

Rebellion Dogs blogs & radio: September 2015

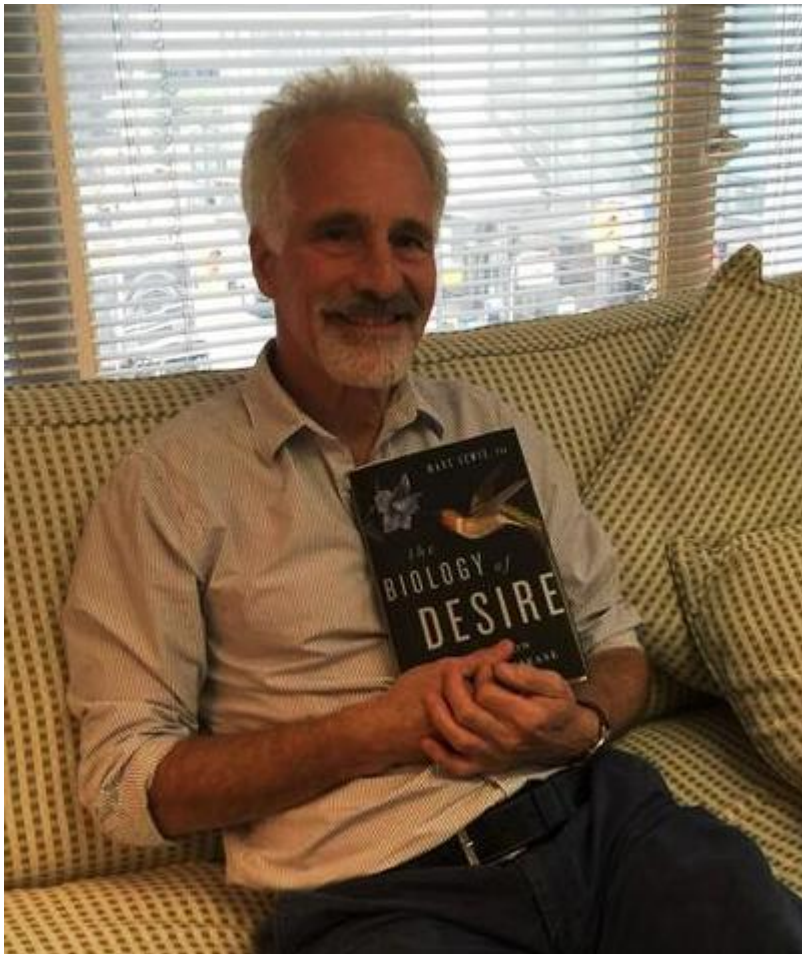


Rebellion Dogs Radio # XVII Meet Marc Lewis & Gretta Vosper, two Davids vs. two Goliaths

This is a transcript of Rebellion Dogs Radio #17, September 2015:

“The dogma of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present and future. As our circumstances are new, we must think anew, and act anew.” Abraham Lincoln

This is Episode 17. If you’re new, welcome; I hope you like us. Today I am very excited to invite two rebels onto our show. If you’ve been a regular to Rebellion Dogs blogs and podcast, you know I’m a fan of Marc’s first book, *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain*. You see, Marc is a drug addict and, yes, we’ve read memoirs narrated by the addict. But this time, the addict is also a



neuroscientist who adds a neurotransmitter play-by-play of the cause and effect between brain chemistry, thoughts, beliefs and behavior. *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain* is gripping. Marc Lewis has a new book called *The Biology of Desire: Why Addiction is not a Disease* and therein lies the rebellion. The addiction/recovery infrastructure is largely tied to the *addiction is a disease, disease of addiction* model, AKA a medical disorder, therefore, as a disease, care for the inflicted falls strictly within the domain of the medical/psychiatric professions.

If addiction is but a bad habit, Tony Robins or Oprah can cure us with a few encouraging words. I’m oversimplifying it as a bar-stool philosopher

would. Luckily for you, and I mean luckily for all of us, Marc Lewis is in the house. We are going to talk about his book and you can hear what the author has to say. Then of course, as always, I know some of you will have something to say on the topic and boom – now we have a conversation going on.

