I believe this? That is what we need to make choices and to find the basis of our bad habits.

Making good decisions

Critical thinking gives them the skills to make decisions. But that's not enough to make good decisions. For that, they need good goals, good aims, a good way in life.

So after we finished working through a chapter of *The Pocket Guide to Critical Thinking* I would read to them from *The BARK of DOG*. It tells how dogs teach us unconditional love and cats lead us to suffer. We hear stories (all the stories in it are meant to be read out loud) that show us how to be more like dogs: caring, loving, giving unconditionally. We learn to avoid the terrible cats Hate, Greed, Vengeance, Lust, Gluttony, Pride, Impatience, Indifference, Sloth, Schadenfreude [taking pleasure in the pain of others], and Guilt, for they lead us from being loving to suffering. Yet by suffering we learn to love better—or perhaps at all.

Dogs and cats. A bible for those who don't like religion, as one inmate said. But it is also the way of the earliest Christians, of the Quakers now, of Buddhists who do not worship Buddha but emulate his life of compassion. Faith is not important; it is the doing, the charity, that matters.

These stories of dogs, and cats, and people struggling in the world allow the inmates to compare how they live with a better way. Sometimes we talked after a story. Sometimes they cried during a story. One story is about how the most beautiful of all dogs attaches herself to a man who is crazy from guilt because he killed when his tribe fought another. Though she, the dog, could have had any human, for she was beautiful and famous, she

found the greatest good in her life being with this man who suffered, who was the “lowest”. And the story tells how he came to be honored, though still crazy, because others could see the good in him through the love she gave him. After I read that, one of the women said, “I want to be like her.”

The stories are good to hear again and again. Some inmates had been in the jail so long they’d heard the stories three times and still found them moving.

Opening up

Addicts are often frozen emotionally. They cannot be loving. They can only survive. Despite that, they are kind to one another—until they are overwhelmed by the horrors of their lives or the need for drugs.

As they hear the stories from *The BARK of DOG*, they open up. They begin to talk. But the class is always about teaching: the focus is on the critical thinking material and the stories. The focus is not on them. They are not asked to look inward, though some do when they give examples of how to use critical thinking or comment on the stories.

For them to become open again, I have to be open, too. I share with them my ups and downs. I told them once that I had been very depressed, terribly, so depressed that I was about ready to start taking drugs. After all, I said, the drugs must be really good if you give up everything—family, friends, children—to take them every day. One of the men joked that he could arrange for me to get the drugs. Another, though, warned me not to take them because I would end up in the jail like him. I told him I’d be careful to take the drugs only at home. But then talking with the women (I taught the men and women separately), one said, “Yeah, they’ll make you feel better. But afterwards you’ll feel worse.” The other women agreed and told me more. I told them that I couldn’t face feeling worse. I was convinced by them not to take drugs.

This sounds like a contrived episode. But it wasn’t. I truly was depressed. They truly did make me avoid drugs, and they helped me see that I was abusing alcohol. I said that I couldn’t be an alcoholic because an alcoholic is someone who drinks more than me. They laughed, recognizing this as a perversion of our work on definitions in critical thinking. But they also recognized themselves in the definition.

To help them at all, I had to be open. I had to be consistent: every Wednesday and Friday afternoon, never missing. I had to be trusted. I told them that what was said in the class stayed in the class, except for talk of criminal plans. I let them know I cared. But I was never enabling. Not sympathetic, but empathetic. They told me they trusted me because I didn’t judge them. I was a volunteer: they knew I wasn’t paid to be there.

I was warned by the director of the jail and others there that this was dangerous. Someday one of the inmates will say I said or did something bad—probably sexual. After all, sex is on their minds a lot. Perhaps they believe their accusations —they interpret what you and I say differently from what we expect. They’ve lived differently, their brains have been fried, either because of the drugs or because the bad wiring is the cause that makes them take drugs, so they have little impulse control. Or perhaps they strike out, kick at anyone they can, and you or I are closest. Then they feel some power—and the powerlessness is overwhelming to them. Not just the powerlessness of being an inmate, but the powerlessness to stop taking much less wanting drugs or a life with hard people.

