

THE PULSE OF SPIRIT



EMISSARIES
OF DIVINE LIGHT

TRANSFORMING ADDICTIONS

1 FEBRUARY 2010

I would like to explore something of our nature and our capacity to love, and very particularly our capacity to open up, and our capacity to yield to something. In opening up, we are transformed. In some way we will serve what we open to, whatever it is. It may be a job, it may be a person, it may be a mission, it may be a drug. But whatever it is, if we open to it, we serve it and we are transformed by it.

There is only one way I know of getting around our innate capacity and compulsion to open up to something and serve it. It's not a very good alternative, because it is to die. As long as we have breath, we will be opening ourselves to something.

This brings up a topic around which there's a huge amount of shame—addiction—because addiction is a way of opening up. And by definition, it's an unhealthy way to open up to something. There are some things that people become addicted to that, under almost any circumstances that I could think of, are not healthy. I don't know of any circumstance where it's a good idea to open yourself to heroin, for instance. But there are other things where it gets a lot more complicated. People become addicted to substances or activities that, in right balance in a person's life, are wonderful. How about being addicted to food? It's not that we shouldn't eat. But we can form an unhealthy relationship with food. We can open ourselves to food in an imbalanced way that leads to an imbalance in us. We are transformed by what we love, and when our relationship with food is out of balance, the results are not good!

It is trickier becoming addicted to something like food that is essentially healthy. There are many things like that. For instance, a person can become addicted to work. Work should be a generative part of a person's life. But when a person gives themselves to their work in an imbalanced way, it is a cruel master. And of course, that kind of imbalance and addiction can lead to other kinds of imbalances and addictions, like substance abuse.

So there are things like food and work and sex, and you could imagine many things that people become addicted to that aren't inherently wrong or bad, but they become somehow wrong or bad for a person if they have an addictive relationship with that part of their life.

It's hard to talk about something like this without shame coming up. Think of an area of your life in which you have an unhealthy relationship with whatever it is. It's hard to think about that without feeling some shame. A few weeks ago, before Christmas, I looked in the mirror and felt some of that, knowing that for the last twenty years of my life, slowly but surely, pound by pound, my relationship with food was showing itself to be something that wasn't entirely healthy. There is a reason to feel shame, I suppose. But I notice that the shame people feel around addiction usually makes it harder, rather than easier, to deal with the issue. The mixture of emotion can make the person feel more depressed, more like they need some kind of upliftment, and they think "I'll go eat something!" or take whatever the drug of choice may be.

Yesterday I took a walk with friends on the Fern Lake Trail in Rocky Mountain National Park, along the Big Thompson River. It was snowy and you could walk out on the ice and hear the gurgling water underneath. What a beautiful place to go! It is not a usual topic of conversation for me, but somehow we got on the topic of alcoholic beverages. We were talking about our favorite wines, and our favorite liquors and how we like to mix them together. It seemed like the whole way back we were talking about alcohol. It reminds me of many years ago as a teenager, when I was smoking pot. We would talk for hours about the best kind of pot and how it made us feel.

Yesterday, as we got in the car and drove back through Estes Park, I was looking for the nearest pub! It is interesting how, if you start to open yourself to something and start thinking about it, you tend to attract the object of your desire or find yourself attracted to it. Hopefully we have sufficient restraint so we don't go headlong into an addiction. But maybe we do, in some way. At some time along the way, we may wonder "Is this an addiction or is this okay?" Or we may come to a place of believing that we just can't stop ourselves. Once you open to something, it does control you to that degree. It changes you.

In the wedding service last Sunday I said that love changes us. That is certainly true in a marriage. But love of *anything* changes us, not just love of a person, or love of love itself. Any kind of love changes us. The object of our love is control. What we may have forgotten is that we made that initial choice to pay attention to whatever it is. We didn't *have* to be talking about alcoholic beverages all the way down on the Fern Lake Trail. That was a choice. But having thought about it, the object of a person's attention starts to become part of their life.

So here is what I believe often happens for a person. In an addictive pattern there is often a struggle with the object of the addiction, whether it's a substance or an activity or a person. The addicted person may try to pull away, but there has been a bonding. The person tries to pull away, but the bond has never actually been broken, so it is as if there was some kind of elastic or rubber band pulling the person back to the addiction. Until something is done about the bond that has been created, the person is torn.

