



Rebellion Dogs Blog December 2015

Stigma & Tribalism: What are we really fighting for?

A familiar 2015 mantra was “let’s end the stigma associated with addiction and mental health.” This political rally call suggests that ten thousand protesters can stop people from drawing stereotypes. That sounds naïve to me.



Unite to Face Addictionⁱ drew a crowd of thousands October 4th at the Washington Monument. People cheered Surgeon General Vivek Murthy as he declared, “We’re going to stop treating addiction as a moral failing, and start seeing it for what it is: a chronic disease that must be treated with urgency and compassion” He went on to share, “I’m proud to announce that next year, I will be releasing the first-ever Surgeon General’s Report on substance use, addiction, and health.”

Dr. Vivek Murthy (pictured) wasn’t the only one to declare the dawn of a new era for addicts and alcoholics. Republicans and Democrats, sports, music and TV celebrities—many of which are famous addicts—all said enough is enough or Abra Kadabra or something just as reassuring and thousands cheered. Musical contributors included Joe

Walsh, Steven Tyler with his Nashville-based band, Loving Mary, Sheryl Crow, Jason Isbell, The Fray, Paul Williams and John Rzeznik of the Goo Goo Dolls.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could end biases and stigma from writing to politicians or attending a rally? Bumper-sticker rhetoric abounds on a day like this. "Drug addiction is a preventable disease." What the hell does that mean? Are we talking about legislating, medicating or singing "All You Need Is Love," together?

Say something sweeping like "addiction can be prevented," or talk about our collective silence or our collective voice or "today is the day," and you lose a little credibility with me. Rallies, buttons and bumper-stickers do not change human nature—certainly not in a day. Don't get me wrong. If this spectacle helps even slightly with the addicts being unfairly discriminated against and harassment—then let's do it every year.

Rebellion Dogs took some pictures and video for those who couldn't be there. I'm never against music and getting together with friends. At the end of this article, we'll point you to some links if you want to see and hear Unite to Face Addiction or catch some of the conversation back-stage.

Disgust and disgrace

Stigma means a mark of disgrace. Insofar as addiction is stigmatized, it is held by public opinion that it is disgraceful to be addicted or to be an addict. Now, this is a double-edged sword because, as I will discuss from my own case shortly, how others feel about me is also a vital motivator that contributed to breaking my individual cycle of addiction. For instance, my addictive behavior disgusted the people that matter to me and the shock of their reaction poked a whole through the spell of my denial. So, there are many facets to addiction and there are many facets to stigma.

Is it about how I feel about myself or about how you feel about my addiction? To be clear—your stigma can't make me feel bad because you think I am inferior to you; I'm not slowed down because you feel threatened by addiction or mental health issue. Labels have power over me only when they symbolize something to me that represents a handicap or inadequacy. You might think I am weak or a risk to you or society at large when you say, "Oh, you're an addict, are you?" But I might not even pick up on your inference so is this really a national priority to control how you feel about me?



Of course the exception is that if you harbor negative stereotypes AND you have power over me. If you are the gatekeeper to employment, healthcare or social status, then your hang up with who or what I am will matter because how can you not be influenced by your prejudice? For many decades this campaign against stigmatizing

addicts has been slowly improving the lives of addicts. Change happens slowly, usually. Let's look at people or events that nudged public perception. Let's think about the contributions of Marty Mann, Betty Ford, the action taken by the American Medical Association's labeling of addiction as a disease. Compare the label of *disease* to the label of *moral reprobate*; one doesn't have to embrace the disease model of addiction to see what a game changer one label vs another was for addicts/alcoholics.

Today, Michael Botticelli, a recovering addict is Obama's Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. That's a symbol of a changing public perspective. As far as stigma goes, while there is need for improvement, the war has been won. For comparison, while there remain a few pockets of Nazi sympathizers across the developed world, there's no present threat of a Fourth Reich emerging as a serious political voice— In the same way, we might hear objections from the Montessori school who rents space from a community center about a new Sex Addiction Anonymous meeting being held in the same building. Yes, stigma is still alive and well in our community but on balance, the public feels compassion for addicts who suffer and those of us in recovery.

Now, I compared stigma to addiction to racist Fascism. There is no basis for racial superiority/inferiority. But is there some merit to the arguments that addicts are hard to love and hard to help? If there wasn't some truth to the protests of our critics, we wouldn't feel so guilty, would we? I don't know about you but I did break promises, hearts and the contracts of social convention. There were innocent bystanders to my addiction and I have regrets. Is it stigma to call me on my bullshit when I am acting out in addiction? I think we have to find the line between health intervention and

discriminating against and harassing people in active addiction or in recovery.

