

“It Will Never Happen to Me!”

Robert H. Albers

*Professor of Pastoral Theology, United Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, Retired
Former Professor of Pastoral Theology, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota*

The title of this article is reflective of the disposition of scores of people I have worked with for decades in the area of addiction. Addiction is an insidious disease process that robs the person of her/his ability to exercise choice. This phenomenon cuts across every social, racial, religious, gender, economic and ethnic boundary, but most of us delude ourselves into thinking, “*It will never happen to me.*”

The temptation to think in this manner may be particularly prevalent among those who are preparing for a professional ministry role or who are already engaged in ministry. It is imperative to state without equivocation, that “the call to ministry” does not exempt anyone from becoming ensnared in the web of addiction. It may be addiction to mood altering substances such as narcotics, stimulants, depressants (particularly alcohol), hallucinogens, inhalants, prescription drugs, or cannabis. Equally devastating are the “process” or “behavioral” addictions that plague humankind such as gambling, food, work, sex (including pornography), shopping (compulsive buying), the internet, and relationships, just to cite a few!

Despite the exponential growth of addiction, reaching epidemic proportions across the globe, one is still likely to say to yourself as you read this, “but *it will never happen to me!*” We deceive ourselves by thinking, “I am above that, my faith is firm, my life is under control, I know what I am doing!” Apostle Paul says it most succinctly, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.” (1 Cor 10:2 NRSV) The Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* captures the essence of all addictions, as it describes alcohol as being, “...cunning, baffling and powerful!”¹

The inevitable question arises as to why this pervasive phenomenon receives so little attention, despite the fact that addiction is one of this nation’s top health problems, which leaves a swath of suffering in our homes and a path of carnage on our highways! The answer is simple, it is called *denial!* As the old joke says it, “Denial is not a river in Egypt,” rather it is an attitude that results in closing our eyes, stopping our ears, and muting our voices to the reality around and among us. Addiction is what I would call an “unsanctioned illness,” that prompts a sense of “disgrace shame”

Addiction is an insidious disease process that robs the person of her/his ability to exercise choice. This phenomenon cuts across every social, racial, religious, gender, economic and ethnic boundary, but most of us delude ourselves into thinking, “*It will never happen to me.*”

that results in attempts to keep it hidden and secret from others. When was the last time, if ever, that addiction was the topic of conversation at home, with family or friends, church classmates, or on any occasion?

It is impossible to discern which addiction is most pervasive among those preparing for or currently serving in ministry. There are three that immediately come to mind as I have seen among lay and ordained ministers: work, alcohol, and sex.

Perhaps our heritage involving the “Protestant work ethic” comes into play, but the fact remains that marriages and partnerships are repeatedly ruined by work addiction. The alluring rationalization for work addiction for those of us in the church is, “*But we are working for and serving God!*” Our understanding of “vocation” would unequivocally maintain that all Christians are “working for God” irrespective of their occupation. It has been a curious paradox in the Lutheran tradition that maintains: “justification by grace alone,” as a theological maxim, but that our work habits often betray us. The frenetic ministerial pace prompts the question, “Are we saved by our works after all?” This is not to advocate lassitude; rather, wherein is the balance in life, when there is true “Sabbath” for those who work on the Sabbath?

Alcohol is America’s “drug of choice,” as well as other mood-altering substances that can become the alleged remedy for the stress that accrues in a fast-paced society! “*I need a drink!*” “*Let’s*

1. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 58-59.

party!" or "It is time we had some real fun!!" The psalmist reminds us that God has provided for humankind, "...wine to gladden the human heart." (Ps 104:15) a gift used as a sacramental experience of God's presence! As with other gifts of creation, the gift can become a curse for those who have a proclivity for addiction. The adage of "all things in moderation," is apt, but for others, abstinence is essential if one is going to live!

Another priceless gift of creation is that of our sexuality. This gift can likewise become an addiction, particularly when the issue of power prevails! The prevalence of sexual abuse in its multifaceted expressions is likely more common than anyone of us would care to imagine. The increased instances of rape, incest, pedophilia, and pornography are not about sexuality, but about "power" and the "objectification" of human beings who have become an "it" rather than a "thou" to borrow Martin Buber's language!

In a conversation with a group of bishops several years ago, one of them said to me, "Eighty percent of my work in the synod is dealing with clergy sexual misconduct!" It takes the form of inappropriate sexual behavior with parishioners, but also manifests itself increasingly in the lure of pornographic material, whether published or on the internet. The exponential increase of pornographic websites is staggering!

"It will never happen to ME?" Perhaps the interrogative rather than the declarative form of the sentence is more appropriate! It can and does happen to people who are preparing for or already involved in ministry! Whether the addiction takes the form of work, alcohol, sex, or other compulsive behaviors, it can and does happen! We become more vulnerable if we adopt the attitude that, "It will never happen to me!" Once the addiction establishes a foothold in a person's life, it metastasizes like a rapidly spreading cancer! People are sucked into the vortex of a powerful downward spiraling whirlpool! Even in this over-powering situation, the denial prompts them to rationalize, trivialize, and minimize its reality. Often when it is too late, the realization dawns that, "This did happen to me!"

Addiction is not only a physical, emotional, and social issue; it is a deeply seated spiritual problem. It appears to be a commentary on a society that Rabbi Michael Lerner contends is experiencing a *spiritual crisis* of epic proportions.² As individuals who are preparing for, or already engaged in, ministry, we want to be a part of the solution, rather than a part of the problem! The important reality is that there is help for this malady. This cautionary comment: In my own ministry as a pastor and professor, when I encountered

As with other gifts of creation, the gift can become a curse for those who have a proclivity for addiction. The adage of "all things in moderation," is apt, but for others, abstinence is essential if one is going to live!

an instance of addiction, I would often state to the person or family; that there are *only* four possible outcomes to this illness:

1. Death
2. Incarceration
3. Institutionalization
4. Recovery

(NOTE: The options are stated in the order of their frequency!)

Lest any of us suffer from a "Messiah complex," the reality in my own ministry is that I buried many more addicts than I was able to help! Visits to prisons often featured those who committed crimes, often under the influence of a mood-altering drug. There were also instances in which the brain damage sustained from protracted use resulted in that person being unable to function in society and hence were institutionalized for life.

When by the grace of God an addict is in recovery, it is imperative that the addict be surrounded by a supportive community such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. Likewise, since this is a family disease it is equally important that family members have a supportive community such as Al-Anon. With this illness as with so many other tragedies in life, "it takes a community to heal a person!" The community of the church can also serve as a healing resource, but it is imperative to understand the disease and then determine how the community can become the most supportive for those "afflicted *with* the disease" as well as those "affected *by* the disease."

If this essay speaks to your situation, there is both help and hope! Seek out someone whom you trust implicitly to assist you in overcoming this illness. Sobriety is possible! Do not fall victim to the deadly attitude, that *It Will Never Happen to Me!*

2. Michael Lerner, *The Left Hand of God*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).