

Trusting God: Detaching from the Addict

by John Vawter

Twenty some years ago a congenital condition in my back manifested itself with lots of pain in the lower back and numbness in my legs. Little did I know that this condition would be of significant spiritual and emotional help to Susan and me when drugs invaded our family years later. Let me explain.

I complained and probably whined a lot about my back and legs. I would not heed Susan's advice to see the doctor. I thought I could fix it myself. I had no idea how I could fix it, but I thought I could. Finally, one day Susan said to me, "If you are not going to see the doctor, do not complain to me anymore." So, I went to the doctor and got the help I needed.

Neither of us realized that Susan was practicing a principle called detachment. It is something every one must consider doing with an addicted loved one. It is not easy. It can be very difficult to pull off. But those who do understand addicts and self-absorbed people tell those of us who are the loved ones that the only solution is to love the addict but turn them over to God. In Susan's case she was no longer going to be "hooked" by my complaining, spend her emotional energies helping me or take her time to try to comfort and help me, when I would not take any steps to be helped by the expert, the orthopedic surgeon.

It is pretty well documented that most addicts have a rebellious streak in them. This is why Alcoholics Anonymous talks about breaking the will of the alcoholic. Our daughter Stephanie, who is a recovering heroin addict, explained to me that addicts have chosen to or continue to choose to live their life for themselves and without consideration of his/her loved ones. They become self-absorbed and self-focused. Usually they do not care what kind of pain or discomfort they cause their loved ones.

At first glance, a discussion or explanation of detachment seems very heartless. But when detachment is properly understood, we realize it is loving, healthy and hopeful. Detachment seems to be unloving, but it is more unloving to deny the person the opportunity to grow by experiencing the consequences of his own behavior. Detachment seems like giving up, but the only thing we are giving up is the illusion of control. Detachment helps both the parent and the addict face responsibility for our own lives. For us as parents, facing that responsibility puts us back on the road to mental and spiritual health.

We understand that we can model Christianity for our children or loved ones but ultimately they must accept or reject Christ for themselves. We cannot make the decision for them. So it is with drugs or alcohol. Now, depending on their age, there are different pro-active stances we can take but ultimately the addicts must decide for themselves. Detachment helps both the parent and the addict face the responsibility for their own lives. For us as parents facing that responsibility puts us back on the path to mental and spiritual health.

Understanding that every addict or alcoholic has a rebellious streak helps us. Rebels do not listen to anyone. Solomon gives us solid commentary on the rebel or fool.

"A fool rejects his father's discipline...stern discipline is for him who forsakes the way...he who hates reproof will die...the mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly...a foolish man despises his mother...folly is joy to him who lacks sense...a rod is for the back of fools."

This principle of detachment seems extremely harsh and unloving. As parents or loved ones, we must recognize that we can not make the addict quit using or abusing. All the recovering addicts who have spoken at our conferences says that their parents raised them correctly. It was the child who chose to abuse. In research we are conducting at present with pastors' kids who have

abused we are hearing one of three reasons for their use and abuse: 1, flat out rebellion against the parents, 2, peer pressure or, 3, the need to medicate themselves against emotional pain they were feeling.

I think we all recoil at the word *detachment* because it seems to be so fatalistic. What if my child does not get clean? What if my child ruins his/her life? What if my child dies? These are all legitimate questions and concerns. Detachment does not mean we do not care. Detachment does not mean we violate our sense of compassion. Detachment does not mean we stop loving our child. Detachment does not mean we do not take some steps to help. Our response to the problem depends on the age of the child and the longevity of the problem. Ultimately, the parent must learn to detach—and quit enabling the addict.

Let me quote Zach Whaley who is a counselor in Phoenix and a popular speaker at our conferences. He explains detachment this way:

“When I detach from an addicted loved one, it does not mean that I am no longer interested or concerned about the welfare of the other person. It just means that I am no longer tied to the addict’s emotions, thoughts or behavior. It means I have chosen to stop reacting automatically to certain stimuli and, instead, to start responding thoughtfully and deliberately. Since I am no longer attached to the other person’s behavior, I am no longer under the control of the other person. Of course, my detachment also means that I can no longer control the other person. It also means I can no longer blame him or her for the things that are totally under my control, like my thoughts, my feelings and my behavior.”