I'm OK, You're So-so: stigma in our own community

Stigma against addicts won't be irradiated by a rally; we can't mandate people's opinions or feelings. If the end of stigma could be willed, we wouldn't have stigma inside our own community. Let's look at the way we see and treat each other. By way of my own journey in addiction and recovery, I want to talk about the stigma—or more accurately, the tribalism—within our recovery community. "Imagine if you will, one alcoholic judging another."

"Too young" was the first double stigma I faced. I was fourteen at my first 12-Step meeting and sixteen when I got clean and sober. "You are scarcely more than a potential-alcoholic," was the first slight I faced both in and outside of the rooms. Judging someone because they meet your stereotype or because they do not amounts to the same discrimination. In a way, I have been fighting one double stigma or another for my whole recovery.

What about considering abstinence over moderation management? To some in the recovery community, abstinence based recovery is the Yang extreme reaction to the Yin of addiction. Abstinence advocates agree that not every heavy substance abuser is an addict but we stiffen at the risks of dangling a harm reduction carrot in front of folks like us? Instead of celebrating choice, harm-reduction is pitted against abstinence. Each side views the other with suspicion and contempt. Each side accuses the other of exaggeration, finger pointing and evangelism.

Now once you chose (or get cornered into) abstinence, do you elect a 12-Step/12-Tradition fellowship? This choice comes with its own stigma—the cult of anti-science, meeting-dependent quackery.

We're not even half-way home now in our struggle with stigma. The next mine field is which 12-Step fellowship? If, like me—you have many ways to *take a trip without leaving the farm* behaviors, substances, each with past wreckage—then your travels will take you to different fellowships to sample. You may feel a pull from each to dawn their home-team jersey.

I've been to AA, CA, SLAA, NA, ACA, Al-Anon, GA and I've read literature from maybe a dozen more organizations where I identify with the problem. I wasn't merely a guest at any of these meetings, or supporting a friend. I have my own issues that qualify me for membership in each one.

I remember at an Adult Children of Alcoholics meeting being told that recovery here is like dog-year compared to AA—a year in ACA had the spiritual cred of seven years on the AA path. Spiritual competitiveness—really? Really; people take their choices seriously and think anyone with an open mind will chose the same. I get these fundamentalist quips at AA, NA, Al-Anon and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, too. “Our brand of cereal is healthier than their brand of cereal.”

Within each tribe, there are conservative vs. the liberal variations to attach our wagon to. Are we going to sign up for the “preserve the integrity of the message” camp or the “radical inclusion” camp? In AA, the muckers accuse the atheists of being what’s wrong with AA today and the feeling is mutual. I am an AA who doesn’t believe in a personal, intervening higher power. I have a choice of mainstream meetings where someone is going to discount atheist AAs like me as intellectually hung-up. Antiquated literature makes it easy for others to paint me as a second-class citizen in the last house on the block and no one speaks up to defend AA’s secular minority. The alternative is going to atheist/agnostic groups. Most of the talk is about recovery, what we do and what we do believe, not what we don't do and don't believe. But eventually, someone will bemoan the deluded self-righteousness of faith-healing AA meetings.

The back-to-basics types will say to godless AAs, “Why don’t you go start your own fellowship?” Such an invitation is the politest form of bigotry. Freethinkers in AA blame fundamentalists for the cultish reputation that our fellowship suffers from. Big-book thumper’s sacralizing of the first 164 pages of a 75-year-old book is a favorite scapegoat for what has caused AA membership to stagnate.

Inside Atheist/Agnostic AA we have our own us and them camps, too. Some make the point, “You don’t join a *program*—you join a *fellowship* with a *suggested*, (ie: *optional*) 12-Steps.” They point to their own complete dismissal as the whole 12-Step process as superstitious and let their 30, or in some cases, 40 years of Step-free sobriety be their evidence that ignoring the 12-Steps is a perfectly legitimate example of AA sobriety. Other secular AAs sidestep the religious morality and language of the 1939 Steps but find principles—not wording—within the Step process that is practical and effective. The agnostic 12-Step interpreters points to Bills, “The wording was, of course quite optional, so long as we voiced the ideas without reservation (*Alcoholics Anonymous* pg. 63)” as an invitation for artistic liberty. “Unity but not uniformity” is their experience of AA.

So, if you’re anti-stigma, which stigma are you complaining about, exactly? I’m guessing

it's not your prejudices so much as those who conspire against you? Stigma is a negative stereotype. Stigma is a bias, a prejudice and guess what? I have them and so do you. Tribalism is human nature. Just as the Red Sox fan sees Yankee conspiracy with every close-call made against Boston, all of us create classes of "team us" vs. "team them".

