

Alcoholics Autonomous



Addiction and Sobriety
Beyond Recovery

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On the cover: an untitled painting by Gertrude Abercrombie,
who died in Chicago of alcoholism in 1977.

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ALCOHOLICS AUTONOMOUS

Addiction and Sobriety Beyond Recovery

This is the second time I have attempted to write this essay. The first time I thought it was about me. This time I know, I feel, it is deeply about “us,” or some sort of “we” that may not yet be formed or may be in its very formation today. What’s important is that this is always about something bigger than you or me - but it is exactly only as big as you or me could ever imagine it to be.

Against Addiction

There are many terms used for the phenomenon of consuming substances to a degree deemed by society to be dangerous or destructive. “Substance abuse” and “addiction” are probably the most common ones. “Substance abuse,” according to Google Dictionary, is defined as “overindulgence in or dependence on an addictive substance, especially alcohol or drugs.” The obvious problem with this definition is that most societies accept a degree of substance use as normal and the line where this becomes “overindulgence” and therefore “substance abuse” is inconsistent and culturally defined. Daily consumption of coffee, for instance, is accepted in most cultures. Where this is not the case, however, drinking coffee every day might be considered substance abuse. Likewise, weed is acceptable in many cultures to try a few times, and sometimes is considered

substance abuse if used more than a few times, and sometimes is okay to use every day, depending on who you ask.

“Addiction,” perhaps, provides a slightly more accurate description. According to Merriam-Webster, “addiction” is defined broadly as “persistent compulsive use of a substance known by the user to be harmful.” Google Dictionary provides an alternative definition: “the fact or condition of being addicted to a particular substance, thing, or activity.” Based on these definitions, it must be concluded that our society, and every individual, is full of addictions. Using technology, working a job, eating most things you find at the store, powerlifting, and shooting heroin are all addictions. This is an essay against addictions. It is written with the recognition that our lives are not, and maybe never could be, free from them. It is a recognition that the struggle against addiction is also a struggle against empire and the categories it forces upon us. This is not a neutral essay. This is not the 12 steps.

Terms used to refer to the process of no longer being addicted to a substance are also mostly unhelpful. Some common ones are “recovery,” “clean,” or “sober.” I will not use the term “recovery,” for it seems to point to a former self, a “non-addicted self,” that one might return to. There is no other self to return to and we are never anything more or less or different than what we are right now. I have never recovered and I shall never recover. I have simply embraced the things which make up this other thing I call a self and agreed to continue to build myself up or knock myself down depending on how I feel in every moment. I will also not use the word “clean” for the obvious reasons that this implies that people who are addicted are “dirty,” which further implies all sorts of racism, classism, and bourgeoisie middle-class values.

In this essay, I will use the term “sober” because it appears to be the least problematic. Sober, according to Merriam-Webster, is defined simply as “not drunk” or “not addicted to intoxicating drink.” I will use this term, “sober,” to also refer to the lack of use of other mind-altering substances, such as drugs. One might argue that most things are drugs and most of us are not

sober and one might be right. If something comes to mind that you think might be a drug and wonder if maybe this essay might be about this thing, it is probably about this thing and most other things that people use to escape their bodies or alter their bodies' perception of this thing we call the world. I will use the terms "joy," "freedom," and "autonomy." I may even use the term "love." I will use these terms and I will mean them. I will not mean some abstraction of them. This will be an act of communication. It will not be a demonstration of anything called facts.

In an attempt to chronicle my full list of credentials, I will mention the following. I spent years, starting from the age of 12, using things called drugs and this other thing called alcohol which is also a drug but filed as if it was something else for whatever reason. My drug of choice was opiates for the years that I spent using drugs heavily but I was also known to use a great number of amphetamines, weed, cigarettes, Wendy's junior bacon cheeseburgers, cocaine, and whipped cream cans in which I would suck out the Nitrous Oxide and throw the can out the window. My drugs of choice to be addicted to now that I am no longer an addict are coffee, various forms of crime, and abstract ideas that I can't understand well but like to pretend that I understand well. If you ask me today why I used drugs I will have many extravagant and well-reasoned arguments about why I used drugs because of society or empire or capital. If you asked me when I was 17 why I used drugs I would have said "because I feel like it, fuck you." When I write about my experiences using drugs I am writing through the lens of a person who is defined as the same person but is now 25 and filters those experiences through the lens of this 25-year-old.

