The Power of Addiction and The Addiction to Power: Gabor Maté Transcript

I've come to talk to you about addiction, the power of addiction, but also addiction to power. As a medical doctor, I work in Vancouver, Canada and I have worked with some very, very addicted people. People who use heroin, they inject cocaine; they drink alcohol, crystal meth and every drug known to man. And these people suffer.

If the success of a doctor is to be measured by how long his patients live, then I am a failure because my patients die very young, relatively speaking. They die of HIV, they die of hepatitis C, they die of infections of their heart valves, they die of infections of their brains, of their spines, of their hearts, of their bloodstream. They die of suicide, of overdose, of violence, of accidental deaths.

And if you look at them, you call to mind, the words of the great Egyptian novelist, Naguib Mahvouz, who wrote, "nothing records the effects of a sad life as graphically as the human body." Because these people lose everything. They lose their health, they lose their beauty, they lose their teeth, they lose their wealth, they lose human relationships and in the end, they often lose their lives. And yet, nothing shakes them from their addiction, nothing can force them to give up their addiction.

The addictions are powerful and the question is: why? And as one of my patients said to me, "I'm not afraid of dying," he said, "I'm more afraid of living." A question we have to ask is: why are people afraid of life? And, if you want to understand addiction, you can't look at what's wrong with the addiction, you have to look at what's right about it.

In other words, what is the person getting from the addiction? What are they getting that otherwise they don't have? What addicts get is release from pain, what they get is a sense of peace, a sense of control, a sense of calmness, very, very temporarily.

And the question is: **why are these qualities missing from their lives, what happened to them?**

Now if you look at the drugs like heroin, like morphine, like codeine, if you look at cocaine, if you look at alcohol, these are all pain killers. In one way or another, they all soothe pain. And thus the real question in addiction is not why the addiction, but why the pain?

Now, I just finished reading the biography of Keith Richards, the lead guitarist of the Rolling Stones and as you probably know, everybody is still surprised that Richards is still alive today because he was a heavy-duty heroine addict for a long time. And in his biography, he writes that the addiction was all about looking for oblivion, looking for forgetting. He says "the contortions that we go through just not to be ourselves for a few hours."

And I understand that very well myself because I know that discomfort with myself, I know that discomfort being in my own skin, I know that desire to escape from my own mind. The great British psychiatrist…R.D. Laing said that the three things that people are afraid of are: death, of other people, and of their own minds.

For a long time in my life I wanted to distract myself from my own mind, I was afraid to be alone with it. And how would I distract myself? Well, I've never used drugs but I've distracted myself through work, and throwing myself into activities. And I've distracted myself through shopping, in

my case, for classical compact music, classical compact discs. But I've been a real addict that way, one week I spent $8,000 on classical compact discs, not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't help going back to the store. And as a medical doctor, I used to deliver a lot of babies and once I left a woman in labor in the hospital to get a classical piece of music. I still could have made it back…to the hospital on time, but once in the store you can't leave because there are these evil classical music dealers in the aisles, you know, who "hey buddy, have you listened to the latest Mozart symphony cycle?" "You haven't?"

So I missed the delivery of that baby, and I come home and I lied to my wife about it like any addict, I would lie about it. And I would ignore my own children because of my obsession with work and with music. So I know what that escape from the self is like.

My definition of addiction is: any behavior that gives you temporary relief, temporary pleasure, but in the long term, causes harm, has some negative consequences and you can't give it up despite those negative consequences.

And from that perspective, you can understand that there are many, many addictions. Yes, there is the addiction to drugs, but there is also the addiction to consumerism, there is the addiction to sex, to the internet, to shopping, to food.

The Buddhists have this idea of the hungry ghosts — the hungry ghosts are these creatures with large empty bellies and small, scrawny necks and tiny little mouths, so they can never get enough, they can never fill this emptiness on the inside. And we are all hungry ghosts in this society, we all have this emptiness and so many of us are trying to fill that emptiness from the outside and the addiction is all about trying to fill that emptiness from the outside.

