

**“Filling in the Holes”**  
**Sermon Written & Delivered by**  
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**Sermon**

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

The last time I saw my cousin alive, I tried to tell him this.  
I tried to tell him that he belonged to this world and that he had a special place in our family and the family of all things.

He didn't believe it.  
He had never felt like he belonged.  
He said that he had big pockets of emptiness, big holes in his being.  
In the brief years of his life he tried to fill those holes with all kinds of things including Buddhism and ice climbing and women and drugs.

On the last night of his life he filled his body with alcohol and jumped from the top floor of a parking garage in Harvard Square.

None of us is perfectly complete.  
We all feel those holes in our being; holes in our soul.  
The dull ache of emptiness and longing is familiar to us as human beings, mortal and finite.

“tell me about despair,  
yours  
and I will tell you mine”

At one time or another, we all feel the cold wind blow through those holes.  
we feel the dull ache of emptiness and the sorrow of what is missing.  
There are a thousand ways to fill those holes.  
Some are benign, like the bag of M&M I ate while writing this sermon.  
Some will deaden the pain and help us to forget.  
Some are dangerous and deadly to both ourselves and the people who love us the most

Of course, if you are a Zen Master, like Roshi Bernie Glassman, you don't even try to fill those holes. When his wife died unexpectedly, he told his friends that he felt raw. “Raw is letting whatever happens happen, what arises, arise. Feelings, too: grief, pain, loss, a desire to disappear, even the desire to die. One feeling follows another, one sensation after the next. I just listen deeply, bear witness.”

One day I hope to approach that level of equanimity and graceful surrender to life.  
But till then, I, like most of you, struggle from time to time with emotional pain.  
I will try to *feel* those holes rather than *fill* them.  
But in moments of low resolve I will seek comfort in food, in cheap paperback novels, in sitcoms.  
Others will seek out stronger forms of comfort and occasionally, certain brains will latch on and want more and more and cannot stop.

It's hard to count exactly how many people are addicted to alcohol because so many instances go unreported. But the current estimates range from 14 million to 25 million Americans suffering from alcoholism.

And 20 million Americans are dependent on or abusing drugs. (2005 figures)

These people come in all varieties, work in all professions. Most of them are employed, have families, pay their taxes.

Denis Meachem was one of those people. In 1988 he was a successful business man, a college professor with degrees from Princeton and Harvard.  
And ...he couldn't leave his house without a drink. Day after day, year after year this continued until one morning, he couldn't get out of bed. With his wife's help, he checked into a detox unit and started down the path of a new life. Today, he is the Rev. Dr. Denis Meacham, a Unitarian Universalist minister specializing in addictions ministry.

Last week I attended a workshop for clergy about substance abuse and its affect on families. Even though nearly every clergyperson there admitted that this was a present and pressing issue for many members of their congregations, very few said they talked about it from the pulpit or had any programs support them.

Why not?

Because alcohol and drug dependency seem like private matters,  
Because there is a social stigma attached to addiction  
Because it's none of our business what happens behind closed doors.

But of course, it is the church's business because addiction is a spiritual issue.  
Addiction is a disease, not only of the body and brain, but also of the spirit  
Addiction blocks and erodes spiritual development  
And it results in a profound loss of meaning and purpose.

Churches and other faith communities have a poor reputation among people who are in treatment or recovery. It's because some of those churches are still preaching that drunkenness is a sin, that drug addiction is a moral failing; a character defect.

In Unitarian Universalist congregations, we don't condemn the person who struggles with addiction.

We don't judge them to be a sinner or morally weak.  
We know that chemical dependency is an identifiable, progressive disease, passed from one generation to another.  
And yet there is resistance to talking openly about the problem.  
And an assumption that it's not a very widespread problem.

Rev. Meacham remembers the reaction of one of his congregants when he suggested that they should become more welcoming to people who are suffering from addictions. The member said to him, "If we do that, then wouldn't we be inviting them to becoming members?" That person imagined that their church would suddenly look like a homeless shelter.

There is still an unspoken assumption that it's all happening to other people.

I'd like to ask you to raise your hand if you or someone in your family currently has, or has had a problem with drugs or alcohol.

I'd like you to notice your feelings  
Just listen  
Bear Witness

And then offer your hopes for healing to those in your thoughts and for all those who struggle.

When my cousin died last year, his family asked me to conduct the memorial service. But don't say anything about how he died. There are still those in my family who don't know the true story; they think he died in a car accident. Shame, secrecy and silence accompany many families who are living with substance abuse.

