

Crack in the Lifestory: The Experience of David Jenkins

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Abstract

Background: The crack epidemic hit poor neighborhoods in the mid-1980s and continued with great force for 10 years. During that time, many susceptible people became addicted to crack. Recovery from crack addiction was often complicated by traumatic experiences that preceded or accompanied addiction; addiction to other substances; presence of other kinds of mental illness; presence of other illnesses; and homelessness. These all posed problems for treatment.

Method: This paper is based on a set of collaborative interviews made with David Jenkins, exploring his lifestory. These were audiotaped over a period of 10 years.

Results: Mr. Jenkins's interest in exploring his lifestory offered a window into the complex ways in which macro issues, like the lack of affordable housing, and micro issues, like HIV infection, are interwoven with addictive disorder. In pre-addiction, the deprivation and injury created vulnerabilities. In addition, they were aggravated by a growing list of new troubles, as well as by the spread of trouble from Mr. Jenkins to his network. In recovery, the deprivation and injury were assuaged by the transformation of his outlook on life, the repair of his relationships, and the use of his new freedom to contribute to the well-being of others.

Conclusion: Mr. Jenkins's recovery from addiction gave him tools to repair a wide range of problems and to become a positive actor within a broad network. This excellent treatment outcome underscores the need for active primary, secondary and tertiary prevention during epidemics of drug addiction.

Keywords: Crack, trauma, HIV, substance abuse recovery, urban, homeless

The crack epidemic of 1985-1995 burst over poor neighborhoods like a tsunami. In an extraordinarily short period of time, the epidemic tore up families, undermined public safety, and drove up rates of disease (Acker, 2009). The furious spread of addiction led to a major criminal justice response, with heavy criminal penalties for selling crack, but no corresponding increase in public health activities to prevent new addiction, limit the harms of existing addiction or rehabilitate those who had suffered from addiction (Watkins & Fullilove, 2008).

The urban neighborhoods affected by the crack epidemic were already suffering from harmful policies of urban renewal, deindustrialization and planned shrinkage/disinvestment (Wallace & Fullilove, 2008; 2011). Each of these

policies had undermined the stability of social networks and increased personal suffering, creating vulnerability to drugs as self-medication in a context in which little social resistance was present. Mass criminalization added new burdens by disrupting social ties and churning the social groups between local neighborhoods and distant prisons (Lane, 2008).

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Individuals living through tumultuous times may or may not have a sense of how history is part of the lifestory. The goal of the collaboration between Mindy Fullilove and David Jenkins was to consider how a specific historic event – the urban renewal of the Elmwood neighborhood of Philadelphia – had affected his life (Fullilove, 2004). Addiction, by its nature a massive change in the individual physiology, may be triggered by events and circumstances. The premise of recovery is that people change themselves so that they respond differently to events: recovery is possible even under dire circumstances. Dr. Michael Smith, Medical Director of Lincoln Acupuncture Clinic, which is located in an economically deprived area of New York City, observed, “A person can sit on a park bench and decide to get sober. Nothing else has to change except that the person has decided to live in a different way.” David Jenkins was faced with dire circumstances and decided to become sober: this paper explores how he accomplished that and what it meant for his life.

Method

David Jenkins collaborated with the author to understand the role of place in the lifestory. The author was interested in his story because he said that he had been homeless all of his life. The collaboration was accomplished through tape-recorded conversations and visits to key sites in Mr. Jenkins’ life. This work started in August 1994 and was completed ten years later. This paper will draw the material generated by the long collaboration, and specifically two interviews, one in 1994, in which Mr. Jenkins described his experiences with crack cocaine, and one in 2000, in which he reflected on his first year of sobriety, as well as his memoir, in which Mr. Jenkins outlined the upheavals he faced in his early life.

