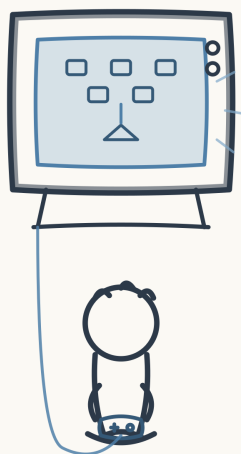


Turning Toward Addiction



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*Understanding the Desire, Holding the Reality,
and Letting Go of the Parts That Don't Belong*

Experienced · Observed · Studied

If you or someone you love is struggling, you don't have to do it alone.

SAMHSA National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357) — free, confidential, 24/7.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988.

Kansas City area — First Call: 816-361-5900, a 24-hour crisis line that has served this metro for more than sixty-five years.

This essay is a set of reflections, not a treatment plan. It is not a replacement for a doctor, a therapist, or a supervised recovery program, and nothing in it should be read as medical advice.

Dedication

To my rave, music, and festival family. All the beautiful ways you chose to spend your time — light shows, electronic music, community, unity — were the very signals that pointed me away from the things that almost robbed me of who I was. We didn't know it at the time, but most of us outgrew the drugs

*anyway. I just wanted you to know: outgrowing them
with you all is a story for another book I'll have to
write someday.*

Sometimes the very sound of a substance's name can spark the desire for it in a reader's mind. For safety and clarity, I want to name the terms I'll use up front, so that anyone who needs to close this and come back later knows what's coming before they meet it. If this isn't the right day for this essay, that's okay. It will keep.

The things I'll talk about — my own battles, and what I've watched over decades caring for the people closest to me, some of whom didn't make it out — stay inside these guardrails, and they aren't limited to drugs: alcohol, benzodiazepines, caffeine, depressants, gambling, hallucinogens (LSD, psilocybin, DMT), marijuana, nicotine, sex and pornography, social media, stimulants, and video games.

I'm going to use the jays framework to explain how I walked through some of these doors and back out the other side, and how I've helped people I love walk back out of theirs. To protect the privacy of everyone these stories touch, I'm telling all of them in the first person. That keeps full anonymity for me, for my past, and for the people who came to me for help. Some of these stories are mine. Some aren't. I'm not going to tell you which is which — with one exception, coming up, that I want you to have before the anonymizing begins.

So let's go through a door backwards, into the mind of an addict, and see if we can find our way out.

Alcohol

Booze. The sweet fuel of the social butterfly — that's my opinion, anyway. It's as good a place to start as any, because I want to break down how the brain makes its own reward, and how a substance and an environment can reach for the very same lever.

Here's the exception I promised. This part is me — Jamison, the author, no anonymizing.

I've never blacked out.

People black out on alcohol all the time. I never have. I've done plenty of stupid things drunk — wrecked my car and lied about it to everyone around me, found out exactly how far I could go — but I always kept the memory. Sometimes it wouldn't surface right away; those headaches are a force of their own. But the moment someone said dude, you wrecked your car, I'd snap straight back into the memory of it happening, the whole thing intact.

I used to think it was a glitch in my logical brain. These days I think it might be the only reason I didn't go down a much darker road after that accident. I'll never be able to explain it. It's probably the same reason dissociatives don't work on me the way they

work on other people — I can't even use laughing gas at the dentist. I just lie there laughing at how bad it hurts.

So why did I drink?

To be social. That was almost always the reason. And honestly? In small doses, that's fine. But when does a college-age kid ever measure small doses?

We drink because others drink. I genuinely can't picture the person who picks up a bottle purely on their own, with no external pull, and drinks their life away just because. I'm sure that person exists. I just can't imagine into them. For most of us it starts as a social lubricant — something that eases the mind and lets knowledge pass between people. It closes the gap.

And there's real machinery under that feeling. Your brain makes its own endorphins — beta-endorphin, the enkephalins — and alcohol reaches straight into that system, nudging the same endogenous-opioid and dopamine circuits that light up the brain's reward pathway. That's the pharmacology under the word buzz. But here's the part almost nobody tells you: the social setting reaches for the same lever. Laughing with people, singing with people, moving in time with people — researchers have watched all of it release the body's own opioids. Robin Dunbar's group found that social laughter alone raises people's pain

thresholds; brain-imaging work has caught that endorphin release in the act. The company was doing some of the work the whole time.

Which means your brain can get there without the bottle. The substance just boosts what the room was already offering.

The fruit of the knowledge lets the knowledge pass. That's all it should be. And then one day, it isn't.