Let me explain this in a different context. The one who taught me about detachment and challenged me to detach is a friend in Phoenix. When I first met him, Stephanie had been through treatment for heroin and had been clean for twelve months. Then our son Michael told us he was smoking marijuana. At the time he seemed aimless. I was my normal A-type, driver temperament personality. I was fearful for his future. I was plotting all types of strategies to help him. My friend was very matter of fact, but not lacking in compassion or faith. He reminded me that I had had a very good rational talk with my son about marijuana. I had also had a second rational conversation with my son. Both times my son had rejected my advice. There was nothing else I could say. I had to commit my son to God in a new way, as many times as necessary every day, and let God do His work in His time, even if it meant negative consequences in my son’s life. The abuser must recognize the consequences of his/her actions. My friend reminded me that God loves my son more than I do. Not only does God love our kids more than we do, but also His love and ability to work on our kids’ behalf are stronger than our love and ability. I am watching that principle work and it is rewarding and humbling to watch. My friend explained that he had had to learn this same principle with his daughter who was in an unhealthy and abusive relationship. She had rejected her parents’ counsel. Now, three things needed to happen:

1. The parents needed to detach
2. The child needed to bear the consequences of her decisions
3. The parents needed to give God the freedom to work in His own way.

Is detachment hard? Of course it is. Is detachment scary? Of course it is. Is detachment right? Of course it is. Solomon, in the verses cited earlier, helps us understand that not all children listen to their parents. Solomon also helps us understand that children need to bear the consequences of their decisions. As parents we do not want to accept this. We love our kids. We want what is best for them. However, it must be their decision to get clean. It is possible that their decision to use may take years off their lives or prevent them from getting a graduate degree and getting a better job. But those are choices and decisions they make. Our ultimate goal for them must be that they are clean and walking with God.

Earlier I mentioned the age of the addict should determine how pro-active we are in detaching. Please remember that in all of this, each parent must determine for himself what his action plan will be. There are no absolutes. I break the issue down into three general age categories: below 18 or legal age; 18 to 30; and, beyond 30 years of age. Detachment plays a

different role in each age category. When the child is below the age of 18 and still is the legal responsibility of the parent, the parent must be very proactive. Drug counseling, searching bedrooms, restrictions, knowing who his friends are and knowing their whereabouts are all acceptable in my opinion. The parent is spiritually, Biblically, morally and legally responsible for the child. When Stephanie was 14, she got some marijuana from a young man in the church I served in Minneapolis. Susan and I knew this was not something we could ignore. We talked to the school counselor, who was also an experienced drug counselor. He advised us to take her to a drug treatment center for an evaluation. The assessment at that time was that she had experimented with but was not using or abusing marijuana or any other drug. Nevertheless, we believed it our responsibility to help her understand the dangers of drugs and at a later date we did search her room.

Stephanie explained to me that if a parent is going to search his kid's room, the parent needs to be prepared to have that child hate him, or at least say so. Stephanie explains it by saying: "Of course the child has violated trust by bringing drugs into the home. In the way the addict thinks, the parent violates a trust, too, because kids think they have the right to their own privacy and that privacy has been violated." Nevertheless, she affirms the parents' right and need to go to any lengths to be proactive when under age children are suspected of experimenting with, using or abusing drugs/alcohol. I can tell you that one of the very lowest points in my life was the day I told Stephanie in front of a drug counselor that I had searched her room and she screamed at me, "I hate you! I hate you!" Did that hurt? It hurt more than I can express or explain. But, it was the right thing to do. Detachment takes on different forms depending on the age of child. There is a vast difference between the 15-year-old abusing and the 30-year-old abusing. It is easier to detach when he is of legal age and not living in our home. On the other hand, starting the process of detachment can help save the emotional and spiritual life of the parent.

