We routinely experience extraordinary encouragement to engage in the consumption of various substances in daily life, many of which are addictive. It could be said that contemporary culture is a ‘culture of consumption’. There is an ever-increasing range of these substances available to us, the consumption of which is put to many different uses that are shaped by many different circumstances. For some persons, the quantity and/or the addictive nature of the substances they are consuming – whether they be legal, illicit or by prescription – becomes a problem to them and/or to others. When this is the case, these persons often find themselves consulting professional therapists.

In these consultations, persons are often oriented to questions like: ‘Why can’t I stop taking these drugs?’ or ‘Why can’t I resist alcohol?’ Confronted by questions such as these, therapists who have an appreciation of the extent to which ours is a culture of consumption are likely to suggest the exploration of other questions: ‘Why is it that some persons don’t take drugs?’, ‘Why is it that some persons don’t take more drugs than they do?’, or ‘Why is it that some persons don’t consume excesses of alcohol?’. The exploration of questions like these gives emphasis to the many cultural forces that are inciting of an

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excessive consumption of a range of different substances. These questions, and
others like ‘How, under these circumstances, is it possible for you to have this
desire to break your life from this substance?’ or ‘How, under these
circumstances, have you been able to nurture this possibility of an alcohol free
life?’ also open possibilities for the exploration of some of the more sparkling
facts of persons’ lives that have been overshadowed and rendered invisible. And
the exploration of these facts contributes to the development of accounts of the
counter-plots of persons’ lives – for example, of ‘resistance to substance abuse’,
and of ‘self-care’.

The emphasis given here to the cultural forces that are inciting of the
consumption of substances is significant, for perhaps the most important first
consideration for persons who want to change their relationship with a
substance is to have an appreciation of what they will be up against in pursuing
that ambition. If it is a person’s conception that breaking from an addiction
and/or the excessive consumption of substances is principally a matter of
refusing pills, stepping back from the bottle, or disposing of the needles, they
are very likely setting themselves up for an experience of humiliating failure
that will be further complicating to their lives. With this conception, there is a
high risk of their good intentions turning sour very rapidly. With this conception,
a person will be unaware of what they are letting themselves in for in making
such a decision, and will not have the opportunity to adequately prepare for
their separation from addiction and/or the excessive consumption of substances.

It is not just the cultural forces that are inciting of the consumption of
substances that persons are up against in their desire to change their relationship
with substances. And it is not just throwing off the weight of the history and the
traditions of the culture of consumption that is required. For most persons,
changing one’s relationship with substances requires a break from much of
one’s life as it is known. It is to break from a familiar sense of being in the
world. It is to break from certain ways of relating to one’s own life and to the
lives of others. And, for many, it is to break from familiar networks of people.

Breaking from addictions and/or the excessive consumption of
substances usually requires a very major life shift – something akin to a
migration of identity, an act of intentionally leaving one’s life behind in order to
make a new life for oneself. Pursuing a desire to revise one’s relationship with a
substance sets a person on a journey, and leaving the territory of life that one
has long inhabited is the first stage of this journey. This departure is not
accompanied by simultaneous arrival in some other territory of life in which the
person finds a place of their own. In departing from the known, a person does not step into another known. This departure is an exit into the unknown. Persons can only be certain of the general direction. But they will remain uncertain about how far they must travel, and what will become of them along the way.

A rite of passage

I often invoke the rite of passage metaphor when I’m consulted by persons who want to break from an addiction and/or from the excessive consumption of substances. Following van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969), three stages to rites of passage can be discerned. First is the separation phase, at which a person breaks from their life as they know it. This marks the beginning of the journey. Second, there is the liminal phase. This is a ‘betwixt and between’ phase, in which one’s familiar sense of being in the world is absent, and where nothing means quite what it did before. This phase is invariably characterised by periods of disorientation and confusion, and times of significant despair. Third, there is the reincorporation phase. Reincorporation is achieved when a person finds that they’ve arrived at another place in life, where they experience a ‘fit’ that provides for them a sense of once again being at home with themselves and with a way of life. At this time, persons regain a sense of being knowledge and skilled in matters of living.

Work that is informed by the rite of passage metaphor provides persons with a general map of the experiences that are to be expected in breaking from addiction and/or excessive consumption of substances. This map that emphasises the phases of separation, liminality, and reincorporation is often an invaluable aid to journeys that can be fraught. This map provides persons with a general guide through the territories that lie ahead. It provides persons with a basis for predicting the experiences that are to be had. It informs persons in the preparations that must be made ahead of departure. Without a map to assist persons in this way, there is a significantly greater risk that they will turn back before completing the journey.