The first time you drink alone, you probably tell yourself what I told myself: just this once. I'd love to meet the person who said that and meant it — probably the same saint who drank one beer and never touched another. The rest of us tied that first high to the room we were in, and something locked on the very first pass. People call it chasing the dragon, and it isn't a myth. Once you've felt that first level of lift, everything after it is a negotiation between dose and damage. Your brain adapts to keep its balance, so the same amount does less, and it takes more to feel what you felt — and the chase can burn through an hour, a week, or a whole life. What makes you suffer isn't the drink. It's the repetition. The frequency.

And when the social spark is gone, the whole point is gone with it. What's the good of being high with no one there?

There's an ego trick underneath the solo version of this. The ego has a way of softening reality to pull itself closer to what it wants to call the self, or God, or the Divine — or, plainly, death. I've long suspected that nearly everything that brings us pleasure is also, quietly, tilting us toward our own edge. You can see the shape of it in alcohol, in stimulants and depressants, on down to nicotine, caffeine, sugar, chocolate. We're coaxing ourselves into a little borrowed happiness.

Hold that as a metaphor, not a coroner's report. It's a way of seeing a pattern, not a claim that joy is literally lethal. Because the same lens shows you the opposite, too: the right thing, in the right setting, in the right dose, can heal — and the very same molecule, in the wrong setting and the wrong dose, can take you apart. Sharing a box of Valentine's chocolates with someone you love is not the same event as finishing it alone at 2 a.m. hating yourself. I'm not telling you to quit chocolate. I'm asking you to see the pattern, because it maps onto everything heavier.

And the pattern cuts both ways hard. Some substances genuinely are medicine when a professional holds them right. Others aren't meant to be taken at all — certain stimulants and depressants are far more addictive than they will ever be therapeutic, and no amount of setting redeems them. I'm not the one to referee which is which. That's what

the doctors are for. They've given their lives to the question. Trust them over me on this one.

That professional-in-the-room idea is exactly why the supervised research is showing what it's showing. In careful clinical trials, psilocybin has produced real, lasting drops in depression and end-of-life anxiety; MDMA-assisted therapy has moved the needle on PTSD that wouldn't move any other way. And there's always a trained guide present — someone to hold the balance while the person does the deep work. Even there, in the most stripped-down setting imaginable, there are still three in the room: the ego, the self, and the healer who keeps the peace between them.

But I have to be honest about where that research actually stands, because hope without accuracy is just a setup. These medicines are still investigational and, for the most part, still illegal outside a research setting — psilocybin, LSD, DMT, and MDMA remain Schedule I under federal law. In August 2024 the FDA declined to approve MDMA-assisted therapy and asked for another trial. Dissociative-assisted therapy is further along — ketamine and its cousin esketamine are cleared for treatment-resistant depression, given only under medical supervision — but that supervision is the whole point. So if any of this is going to help us, we have to be patient enough to let the experts bring it to us in the doses and the settings it was meant to arrive in. Not in the port-a-

potty at your favorite festival. The molecule doesn't care about your intentions. The setting is half the medicine.

If you take nothing else from all of this, take this: some of the things we reach for, we may have been meant to reach for — in smaller doses, and around other people.

Now, back to frequency. How did I fight the thing?

For any substance, it comes down to repetition — and repetition can be turned down. Take the “morning routine” and make it an “afternoon reward,” after the laundry's folded. Crack it open then, if you're going to. You made it hours further than the timeline you were on. Don't hate yourself for it. Tomorrow, maybe it's drinks with friends in the morning again — that's what it was for. But stop it there. Don't go home and continue the pattern alone. Take the nap. Meet the hangover early. Widen the gap between one use and the next, and then fill the gap with something — poetry, music, art, whatever this stuff I make is. I write, right? <3

One hard warning, and I mean this one flatly, no lyricism. If you are a heavy daily drinker, do not just stop cold on your own, and don't white-knuckle a crash taper by yourself either. Alcohol is one of the few things whose withdrawal can actually kill you — seizures, and a medical emergency called delirium tremens that can be fatal even in a hospital.

Benzodiazepines are the same way. This is the one place where the move is not to argue with your own body. It's to call a doctor and let them bring you down safely. There's no shame in a supervised detox. It's the opposite of weakness; it's the version of this where you live.

And I have to hold something else next to the harm-reduction talk, out of respect for the people in my dedication who didn't make it. For some people, the frequency simply cannot be dialed down — the “one afternoon beer” isn't an option their body will honor, and moderation is the trap, not the exit. For them the road is full stop, with support: a program, a sponsor, a First Call, an AA table. If that's you, the honest kindness is to say so plainly rather than hand you a dimmer switch that was never going to work.

I'm not as young as I was. I used to be able to kill a whole bottle by myself, sleep it off, and clock in the next morning bright-eyed like I'd accomplished something. Now a single sip means I'm calling a cab. That's what sobriety feels like from here, and it's almost as frightening as the addiction was.