Now, if you want to ask the question of why people are in pain, you can't look at their genetics, you have to look at their lives. And in the case of my patients, my highly addicted patients, it's very clear why they are in pain. Because they have been abused all of their lives, they began life as abused children. All of the women I have worked with over a twelve year period, hundreds of them, they had all been sexually abused as children. And the men had been traumatized as well; the men had been sexually abused, neglected, physically abused, abandoned and emotionally over and over again. And that's why the pain.

And there is something else here too: the **human brain**. The human brain itself develops an interaction with the environment; it's not just genetically programmed. The kind of environment that a child has will actually shape the development of the brain.

Now, I can tell you about two experiments with mice. You take a little mouse and you put food in its mouth and he'll eat it and enjoy it and swallow it, but if you put the food down a few inches away from his nose, he will not move to eat it, he will actually starve to death rather than eat. Why? Because, genetically, they knocked out the receptors for a chemical in the brain called dopamine. Dopamine is the incentive and motivation chemical.

Dopamine flows whenever we are motivated, excited, vital, vibrant, curious about something, whether seeking food or a sexual partner. Without the dopamine, we have no motivation. Now what do you think the addict gets? When the addict shoots cocaine, when the addict shoots crystal meth or almost any drug, they get a hit of dopamine in their brain and the question is: what happened to their brains in the first place? Because it's a myth that drugs are addictive. Drugs are not by themselves addictive, because most people who try most drugs never become addicted.

So the question is: why are some people vulnerable to getting addicted? Just like food is not addictive but to some people it is, shopping is not addictive but to some people it is, television is not addictive but to some people it is. So the question is: why the susceptibility?

There's another little experiment with mice where infant mice, if they are separated from their mothers will not cry for their mothers. Now what would that mean in the wild? It means that they would die. Because only the mother protects the child's life and nurtures the child and why? Because genetically they knocked out the receptors, the chemical binding sites in the brain, for endorphins and endorphins are indigenous, morphine-like substances; endorphins are our own natural pain killers.

Now…what endorphins also do, they make possible the experience of love; they make possible the experience of attachment to the parent and the parents' attachment to the child so these little mice without endorphin receptors in their brains will naturally not call for their mothers. In other words, the addiction to these drugs and of course the heroine and the morphine, what they do is they act on the endorphin system, that's why they work. And so, the question is: what happens to people that they need these chemicals from the outside? Well what happens to them is when they are abused as children, those circuits don't develop.

When you don't have love and connection in your life, when you are very, very young, then those important brain circuits just don't develop properly. And under conditions of abuse, things just don't develop properly and their brains then are susceptible then when they do the drugs. Now they feel normal, now they feel pain relief, now they feel love. And as one patient said to me; "When I first did heroine," she said, "it felt like a warm soft hug, just like a mother hugging her baby."

Now, I've had that same emptiness, not to the same degree as my patients. What happened to me is that I was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1944 to Jewish parents just before the Germans occupied Hungary and you know what happened to the Jewish people in Eastern Europe, and I was 2 months old when the German army moved into Budapest. And the day after they did, my mother phoned the pediatrician and she said, "Would you please come and see Garbor because he is crying all the time." And the pediatrician said, "Well, of course, I will come to see him, but I should tell you, all of my Jewish babies are crying."

Now why? What do babies know about Hitler or genocide or war? Nothing. What we were picking up on is the stresses and the terrors and the depression of our mothers and that actually shapes the child's brain — that actually shapes the child's brain. And of course, what happens then is that I get the message that the world doesn't want me, if my mother is not happy around me, she must not want me. Why do I become a workaholic later? Because if they don't want me, at least they are going to need me. And I'll be an important doctor and they are going to need me and that way I can make up for the feeling of not being wanted in the first place.

And what does that mean? It means that I am working all the time, and when I am not working, I'm consumed by buying music. What message do my kids get? My kids get the same message that they are not wanted. And this is how we pass it on, we pass on the trauma and we pass on the suffering, unconsciously, from one generation to the next. So obviously, there are many, many ways to fill this emptiness, and for each person, there is a different way of filling the emptiness but the emptiness always goes back to what we didn't get when we were very small.