I believe that when a child is at such a young age, parents cannot detach and let the child make his own decisions. The stakes are too high. Nevertheless, we as parents must also be cognizant that our child can use and abuse if he wants to do so. We cannot be with him every minute of the day. He can buy or barter for drugs at school and use them there. Some do exactly that. Also, drug counselors tell us that some kids get good grades and are involved in extracurricular activities just so they can hide their drug use from their parents. Todd Smoke, one of our conference speakers, said there is nothing his parents could have done to keep him from abusing drugs and alcohol in high school. He was sneaking out at night after they went to bed. He was getting good grades the entire time. He also says there is nothing they could have done to get him to stop in his adult life either. We always think drug abuse is "across the tracks." It is not. It is everywhere. Statistics for the Phoenix area where we live tell us that the high rent districts have as much drug use and abuse as the low rent and high crime areas.

On the other hand, as a child gets nearer to the age of 18, the parent may have to express tough love to the kid as a part of detachment. I talked to one family who live in a state where they could be held legally responsible—and that includes jail—for the drug related crimes of their 17-year-old son. Legally, they could not remove him from their property. He continued to violate their rule of no drug use anywhere. When I asked them who paid the mortgage on the house they said they did. So, I reminded them that they had the authority to set the rules. I encouraged them to change the locks on the house and move his bed to the garage with the understanding that, since they were legally responsible for him until his 18th birthday, the garage was where he was going to live until he was 18. Then he would be vacated from their property. He would be on his own. This story helps us understand that detachment is not easy, clear or simple. Legal factors can enter in. Nevertheless, after our talk the parents realized that their son was running and ruining their lives as a couple. They realized they were too intertwined with their son's bad decisions. He was controlling them. They did not move him to the garage, but they did begin to detach and withdraw family favors from him. This detachment was for their own spiritual and mental health. For example, they did not give him money for a major family function as they did the other kids. He realized the difference. When he asked why, they told him bluntly, "We will give you nothing beyond what the law requires as long as you are using drugs." This was the start of detachment for them. They were on their way back to health. Detachment got his attention and started his journey back to sobriety.

The age from 18 to 30 is a different story. I think detachment in this age category can be more acute and definite. When our children are of legal age, we have no legal right to make them do anything. In this age category we parents must assume responsibility for our own lives. I understand that we love our children. But they cannot control us. Often, the parents' detachment helps their addict child understand that he must accept responsibility for his actions. The experts in drug/alcohol rehabilitation make it very clear that only the addict can decide to get clean. Sometimes this means he "must hit bottom." Unfortunately, the addicts are our kids. We created them. We love them. We would give our lives for them. We would do anything for them. And, that is exactly the problem. We would do anything for them and they know it. So, they use, abuse and manipulate us in order to spend more time with their beloved mistress that is drugs or alcohol. That is why it is the loving and mature thing to let our adult children hit bottom and face the consequences of their own actions and decisions. A man recently wrote about his son, "My son is using drugs again. He is not using enough to hit bottom but enough not to be free to live a victorious and fulfilling life." This is why this man and his wife are detaching from their son to help hasten the process of his hitting bottom so he will get the help he needs. Many times as parents we keep the fact of our child's addiction in the dark because we are embarrassed or afraid of people's reaction. This is a very normal reaction to drugs in our family and we must be aware of this as the enemy of our own souls and spiritual and emotional health. We must remember that addicts have a mindset and a way of thinking; it is called "addict logic" and you and I do not have it. Their main motivation in life is to get their next high or fix. So, if they sense that we parents will not make them face the consequences of their use and abuse, then they will manipulate us for their own ends.

So, we begin to detach. **We detach first from assuming responsibility for our child's actions.** As the Nar-Anon creed states: "I did not cause it, I can not control it and I can not cure it." We recognize that although we were not perfect parents our misdeeds and mistakes are not responsible for our child's use and abuse. Stephanie told us that one of her Alcoholics Anonymous discussion groups was made up of "street people, middle class people, wealthy people and people who had been wealthy but lost all their money to their addiction." She said that in spite of their socio-economic differences they agreed that the one common denominator among them was this: *Until they quit blaming others for their addiction, they did not go get the help they needed.*

Secondly, we begin to detach emotionally and spiritually. We put our stake in the ground as we realize that just as the addict is responsible to get clean so we are responsible to be healthy, both spiritually and emotionally. As Nar-Anon says,

"Your role as helper is not to **DO** things for the person you are helping but to **BE** things, not to try to train and change his actions, but to train and change your actions. As you change your negatives to positives—fear to faith; contempt for what he does to respect for the potential within him; rejection to release with love...as you change in such ways as these, you change the world about you...."