Before taking a first step in this migration of identity, in the lead up to the separation phase, work can be done to identify all of the forces that the person will be challenging in this step, and the full significance of this as a migration of identity can be explored. A fuller appreciation of these forces and
of the significance of this migration contributes to establishing a greater readiness for the journey. However, despite the close attention to this, whether or not all of these forces have been sufficiently identified, and whether or not an adequate grasp of the significance of this migration has been achieved, cannot be determined ahead of departure – there is always a strong possibility that the person will turn back.

As well as the attention that is given to preparations for the separation, it is important to engage in some predictions of the experiences that are to be had in the liminal phase – the betwixt and between that is characterised by significant periods of confusion and disorientation, and at times by despair and desperation – and in making preparations that will assist persons to see these experiences through to reincorporation.

Immediately prior to stepping into these journeys, and as they are taking their first steps, persons frequently feel their spirits rising with the new hopes for a life differently lived. However, following this, persons invariably find themselves crashing into a trough of confusion and despair. This is usually interpreted as a physiological phenomenon, one that is associated with withdrawal of the substance. However, although this physiological phenomenon is usually significant, this does not entirely account for this crash. In stepping into this journey, persons are breaking from the known, detaching from a familiar sense of the self, and they suddenly find themselves at a loss to know how to deal with the world. If persons do not understand this experience in the context of the liminal phase of the journey, it will be read as regress. Under these circumstances, with hopes not initially realised, life under the thrall of addiction and/or the excessive consumption of substances will often become a more attractive proposition than perseverance in efforts to revise one’s relationship with these substances.

Although considerable attention is given to the mapping of this journey, and to preparations for the separation, liminal and reincorporation phases, it is important that persons understand that turning back remains a distinct possibility. There are ways of understanding this turning back, and preparing for this eventuality, that don’t construct this as failure, that don’t contribute to that ‘back to square one’ experience that is shaming of persons and that is so undermining of hope and of future efforts. Turning back can be understood as the outcome of an insufficient appreciation of the forces that are inciting of the consumption of substances, of gaps in the preparations made for sustaining one through the rigours of the liminal phase, and so on. It can also be understood that
all attempts at migrations of this sort contribute to the development of
knowledges and the skills of the sort that are necessary for the successful
completion of the journey, and that these will contribute to persons being better
prepared on future attempts.

**Other maps**

It is often helpful to provide persons with maps of the journeys made by
others. Although these other maps will not accurately represent the specific ups
and downs to be experienced by the person who is undertaking preparations, it
none-the-less provides the person with some account of what it is that is ahead
of them, and provides some guide to these preparations. These other maps also
provide a measure of reassurance to persons when in the liminal phase and
finding themselves in a trough of confusion and despair – this was only to be
predicted, and others have been there, survived this, and have gone onto better
things.

Apart from the provision of maps of similar journeys, there is the option
of inviting others along for a meeting or two with the purpose of interviewing
them about their experiences of migration. There is much to be learned in these
interviews: what it is that has sustained others through the liminal stage,
including the specific knowledges and skills that are relevant to this, the
affiliations and circumstances or structures that provided necessary support, and
so on. These can be interviews of persons who have undergone various
migrations – geographical, national, cultural, and, of course, migrations of
identity in relation to breaking from addiction and/or the excessive consumption
of substances. It can be particularly helpful to interview persons who undertook
a migration only to turn back and then to again retrace their steps at a later time,
this time completing the journey. Often those who are interviewed in this way
make themselves available as a source of support and encouragement to the
persons who are about to embark on this journey.

The information gathered in these interviews can significantly inform a
person’s preparations for their journey. These interviews also have the effect of
stimulating their ingenuity and the expression of some of the knowledges and
skills, relevant to transitions in life, that can be traced through their own
personal history. Further explorations of these traces can render these
knowledges and skills more richly described, and thus more available to be
expressed in the preparations for the migration of identity, and through the liminal phase.

**Formalising the rite of passage**

The formalisation of this rite of passage is helpful. A forum can be established in which the person publicly announces, before assembled witnesses, their decision to break from the addiction and/or excessive consumption of substances. Here, the person can speak to their understanding of the forces that they are up against in succeeding with this decision, and can share their appreciation of the significance of the proposed journey as a migration of identity. The hazards and the insecurity associated with this migration can be drawn out. The preparations for the journey can be outlined, along with the skills and knowledges that are available to the person in navigating this transition. The assembled witnesses then contribute to a powerful acknowledgement of all this, in part achieved by a series of retellings of what has been heard. This is an acknowledgement that is significantly authenticating of the person’s decision to undertake this migration, of the purposes, hopes and commitments that this decision speaks to, and of the courage, determination, knowledges and skills that will be required in the successful conclusion of the journey. At this time, these witnesses usually volunteer those resources that might be at their disposal, and that might contribute to sustaining the person through the liminal phase.