So that's one of our rebels: Marc Lewis vs. the dogmatic obedience to the imperfect jargon of the medical infrastructure. And he isn't calling for a wholesale abandoning of the medical treatment of addiction; I think he just finds it unscientific and, frankly, unhealthy to promulgate a language around addiction to the point that it becomes sacred. We must always be open-minded, we must always courageously move forward. Of course, people have a tendency to resist change; sometimes this resistance comes in the form of ridicule and sometimes in a more overt aggression is how resistance plays out.

Our other rebel today also promotes change and has recently come up against ridicule and aggression. Gretta Vosper doesn't come from institutionalized medicine or sciences. Gretta comes from Institutionalized spirituality. She is a minister with the United Church of Canada, she is an atheist and an author of two books which, like Marc's first book, I've touched on before. *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe* was a 2008 best-seller and her follow up book in 2012 was *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief*.

In case you thought you heard that wrong, Gretta Vosper is a minister of a Christian Church and she doesn't believe in an intervening/interfering deity. She treats the Bible as mythology. She practices and promotes what she calls *post-theistic Christianity*. From what I see from her congregation and other liberal Christians is that the idea is to rally behind deeds and humanity and not so much doctrine. You might see this as an untenable contradiction but a growing number of modern Christians do not. Vosper wrote in *With or Without God*:

“I do find it hard to imagine that preserving an institution for preservation's sake itself is anything more than an enormous waste of time and energy. But I do think that the church is well placed to bring about some significant change in the world. And change in the world is desperately needed.”ⁱ

We may all know someone in Ministry who will concede that Noah's Ark is a metaphor and that the Adam and Eve story isn't to be taken literally. We likely all know adherents to one of the three Abrahamic monotheistic faiths who go to the mosque, synagogue or church for the community, charity and family tradition but if you ask them, they aren't playing nice now because they believe in an afterlife or because they take their holy book to literally be the word of Yahweh. But how much latitude do we, can we, should we extend to those at the pulpit?

Gretta Vosper has been out of the closet as an atheist since 2001 but only now is her job on the line. Here's what the *Toronto Star* reported August 5th:

An ordained [United Church of Canada](#) minister who believes in neither God nor the Bible said Wednesday she is prepared to fight an unprecedented attempt to boot her from the pulpit for her beliefs.

In an interview at her West Hill church, Rev. Gretta Vosper said congregants support her view that [how you live is more important](#) than what you believe in....

“Is the Bible really the word of God? Was Jesus a person?” she said.

“It’s mythology. We build a faith tradition upon it which shifted to find belief more important than how we lived.”

...

Rev. David Allen, executive secretary of the Toronto Conference, said he took various concerns about Vosper to the church’s executive, which decided it wanted to investigate her fitness to be a minister.ⁱⁱ

From the *Vancouver Sun*:



What if she were, say, a minister in the venerable Unitarian denomination, where anti-theistic views are commonplace and commonly ignored by the secular media? What if she was just speaking as an individual?

Liberal United Church of Canada officials, since they pride themselves on being “welcoming” to everyone, have never publicly taken on Vosper or suggested she stop accepting the money and benefits of the denomination.ⁱⁱⁱ

If you have a strong, visceral feeling one way or another about Gretta Vosper (picture courtesy of Vancouver Sun), you’re not alone. The blogosphere is ripe with opinion, support and hostility; unsolicited advice comes from the most religious and ardent atheists. Yes, fundamentalist atheists and Christians are united in their outrage towards Vosper’s stance. Does everyone want a clearly defined, homogenous good guy and villain? While Vosper’s congregation is behind what she’s doing (and I think those are the only people from whom an opinion really matters) many of a more militant faith or atheism see her as a disgrace to their own noble cause.

So these are our two rebels that we are celebrating today. I assure you this show will offer you some mind-expanding reading, if nothing else. Many of you know I host another radio show, *IndieCan Radio*, devoted to under-the-radar independent or emerging music artists. In that show I interview artists and industry insiders and the main focus is playing what’s been tagged as “the best music you’ve never heard.” A few regulars have shaken a fist at me, bemoaning the fact that my free radio show has cost them dearly each year in new music they buy and new festivals they attend. Conversely, what if, as a result of this show, listeners find themselves buying a book a month more than they intended? I don’t know about you but one of my great joys about

consuming art or non-fiction books is I am always making a “recommend list” of other people whom I think would love this book, exhibition or musical artist. It is a great joy to share that which has made a positive impact on me with other people I love. So if this free radio is starting to cost you money, hey, I’m just a link in the chain. Someone recommended these books to me first. I’m just passing it on.

