UNITY

Content Warning: Childhood sex abuse

"There are basically two types of sex addicts. The first type is an internet user in recovery. The second type is an internet user." –Anonymous

"Sex addict" carries baggage that wasn't all true for me. I didn't even realize, "I'm a sex addict," because my addiction seldom involved having sex. My acting out had more to do with pixels on screens and lusting for the height of self-pleasure. I use the term "lust" because it also includes my zombie mind-state — my insatiable hungry ghost.

My primary addiction is lust. By age five, I was subjected to childhood sexual abuse (CSA). I was told it was a game. At the peak of it, it was the best feeling in the world. Since I enjoyed this game, I never suspected this was trauma or abuse — especially not "compared" to others'. But as Dr. Gabor Maté put it, "Trauma is not what happens to you. It's what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you." Inside, I lived a life of shame and secrecy.

I'm pretty sure my hungry ghost was born the moment I realized I could play this game solo and indulge in self-pleasure anytime. *By age six, I was hopelessly addicted*. Not to sex, but to the *neurochemical hit* released by self-pleasure.

My parents would catch me in the act. They were shocked, they would shout, and they would shame me, hoping that it would help me break this habit. They did the best they could with the knowledge they had. But scolding and shaming *never helped*. It just made it harder to get the help I needed.

What I desperately needed was one safe person. Someone non-judgmental, present, and compassionate. I needed someone to ask me, "What happened?"

Instead, I was saddled with a deep-seated sense of shame as my core identity. Despite how painful my shame was, I could not stop. To protect myself from the pain of shame, I developed a patchwork of unwholesome habits.

To cover up the humiliating behaviors that I felt powerless to change, I learned to lie. It was less painful to tell a lie than to get caught masturbating.

My addiction also compelled me to keep safe by hiding, isolating, and becoming hypervigilant. In fact — I recall the feeling of excitement when adults were going to leave me home alone. I knew that I was

soon going to disconnect from the world and act out again. And while acting out, I cultivated lifelong hypervigilance and a fear of environmental disruptions, which paved a road to generalized anxiety disorder.

As a child with an overwhelmed libido, many things that were probably normal to other kids would drive me *insane*, like seeing people in bathing suits. Walking through the underwear section of a department store. Or seeing models in advertisements. But the worst was just going to school every day. I would always feel attracted to, and in love with, someone in my class — sure it sounds like innocent love in this story, but to live that experience was to be flooded with shameful feelings that I didn't understand.

These were *extremely difficult* events for me. The feelings were overpowering, agonizing, and confusing. I had no elder nor mentor to guide me through the darkness.

If I pause for a moment and look back at what happened, I see why a child would naturally develop the traits I had. These were survival skills.

They served to protect me from immense pain rooted in childhood complex trauma. It's clear to see how these traits predispose anyone to addiction when we list out the traits: dishonesty, secrecy, dissociation, disconnection, isolation, hypervigilance, shame.

In youth, I blamed myself for being unable to control my habits. However, it's clearly unfair to blame the five year old sex addict. So I've always wondered — at what point is it justified to blame the addict for being addicted? Can we blame the ten or fifteen year old for the inability to quit?

It was only in recovery from sex addiction, after completing an inventory, that I recounted and reconciled the wreckage in my rear-view mirror. Doing the inner work of self-inquiry and investigation revealed that lust influenced nearly every decision I made. Here's a tiny fraction of harms that I've tried to restore balance with:

I objectified people — I was othering and dehumanizing. When dating, I would use alcohol/drugs/power to coax someone into staying the night. At other times, I would just prefer self-pleasure over actual sex, regardless of how sexually appealing my partner was. In most sexual relations, I found it challenging to reach climax unless I fantasized about porn — even if I hadn't viewed porn for months. When I used porn, I noticed that my tastes progressively became edgier and more shocking in order to achieve arousal.

Just like my drug addiction, I crossed sexual lines I swore I'd

never cross. I never thought I would arrange meetups for anonymous sex or compensated companionship. I knew I needed to hit the brakes long ago, but seeking sexual gratification was my life purpose. Without the hungry ghost, could I enjoy life? Who was I before the world got to me?

For about ten years, I drifted in and out of recovery rooms for substance use disorder. Then I turned thirty-nine in the hospital with pancreatitis, from alcohol abuse. Pancreatitis hurts like hell. It felt like I was getting tattooed inside my stomach for ten days straight with zero breaks.

But it was less painful than the unassisted withdrawal from a prior fentanyl addiction that ravaged me. I considered pancreatitis a blessing from the universe and a final call to awakening. I said to myself, "This is where it has to stop. When I turn forty, there's no way in samsara that I can still be running on the same toxic rat wheel of addiction."