When I was 16 I crashed my car into a tree because I was on a mixture of Vicodin, Adderall, caffeine, and marijuana, and my body did not like this combination on this particular day, and so I had a seizure. As a result of this experience I was arrested and got a DUI and almost killed a friend and almost killed myself. When I was 16 I lost my license because of this. When I was 16 I said that I would never use "hard drugs." When I was

17 I started using heroin and this was the drug that I enjoyed more than any other drug. I also tried smoking crack but mostly did not like it. I never tried crystal meth and therefore am happy I can say I stayed true to my pledge at 16 to never use “hard drugs.” My progression of drug use happened quick and my progression to no longer being addicted to these particular substances happened slow. I was in outpatient rehab at least three times and was suspended from school also at least three times. I was arrested more than three times but I couldn’t say how many times. I went to inpatient rehab one time for 40 days and 40 nights and I have been sober since that first day, August 18, 2010. Today is August 19, 2018, and I have just begun to pretend to understand what all of this means and write about it.

Discourse on Addiction

There are many things that are said in the media and at family parties about addiction and people who are called addicts because the substances they are addicted to are deemed unacceptable by society. One thing that people like to say about those who are addicted to substances in a way that is not socially acceptable is that they have had bad childhoods or exceptionally traumatic experiences. Some people who become addicted to substances have in fact had very traumatic experiences but we have also all had very traumatic experiences and this world we live in is filled with trauma and most experiences in it are terrifying. I would not say that I have ever experienced any sort of trauma which I would describe as exceptional, though I know many people, namely women or non-men, who have experienced trauma which to me appears exceptional but is also, unfortunately, not exceptional and is, in fact, the state of normal in this world.

Some of these people use drugs and some of these people do not. Sometimes getting sober requires addressing these underlying traumas and sometimes it requires an understanding that there is no escaping trauma unless there is an escape from this world. When I say “this world,” I mean the world that has been placed upon us. I do not mean the earth, but a certain perception of

the earth and the creatures and power structures on it. I mean something like “society,” but I do not mean “society” because I do not quite believe that something like “society” exists, though I have and will continue to use the word to mean a group of people with a certain perception of the earth and the things on it. This world is something most of us inhabit in a certain way but it is also something which we can break from or live in the cracks of. A world is also something we can build and there are multiple worlds in this place called earth. The world I mean when I say society is only one, though it may be the most powerful, for now.

Healing from trauma is often marketed as an individual process and sometimes it is, but the individual is never a separate thing from the spaces they inhabit and healing is also always a communal or social process as well. If it is true that addressing addiction requires addressing trauma, then it is true that addressing addiction requires addressing this world and the necessary break from it that we must make if we wish to take addiction seriously. It requires addressing colonialism, racism, misogyny, and all sorts of other mindsets we have been taught. We are all very traumatized and we are all very in need of a new sort of culture or world. We do not need more doctors to tell us we are traumatized; we need more spaces to talk about these things collectively and unlearn all we have been told. We need new ways of relating to one another. Any hope for truly addressing trauma will not be an individual one but a cultural one. It will not be given to us, it will be built, *by us*.

Another thing that people in hospitals or in college lecture halls like to say is that addiction is a disease. I am looking on a website about addiction that tells me that “modern science says addiction is a disease, not a choice.” Modern science also brought the atomic bomb, nuclear power plants, unspeakable forms of torture, and GMO corn. I do not take cues from this creature called modern science. Merriam-Webster tells me that a disease is a “disorder of structure or function in a human, animal, or plant, especially one that produces specific signs or symptoms or that affects a specific location and is not simply

a direct result of physical injury.” I write in my notebook that modern civilization is a disease and am left more confused about what a disease really is. I read the second definition, “a particular quality, habit, or disposition regarded as adversely affecting a person or group of people,” and become even more convinced that modern civilization is a disease and begin to make plans to destroy it. I also become sure that addiction is a disease like most things, but it is also like most things.

