

A State of Radical Grace

Gabor Maté knows things about addiction that can help us deal with it effectively. His medical practice on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside taught him everyone has compulsions, and his is - get this - buying classical music

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IN THE REALM OF HUNGRY GHOSTS

Close Encounters with Addiction

BY GABOR MATE, MD

Knopf Canada, 465 pages (\$34.95)

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Today Knopf Canada is releasing *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*, Vancouver doctor Gabor Maté's fourth book, in which he applies his signature mind/body/emotions perspective to the topic of addiction.

This is the first time I've read his work and I'm pleasantly surprised at his ability not only to draw together and skilfully interpret the latest research on addiction but also to examine unflinchingly some of the deeply held judgments that lead us to pursue less than optimal responses to the problem.

Although *Hungry Ghosts* is awash with practical information and well-articulated analyses of addiction, the theme that stands out is that of blame. Its role in addiction is complex. It is implicated in the causes, consequences and treatment of addiction and its presence helps explain why we have such a hard time moving toward more effective solutions to this problem.

So take a deep breath. With Gabor Maté, who for eight years has been the staff physician at the Portland Hotel on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, as our guide, we're about to come face-to-face with some of our most cherished denials about ourselves and the phenomenon we call addiction.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun files

Dr. Gabor Maté, shown in his office on the Downtown Eastside in 2003: 'I have come to see addiction ... as a subtle and extensive continuum Somewhere along that continuum I locate myself.'

The first denial he takes on is the belief that addiction is something that only affects other people. In his words, the "hungry ghosts" that reside in the realm of addictions constantly seek something outside themselves "to curb an insatiable yearning for relief or fulfillment." And while we all easily recognize the hungry ghosts who haunt Downtown Eastside alleyways in search of relief and fulfillment in alcohol or heroin, he suggests that in many more of us the spectres include vitality-sapping compulsions toward work, sex, shopping and other such pursuits.

In fact, he hints that our rather callous response to chronic drug users, expressed most clearly in the "war on drugs" approach currently informing some of our national drug-control policies, may be an unconscious effort to deny the reflection of ourselves we see in the "dark mirror" held up by those experiencing chronic addiction.

In the second section of the book, he further sensitizes the reader to what he sees as the ubiquitous nature of addiction by revealing that he suffers from his own dysfunctional compulsion to, get this, purchase classical music.

Like me, readers may at first be inclined to dismiss his admission to being an addict as overly dramatic. However, in sharing personal details about the consequences of his compulsion on his mental health, he drives home the point that chronic addiction and more common, more socially acceptable behavioural compulsions differ mainly in degree. He writes:

I have come to see addiction ... as a subtle and extensive continuum. Its central, defining qualities are active in all addicts, from the honoured workaholic at the apex of society to the impoverished and criminalized crack fiend who haunts Skid Row. Somewhere along that continuum I locate myself.

Although there is a danger in suggesting that everything is an addiction, Maté does a great service by forcing us to confront the us-and-them mentality that drives the get-tough responses to addiction.

The middle sections of *Hungry Ghosts* present an easy-to-read summary of what is known about the biological and psychological causes, and the consequences, of addiction, one of the key understandings being that the brains of people experiencing addiction operate differently to normal brains, and these differences contribute to a worsening of the addictive process over time.

Most fundamentally, these findings suggest that the view of addicts as weak and making poor life choices is deeply flawed. The best neuroscience now indicates that chronic substance users experience a different brain state, which makes it exceedingly difficult for them to choose, in any real sense of that word.

A third major scientific finding discussed in *Hungry Ghosts* is the fact that environmental and experiential factors play a larger role in overall brain development than genetic endowments. The question, then, is why is so much focus placed on genetics in addiction research and in media reports on it.

To this quandary, Maté offers an amazingly insightful answer:

There is a psychological fact that, I believe, provides a powerful incentive for people to cling to genetic theories. We human beings don't like feeling responsible: as individuals for our own actions; as parents for our children's hurts; or as a society for our many failings. Genetics -- that neutral, impassive, impersonal handmaiden of Nature -- would absolve us of responsibility and of its ominous shadow, guilt. If genetics rules our fate, we would not need to blame ourselves or anyone else The possibility does not occur to us that we can accept or assign responsibility without taking on the useless baggage of guilt or blame.

Do you see the pattern involving blame here?

Later, Maté presents a well-reasoned critique of the so-called war on drugs and offers suggestions for how we might respond more effectively to chronic addiction. He makes an impassioned call for more harm-reduction programs like Vancouver's supervised injection site.

He identifies clearly what I call the active ingredient in the harm-reduction approach. He writes:

The moments of reprieve at the Portland come not when we aim for dramatic achievements -- helping someone kick addiction or curing a disease -- but when clients allow us to reach them, when they permit even a slight opening in the hard, prickly shells they've built to protect themselves. For that to happen, they must first sense our commitment to accepting them for who they are. That is the essence of harm reduction, but it's also the essence of any healing or nurturing relationship.

This is a significant observation that helps explain why "getting tough" with people experiencing chronic addiction doesn't help them deal with their problem effectively.

Bear with me while I try to explain. Similar to Maté, I believe the essence of harm-reduction programs is that they can extend unconditional acceptance to addicts who, like many on the Downtown Eastside, absolutely loathe themselves. In my experience, this type of "radical grace" is essential to any deep healing process because you must accept something about yourself before you can confront and change it.

But, and here's the important nuance, a person's propensity to hear blame is directly proportional to the amount of shame he or she carries. This means that even minor undercurrent judgments are keenly felt by those suffering intense shame, and anything that triggers this shame will only lead them further into denial.

The art of helping people experiencing chronic addiction to help themselves involves delicately balancing the energy of pure acceptance with a genuine desire to assist, and this must come forth with absolutely no hidden agendas or judgments because if they are there, they will be felt. This approach requires immense amounts of creativity, authenticity and patience.

Unfortunately, many, if not most, of our responses to chronic drug addiction embody the shame-and-coerce approach. Even though we have a smattering of harm-reduction programs on the Downtown Eastside that are capable, in theory, of extending radical grace to addicts, they are applied within a highly judgmental social context. And we wonder why addiction seems to get

worse.

By way of a critique of *Hungry Ghosts*, I'd like to point out just how difficult it is to practise radical grace consistently and keep undercurrent blame from tainting our efforts.

Maté writes:

As this book is being completed, the disturbing details of the serial murder case against pig farmer Robert Pickton are emerging in a B.C. courtroom. If convicted, Pickton will be counted among the most prolific and most sadistic killers of women in North American history. I believe that as a society we are unwitting accomplices in the deaths of the [Downtown Eastside] women who allegedly became Pickton's victims because our criminalization of drug use drove those women into prostitution and into the underground street life that led to their deaths.

Here Maté unwittingly falls into the trap of trying to shame society into confronting its denials by suggesting we are all complicit in the brutal Pickton murders. While I agree that society needs to assume some responsibility for these horrible events, his use of blame to try to bring this about will ultimately fail for the same reason it doesn't work with chronic drug users: Guilt used in this way invariably impedes change.

Apart from this, and apart from the fact that his most innovative suggestions for change are for some reason presented in an appendix, I highly recommend *Hungry Ghosts* to everyone seeking insight into addiction. Gabor Maté's masterful and impassioned treatment of the topic is a welcome relief from the tired old thinking that has kept us from dealing effectively with it for the last 100 years.

Gerald Thomas is a senior policy analyst at the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C.

A book launch for *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, hosted by psychologist Bruce Alexander, is set for Wednesday, March 12, 7:30 p.m., at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church. Admission is \$5.

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