I will use my own idiosyncrasies as an example. The same AA that I accuse of being a religion in denial, I defend against the criticisms of Dr. Dodes who calls our modality ineffective. I appear to feel the same duty to criticize AA as I feel the need to defend it, depending on which way the wind is blowing.

Admitting my own biases helps me from being permanently blinded by my own knee-jerk reactions. I want the variety that nurturing open-mindedness offers. Intolerance comes easy but that shuts the door to new experiences. Uniformity is comforting but variety is the spice of life. It's true that I see doubt as a higher plane than belief in a personal God. It is also true that I prefer cafeteria-style AA over obedient submission to a uniformed mantra. I like both spontaneity and order, but I'm less afraid of chaos than I am of rigidity.

But what does it matter what I think is good or bad, comfortable or repulsive? People who prefer, or rely on, the absolute certainty of a creator God and a by-the-"rarely have we seen a person fail who have thoroughly followed our path"-book method are sober today. Will I celebrate every recovery as virtuous or stand in judgment over what Freud is credited for coining as "the narcissism of small differences?"

Social constructionism is a collective support of a particular theory that we call knowledge, reality or experience. Our group reinforces each other in a codependent understanding of our brand reality or worldview. We have tribes and tribes within tribes—cultures and subcultures. This is true in our recovery community and it's true everywhere.

How do we get to nine? The six-plus-three-ists know the answer and they can prove that they are right. But so can the four-plus-five-ists.

More Stigma Please, I'm Dying Here!

Now there's another way to look at stigma, which has to be considered in my case. I have to admit that stigma has a role in fostering the motivation for me. Let's go back to when I was sixteen years old and facing the scrutiny of, "I spilled more than you ever drank, kid." This discounting of my place in AA was a way of saying, "I don't know if you've lived

enough to be a real alcoholic, youngster. Getting drunk and puking doesn't make you an alcoholic. Maybe you're a wanna' be alkie." That's the stereotyping and judgment that comes with being a young alcoholic.

As it turns out, I was facing the same internal dialogue, "Am I really an alcoholic?"

"That's it; I'm powerless over alcohol."

"No, that's silly, I can master drinking, I just have to learn to control myself and get everyone else has to back off and I'll be fine."

So, while I was on the verge walking away from sobriety and back into the world of learning to drink like a gentleman, what impact did it have on me when someone else scrutinized my legitimacy as an alcoholic?

Well, I dug my heels in and said to myself, "I'll show you who's a real alcoholic. You can't tell me if I'm an alcoholic or if I belong here—work your own damn program, buddy!"

I was staying sober to spite my critics. The stigma against me became my motivation; I was staying sober to spite and break a stereotype.

Fast-forward 35 years into sobriety; in 2011 I was wondering if AA was too rigid for me and why should I waste my time here? Just then, my group, Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers Group was one of two, and later three, groups that was delisted from the Toronto Intergroup meeting list. Once again, at a time of my own inner conflict about my loyalty to AA, I dug my heels in and said, "I'm here to stay and who's asking for your approval, anyway!"

Direct-sales techniques include mind-games whereby the saleswoman gains a psychological advantage over her prospect. The salesperson manipulates her buyer without the buyer realizing that the buying decision isn't their own idea. The reverse-close is one such racket. Our salesperson is selling cars and a middle-aged fellow expresses an interest in an economical family car. Then she catches him eyeing a way more expensive sports car. Would she prefer to sell the man the higher priced, higher commission sports car? Sure she would.

Of course, if she starts with the features and benefits of this sexy muscle car, she'll push the potential buyer out of his fantasy and he'll return to his more pragmatic objective. But

if she says, “Sir, don’t be paying attention to that trouble maker; she’s way to much machine for a family man. Let me show you a four cylinder fuel efficient minivan,” something happens in the buyers mind.

“Don’t tell me I can’t handle this bad boy,” he thinks. “Well how much would this car cost? I’m just curious; it looks like it can fit four passengers when you need to.”

The reverse sales pitch manipulates the buyer into something by emotionally nudging him towards what the sales person wants with the reverse of an idea, “Don’t be silly, you don’t want that.” Of course the sales person knows that the car represents a status symbol to the prospect and a higher commission to her. Fear of loss is always a stronger motivator than desire for gain. Take away the sports car option and fear of life slipping the buyer by will kick in. But to work, the prospect has to think it’s his idea.

In a similar fashion, I was sitting on the fence and an AA member gave me the out I was looking for, “You don’t belong here; go do some real drinking and come back when you’ve had enough.” I reacted to him with a sudden fear of loss of my membership status, saying, “No way; I’m staying.”