David Jenkins was one of 11 children born to Gus and Alfonza Jenkins. He spent his early years in the Elmwood neighborhood of Philadelphia, which was nestled near the

Delaware River between the Tinicum Wildlife Preserve and a factory district. Jenkins’ father died when he was 4, and his mother was afflicted with depression and alcoholism. Jenkins was subjected to emotional, physical and sexual abuse. He was also appreciated as a gifted child by his teachers and neighbors, and given lessons in art, music and the natural world. The neighborhood was condemned as blighted and bulldozed for urban renewal when Jenkins was 11. His family moved to West Philadelphia, which quickly turned over from white to black, and collapsed from disinvestment and other negative pressures. Jenkins’ mother put him out of the house when he was 15, and his long odyssey began. He earned a living as a piano player, working at the Village Gate, Cantor’s and other clubs in the US and the Virgin Islands. He was a gay rights activist and participated in the 1969 Stonewall uprising. He calculated that he became infected with HIV in 1982. He became addicted to crack in the early 1990s while living in Los Angeles.⁵ He became sober in 1999 and died in 2009.

Results

Active Using

In September 1994, David Jenkins arrived for a second interview with Mindy Fullilove. This excerpt is from his second long speech:

I gotta put all the, I gotta put the Housing Works [AIDS service organization], and DAS [NYC Division of AIDS Services] on the back burner for my career and stay in the SRO [single room occupancy] hotel I even wrote a poem about it today it took me five minutes I got so mad with people knocking on my door but... and this one woman came in the room whaaa you know over our hot plates. Whole bunch of us everybody always asking for crack or the cop or three dollars to do the and the characters are incredible. I mean if you’re going to be an actor, tszz

one thing you want do go got there and study those people once. And I um I've become everybody's friend, where, whatever you know they kind of look up to me but they you know these people in that hotel they're they're they're into killing themselves and they know it, and they can't they don't see no way out. That the sad part about that y'know they just don't see. I KNOW I'M GETTING OUT.

In the space of six sentences he introduced 10 topics: his annoyance with two agencies; a poem he wrote; being mad at the people in his building; a woman who came to his room; hot plates; people asking for crack; incredible characters that actors should study; being everybody's friend; self-destruction; and his escape plans. Jenkin's speech was pressured, his tone annoyed.

Fullilove, who was focused on the stated reason for being in the meeting, introduced an 11th topic. She said, "You first became actually homeless – not just homeless in the sense of yourself but actually homeless – because you got strung out on crack." Jenkins related this to being "homeless homeless" which occurred in Los Angeles, and he launched into a long story about the onset of his addiction to crack.

That happened because um my lawyers settled my case. So I got you know \$50,000 dollars and only took \$13, 12, 10,000, something like that. I had all the rest of this money to play with which I was going to do in the studio. And plus I had to pay back the welfare, oh that stressed me out, living in Skid Row in LA was no picnic... I never had money to do crack... but I came back I had money... Micky and Champagne and Shane they were all you know they were all gay with the Champagne, she was a drag queen from Louisiana... they said how much money you got? I said well I go to a money machine. So I go zap my

card at Wells Fargo. Out come the money, 2, 3 250 dollars or something whatever... they give me little teenie weenie little piece like this and go put on the pipe. So I said ohoo haha ha and I start floating. I said mmmm I said this stuff makes me horny too, you know.

In that state of euphoria, he took the group out for a limousine ride down the coast and back, arriving back on Hollywood Boulevard in the late afternoon. Then, he remembered, "Somebody said, 'David you better get out of here cause you got money and stuff and word gets around these hotels y'know.'" He moved from hotel to hotel, each time starting a new life, but each time quickly getting involved with shady characters and more drug use. Fullilove inquired, "At that point did you feel homeless?"

Jenkins replied, "Yeah, cause I didn't have nowhere to go. I couldn't come back to Philadelphia. I mean I was out there by myself. I had all this money and couldn't, didn't know what to do with it. I had a CD. And that's when my aunt my, that's when my, y'know when you're homeless you're vulnerable to world, that's the worst part of it... I got caught up in a whirlwind and gettin' high."

Very quickly drugs, alcohol and the unstable scene took their toll and Jenkins told a friend, "Get me out of here." He went to a rehabilitation center, and became the organist for the place. He stayed two months, but relapsed soon after he left. As he continued to use crack, he went from novice to initiate. "I learned how to smoke to a tee. Here is New York these people don't know how to smoke it they go [sucking sound] and they get all this black brown stuff coming at 'em. LA, you do it very light. I learned how to smoke crack. Take it and you don't even let the flame touch the pipe..."