Rather than continue to ponder whether addiction is a disease I begin to wonder why capital might want to define it that way. What does having a disease imply about the thing that you have? For one, it implies that maybe there is some sort of cure or course of action that can eradicate it (or that maybe there one day could be) and that most likely this cure or course of action is available for purchase somewhere at a drug store or at a special residential facility that doesn't accept most insurance (despite their website saying they accept most insurance). It also implies that it is not the fault of the person using and that they are simply sick. This makes me feel better because most people feel bad for those who are sick but I have no argument for or against it since I still do not know what this thing called a disease really is and people should feel bad when they see their friends suffering even when they do not have diseases. I know I never made a choice to get addicted but also recognize that I made most of the choices I made while addicted of my own accord. On the other hand, I also feel I may have been possessed by some sort of demon and can take no responsibility for the things I did when I was high or stealing from my friends or family to get high (I'm sorry).

Ultimately, “disease” is just a word like any other word that is used to describe a group of things which certain humans find to be similar. What matters is what the implications of calling it one thing vs. another are. The implications of calling addiction a disease are better than the common implications of not calling it a disease which are that all people who are addicted are weak (I am weak) or self-centered (I am self-centered). It would be preferable to find a third way of speaking about addiction which

recognizes that it may or may not be a disease and people who use may or may not be self-centered, but also that we should support friends who wish to live a life that is different than the one they are living now, and sometimes even encourage them to live a life that is different than the one they are living now when we see the one they are living now bringing them to an untimely death, unfulfilling life, or a life full of causing harm to other people. One could argue here that life is not necessarily preferable to death or maybe even that the pursuit of death is also a noble pursuit and it would be hard to prove otherwise but this is an essay about life and for those who want to live a life for I do not know how to speak about death as I have not experienced it – or, if I have, I do not recall it.

One could also ask whether a sober life is inherently a preferable way of life. While I could say that it has certainly been preferable for me, I do not wish to make a philosophical and certainly not a moral argument for sobriety. This is not a persuasive essay. This is not about convincing anyone to be sober. This is an essay for those who wish to be sober and are looking for something other than what has been offered to them. This is also an essay for those who wish to use drugs and are looking for something other than what has been offered to them. This is about recognizing the complexities of this phenomenon we call addiction and building something new to address it, together.

We admitted

If you ever attend a rehab clinic or a psychology course or read a magazine about addiction, you will hear many things said about the way in which one must become sober and the proper steps to take to maintain this sobriety. Most of these things will be stated as fact and they are facts in so far as all opinions are facts, but there are also other facts that may not have been presented to you which should be considered.

The most common prescription for the disease of addiction is the “12 step program.” There are many 12 step programs today

but the most common ones are Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA). These 12 step programs are presented as clear and concise ways to go from being an addict to being an upstanding sober person in 12 easy steps. I do not wish to discredit these programs as I have seen them work for many people and even myself for a period of time. Instead, I would like to point out that the thing that makes programs like AA or NA work is not the steps themselves nor the organization but something else.

The first step in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous states, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.” This first step is simply a recognition that alcohol, or “our addictions,” as in the case of NA, are a problem. While this admitting may be an important part in the process of getting sober, it is not the most important part of this step. Instead, the important thing here is the *we*. *We* admitted *we* were powerless over alcohol – that *our* lives had become unmanageable. From the very beginning of the program, one is made to identify with a *we*. Rather than see oneself as an individual with an addiction that needs to be dealt with individually, we begin to identify with a certain common experience among the people in the room of a meeting. The *I* begins to become less important and we begin to see ourselves as a part of a certain collectivity. It is this collectivity that presents the real potential for the success of a program like AA or NA, but it is not only AA or NA which can offer this. This bond can also be found elsewhere.

In addiction there is often no recognition of any common bond beyond the self and a certain practice. In this sense, addiction *is* a certain form of self-centeredness. Addiction sucks us into the trap of the ego, it cements the self. It is a process of isolation and also many times a product of isolation. This is not to say that there are never bonds formed around non-sobriety, but that addiction exists outside of these bonds and consumes one’s life beyond what is held in common. This is not true of all substance use but *is* true of addiction. Addiction is all-encompassing, it consumes the body and the mind, it is a way of living, a way

of living for the self. When we begin to feel we are not just an individual self but part of a common trajectory, we begin to find a reason to live beyond our addictions.