But look at the gifts it hands me. I'm the ride now. I'm the sober head in the room, the one making sure nobody hurts themselves. I was a trip guru before I knew the word for it — did it at parties even when I was the drunk one, just being there for people, and it lit up something in my brain I still can't fully name.

Maybe that makes me square. I'd rather spend the night driving my drunk friends home than being one of them. Sorry to the friends who've missed me. If you've ever called me for that ride, you already understand.

There are real resources for that ride, too — rideshare, sober-driver programs, whole campaigns built around getting you home. Use them. In 2023 alone, more than twelve thousand people died in drunk-driving crashes in this country. Don't be me, plowing straight through a roundabout, some part of my brain cracking up that I hadn't gone around or about a thing as the car went airborne. It was funny to me in the moment — that's the horror of it, how easily the mind will dress up its worst decision as a joke while it's happening. It wasn't funny. It was one of the worst decisions I've ever made, and I only got to keep laughing because I got lucky. Told you I don't black out. I remember all of it.

Be social. Be kind. Be free. But don't be alone with it, and don't drive. Make the call. Take the ride. Get home, and once you're home, be safe there too.

Push the envelope the other direction. Widen the gap. As it grows, fill it. And if you slip and close the gap — that's okay too. The single biggest mistake you can make in that moment is to cover the mistake with another one. You keep pulling the frequency back down to something livable. Even with alcohol, even if

you're out every weekend — as long as it isn't eating your money or your relationships, fine, piss in the wind. We were half-built for it.

The hard part isn't stopping. It's finding out why you were doing it. And sometimes you only find that at the bottom, sitting in it. Rock bottom is jagged. There's no comfortable way to sit there. But here's the funny thing about the bottom: every direction out of it is up. Even swapping the morning routine for an afternoon retreat is a change of direction. Imagine doing it again the next day. And the next. Imagine being the hero of your own story with nobody coming to save you.

Let me turn the lens before I close, because I said I'd talk about the ones that aren't drugs — social media, sex, pornography, video games. They pull the same reward levers, and the frequency of use shapes how well we can steady ourselves without them. The science has started to catch up to this: gambling is now formally recognized as a behavioral addiction, and the World Health Organization added “gaming disorder” to its diagnostic manual, precisely because these behaviors lean on brain-reward circuitry that overlaps with what substances use. It's real. It's also, in places, still being argued over — so I'll hold it honestly rather than oversell it.

Someone I trust — one of the smartest people I know, and one of the few who knows himself better than I know myself; he okayed this anonymous mention — once described his pornography habit to me in a way I've never shaken. He said the performers who really do it for the audience, the ones who know they're beautiful and know people are starving for an intimacy they can't name — those were more compelling to him than the ones who'd been talked into it or driven to it by need.

That sat with me a long time, and it taught me something about perception and intent. The more I looked, the more it held: across the industry, the ones who seem to last were the ones doing it out of something like conviction. Free love, some would call it — the old idea that sexual desire is wired into us in a way we can't fully explain. That reads across orientations, as far as I've ever seen.

People have their signals, the things they're drawn to, and those signals are shaped by where they grew up and who was around — coherent, in the jays sense, with a whole life's environment. Which is enough for me to say the quiet thing plainly: a person's understanding of themselves is not my bridge to build. Neither is anyone's understanding of the field, the design, whatever you want to call it. I'll leave in only the oldest instruction that matters here — to treat the other as a mirror — and leave the rest alone. Because even when the self-perceived

“superior” one looks at the addict wrestling the stronger demons and thinks disgusting, or gross, that same ego will drive home to its coffee, its sugar, the little prescriptions we've quietly outlived the need for, and its social media, where it can talk about other people and their problems. Addiction wears many masks. The Self behind all of them is the same.

And while we're being honest about masks: blame wears one too. It's easy, in the throes of it, to hand the whole weight to whoever wrote the prescription. But there's a difference between the doctor who tried — who treated the pain in front of them in good faith — and the one who never cared to follow up. We shouldn't fault the healer who acted rightly with what they knew. The responsibility for what a thing becomes, long after the reason for it has healed, travels back home with us. It stays in our hands, same as the choice does.

The pattern of addiction runs through pornography the same as anything. As glamorous as that world can look, that life is for the people equipped to live it, on both sides of the screen. And too many quiet stories of erectile trouble trace back to a tangled-up sense of needing the release — though I'll be straight with you that the science here is genuinely unsettled. What the research more consistently finds is that it's the distress about the use, not the raw frequency, that tracks with the problem. The timing of that betrayal

is always impeccable, isn't it — right when you need your own system to work, for someone real.