That year, I began stopping. I slowly let go of who I thought I was. I stopped letting others define happiness and success for me. I stopped blaming others. I stopped denying reality. In the calmness, I could see how my addictive habits were all interconnected: alcohol, drugs, sex, codependency, technology, all of it. Incidentally, it was the same year that Recovery Dharma was established, so I could work on all addictions at the same time by using Buddhist practices to address the *root cause* of suffering

For the first time after some ten years of being in recovery, I finally took my recovery program *seriously*. I asked myself, "How much time was I willing to put into my addictive behaviors? And how much time am I willing to put into my recovery?" An honest, gentle voice from deep within suggested wisely, "Chase your recovery like you chased your addictions."

So when they told me to get into service, I signed up and showed up. When they said to sit daily, I sat daily. When they said to go to meetings as often as possible, it made sense to go to the same number of meetings daily as the number of times I used to act out each day. And when they stressed the importance of sangha and inquiries, I did my best to create real connections within my sanghas and inquiry circles.

Each ingredient of the practice made an important difference.

I used to only share when I thought it would get people to approve of me. Then, one day at an in-person meeting, I decided to close my eyes, relax, and just listen. I stopped thinking about what I was going to share. Instead of hearing ways my story was different from the person sharing, I listened for all the ways that we *shared common roots*. Instead of grasping for external approval, I could finally hear how *authenticity* and *weakness* were the truer currency in rooms of recovery.

I made a hard but wise choice, regarding renunciation from love and lust. I decided that, based on my past, *I was unsafe to myself* if I pursued recovery friendships with those whom I felt attracted to. Some of y'all might be able to handle that, but for this love and lust addict, I might as well be playing Russian roulette with my recovery. It was easier to fully renounce attractive recovery friends for the time, than to eventually have both my recovery and my heart shattered. I learned to love the new life of having *true intimacy* with friends without attachments of lust. It was a beautiful new road to nurture healthy relationships.

Additionally, since I had experiential success in medication assisted treatment (MAT) for tapering off of opiates and nicotine, I asked health professionals about MAT for calming hypersensitivity to sexual triggers. "If this aphrodisiac exists, then that anti-aphrodisiac exists," I imagined the Buddha fantastically telling Ananda. Eventually, I was recommended herbal supplements. I don't know if they really worked or if it was just the placebo effect, but I didn't care — within a couple months, I had a breakthrough.

I went on a vacation where there was the ocean, beaches, and lots of human beings in bathing suits. Since childhood, this environment was a trigger where I would obsess uncontrollably about the beautiful people passing by. But on that vacation, I was different. People were still beautiful, but I observed myself and became fully present to an unfamiliar "quiet." I could hear myself think! I didn't have to be hyper focused on where each beautiful person was — *I found I had a choice over what I concentrated on*. I didn't have to obey the hungry ghost. This newfound glimpse of control over my libido astounded me. I had never experienced this level of equanimity and serenity. I was forty years old. That was a very emotional day for me.

Recovery Dharma gave me a way to own my entire story that was drastically different from what I experienced in traditional 12-step spaces. I used to be asked to avoid discussing "unrelated" addictions such as alcohol, drugs, or sex, depending on what kind of meeting I was attending. In RD, I could talk about all the issues of my recovery without being censored. This allowed me to share how critical it is to connect the dots between (1) my process addiction; (2) my substance addiction; and (3) my complex trauma from childhood. In the Dharma, there's no such thing as an "outside issue" to my recovery when all things are interdependent.

Something tells me that Recovery Dharma will withstand the

test of time. Not only because it's founded on a healing program that's been helping people for thousands of years, but also because Recovery Dharma is future-proofed: our fellowship doesn't have to spawn a new fellowship for each new process addiction that arises. Among the most powerful aspects of RD is that *we are empowered to easily create a new affinity group* (special-interest or topic meeting), so we can find others who face, or have overcome, similar struggles. For example, when some of us noticed there wasn't a meeting for people suffering from love and lust, we created a sangha and meetings for it. And you can do the same with your own affinity group. Even though all addictions are welcome at all meetings, I've experienced a deepened *connection*, *wisdom*, and *healing* with others concentrating on the same topic.

I used to make unthinking comments about other process addictions, especially if I didn't relate to the addiction. Eventually, I could see how I was shaming, minimizing, and gossiping about another person's recovery journey. I was unskillfully *hindering* their healing. I was doing exactly what others had done when shame, stigma, and embarrassment kept me in my spiral of silence for thirty-five years. I've retrained myself to notice before I judge, criticize, or invalidate anyone's struggle. Instead, I reflect on the courage it takes for someone to open up about their inner battlefield. I believe as long as we can honor one another's struggles, this fellowship will thrive.

When I think about the baggage that comes with "sex addict," sometimes my trauma sends me backward and wondering, "Is it really okay to share about sex addiction here in Recovery Dharma?" And then I'm reminded that *sex addiction is the very first process addiction that our book specifies* — and it's mentioned repeatedly. The authors knew what they were doing. Heck, the Buddha devoted a whole precept to suffering less from our sexual conduct. So if sex addiction is causing you suffering, but you're waiting for permission to share and heal about it, our program and our book have already given us permission.

So, once more with love: it's okay to talk about sex addiction in Recovery Dharma.