When I left rehab I felt alone. The only thing I had in common with all of my friends, save a few, was that we all liked to get high. I now no longer had this activity in common and as such no longer had any friends or any sense of a *we* that I was a part of. This *we* is what is desperately needed if one wishes to remain sober but the bond that makes up the *we* cannot revolve around using drugs. I found this *we* in many places over the course of the past eight years. As I began to feel more alienated from most of my peers, I looked for an outlet, a place where I felt a certain bond or common life. I knew that I did not want to drink or do drugs and I also knew that I was not like most people so I looked for others who seemed to not be like most people and who also did not want to drink or use drugs. This is where I found straight edge. Straight edge presented for me a certain sense of identity and community that I desperately needed. It also presented a certain set of *practices*. It presented a certain way of *being* in the world. There were ready-made images, activities, and groups to identify with. I no longer was an individual struggling to remain sober, I was straight edge, and that meant something more than my individual choice to remain sober. I was something beyond myself.

This is just one example, and the thing which I have identified as the *we* that I am a part of has shifted and changed over time, but that is the point. There is nothing inherently better in the *we* of the NA program or straight edge than there is in the *we* that can be found in many other groups or movements. I still call myself straight edge despite the moralisms and contradictions of it. I still call myself an anarchist despite my suspicion of ideological labels. I still wear my one year NA keytag despite my disillusion with the NA program. I still don't eat meat despite my disdain for the liberalism of veganism. These things have kept me alive throughout my years of sobriety by providing a sense of camaraderie. They have connected me to something larger than this thing I call my self.

On Purpose

When one first stops using the substances that they are addicted to there is often a certain feeling of senselessness, meaninglessness, and loneliness which can most accurately be described as despair. “Despair,” according to Wikipedia, is a “loss of hope in reaction to a breakdown in one or more of the defining qualities of one’s self or identity.” The very thing you have spent years doing is no longer a part of yourself – and in most cases this was in fact the defining part of you, as it consumed your whole life. While despair cannot be avoided, the void of having no purpose to your life is often too much to bare and turns many back to their addictions very quickly. This is also what turns so many to religion in the form of Christianity or Buddhism or Science.

As we search for a new sense of meaning and a reason to live, we inevitably find religions as they are the best advertisers. They have the most widely accepted and talked-about answers to the problems of existence. They offer a clear vision of a world and the individual’s place within it. They can even be very successful in helping people who were addicted to certain substances to no longer be. They offer both a purpose and a sense of community around that purpose. The problem, however, is that they do not seek to address the structures that most often cause addictions. On an individual level, these institutions may work to keep one sober by appeasing the void through offering answers about existence and promises about universal meaning. When they attempt to work against addictions, however, they are merely acting as Band-Aids. They are sometimes effective but they do not seek to fix the roots of the problem.

In order to feel a sense of purpose one need not recognize a certain meaning inherent to life for there probably is no such meaning. Or, if there, is we should probably never know it, though sometimes I feel as if other animals may know it and could tell us if only we were better communicators. The beauty or maybe the sheer ugliness of this nonexistence of meaning is that whatever one chooses to do in every moment is in fact the very meaning of their own life. One’s purpose can be created,

destroyed, and recreated new in every moment. What we should seek is to create the conditions that allow for the full enactment of this purpose. Eventually we will recognize that us actualizing our meaning in the world will inevitably run into the same limits that others will hit in their own pursuit of meaning. This is where we begin to find something in common. Our search for individual joy inevitably comes into contact with this thing we call society, or this world, and we will either fall back into despair over our inability to be free, or we will undertake a certain struggle against this world. This is where the individual pursuit of joy becomes a collective one. We begin to act against despair. Not out of hope, but out of necessity. To fight addiction it is necessary that we find lives worth living.

It is important to note here that there are some forms of community that do not offer purpose and there are some forms of purpose that do not offer community. Community based around the neighborhood in which you live, for instance, does not offer purpose. The only common bond shared is one around the space which you inhabit. There is no common perception of the world or how one wishes to live in it. It offers no purpose, no *trajectory*. In fact, it is arguable whether this is any form of community at all. One could also develop a very individual purpose that only focuses on the self and one's own trajectory in the world. What we will soon find, however, is that we will be left feeling isolated and in despair once again. We fail to identify with something outside of ourselves and as such are still slaves to our own ego. We may pick up our addictions again or we may resign ourselves to a life of despair. We *should* seek out individual meaning and purpose in the world but once we do it is necessary to find others who share this purpose, who bring this purpose beyond an individual pursuit.