Often a person loses track of the fact that there is a place in themselves where they can make a choice, and in fact they *did* make a choice. But the place in the human psyche where that choice is made can be lost. Like Hansel and Gretel, we should leave pebbles or crumbs so that we can get back to the place where we did choose to open ourselves to whatever it was. On that walk in the mountains, when we might have been thinking of something else, we chose to think of alcoholic beverages.

I began by saying that there is a component to the human makeup that is designed to open itself, and not particularly to alcohol. We're made to open up to something, and in fantastic ways. When you see a person open up to something creative, isn't it miraculous? For instance, if a person is a musical performer and they give themselves to that, extraordinary talent comes through them. The person's spirit and emotions and body go well beyond the usual range of experience.

The other day in our ethics workshop, we were considering the experience people have of what psychologists call *nonordinary states of consciousness*. We invited people in the room to talk to each other in groups of three about their own experience of nonordinary states, and there was a lot of conversation going on. I don't think there was anybody in the room who hadn't had an experience of a nonordinary state of consciousness, brought on in whatever way—maybe by a religious or spiritual experience, perhaps by a sexual experience. And talk about a nonordinary state! Hormones become active in a person and they think of doing things that they would never think of doing. They have given themselves to an experience that is beyond the usual.

Have you ever thought about a basketball team that for sixty minutes of playing time runs up and down a full-length court, jumping up and down while they do it? Have you ever tried doing that? It is nonordinary! But they can do it because they have consistently opened themselves to the experience, and they have been changed by the way they opened.

We're transformed by whatever we give ourselves to, sometimes in miraculous ways. We have this amazing ability to give ourselves to something. And it's not only an ability; it is a compulsion. We are made that way. And you will give yourself to something, I believe, unless you take that other alternative and decide to check out altogether. You will give yourself to something, and what will it be? How would you know if this is the right thing, the creative thing? I think there are probably some good tests. Having found the place in ourselves where we have a choice, I believe we should give ourselves to something that leads to life. I don't think that in our wildest imaginations methamphetamine is leading to life.

I know a young man who has deep passion and desire to live a creative, meaningful life. He is also very independent and strong willed. To the shock and horror of his mother, sometime earlier in the year he enlisted in the army. It was the last thing she thought he was going to do. It made her wonder why. *Why* did he sign up for the army? I believe it was for exactly the reason that we are thinking about this morning. He has a powerful urge to give himself to something, to open himself to something that would transform him into the man he wants to be. He was called to an endeavor

that would take all the energy that was looking to come through him. He wanted to *commit* himself to a mission and, in doing so, accept the discipline of that mission. I understand that he still has a choice as to whether he enlists. Whatever his choice is, I hope he finds what he is seeking.

Wisdom requires that what we open ourselves to has to be life-giving, and it has to be real. We have to ask if this is really *worth* giving ourselves to. Is it really going someplace? Is it *really* leading to life?

Over the past few weeks we have been considering spirituality and religion. I've come to believe that spirituality is too important to leave to the religions of the world. It is not that there aren't people practicing religion who are having a spiritual experience and may have something to offer. But still, our own spiritual experience is too important to leave to somebody else. Because when you come right down to it, spirituality is about your life, and what are you going to give yourself to in your life?

I want to know the answer to that question for myself, not just because somebody else told me their take on it. I want to know for myself that what I'm giving myself to is real and true and accurate, and calls on *my* highest. I want to give myself to something where I can have a great experience in giving myself to it. I probably won't see the whole picture initially, and might wake up tomorrow and see more and be able to pursue that "more," and the same the next day and the day after. I want to open myself to something that doesn't have a ceiling, that is right for me, and that doesn't have limits.

The reality of what life is, and what life is calling us to, *is* like that. It's always calling us to something more. There is *always* something more to see and something to do.