He managed a tenuous balance of using and work, such that he was able to maintain employment while continuing to have a series of chaotic encounters and unstable living situations. Though he started to feel

homeless while living in hotels, after moving to Las Vegas he became literally homeless and spent time on the streets. He related:

I did sleep on the ground this one time I was homeless in Las Vegas. That was the last crackhead I lived, I let live with me... this guy doing crack around me, and bringing in a seventy year old woman when I ain't got no clothes in, from Tennessee, selling crack to her, police, policeman from New York, bringin' all these people up in my place oh lord, had to leave it...

Still an active user in 1994, Jenkins tried to maintain a façade of control and competence in relating these stories, arguing that his upbringing, knowledge of the Bible, and real pity for the addicts and street people he had met made him different from other addicts in some fundamental way. Yet the stories were replete with danger and upheaval that threatened his life and sanity on a daily basis. His life was clearly out of control, though he not yet admitted this fact to himself.

Jenkins invited Fullilove to visit him at his SRO, which he had nicknamed "Hell Hotel." It was an old monastery that was sheltering homeless people, many living with HIV infection or full-blown AIDS. Jenkins occupied a small cell-like room, and shared a bathroom on the hall. Most of the residents were active drug users, and the chaos that Jenkins had encountered in Los Angeles and Las Vegas continued in New York. He tried to keep it out of his room, but, as he was a source of chaos, and not just a victim, it followed him inside.

Jenkins' SRO hotel, like other institutions of the crack era, was filled with people who both caused addiction-related harm and felt blameless. Shifting culpability to others widened the circle of interpersonal injury and kept chaos moving in the environment.

In Recovery

In 1999 Jenkins went to another rehabilitation center and stayed for several months. In September of 2000, with a year of living drug-free under his belt, he joined Fullilove for another conversation. It is instructive to examine a segment of his opening comments of approximately the same length as his opening comments in 1994:

Well first off, your choice, somebody took some pictures of me. I'm not allowed to play in my hotel lobby because of some sick woman, I'm not going to waste my time talking about that, and I got to get out of that building ASAP. The family reunion, I want to say one thing that's very important, my friend Pat Howard, that you met when you came to the library in my building, has noticed a great change in me, Dodie and Carol, my playsisters have noticed a great change in me, and Maxine Brown. And I have a good support system, Cesar Ureta, down at 5th Avenue Psychiatry, I've been seeing him twice a week and Dr. Jeffrey Fishberger, at Roosevelt Samuels clinic once a month and Dr. Carnevale, who is from Italy and he's taking care of my health, this past Monday, my viral load is undetectable and my t-cell count is up to 170 and my CD4, my platelets are up, I'm not anemic, of course I haven't been using for a year.

From the tapes it is apparent that the pace had slowed – although the same number of words, it took twice as long for him to speak them – and the angry tension is gone. Even when he noted his troubles in the hotel, he commented, "I'm not going to waste my time talking about that." He shifted subjects, as before, but these subjects are all related to the story he was about to tell, illustrating the great change.

He then related the story of his attendance at a family reunion. His network – including his probation officer, doctor, friends in his building and family – was afraid that he would turn it out with his anger. The network worked with him to be a positive presence at the reunion. He related that people prayed with him and some put him on their altars. His Buddhist friend, Pat Howard, told him to let go of his fear.

When he got there, he was able to behave appropriately, and he was even able to help others who were having trouble managing the emotions of the day. “What are they looking to me for?” he told Fullilove he asked himself. “They don’t even know the strength it took for me to sit there.” When he stood up to give a toast, the family got tense, but instead of spewing his anger at family dysfunction, he brought attention to the family’s three matriarchs, thanking them for all they had done.

Right after that his family called him to come to his mother’s side as the end was near. He arrived in Philadelphia at 10:25 PM and found that his family had left. He was angry, but did not get distracted by that. He sat with his mother, and reassured her that he was all right. “Go to the light,” he told her, “go to the light. Mother, this is David, go to the light. Cousin Eva told me to tell you, ‘Go to the light.’... You’re finished here, your time is up, it’s time for you to rest.” His mother died shortly after he left that evening.