On Joy

What we seek, then, is the reconciliation of one's sense of purpose and the *we* in which one sees themselves. It is this reconciliation, in the case of my own addiction, which has kept me sober.

Initially, I aligned with a certain discourse around addiction tossed around at rehab clinics and worship services and felt my purpose was to help others who were suffering from this thing called addiction. I also aligned with a certain community at AA or NA meetings in a trailer somewhere behind a church or in basement that shared this purpose along with an addiction to coffee and cigarettes. As I became bored with the NA program, I began to find this purpose in different basements centered around straight edge and hardcore. There was a set of practices I engaged in with others who shared a similar view of the world and I felt a sense of meaning in my actions. Over time, I became disillusioned with hardcore bros who only wanted to slam in the pit claiming to be a movement, and with punks competing for social capital claiming to be political, and so I began to look elsewhere. I became more involved with radical politics and began to identify with people who came together around different bonds and practices outside of music. I found people who shared my perception of the world and wanted to act in the world to make a different reality.

I find this line on a page of my notebook: “Insurgency = making thoughts a practical gesture. Acts of rebellion are acts of truth.” It has no quotes around it. I do not remember writing it. I search for this quote on Google and find nothing. I begin to wonder if maybe I wrote this sentence but come to no conclusions. Nevertheless this sentiment is important for those struggling with addictions. When we become newly sober, what we need desperately is a truth, any truth. We find this truth inside ourselves for there is no truth to be found elsewhere or if there is, I could not tell you how to find it. We let this truth sink in deeply and become a part of our selves. The self and this truth become inseparable. However, we do not stop there. We recognize this truth, our truth, and we wish to make it reality. We seek a practical gesture. We seek enactment of our truth. In doing so, we find others with a common truth, a common view of the world, a common definition of joy and misery. As we find others in joy, our truth expands. The joyous moments we experience are the ones that exist in the cracks, the exceptions to the monotony surrounding us. We become a force in the

world. We are not the only force and we are not the strongest force but we are determined. We begin to act, together.

On Neutrality

One might say here that a collectivity and a sense of purpose can come from anywhere, and that your local police force or a white supremacist group or becoming a member of the flat earth society can provide these things and one would be right. However, this is not a neutral essay and I have no investment in the sobriety of those I would otherwise find detestable. While it is doubtful this essay will reach anyone on the cuff of deciding whether the community they wish to be part of is a white separatist group or the police force or the Democratic Party, allow me to say a few things about why these are unfit choices.

As has been stated, a certain new form of life is required to address addiction in any serious way. Serving empire, in the form of the military or the police or the Catholic Church or working for Tesla is not a purpose, it is a lack thereof, it is a default. It is seeking a further entrenchment in the confines of the world that has been placed upon us. It is a nonexistence. To truly exist is to position yourself against certain ideas of this world so as to make yourself real against them. Failure to stand outside of the roles placed upon us by this world makes us nothing other than *things*. We are chess pieces, moved around daily in the pursuit of a purpose that was never our own. Might diving into a life as a police officer keep you sober? Possibly, probably not, but possibly. But what will you have done? You will have ceased to exist. You will have foregone an opportunity to identify something in yourself worth living for. You will instead receive a false opportunity to uphold a reality that is not of your making and which only presents false promises about your well-being. You will be sober but you will have lost the battle against addiction. You do not exist.

A life devoted to service of empire, then, is not a life at all. Further, empire has created this world that is full of addictions. Trace an addiction back far enough and one will almost always

find this to be true. Allow me to suggest, then, a life devoted to fighting the conditions that cause so many addictions. This could mean a life devoted to workplace sabotage, teaching others how to garden, the fight against boredom, helping others deal with interpersonal conflict, destroying a bank or banks or all currency, fighting white supremacy or misogyny. All of these are meaningful pursuits that fight against the conditions that perpetuate addiction.

