Why Can't I Fix It?
Some Questions We Ask When We Love Someone with Addiction

Sunday, October 19, 2025
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Hymns: This Joy that I Have (Shirley Caesar); #51 Lady of the Seasons' Laughter; #108 My Life Flows On.
Special Music: Over the Rainbow (tune Harold Arlen, 1939), piano and flute; It Takes All of Us for All of Us to Make It (Soto & Dodd), choir and piano; Aria (Eugene Bozza, 1936), piano and saxophone.

Personal Reflection by Jenni

When I was 18, I went off to college and soon met a charismatic, alcoholic artist six years older than me. I fell in love with him and stayed in a relationship with him for 15 years. For a variety of reasons, my heart had a hole in it and this man's addiction and dysfunction filled that hole perfectly. During the relationship, I secretly struggled with shame and felt very alone. I didn't want to open up to my friends or family about what I was experiencing because I was afraid of their judgment or pity or expectation that I would leave the relationship. Leaving felt impossible because he needed me, or so I had convinced myself. I dismissed his alcoholism and my unhappiness for many years.

In my early 30s, I began to tire of his dysfunction and mine, and I started talking to my partner about 'getting some help' for him. I dove into the project of getting him sober and did all of the work to set up appointments with clinics and therapists and I went with him on initial visits. But mysteriously, nothing worked. In one instance, I scheduled an appointment for my partner to see a well-regarded therapist within walking distance of his workplace. I sat in the lobby waiting for him to show up to the appointment, but he never came. When the therapist called my partner's name, I nervously explained that he wasn't able to come so the therapist invited me to do the session myself. That initial session led to several more sessions and those sessions were a turning point for me. I will never forget the therapist's sage words to me -- "Jenni, sometimes your "helping" isn't actually helping". Wow. That insight, so very simple but spoken with professional warmth, helped me become aware of my co-dependency and slowly gain the confidence to break my tired patterns.

Prompted by my therapist, I went to an Al-Anon meeting. Al-Anon is modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous and is a support program for people whose loved ones struggle with addiction. I was so nervous to go to the meeting - what would I say? How could I describe the complexity of the last decade+ of my life? Well, I didn't end up speaking at all because I cried the entire time. I was overwhelmed by emotion and the realization that I could no longer ignore the dysfunction I was drowning in. I listened and absorbed all I was hearing, and I was comforted that others knew how I felt and were experiencing the same 'stuckness' and frustration. Sadness and grief were expressed freely in that room. I left the meeting with a cathartic sense of relief.

In the movie version of this story, I would have immediately gone home, packed my bags and said goodbye without looking back. In reality, the process of leaving the relationship happened in agonizing fits and starts and took over a year.

Now, many years later, my life is stable, and I am in a happy marriage. Having been launched on a long and difficult journey of personal growth by that early experience with Al-Anon and therapy, I've gained perspective on the trajectory of my journey and compassion for the person I used to be, and for my former partner. I sometimes wonder if he would have gotten sober earlier if I hadn't been so eager to make his life the focus of my own life. These days I can easily see how my co-dependency contributed to the dysfunction in that relationship, and I'm happy to say that I've learned to welcome healthy love and boundaries into my life.

Words from another member about her brother

This reading comes from a member of our congregation, who wrote it several years ago about her younger brother's alcoholism and her inability to change him. She writes:

Am I my brother's keeper? I care about him. But I live a thousand miles away; I may not be able to help my brother get sober, but there are steps that I can take. All over the country, groups of recovery advocates have formed to speak up on behalf of those in recovery, those who need help in getting there, and the folks who love them. I joined an organization called Faces and Voices of Recovery but there are many other advocates, which rally to change public perceptions of addiction, and of recovery, and to remove barriers that keep people like my brother from getting the help they need. I write to my political leaders every time I see an opportunity to speak up for insurance fairness or against the budget cuts that just keep coming against treatment programs.

And when the halfway house tries to open in my community, I'll be one of the folks at the public hearing speaking in favor of it, rather than on the side of the room filled with neighbors afraid for their property values. I know that there are other values that are more important.

Sermon by Roger Jones

Most aspects of our relationships with other people remain beyond our control. This is true especially regarding loved ones, friends, or coworkers who have self-defeating or self-destructive behaviors, especially addictive and compulsive behaviors. Out of a sense of love and care, we may try to change others' behavior, but that is impossible. We feel frustrated, angry and scared. Why can't I fix it? This is the question behind our helplessness.

I appreciate the people who have reached out to tell me their stories of having a loved one with addiction as I was preparing for this sermon. Nearly everybody stated the same answer to that question: You cannot fix another person's addiction. You can't fix another person. But you can find a measure of acceptance and freedom even if the other person doesn't recover from their addiction. You can be healthy even if they are not.

Here are four things we can do to be healthy amid the chaos of life: we can reach out and confide in others, know our limits and honor them, remember our sources of joy, and do things that make us feel proud. This isn't a magic formula; it's work, but it's a lot better than going around in circles of misery, shame, anger, and fear.