Although he was still living in a difficult environment, Jenkins had a new way of living, and had a different set of people in his life. Instead of participating in a spiral of harm, he was able to be a helpful part of the family system. Younger relatives could look to him to help in understanding the dysfunctional family system; older relatives could get support for facing complex interactions. He did not shy away from facing the abuse and addiction that troubled the family, but he was able to face it without falling into a corrosive, unrelenting rage.

Because of the escalation in housing prices in New York City, Jenkins was not able to get an apartment in Manhattan, and

eventually decided to return to Philadelphia. He was supported by several family members, and this circle of supporters grew over time. He felt a new closeness to God and rejoined the church of his childhood. Always an activist for gay rights, he became an activist for AIDS awareness in the black church. He eventually told the people of his church that he was living with AIDS. This brave admission was met with kindness and helped many to reconsider their prejudices against people with AIDS. He spent his last months working with a filmmaker to bring his concerns to a larger audience. At his death in September 2009 he was surrounded by loving family, an end that was unthinkable in 1994.

Discussion

Addiction, it is well known, is not simply a disease of the individual, but affects whole systems of people. Epidemics of addiction, like the crack epidemic, convulse communities and leave lasting problems in their wake (Wallace, Fullilove & Wallace, 1994). David Jenkins was highly vulnerable to addiction because of childhood abuse, bereavement, and upheaval—as discussed by others (e.g. Wallace, 1990). His marginalization as a gay person began very early and continued throughout his life. Drugs were part of the subcultures in which he lived. As life circumstance pushed him even further to the margins where crack use was widespread, Jenkins became involved with its use. He quickly became addicted and very early on in his use became debilitated enough to begin to seek treatment. It took years for him to become drug free. He was aided in recovery by access to treatment, fear of aggravating his HIV infection, and support from a network of spiritual people.

At the heart of his “change” was a new attitude: he let go of his fear, which had been a prime motivation for his behavior. Bill Wilson, one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, emphasized “self-centered fear” as a key to addiction (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001). Self-centered

fear, a common sequelae of childhood trauma, is a behavioral schema which roughly translates as: “I am in danger, therefore I am justified in doing what I need to do to protect myself.” Jenkins’s friend, Pat Howard, was able to interrupt this thinking by helping him see that he need not fear. She was even able to get him to turn it around and begin to consider the difficulties faced by others and how he might be of service to them. Howard’s work with Jenkins’ parallels what Alcoholics Anonymous calls “spiritual awakening”—as also documented through the research of Green (2002).

Such a shift has remarkable behavioral consequences for the addicted person and his network. Jenkins was a cause of chaos during his active using, but he became a source of comfort and strength during his recovery. Instead of engaging himself and his network in damage control and repair, he and they were able to focus on larger tasks of community building, in his case in the fight to prevent the spread of AIDS among African Americans.

Jenkins’ recovery involved reawakening his childhood religious beliefs and moving closer to God. Spirituality, for example, as promulgated in the 12-step fellowships, has been shown to be helpful for recovery (Kelly, Stout, Magill et al, 2010). While reasons for this have not been fully elucidated, in Jenkins’ lifestory spirituality was a source of forgiveness for himself and others. It offered him a new manner of managing the harms of abuse and upheaval that had so deeply strained his life. That injury had multiple layers, including: physical, sexual and emotional abuse; loss of his neighborhood due to urban renewal; abandonment by his family; and homophobia in his family and in the society.

Jenkins’ crack addiction began when he won a court settlement of \$35,000. Had he not become addicted, he might have used that money to buy a small home, thus ending his lifelong problem of homelessness. On the other hand, he became addicted because he was in the grip of self-centered fear and thus unable to make sound decisions. His

recovery from addiction precipitated a much deeper recovery from childhood injury. Adding to a broader prescription for how to improve life in urban settings (Fullilove, 2013), Jenkins’ lifestory is rich in contributing lessons for primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, as follows:

- stable communities can prevent much abuse and thereby limit the inauguration of self-centered fear, the substrate for later addiction
- addiction treatment can mitigate addiction once it is established
- addiction services can promote community rebuilding by returning people to productive and selfless roles in society

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