By detaching spiritually, we focus on our own spiritual walk with Christ and we ask and trust the Holy Spirit to work in our child's life.

Thirdly, we may have to detach physically from our children. This is tough. But, we must be motivated by what is best for them. Maybe two stories from support groups for parents of addicts will illustrate the point. One woman asked her group if they thought she was being too permissive to allow her adult son to live in her home, cook his heroin and shoot up in his bedroom. In unison the group said, "Yes!!" On the other hand, a woman told of putting all her son's things on the front porch for him to find when he came home. He rang the doorbell, because the locks had been changed, and asked, "What is happening?" She explained that he had violated her rule of no drugs if he lived in her house. He responded by asking where he was going to sleep that night. Her response was, "That is not my worry. You made the decision not to sleep here when you used drugs again." I think it is easy to see that the woman who manifested tough love was indeed showing more love toward her son than the mother who let her son cook his heroin and

shoot up in his bedroom. Genuine detachment in this age category means parents are willing to break contact with their kid in order to let their kid assume the responsibility for their addiction. The final age category is over 30 years of age. At this point, unless there are extraordinary circumstances, all children should be on their own and supporting themselves. So, there is no reason for the parent to be paying bills, giving money or free rent. This is the stage of life where the parents should be free to pursue their own pleasures and ministry opportunities. They should not feel guilty over the choices their kids made or make. By this time there is no one to blame but the addict. It is easy to say but hard to do—but parents of addicts over the age of 30 should not be controlled by them nor be responsible for them.

I just read an article about a young man who ran the Los Angeles marathon. One year ago he was living in a dumpster. His parents forbade him to come into their house until he got sober. His younger brother would leave the door unlocked so he could sneak in during the night to get something to eat, but his parents did not know that. His parents' detachment helped bring him to the bottom. He says about his going to a Catholic treatment center, "I was so tired of being dirty and alone." It must have hurt his parents to put him out, but it was the right thing to do. At the treatment center he met a man who introduced him to running and he used the training for the marathon as incentive to manifest the discipline needed to stay clean and sober.

I have mentioned a number of times that detachment is not easy. "Because detachment does not happen overnight in a once and for all decision and action," says Zach Whaley, "we can not just detach from the addict. We cannot just stop being enmeshed with the addict. Concentrating on detachment does not work. Paradoxically, when we focus on detachment, we remain attached. The Apostle Paul has a solution. Whenever he tells us to stop something, he tells us to do something else instead. He often used the phrases 'put off' and 'put on.' We need to put off dysfunctional and unhealthy attachments and attitudes that tear us down and suck the life out of us and put on functional and healthy attachments that restore life. Proverbs 4:23 says, 'Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.'"

Zach shares three lessons that he used when he was learning to detach.

The serenity prayer: "Saying this prayer over and over helped me to focus on God and my own recovery instead of being an enabler."

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

Recalling memorized Scripture verses: "Especially helpful to me was Proverbs 3:5 which says, 'Trust in the Lord with your whole heart and do not lean on your own understanding' and Philippians 4:13 which says, 'I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.'"

The slogan: "'This too shall pass' helped me to develop patience and trust in God for the future of my addicted one and for my life."

In conclusion, let me reiterate that detachment is a necessity for all of us who have addicts in our families. It is a necessity for their sobriety and our spiritual health. Detachment does not mean we quit loving; in some cases it means we start loving. Detachment does not mean we are fatalistic; it just means we turn the control and future of our child over to the care of God Who expresses His love to us in Jesus Christ. Detachment is not easy. We must learn to practice it every day. Relapses will occur in our journey toward detachment. As hard as it is to detach, there are plenty of testimonials from parents of addicts who have gone before us who tell us that they did not let God control the situation until they detached.