This advice comes from Nathan Detering, a minister at a UU church in the Boston area. His younger brother was a drug addict who died of an overdose. His brother was a teacher and a charming friend. He had a wife and a little child. He had gone through rehab and had a 12-Step sponsor, but he couldn't stay clean. Nathan began speaking openly about the pain caused by his brother's addiction and the tragedy of his death. He saw a therapist and attended support groups. He spoke with others who had lost loved ones to addiction and listened to people in recovery. This led him to write the book after which I titled the sermon: *Why Can't I Fix It?*

His brother's addiction was a family disease, but the family learned more healthy ways to address it. They learned, for example, that it is impossible to argue, threaten, beg, or shame an addict into sobriety. However, Nathan's counselor suggested that he tell his brother just three things. As Nathan writes, these are: "How much I love him; that because I love him I need him to know how concerned I am about his drug use and how I see it affecting both him and everyone around him; and that I'm here … to help him get the help he needs." These three things can be spoken again and again, especially the love. Nathan hoped that, when his brother was "on the edge," he would remember, at least, that he was loved.

My father died fifty years ago of a heart attack at age 60. In our small town, he was a beloved family doctor who later specialized in anesthesiology. His patients regarded him as wise, caring and understanding, and a source of good advice. Yet he could not manage his own life. There was alcoholism, some drug abuse, and heavy cigarette smoking. He was hospitalized once or twice and he spent a month at a rehab facility, but I don't think he ever gave up drinking.

Addiction is a disease of isolation. It puts the sick person in a spiral of self-centeredness. Even if they can be sweet and helpful sometimes, their obsessive craving saps their self-respect. It wipes out their empathy.

To get drunk or high, some addicts borrow money from their parents, children, or siblings but never pay it back. They always have an excuse. Some addicts have stolen a relative's money, credit cards, or jewelry. Some people have been threatened or assaulted by an addicted spouse or an addicted adult child; they had to file restraining orders against them. Some grandparents have assumed custody of their grandchildren; either the addicted parents have repeatedly neglected the kids or they've gone to prison. None of that is part of my story, but when my dad was drunk, he could be verbally vicious and condescending. At least once I watched my mom and my older brother wrestle the car keys away from him when he was drunk. Addiction is a family disease.

One person I know has an elderly parent who has been a compulsive shopper and hoarder for decades. They have shopped, first at stores and later by telephone, and now by online orders. New purchases arrive daily. This person had an occupation as a health professional, and respected for it, yet they took their teenager's paycheck from a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant. They promised to pay it back but never did. This addiction has led to three financial bankruptcies. Yet not long after each bankruptcy, credit card firms slithered back like a drug pusher greeting an addict outside a halfway house. This parent has bought 120 luxury handbags, most of them not even unwrapped. Packages crowd the rooms and hallway. This clutter has caused them to fall twice, and then the paramedics could barely make it through to help them. There's no room on the bed to sleep on. To me, shopping and hoarding compulsions demonstrate the absolutely irrational nature of addictions. You can't explain another person's compulsions or fix them.

Fortunately, the adult children of this hoarding parent have the support of one another. They are unified. They know their limits. This person told me: "I've been able to draw the line. We don't talk about money when I call because I know they lie. All it does is create more suffering for me to try to fix them."

Setting limits is hard, but necessary. A friend of mine who is a longtime recovering alcoholic and whose adult child became an addict said this: "I know how to not drink, but I need to learn how to set limits. I get so tied up in my addicted child that I'm cheating the other people who need me."

Like many spouses of alcoholics, my mother spent a lot of energy trying to get my dad to stop. She felt responsible for his image in the community and for the impact of his behavior on me. Early one morning when I was a child, my dad wasn't home. Mom told me that Dad had been drunk and had stopped at his medical office at night. (He had sold the practice to a younger doctor but still had privileges and a key.) It wasn't safe for him to drive home, so my mom and her brother went to the office and took his car keys. They put a blanket on him so he could sleep on the floor there. She told me that in the morning, the other doctor would find him there and attend to his needs.

Years later, when I was an adult, she explained that this was a lie. The truth was that the police had pulled my dad over in his car for drunk driving. They called Mom to let her know and ask her if she wanted to come and get him. She said no. She let them keep him overnight in

jail. She found her limit. By letting him stay there, she not only avoided a pointless confrontation with him late at night, but she also allowed him to hit bottom, as we say in 12-Step groups. She let her husband experience the consequence of his behavior, instead of rescuing him from it. As I look back on that, I am proud of her.

Shame, guilt and caretaking for an addicted person can isolate family members from our sources of support. One parent wrote that addiction "is a secret that the addict does not want you to reveal to those closest to you." However, this person told me, "Getting to know a friend on the same journey has been a lifeline for me. Over time, I am slowly revealing more about our family's journey through addiction with other close friends. What I am learning is that each one of them has been touched by addiction in some form or another in their lives."

At Al-Anon and other support groups, people can hear their own pain and confusion reflected in the words that other people speak. Honesty breaks down the walls of isolation and shame.