That huge capacity that you or I have to give ourselves will kill us if we don't keep using it for something right and true for us. If we stop at some ceiling and say, "Oh, this is it, and now I'll just get comfortable," we die inside. And it is hard to turn off our capacity to open. You have a choice as to what you open yourself to, and if you don't keep opening to something good, you're going to be opening to something that is your methamphetamine, your unhealthiness. It's true for anyone, I believe. There is something to open to that leads to glory for us.

So how do we make the shift? Do you want to try to shame yourself out of your addictions? It doesn't usually work very well—I know it doesn't work for me. As a young person, I was a smoker. I learned something about addiction through smoking. I used to say that I didn't see what was so hard about quitting smoking. I'd done it hundreds of times! That's the experience of most smokers. As long as the attachment to smoking continues, quitting is likely to be temporary. There is often a push-pull tug-of-war, as if there was an elastic band that brings the habit back into play.

For me, at some point I said to myself, "You know what? I smoke, and I'm going to enjoy it. And I may quit one day, but up until the day that I quit, I'm going to enjoy it and I'm not going to sit and suffer in shame over it. And there will come a day when I will quit." I found that I would rather

accept the fact that I smoke, if I'm smoking, than wrestle with it. And for me, sure enough, there did come a day where I just said, "Today is the day."

I found that place in myself where I had made a choice to smoke, and I could make a choice not to smoke. I said no, I'm not going to do that anymore. I took up running—that'll convince you to stop smoking pretty quickly anyway! I had a passion that needed to come out someplace. It was coming out through my smoking very well—I was a passionate smoker! But that passion could find another way to come out; I could give myself to something else. I have a choice, and you have a choice, to take this tremendous capacity to yield and open; and we can yield and open to exactly what would be most creative for us.

I'd like to share a couple of biblical quotes with you. One is from Malachi: "I will...open you the windows of heaven." (*Malachi 3:10*) This is addressing exactly what I'm speaking about this morning—our capacity to respond, to open. We can open to heaven—not the heaven after you die but the place beyond this world of time and space, from whence the source of our life springs. I will open to that. Our capacity to open should be, first of all, to our own life, the life that's in us, the spirit that's in us, and the spirit in all things. When we open to that, we can do something creative with how we open to the world.

This brings us to the other biblical quote I'd like to share: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness..." (*Matthew 6:33*) If there's a shaming tone that you hear in those words, let's dispel that overlay so we just hear the truth to which these words point. Open first to the source of your own life "and his righteousness"—and how that rightly translates into how you are in your world, with the things of your world. So if you seek the reality of your own spirit first, then when it comes to the glass of wine or the relationship, the meal, or your work, you can find a right relationship with it that is balanced by the greater passion for the fulfillment of your life.

If I don't sense the mission and purpose and the *importance* of my life, I might throw it away in stupid ways. But if I have conscious passion for what my life is about, what I'm here to do, if I know I'm a loved person who's got something great to do, I will act with authority in how I relate to my world and the people in it. I will act with authority in my own conduct, out of the love I have for my spiritual purpose. Where that's high in a person, where they're filled with that, they can deal with all these things that otherwise become sticky. We're held by what comes through those windows of heaven—something great and beautiful and grand, which is the reality of being that *we* are. It brings our self-respect, our sense of purpose and mission, our realization that we have something great to do on earth. We have a gift to give to this world and to other people. I am too important to throw my life away doing something stupid.

Our capacity to open ourselves is a wonderful thing. If we catch ourselves giving our life to something that's not healthy, perhaps we can take that moment to appreciate how we're just made like that—not made to be addicted to this one thing, but we are made to give ourselves. And that is a beautiful thing. But we can choose to open ourselves to what makes us healthy and strong, which

is the reality of spirit, our own spirit and the spirit of all things. Loving that one spirit, we become strong.

So I believe this is a key area, not only because of the potential destructiveness but because we have the opportunity to open ourselves in new ways that bring life. Men particularly are shamed for their openness and vulnerability. Those are wonderful qualities in anyone. It is worth thinking about how much the shaming of that capacity for openness and vulnerability makes us ripe for addiction. And there may be a kind of continual re-wounding that happens in the addictive pattern, which only deepens it. Many times, the antidote is found in coming to a place where a person stops shaming themselves. In that freedom, there is an opportunity to make a new choice.

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