I cannot be mad, I cannot avoid them if they accuse me. My reputation may be hurt, perhaps blackened. But I stay with them until, I hope, one day they come to tell me that they are sorry, that they have done wrong. Or they don’t.

But in the jail each accusation has to be taken seriously. Guards at jails have abused inmates. Investigations follow from an accusation. Possibly a lawsuit will follow. So it is not just my reputation but the reputation of the jail that is at stake. The jail administrators and I have not resolved this issue of how open I can be. I've been told never to do a critical thinking exercise that even mentions sex, for an inmate might misconstrue it. Yet they need to learn to make decisions about sex, and sex occupies their minds a lot. I said that I was not worried because I knew that the other inmates would back me up as not having said anything out of line. But even then, there would have to be an investigation, which would be not only tedious but time consuming, involving the Sheriff's office.

A comparison to other methods of helping addicts

All you need is love

A standard way to try to help inmates is to recognize that they, as all of us, want love, unconditional love. So we should try to make them "feel good about themselves." You are worthy of love, we tell them. Everyone is. You can be loved.

That's a dead end. If you're looking for unconditional love, for complete acceptance to justify yourself, to overcome the rejection by your parents, by an uncle who raped you, by a woman who lied to you, by a father who beat you, by teachers who told you you're stupid, love to overcome the guilt for the wrongs you have done—you'll never get it. Whatever is offered is never enough. It has to be there constantly, perfect, always accepting of you. God as the source of the unconditional love you want gets to be thin sustenance. Why did God let them take my baby away if He loves me unconditionally? Why did God let my boyfriend die if He loves me unconditionally? Why does He keep putting drugs in my way so I can't stop if He loves me unconditionally? Theology, it's all for the best, God works in mysterious ways, does not comfort. They cannot see their way by reasoning to the perfection of God's love. They need love now—large doses of it, unconditional. Yet they expect to be betrayed, so that given good—though not perfect—love, they will test it again and again until it breaks. A lover cannot be a saint; he or she needs love, too.

This idea that all we need is love is summed up in the saying:

No se puede vivir sin amor.

"One cannot live without love." Few realize this is a misquote of the saying of the 16th century monk Luis de Leon:

No se puede vivir sin amar.

"One cannot live without being loving." The first leads to a search for love. The second, in which "amar" is the verb rather than the noun "amor" for "love", opens the path to being loving. We, the addicts and ourselves, need to look outwards, not inwards. We need to learn to be loving, not passive but active in our love.

And we need more than love. We need skills—the skills to think clearly. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Face up to your faults

Another way of "treating" addicts is to get them to look inward, to make them face that they are addicts, that they lie and cheat and steal, that they hurt others and themselves. If they can face the truth, it will set them free. Then they can learn to love themselves.

But looking inward is as likely to get them stuck facing how horrible they are. And really, they already know that they lie and cheat and steal and hurt others and themselves.

At least they know when they're in the class in jail because then they're free of drugs, sober, and can reflect. Outside, hurt and hurting, they are in denial. Then looking at what they have done and are doing is important.

But only as a first step. Yet too often it's claimed that if you look inward, if you learn to accept yourself, to be compassionate to yourself first, then you can reach out to be loving to others. But to focus inward is to encourage selfishness, egotism, me, me, me. It might lead to being loving to others but is equally likely to get stuck there: me, me, me. That is what many have found in psychoanalysis.

The 12-step program

The 12-step method was begun by Alcoholics Anonymous and is now adopted by other groups such as Narcotics Anonymous. These are religious movements, based on an evangelical Christian conception of a just and merciful God. Addicts are told to admit that they are powerless and give themselves to God who will "remove all these defects of character" and "our shortcomings." For a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist to adopt the 12-step method would be to go against his or her own religion. For an atheist to be guided by it, he or she must first accept God. I could never adopt the 12-step method because it would mean giving up my most basic beliefs and world-view. Perhaps it is easier for addicts because they don't have strongly held beliefs and a world view.