However, one person here told me that at UUSS and in the larger community, they are cautious about revealing their family struggles because they fear being judged; they anticipate getting advice rather than empathy. Nathan Detering explains that our culture of shame and secrecy about addiction is a feature of white supremacy culture. In many white-dominant settings, most people feel we must look as if we are holding it all together. This is perfectionism, and it's toxic. It is isolating to avoid being vulnerable, to hide that your life is not great right now. Nathan devotes a chapter to the dynamics of race and racism regarding addiction. For his book he had conversations with leaders and members of African American churches. He learned that in communities of color, where systemic oppression causes hardship and heartache in many families, it's common for people to be upfront about their struggles. And it's common for others to listen rather than criticize, to share prayer and give hugs rather than give advice.

It is possible to love a person and be deeply angry at their behaviors. It is possible to love them *and* keep your distance from them. It is possible to hope and pray that they will admit they need to stop and will ask for help in doing so. To be sure, a person's addiction or other self-destructive behavior doesn't represent all of who they are. And if they die of their disease, we remember not only their struggles, but their gifts as well.

Stories of others' experience contain insight and wisdom. The most important learning is to change our focus from the behaviors of the addict to our own life—to our choices and options, our sources of support, and our goals. When we surrender the compulsion to fix another person, then we can make wise choices for our own wellbeing.

Knowing our limits and keeping our boundaries can be hard work in many relationships, not merely those we have with addicted people. Margaret Marcuson is a Protestant pastor and a consultant for congregations and ministers. Margaret says: Stop trying to do the impossible thing of trying to change others, and start doing the merely difficult work of managing yourself.

People with addicts in our lives talk about walking on eggshells, not wanting to be an excuse for an outburst by our loved one. If we grow up with this, such an experience can lead us to be anxious and insecure in all our relationships as adults. We may try to control people. Or we may try constantly to please others, which is another attempt at control. But really, we need to work on living with discomfort and uncertainty. As Maragret says: You can manage how you respond to stressful situations, because your words, actions and attitudes are the only things you really can manage.

In groups like Al-Anon or in therapy with qualified professionals, we can learn ways to cope without having our serenity depend on whether a loved one gets better or not. Nathan Detering recommends four practices for health and healing. These are: reach out and confide in

others, know your limits and honor them, remember your sources of joy, and do things that make you proud. As I was reading this, I decided it's a good framework for spiritual health in general.

Moreover, it can help us deal with the current crisis in this country. Right now things feel dangerous and out of control, like a family but at a national scale, with men at the top addicted to power and causing so much harm. These practices won't remove them from power, but they might help us to manage our distress for the long haul. It might give us the strength to keep working together for justice and freedom.

First, we can learn to be honest about our struggles. We can confide in support groups, clergy, counselors, and friends whom we can trust to listen to us. By telling your story, you help others to feel understood. You feel understood also. You know, we talk about self-care a lot, but we can't give ourselves all the care we need. We must reach out to others. Care and compassion grow by sharing them. This point makes me think of the words that our choir sang: "All of us/ need all of us/ to make it."

Second, we can learn to set limits when a situation is too much to handle. For example, Nathan's addicted brother called their mother on the phone all the time, whether he was using or clean, whether he was afraid or happily in denial. She said: "I hate to admit this, but there were times when I would … see his name on the caller ID and I would just let it ring… Because I didn't have the patience or the energy. I knew I would say something I would regret." She went on to state an important realization: "I also knew that it wasn't good for me—or for him—to keep going around in circles together about the same problems; me giving the same advice, him telling me why it wouldn't work, and then circling back to the beginning again." It's worth noting that his mom did not try to get her son to call her less often or to call her only at specific times. Or maybe she had tried that and found that it was impossible to manage him. What she did was manage her own boundaries. As she said: "I let his calls go to voicemail sometimes, because I knew I was at my limit."

Third, we can remember joy and learn to cultivate it. Especially when you are going through hard things, it's necessary to do some other things that give you joy. This may not seem easy when we're afraid, confused or sad. However, we know some things we like to do. Choosing to do them even if we don't feel joyful is a way to practice joy in anticipation for the day when the feeling of joy returns. Nathan's therapist told him "that doing things that make us happy and give us joy is like physical therapy for the soul."

Fourth, do things that make you proud. When we learn and remember that we are more than the family member of somebody with an addiction, we gain more self-confidence. We can choose to do this through volunteer work, arts, music, athletics, building things, cooking, etc. We can participate in a congregation or community organization. We can use our skills in service to causes that we care about.

These four practices can be a guide for spiritual health for anybody. And at this time of crisis in this country, they can sustain us in the long term. Reach out and learn to confide in others; know your own limits and honor them, remember what gives you joy, and do things that make you proud.

In this congregation and beyond it, let us build connections to sources of strength, joy, trust, compassion, and care. In big ways and ordinary ones, we can help one another by learning our limits, building our confidence, speaking with kindness, and practicing joy. Let us have the courage to be more open and vulnerable, because we all are vulnerable. Let us be worthy of the trust we have in one another. So may it be, blessed be and amen.

Now let us please take a moment of silence together. Amen.