David Sheff has written a book, just released entitled Beautiful Boy. The Beautiful Boy is David's son, Nic who started using marijuana in the 7th grade and then became severely addicted to crystal meth.

"I kept our family's problem a secret for a long time, writes David. It wasn't that I was ashamed. I wanted to protect Nic, to preserve our friends' and other's good impressions of him. But I have learned that the AA adage is true, you're as sick as your secrets.

Nic, brilliant, charming, full of potential, was also frightening and unpredictable when he was using. Nic broke into homes, stole money from his parent's friends, slept in doorways.

Every person who has loved someone who is addicted to drugs or alcohol knows exactly what the title of Heather's poem means—"At Arm's Length."

“We loved you at arm’s length for fear that the stain of your addiction might spread across the fabric of our world.”

The stain of Nic’s addiction did seep into the lives of other member of that family, and David said that he became addicted to his son’s addiction.

He gave him money, paid for rehab, paid for hospital stays, detox programs, plane tickets, bailed him out of jail, and then, no more.

David finally realized that he was powerless over this addiction; all the money in the world, even a father’s love could not save Nic.

David is an atheist. Religion and spirituality were not a part of his life, and yet, he prayed without ceasing, “Dear God, please, please save my son.”

This is the first step in the 12-step program developed in 1935 by Alcoholics Anonymous: to admit being powerless over this addiction--not powerless over every aspect of one’s life, but just in this one area.

As Heather says in her poem, “The hardest lesson was to learn our love alone could not heal you.” We cannot save another person, no matter how much we love them.

It is the hardest lesson to learn because it calls us to surrender.

And that feels like giving up.

But it’s not giving up as in walking out, not caring any more.

It’s giving over to something else more powerful more powerful, even, than our love.

If you’re a Theist, it is clear to what you are surrendering.

You surrender to God.

You surrender to God’s will and to God’s Grace.

If your theology is broader, you surrender to the spirit of life; to the powers of the universe that hold the stars in their place and give us the freshness of springtime.

Whatever your worldview, if you suffer from addictive behaviors, these are spiritual ailments and recovery is a spiritual process.

The 12 step recovery programs have been the most effective for helping to achieve sobriety and gain recovery. Alcoholics Anonymous grew out of a fundamentalist Christian group called the Oxford Group and a belief that the antidote for alcoholism is religious conversion.

Some AA meetings are even structured like a Protestant church service, with prayer, readings from the Big Book, (the AA Bible), passing the plate and of course, lot of coffee.

Within the 12 steps the word God is used several times, although members are invited to substitute that word and image with any other concept of a higher power.

A lot of Unitarian Universalists are able to live peaceably with that language by reinterpreting it for themselves. Many are able to envision perhaps not a higher power, but certainly a power other than their own; the power of connection to other people and to the nature; the power that moves a person to forgive and to love.

For those who really can't get past that language, there are alternatives. SmartRecovery is one alternative to AA that uses spiritual concepts in a much broader and inclusive way. Unfortunately, there isn't a group right here in the Williamsburg area. Perhaps one of you will organize something. We will be happy to provide space free of charge as a community service, just as we do for the AA men's only group that meets in Parker House every Thursday night at 6:30. Also, Rev. Denis Meacham has published a book called the Addiction Ministry Handbook, a Guide for Faith Communities that want to discuss recovery in the language of liberal spirituality.

The Williamsburg UU congregation could become a place where people, turned off by traditional religious recovery programs can find a place to heal and grow.

We offer a sense of Belonging and a way out of Isolation.

Our message is one of hope, not judgment.  
We believe that families do heal;  
that intervention and treatments do work;  
that spiritual health and wholeness are possible again.  
We believe life can get better.

But sometimes congregations give off a vibe that they are full of perfectly healthy people, fully functioning families. Those who are struggling with their sobriety will not seek out that kind of spiritual community.

So we have to continue to be a place where the truth is told--the truth about the wounds we carry around. We have to continue to be a place where revelations of the heart are welcomed and expected; where hurts are held right next to exquisite joys.

As I read David Sheffs book I wanted each page to bring David and Nic closer to resolution, to recovery. But one page of sobriety turned into pages of relapse, anxious day of waiting and disappointment.

By the end of the book there is no resolution, no promise of lasting recovery. There is, however, an unexpected serenity as David feels the holes in his life. He allows the dull ache of despair over Nic to sit next to the joy he feels in seeing his youngest son play lacrosse. It's a full and, in its own way, a beautiful life.

May yours be just as exquisite.

Amen.