This method does not encourage the addict to find the power within to change. Addicts are asked to remember the bad they have done and make amends. But we cannot make amends for past hurts we have done, most especially when we were incapable of making choices at the time we did the wrong. Going back to tell people "I'm sorry" is about you, not about them. We have to learn to look forward, to what we can do. The only way to make real amends is to begin to live a good life. Responsibility comes from power within oneself, not by admitting wrongs but by looking each day to be loving.

The only stated goal of Narcotics Anonymous is abstinence, and that through accepting God. I see the goal as living a good life. Walking that path, which anyone can begin whether committed to giving up drugs or not, will lead the addict to want to give up drugs. Abstinence is not a goal but a means.

Narcotics Anonymous is clear that "There is only one requirement for membership, the desire to stop using." But the hard first step is leading addicts to want to stop. The 12-step method seems more to be directed toward getting addicts out of denial, and if it does that, it's good.

And the support of the group at NA meetings is important to many. There the addicts are accepted. They depend on the group, they're encouraged to return and return, sharing their stories. Perhaps this is helpful. Perhaps they do gain some power from this.

Being loving

We can learn to be loving without confronting all our fears, our anxieties, our anger. We help others and feel good by the doing. We might never confront our fears—or perhaps we will because others tell us we are good and we don't believe them, so we try to figure out why we don't believe them. But we might never relieve those deep fears and anger. Indeed, none of us ever will. I never have. But looking outwards, helping others, walking with a loving heart, we can persevere.

It's not "truth" that will set you free from addiction, from fears. It's a better way of living to replace the drugs that will make you feel better. We can become loving so that we

don't always have to be running from our fears. It doesn't require great effort. It doesn't require looking at your navel to discover your past—real or imagined—traumas. It is just *allowing* yourself to be loving as you were when you were a child.

We should be loving and kind and generous with them to make them feel whole and not isolated. But equally, we do so to be an example. You, too, can act this way; you, too, can help others.

The stories of *The BARK of DOG*, which are not only moving but often funny, offer them a better way, summed up in the Covenant of DOG:

- Be kind.
- Be generous.
- Count not the giving and the taking, but give unconditionally.
- Harm no human.
- Harm no dog.
- Keep from thee hate, greed, vengeance, lust, fear, gluttony, pride, impatience, indifference, sloth, schadenfreude, guilt, and allergy, for these are the way of CAT.
- Put from thee all thought of power save the power of a loving heart.

There is no promise of love. But if we are loving we can feel ourselves in the flow of all, the flow of love. Look outward to others, not inward to blackness. Never ask for anything in return, for then kindness becomes a business negotiation. Giving, wholly, with no thought of return, we can become whole and powerful, for there is no power like the power of a loving heart.

This, I believe, is a better way they can embrace. Yes, giving without expecting anything in return is hard, a hard way. But it's also the easiest way. You smile at someone at the grocery store, you pet a dog, you help someone who's dropped a package, you call someone who is hurting just to say hello, you're there with them—and then you feel good. Truly, virtue is its own reward.

Giving, loving, not blindly enabling the bad but with strength of mind, clarity, and empathy. This they learn with critical thinking and the stories of *The BARK of DOG*.

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I called this essay "Teaching Addicts." But really it's for all of us.

How many of us are lost in making a decision about buying a car, about a job, about moving, about investing our money? We just do, without reflection. How many of us live with bad habits from beliefs we've never examined? How many of us believe nonsense that a little critical thinking would dispel?

How many of us strive for power as the greatest good—power through money, power through being sexually attractive, power to compel others to our will, power to hurt, power to insulate us from feeling. Fear is the goad to wanting such power rather than the power of a loving heart.

The difference between addicts and us is that the addicts know they need help.

Arf 

Arf (Richard L. Epstein)
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Dedicated to the inmates at the Socorro County Detention Center who gave me the motivation and courage to write this, and to Ed Sweeney, the director, who gave me the opportunity to teach there.