And then we look at the drug addict and we say to the drug addict, “How can you possibly do this to yourself? How can you possibly inject this terrible substance into your body that may kill you?”

But look at what we are doing to the earth. We are injecting all kinds of things into the atmosphere and the oceans and the environment that is killing us, that is killing the earth. Now which addiction is greater? The addiction to oil? Or to consumerism? Which causes the greater harm? And yet we judge the drug addict because we actually see that they are just like us and we don’t like that, so we say, “You are different from us, you are worse than we are.”

On the plane to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, I was reading the New York Times, on June the 9th and there was an article about Brazil and the article was about a man called Nísio Gomes, a leader of the Guarani people in the Amazon who was killed last November and you probably heard about him. And he was killed because he was protecting his people from the big farmers and the companies that are taking over the rainforest and destroying the rainforest and that are destroying the habitat of the native Indian people here in Brazil.

And I can tell you that coming from Canada, the same thing has happened over there. And many of my patients are actually First Nation Indian people, native Indian people in Canada and they are heavily addicted. They make up a small percentage of the population but they make up a large percentage of the people in jail, the people who are addicted, the people who are mentally ill, the people who commit suicide. Why? Because their lands were taken away from them, and because they were killed and abused for generations and generations.

But the question I ask is, if you can understand the suffering of these native people and how that suffering makes them seek relief from pain in their addictions, what about the people who are perpetrating it? What are they addicted to? Well they are addicted to power, they are addicted to wealth, they are addicted to acquisition. They want to make themselves bigger. And when I was trying to understand the addiction to power, I looked at some of the most powerful people in history. I looked at Alexander the Great, I looked at Napoleon, I looked at Hitler, I looked at Genghis Khan, I looked at Stalin. It’s very interesting when you look at these people.

First of all, why did they need power so much? Interestingly enough, physically they were all very small people, my size, or smaller, actually smaller. They came from outsiders, they were not part of the major population. Stalin was a Georgian, not a Russian; Napoleon was a Corsican, not a Frenchman; Alexander was a Macedonian, not a Greek; and Hitler was an Austrian, not a German. So a real sense of insecurity and inferiority.

And they needed power to feel okay in themselves, to make themselves bigger, and in order to get that power, they were quite willing to fight wars and to kill a lot of people just to maintain that power. I’m not saying that only small people can be power hungry but it is interesting to look at these examples.

Because power, the addiction to power, is always about the emptiness that we try to fill from the outside. And Napoleon, even in exile on the island of St. Helena after he lost his power, he said, “I love power, I love power.” He couldn’t think of himself without power, he had no sense of himself without being powerful externally. And that’s very interesting when you compare it to people like the Buddha or Jesus.

Because if you look at the story about Jesus and Buddha, both of them were tempted by the devil and one of the things that the devil offers them is power, earthly power, and they both say no. Now why do they say no? They say no because they have the power inside of themselves, they don't need it from the outside. And they both say no because they don't want to control people, they want to teach people. They want to teach people by example and by soft words, and by wisdom, not through force. So they refuse power and it's very interesting what they say about that.

Jesus says that the power and the reality is not outside of yourself but inside. He says the Kingdom of God is within. And the Buddha, before he dies and his monks are mourning and crying and they are all upset, he says, "Don't mourn me," he says, "and don't worship me, find a lamp inside yourself, be a lamp unto yourselves, find a light within."

And so as we look this difficult world with a loss of the environment and global warming and the depredations in the oceans, let's not look to the people in power to change things. Because the people in power, I'm afraid to say, are very often, some of the emptiest people in the world and they are not going to change things for us. We have to find that light within ourselves, we have to find the light within communities and within our own wisdom and our own creativity. We can't wait for the people in power to make things better for us, because they are never going to, not unless we make them.

Now, they say that human nature is competitive, that human nature is aggressive, that human nature is selfish – it's just the opposite, human nature is actually cooperative, human nature is actually generous, human nature is actually community-minded.

What we see here at this conference with people sharing information, people receiving information, people committed to the better world, that's actually human nature. And what I am saying to you is, if you find that light within, if you find your own nature, we will be kinder unto ourselves and we will also be kinder to nature. Thank you.