On Life

I search on the internet for “how to recover from addiction.” The first website tells me, “You don’t recover from an addiction by stopping using. You recover by creating a new life where it is easier not to use.” I agree with this sentiment emphatically and read on to see what their theory for the overthrow of capital is and am sorely disappointed. It is true that a completely new way of living is needed if you wish to stay sober. It is true that you will probably need new friends and new places and new ways of seeing things. It is also true that anyone who takes addiction seriously will recognize the necessity of negating this world we live in. We must create the conditions for lives worth living. Going to work at a job you hate for 40 hours a week is not compatible with this sentiment. Being a black person in this place called America is not compatible with this sentiment. Being a woman in this world is not compatible with this sentiment. Prisons, factory farms, logging sights, shopping malls, and the existence of the police are not compatible with this sentiment. These do not allow for the conditions of joyful lives.

Let us understand, then, that the war against addiction is also a war against this world. On its surface this may appear a deeply political proposal but this is not about politics this is about life and for those who want to live life, and especially for those who do not. The expectations that this world puts on us are often too much to handle. The policing is too much to bear. The acceptable forms of expression are never enough. The lack of true bonds among creatures is heartbreaking. Everywhere we

turn, our eyes see devastation. It is no surprise that so many of us need drugs or alcohol to survive, the alternative is often debilitating. We push on nonetheless. We commit ourselves to a struggle against this world and the ways it forces addictions on us. We begin to build something new.

We reject the label of addict as just another identity category that empire wants to place on us in order to further subjugate us. If we are understood as a category we become easy to exploit. We have addictions but we are not addicts. Likewise, we reject the use of this label as some sort of handicap or disability in need of pity or consideration as a defect. Addiction is a part of everyone's lives. We make no claim for safe spaces for those struggling with addiction, there is nowhere safe in this world, just as there is nowhere free from addiction. What bonds us is a commitment to fight the power structures that exacerbate and cause so many addictions, we share no identity category - we share only a common struggle.

A Vision

A network of spaces formed around the goal of creating a new world and making a break from this one. Simultaneously, a commitment to promoting sobriety within these spaces and supporting those who are fighting addictions. Sober spaces, but not formed with the purpose of sobriety. Sobriety is not our goal. Because we take addiction seriously, our goal is a new world. Promoting sobriety is simply a vehicle to reach and encourage people who are in need of meaning and purpose. We have a purpose. Our purpose takes seriously the war on addiction in a way that AA or NA does not. We should offer it to those who see the same things we do. We should make ourselves visible. Leaving flyers outside of rehab clinics, building friendships with those new to sobriety, having sober meetups at a space in town, building our own spaces for people who wish to become sober and need somewhere to start. As much as possible,

building alternatives to the ones offered us by this world. We want autonomy in our health as much as any other aspect of our lives. This means autonomy from the hospitals that don't take us seriously, the police who only want to throw us in jail, and the rehab clinics that just want our money. This means collecting naloxone in case of overdose, learning how to mediate fights among friends and how to deal with mental health issues, and creating spaces where people can go to be sober. It also means collecting and distributing clean syringes for those who do not want to be sober. We do not have a moral position on sobriety. We want joy and freedom for the addicted person just as much as the sober person.

We must also recognize that addiction will not be eradicated. Even among those considered sober we see lives full of addictions. Addictions to God, coffee, cigarettes, television; addictions to money, power, intelligence, and beauty. We are still addicted. We will still have friends who are addicted. We will still have friends who we cannot help despite our deepest love for them and our deepest wishes for their well-being. This is simply a part of this world, and it will most likely be a part of the next. We seek to rid our lives of the systems that push so many into addiction, but this does not mean that addiction will go away. We should do our best to help those who are addicted and to take seriously the factors that push people into addiction, but this does not come from a place of charity. We cannot help everyone, we are just as helpless. But we are also just as powerful. We seek a shift in culture, not any sort of evangelical conversion. Our pasts are places to build from, but they are not the thing that unites us. What unites us is the vision of the world we want to live in. The dream which we want to see as reality. The dream *is* the only meaning. We are looking for those who want to find us.

The expectations that this world puts on us are often too much to handle. The policing is too much to bear. The acceptable forms of expression are never enough. The lack of true bonds among creatures is heartbreaking. Everywhere we turn, our eyes see devastation. It is no surprise that so many of us need drugs or alcohol to survive; the alternative is often debilitating. We push on nonetheless. We commit ourselves to a struggle against this world and the ways it forces addictions on us.

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