

COLUMNISTS

Moral judgments don't treat addictions

I am filled with contradictions. Even my best intentions seem to run into themselves. A good example is my proclaimed desire to be thrifty and save money. This otherwise admirable goal leads me to complain constantly about the expense of items I buy. A favorite for me lately is the price of gasoline. Mind you, I seem never to forego even frivolous outings in my car. I just whine about how high fuel prices are. This is even sillier when related to another habit of mine, which is buying bottled water. While bemoaning the price of gasoline, I think nothing of paying for water that I could take right from the tap! Contradictions abound in my life, and seem to permeate entire areas of our culture as well.

In this connection I think about some of our attitudes toward crime, punishment and mental limitation and illness, for example. It was announced a few weeks ago that the president and other officials have declared that they don't think that mentally retarded people should be sentenced to death when they are found guilty of murder. I guess I should be relieved to hear that, but it seems so obvious to me that punishing a person by killing them, particularly when their understanding and human freedom are seriously limited, makes no sense to begin with. The very idea of executing mentally retarded people in a supposedly civilized country seems like a contradiction to me.

Contradictions in the area of our attitude toward addictions seem equally absurd. Today we recognize that individu-



By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

the moral life

als in our society suffer various forms of dependency and that a lot of us become addicted to a whole range of substances and behaviors. Today we recognize addictive dependency on alcohol, drugs, tobacco, coffee, excessive food, too much work, the pursuit of sexual pleasure. While most people can engage in the use of all these without serious problems, some of us become so absorbed by a single activity that it begins to play a destructive role in our lives.

But a whole host of social attitudes surround addictions, and some of these actually serve to encourage the addiction rather than limit it. So much moral disapproval is associated with drug use that the government controls these substances. In fact, the sale and use of drugs incurs severe penalties. Those who engage in these activities are defined as criminals and are often stereotyped as "dope fiends." Rather than treating drug addiction primarily as a medical or psychological problem, as might be the case in some European countries, we treat it primarily as a moral and legal problem.

Even though studies and statistics show that strict laws like those in our own state are ineffective in reducing drug abuse, the laws remain in place and our approach to the matter remains fixed. That looks like a contradiction to me.

Alcohol addiction also receives a significant share of moral condemnation. We are reluctant to inquire into why this addiction is so serious in the United States. We resist asking how it may be a symptom of larger American problems like poverty, meaninglessness, the lack of realizable goals or spiritual deprivation. We seem to be content to view addiction to alcohol as a purely personal problem separated from the cultural difficulties that promote it. Even though removing the moral stigma associated with alcoholism has been shown to assist many people in overcoming their addiction, we continue to impose rigid judgments on one another. This is an enormous contradiction.

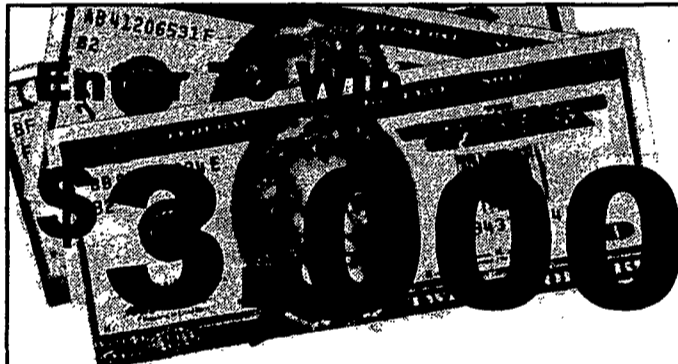
The harsh criminalization of drugs and false moralization surrounding alcoholism actually work to prevent people from seeking and accepting help for their conditions. These attitudes and practices function, paradoxically, to encourage family and friends of addicts to deny and even enable continued substance abuse. There is not a person reading this column who has not covered up, excused, or endured addictive behavior in a loved one. Some of this is the result of the negative moral judgments that lead us to condemn those who suffer from addictions as morally weak, criminal and delinquent. But labels like this,

and the contempt we hold, are part of what prevent addicted people from finally accepting the responsibility for their own recoveries that could lead to genuine healing.

In some ways we are a sophisticated country, but in other ways we seem unable to recognize distinctions in human behavior that should be obvious to all of us. Sometimes human beings act because they have made a free choice. But sometimes people act voluntarily, in the sense that they do perform a particular action, but in a way that hardly can be called free. In these cases, actions proceed from inner compulsions and an actual lack of freedom, rather than from genuine human choice. The behavior of those suffering from addictions are like this. Recognizing this distinction will not destroy our sense of moral responsibility. It will strengthen it.

The Gospels are filled with the invitation to bear one another's burdens. So much of our culture seems to want to deny that real pain, sorrow and frustration are part of life. So much of what it offers is a quick fix to all of our problems. At the same time, we carry many attitudes that cling to rigid and unrealistic moral judgments about addictions. We need to move beyond the many contradictions that surround our approach to drugs and alcohol so that we can help to promote the genuine healing that happens when we are willing to bear one another's burdens.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.



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