Same with social media, where our wanting spills out into public view. Relationships leave legible traces there, and those traces turn into the worst version of the story more often than not. It usually starts in trust — send me a picture — and trust, once it's out of your hands, can be broken. My private life is my private life. These days there's no one in it but my partner. The drive to want, to reach, is old and probably not built for monogamy — that's just genetics being honest. And still, I can't argue with what I found in her: the actual yin to my yang, and the last thing that carried me across the final pharmaceutical bridge to being all the way sober. Just today I gave up vaporized nicotine and drank two Dr Peppers instead of my usual half-dozen. It was a real headache. I made it anyway, and I feel better for it.

I once had a 22-millimeter kidney stone pulled out of my back — a robin's egg, near enough to cover a quarter, the kind they don't even let you try to pass. I still can't tell you why I ever drank soda after a pain like that. But I did. Today was two. Tomorrow, maybe one. Who knows after that. But I know this much: every time I choose my own health over my own failure, I hand a little time back to the far end of my life. All those grim little facts — every cigarette costs you x minutes — the newest estimates put it around twenty minutes a cigarette. Here's the part they leave

off: you can win a lot of that back. Quit at forty and you cut most of the risk. Quit earlier and you get back more. The recovery is real and it's significant, and it starts the day you decide it does.

Look at that. This whole thing started as an essay about wrecking my car drunk as a skunk, and it's ending with me pairing two small healthy choices and quietly closing three or four chapters of my life at once.

Tomorrow I might slip. I won't hate myself for it. I'll get up and keep going. And somehow, just knowing that — knowing it all the way down — is often exactly enough to keep me from slipping in the first place.

I told myself the video-game version of this lie for years. Never saw it as a problem, right up until I saw how much of my own feeling I was pouring into imaginary things. I called it therapy to my partner. I watched my kid start to absorb my demons. And when I finally set it down, what stunned me was the setting-down itself — that a thing I'd held close my whole life came loose in the space of two fast realizations, back to back, right when it counted most. Sometimes the hardest thing to see isn't what our choices do to us. It's what they do to the people who love us. And sometimes that's the whole of what we need to pick no, for one moment, of one hour, of one day.

Sometimes, just sometimes, we get too high without any drug at all. My theory would say the brain can do the very same thing when it tries to measure the gap between the ego and the self. We get so high on our own egos — on our perception of these material vessels we walk around in, and the things we've gathered — that we lose track of the real importance we hold in the grand scheme of the self. Jung had a name for that particular altitude. He called it inflation: the ego puffing itself up by mistaking something vast and shared for something it personally owns, until it can't tell the difference between itself and the whole. The higher it climbs, the harder the fall waiting on the other side — the crash into emptiness that the substance, later, gets recruited to fill.

Shorten it, so it's easy to carry:

*Sometimes we get so caught up in who we are, we
forget who we can be.*

But that's not to say we don't remember, on some deeper level. Jung believed the wholeness never actually leaves — that there's an ever-present pattern of it in us that can slip out of the mind's view for years and still be there, waiting, the whole time. We don't build it from scratch when we come back. We remember it. The word he reached for was almost the same one: an un-forgetting. And maybe that's all recovery ever is — the long walk back to a center that

was holding your place the entire time you were gone.

Jung had a different way of looking at the demon of alcoholism, and for whatever reason, his thoughts on the subject collapsed into a reality that saved countless lives. But he was only a small link in the chain of the idea. A man named Rowland Hazard went to Carl Jung for his drinking in the early 1930s. Jung eventually told him the truth as he saw it: that medicine and psychology had nothing left to offer him, and that his only real hope was a genuine spiritual conversion. Hazard carried that to the Oxford Group, and from there it passed to Ebby Thacher, and from Thacher to a man named Bill Wilson — Bill W., who went on to co-found Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935. Decades later Wilson wrote to Jung to thank him for the spark. Jung wrote back in 1961, near the end of his life, and named the craving for drink “the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness.” *Spiritus contra spiritum*, he wrote — spirit against spirits — the same Latin word for the bottle and for the highest thing we reach toward.

Those chips they hand out hold exactly as much power as the people holding them give them. This stands true in the warm church basement with the hot coffee during AA, as well as the cold casino lobby under the flashing lights of Markov's dreams. A constant reminder of a demon outlasted, whatever

story you hang on it. That kind of symbol runs through nearly every faith, carried in small objects. I'm not telling you God will heal you. I'm telling you the design seems to hand us every tool we'd need to heal ourselves — and that the power to choose stays in our hands.

In theory.

Love yourself, even when you fail. Sometimes that small mercy is the exact thing that makes you choose differently next time. And love others when they fail, because maybe they don't yet understand why they do what they do. We can only help.

Not judge.

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