

“Weighing the Risk”

The book of Ruth

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I am currently reading a book that is rapidly changing my life. It is a new book by science journalist Catherine Price called “How to Break Up with your Phone.” The title sounds like the beginning of a satirical humor article you might find in McSweeney's or The New Yorker, but it's not a joke. The longest I go during the week without my phone somewhere on my body is when I leave it in my office before the start of worship each Sunday. I often feel like my phone is a bad boyfriend I can't shake, and our breakup is overdue.

Price's research seeks to help those of us who struggle to separate from their smart phones or ipads or computer screens to first break up with and then form a new relationship with our devices – one that is intentional and productive instead of distracting and all-consuming. It's a good read. There is probably someone in your life who should read it, but I will warn you that if run out and buy it for them, they will not appreciate your gesture or the book. The phone breakup is best initiated by the one who needs it.

In her book, Price names the reliance many of us have on our phones as a form of addiction. She does not do this to make light of addiction, but rather to begin to see addiction as a spectrum of behaviors, and to be able to place ourselves and our behaviors on the spectrum. Price writes, “Not all addictions are to drugs or alcohol—we can get addicted to behaviors, too, such as gambling or even exercise. And addictions exist on a spectrum; it's possible to be addicted to something without it destroying your life. Addiction can be defined as continuing to seek out something (for example, drugs or gambling), despite negative consequences.”

I appreciate this expansive definition of addiction because it moves addictions from the margins to the center – it helps us understand that addiction is not something that happens over there, in a community or family separate from ours, but that addiction is something that impacts many of our lives and our families, directly and indirectly. Addictions are often ignored until they have life-altering consequences, but when we ignore them or only think of them in the extreme, we are leaving people who struggle with addictions anywhere along the spectrum, we are leaving them vulnerable and less able to seek support.

My friend and college roommate recently experienced this reality through her boyfriend, Joe. Joe was a great boyfriend – thoughtful, outgoing, and caring. By thirty he was steadily climbing the corporate ladder and was incredibly successful. What no one knew, including his girlfriend or close family, was that Joe struggled with alcohol abuse. His work environment frequently involved business lunches with drinks. After work, his coworkers would unwind and network at the bar. Then dinner out with more drinks. Or meeting up with friends for a nightcap. This was totally normal for the culture he worked in. Joe often drank all day, every day. Alcohol consumption was normalized, but addiction wasn't, so Joe was able to keep this addiction carefully hidden from the people he was closest to.

He did so until his body began shutting down and he wound up in the hospital with complications from alcohol poisoning. His family and friends continued to be in denial, to struggle to find any words to describe why this was happening. Joe died last year, in his mid-thirties, due to alcohol addiction. Everyone in his life is reeling – from friends and coworkers to family – because no one had any idea. The face of addiction is not usually associated to the upper middle class, successful, nice guy that everyone loves, but Joe was not an anomaly. There was no language or awareness in his community that was able to connect Joe's struggles early enough to save his life.

Joe's story is an extreme one, and it is often the only kind of addiction story we hear because we do not recognize the spectrum of addictions, and we don't encourage intervention or healing until our loved ones or we ourselves reach the far end of the spectrum. Part of bringing addiction out of the wilderness is to recognize that there are different kinds of addictions that have different kinds of impacts on people's lives, relationships, careers, families, and health.

Part of why we as a culture fail to do this is because similar to mental illness and depression, we often default to defining a person by their addiction. In the same way we say “He is mentally ill” instead of “He lives with mental illness,” we might say “She is an addict,” instead of “she has an addiction.” We forget that addiction is one part of a person: a part that needs care, support, and healing, but a part that does not define a person. It does not define their worth, their strength of character, their purpose or their love.

Bringing addiction out of the wilderness means telling the full story of a person's life and experiences – of which addiction might be one part – and helping to name the full story before addiction becomes all consuming. In community this means acknowledging that addiction – whether it is a substance or a behavior – is something many of us live with, with various impacts and consequences on our lives and relationships. We can't wait there is an epidemic with a particular type of addiction, as we recently saw with the opioid crisis, before we begin talking about or recognizing addictions in our community.

Community is an important element for recovery and healing from addiction, both substances and behaviors. Being a part of a community, recognizing yourself as a member of something that is bigger your individual life, is critical to provide the support and motivation for recovery. Twelve Step groups are grounded in this knowledge – they partner new members with a sponsor to build a relationship, and at every step of the journey you are encouraged to move toward accountability, sharing, and building trust with the people around you.

This turn towards community as we seek healing is why the story of Ruth and Naomi speaks to the process of seeking recovery and healing from addictions. Ruth and Naomi were brought together when Ruth, a woman from another country, married one of Naomi's sons. Unfortunately Naomi's two sons and her husband all died within a few years of each other, leaving Naomi with no husband and no sons, only two foreign daughters-in-law. She tells Ruth and her other daughter-in-law to return to their country and their families, to go back to what is most familiar. The first daughter-in-law does, but Ruth refuses – instead she places her trust in Naomi and takes the risk of living in a foreign land in order to stay with Naomi and build a new kind of family.

This mirrors the process of moving from an addiction or addictive behavior, that which is familiar and soothing, to taking the risk of stepping into a foreign experience like recovery. Foreign lands make you feel out of place and uncomfortable, the comforts or familiarity you once knew disappears, and in foreign lands you have to navigate new relationships, new ways of being, new EVERYTHING in order to survive and eventually thrive. Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi in this strange place makes no sense! It would be easier to return to the places or behaviors she once knew, but the reward of love, hope, and a new community of healing are worth the risks. In this way, Ruth is a model for entering the foreign land of recovery.

Ruth and Naomi's story continues as they lean on Boaz, a family member of Naomi's departed husband, for support. He first allows Ruth to glean, to gather food, from his fields, and then protects her from anyone who might bother her. Later, as we read, Boaz and Ruth are joined in marriage and have a child. This comes about because Ruth takes the risk of radical action in order to form a connection with Boaz and provide for her future. She and Naomi recognize that they cannot survive on their own, that it will take more support than they are able to give one another. Boaz and his community become their community. They become embedded in a new

land that eventually becomes home, rooting them in the wholeness they were not able to find in other places.

Once again it took Ruth having the strength to take risks and take action to change the direction of her life. We see in this story that God stays with Ruth and Naomi, blessing them in their risk taking and their desire for new life together. Taking a chance on recovery, no matter where you relate to on the spectrum of addiction, is a risk and a challenge. It is one that is best supported by love, by steady guidance like Naomi gave to Ruth, and in the context of community, whether it is a 12 step group or a faith community like Edgewood. In many cases it takes multiple points of connection and hope in order to navigate the foreign lands of recovery and wholeness.

Churches like ours can be a place of support and healing for those among us who struggle with addiction by moving our awareness and care for addiction from the margins towards the center of our community. The AA meetings that convene at Edgewood each week are not just room rentals, but they are an important part of our community ministry, and an important part of our Edgewood community. Addiction – via substance and behavior – finds its way into almost every family. This is not something to neither be ashamed about nor hide. Ending the wilderness of addiction involves giving voice to our addictions and seeking support and strength in relationship with one another. We cannot wait for the epidemic to hit home or for a crisis to occur – by then it is often too late. Wilderness turns to healing when we are able to care for one another at every stage and manifestation of addiction. May it be so. Amen.