It can also be helpful to plan, in advance, for a ritual celebration that will mark the person’s arrival at the phase of reincorporation – when the person will have begun to experience some sense of familiarity with other ways of being in the world, when they will again have a sense of ‘being at home’ in the world, but in a different place. The shape of the proposed celebration can be worked out, and a guest list can be established. Guesses can be made about the sort of stories that the person might tell of their journey, and about the sort of declaration that the person will make about their arrival at a different place in life.

**Alcoholics Anonymous: A structured rite of passage**

In the above discussion I have invoked the rite of passage metaphor and
provided some ideas about how this can be taken up in assisting persons to revise their relationship with substances. Upon reviewing what I have written here, I found myself reflecting on what has become a particularly well established approach to addressing addictions and/or the excessive consumption of substances that is structured as a rite of passage – Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Although the ideas that I have discussed in this paper are not directly informed by AA, and although many of the ideas and practices of narrative work directly contradict many of the ideas and practices of AA, I nevertheless have a strong respect for AA, one that now stretches back over two and a half decades. I will here share some of these reflections, doing so in the context of an acknowledgement that I cannot claim an insider’s knowledge of this system.

I believe that the originators of Alcoholics Anonymous had great vision, and a profound understanding of the significance of rites of passage. At the centre of AA is a ritual event that provides for a formalisation of the stages of separation and reincorporation, and for a marking of the turning points of persons’ lives. This is accompanied by the convening of forums that provide the opportunity for persons to give testimony to the decisions that they have made to break from excessive alcohol consumption, to the desires and purposes that motivate these decisions, and to tell and retell the stories of their lives before a group of witnesses, many of whom are veterans of such journeys. In this context, the responses of the witness group are powerfully acknowledging and authenticating of these decisions, desires, purposes and stories. As these decisions and stories, and these accounts of desire and purpose, become more richly described, they become more influential – they are more significantly shaping of persons’ lives.

There is also so much about AA that provides a great deal of sustenance to those who are navigating the liminal phase of this journey. There is a buddy system that provides the traveller with intimate support, and a concerned community of fellow travellers who share the maps, the knowledges, and the skills that are specific to journeys of this kind. The structure of AA builds in frequent opportunities for travellers to give voice to the trials and tribulations of these journeys, and for them to experience continuing acknowledgement of the different struggles that they find themselves engaged in.

AA’s responses to persons who turn back to the bottle are generally compassionate rather than judging. This is an antidote to the demoralising sense of personal failure that is so often occasioned by such U-turns, and keeps the door open on options for persons to try again, and yet again. In response to
these U-turns, the AA community just goes on reaching out. This is a reaching out by persons who have ‘been there’, and who have a strong appreciation of the desperation that is experienced in this struggle.

In terms of explanation for why it is that persons break from substance abuse, AA privileges notions of conscious purpose, commitment, and calling. In privileging these notions, and in not joining with the contemporary habit of psychologising motives for action, AA assists persons to resist turning their lives over to the knowledges of the professional disciplines – the understanding of what it is necessary to understand does not require a submission to the ‘expert’ knowledges. In evoking notions of conscious purpose, commitment and calling, AA emphasises ways of life that are guided by personal ethics, formulated and re-formulated time and time again through tellings and re-tellings in a concerned community.

Alcoholics Anonymous, in the journey that it structures, in the understandings that it emphasises, and in its actual practices, has clearly had a positive impact on the lives of so many persons.
Community responses

In that contemporary culture is a culture of consumption, and in that there is an ever increasing range of substances available to us, it should not be so surprising that addiction and/or the excessive consumption of these substances is so prevalent, and that this is destroying the lives of so many persons, traumatising of their families, and wreaking havoc in our communities. In view of the burgeoning nature of this situation, I believe that it is unrealistic to expect that individual therapeutic responses will ever be able to respond adequately. The need for organised community responses is urgent.

Alcoholics Anonymous provides a community response that has assisted many persons. But, despite its success, there are many persons for whom it doesn’t fit at all well. How can this fact play a part in encouraging us to join together in the exploration and development of other community approaches to assist persons to break from addictions and/or the excessive consumption of substances? Perhaps some of these explorations could be informed by alternative applications of the rite of passage metaphor.

Note
1. This piece began its life as an interview of Michael White by David Denborough. David’s thoughtful questions, and his responses to an earlier draft contributed much to the shaping of what is written here.
   I would also like to acknowledge various people who read earlier drafts of this paper and offered helpful feedback and comment. In particular I would like to thank Amanda Kamsler, David Epston and Loretta Perry.

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