Andrew Solomon (pictured) is the author of five books and *New York Times* articles.

In a Ted Talk, Solomon shared about his own identity crisis in a world of stigma:

“It took identity to rescue me from sadness. The gay rights movement posits a world in which my aberrances are a victory. Identity politics always works on two fronts: to give pride to people who have a given condition or characteristic, and to cause the outside world to treat such people more gently and more kindly. Those are two totally separate enterprises, but progress in each sphere reverberates in the other.

Identity politics can be narcissistic. People extol a difference only because it's theirs. People narrow the world and function in discrete groups without empathy for one another. But properly understood and wisely practiced, identity politics should expand



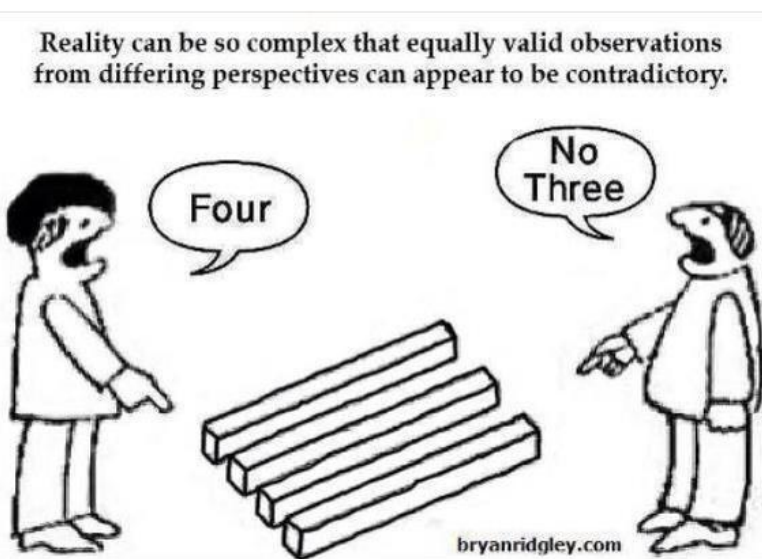
our idea of what it is to be human. Identity itself should be not a smug label or a gold medal but a revolution.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Twelve Step members, who indoctrinate themselves into the culture, might see their addiction as an unforeseen gift and their higher power of their own creation (understanding) as being at a level beyond conventional religious constructs. In identity politics this is how mutual-aid groups form an “us” tribe “to give pride to people who have a given condition or characteristic.” Now some outsiders will empathize with us and others will criticize. Critics will see dependence on meetings as just another crutch and faith in higher power as a misconstrued ego manifestation.

It’s a temptation as an NA or AA member to see oneself as one of the chosen people on a path laid out by God. A more humble approach is to see our label/condition as *addict* as no greater and no lesser than anyone else. Sure we can chose to call ourselves, “in long-term recovery” instead of “drug addict” but how we feel about these labels is more important than how we self-identify. It’s a temptation to view our own path of recovery as superior and another choice as inferior. For me, it’s better to not see addiction/recovery as a zero-sum game whereby if your way is *better*, then I lose, if my way is *better* then you

lose. Recovery is a constellation of modalities. Each if affected by gravitational pulls, repulsions and inescapable orbits that find us inter-dependent on the other orbs and energy in our system.

There was a time when I got drunk (or stoned or acted out) *at* someone. I was in an inter-dependent dance with my environment. There are times when I stay sober or I leave or I



stay in reaction *to* someone. Again, inter-dependent relationship seems as inescapable as our solar system’s components dependence on each other. I may not be able to break free of the stigmas I harbor, nor those that you harbor against me. But I can understand stigma and bias as part of the complexity of the human experience. Understanding my own limits shouldn’t make me feel ashamed; it ought to make me more empathetic of those around me, be they supporters or critics.

Like aging, stigma is part of life. I can't transcend it; I can make room for it. Aikido is a martial art that embraces non-dissent. Harmony is the philosophical base which offers advantages in life over discord in Aikido. Sensei Kochi Tohei (1920 – 2011) would have concurred with The Big Book's, "Love and tolerance of others is our code. And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone."ⁱⁱⁱ Tohei wrote that according to Aikido, while the Universe is in balance, there is conflict in the relative world. So, it's better to think about the big picture and see how seeming opposites complement each other.

"Do not say that this is a world where we must struggle to live each day. The true way to success is exactly one and the same as the principle of non-dissent, and that is the way to peace."

ⁱ <https://www.facingaddiction.org/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_solomon_how_the_worst_moments_in_our_lives_make_us_who_we_are?language=en

ⁱⁱⁱ Into Action, p. 84 *Alcoholics Anonymous* (1939)