On that note, I am reading Malcolm Gladwell’s *David and Goliath*:

“I want to explore two ideas. The first is that much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of these kinds of lopsided conflicts because the act of facing overwhelming odds creates greatness and beauty. And second, that we get these kinds of conflicts wrong; we misread them, we misinterpret them. Giants are not what we think they are. The same qualities that appear to give them strength are often the source of great weakness. And the fact of being an underdog can change people in a way that we fail to appreciate. It can open doors and create opportunities and educate and enlighten and make possible what might otherwise have seemed unthinkable.”^{iv}

Let’s meet some rebels, starting with Marc Lewis. I’ve been keeping tabs on Marc’s journey since I found out about him from his first Random House book, *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain*. In August of 2015, he was in Toronto doing some press regarding *The Biology of Desire*. Let me share with you my conversation with Marc when he visited my Toronto office.

Joe C: Marc, your newest book challenges the disease-model. That’s been done before. When all this started there was a moral failing-model. Some cynics would say that the American Medical Association came out with the disease-model for addiction to gain dominion over the care of addiction. Is there truth to this; do they play the villain in this drama?

Marc Lewis: Well, I guess so, but my brother’s a doctor. He’s a lovely man; I wouldn’t call him a villain. But psychiatry is a funny sub-discipline. It’s medical of course but they do have a colonial tendency to take over “mental” health issues and say, “These are medical issues.” They often treat mental health problems with medicine and they call them diseases because that’s what doctors do—they put things in boxes and categories and say if you have this particular set of symptoms then this is the label and this is the treatment. So yes, they have taken over this whole world of difficulties which people face when they live their lives.

Joe C: Yeah, I find doctors sometimes are more fascinated with disease than the host-patient and we hear it in their language. A test result of “positive” means you have the disease and “negative” results mean you are free. That’s the opposite way a patient looks at what is a positive and negative result from testing.

Disease as a metaphor? Great. But as the basis on which everything else is going to be treated, then there are certain problems. Other language has been used: allergy, a malady, moral failing, and phenomena. I like “phenomena” because I can identify addiction in myself and I can recognize it in others but I can’t get the results in a blood test. I can’t prove to you that I’m an addict; you can’t prove to me that you’re an addict.

Marc Lewis: That's right. There's no test for it.

Joe C: Even MRIs show changes in an addicted brain but that doesn't prove a connection and it can't show risk factors in a young person in the way we can help predict other diseases, right?

Marc Lewis: That's right. There's no norm to measure against in the case of a young brain. The brain is changing so massively anyway—especially in the adolescent years. One of my favorite factoids is that in early adolescence we are losing 30,000 synapses per second, across the cortex. Per second—that's a lot of change; that's a lot of restructuring.

Joe C: It's overwhelming to a layperson to read about neurotransmitters and what they're doing. I get this image in my head of Frankenstein's laboratory (Pic below: Actor Marty Feldman in *Young Frankenstein* (1974), Gene Wilder and Mel Brooks).

Marc Lewis: It's really hard to reconcile that there's this mushy, grey, jelly-like thing that makes us human and beautiful, aware, conscious and connected. But that's the way it is; we are biological matter.



Joe C: But some people don't call it a "brain" disease, but rather a "mind" disease, a behavior or compulsion that takes over our mind.

Marc Lewis: Then you're doubling-down on the terminology by calling it a mind-disease. To keep things a little bit sane, we want to focus on the idea that disease has something to do with bodies. We don't want to be Cartesian dualists and say there's the mind over here and the body over there and they're connected by some kind of portal that connects them. We don't think that way, or at least I hope we don't anymore. At least not in science we don't.

Joe C: But in Eastern Philosophy they hold out a different way of looking at things than the Western scientific way of looking at things. Is that fair?

Marc Lewis: Well, Buddhist philosophy sees that there is some kind of entity, like a soul, that reincarnates or transcends beyond the body, but most of us don't see it that way—at least not literally. But to go back to your question about all these labels—malady, allergy, disease—to me, they just all sound so old-fashioned.

Joe C: None of them give that “Ah-ha; that's it” moment of clarity?

Marc Lewis: Right, but that language, even moral-failing, it keeps coming back. I was just in Vancouver, on the East side and there are several city blocks where a lot of addicts are spread out with all their belongings and they look like hell. They are shooting up on the street and it's really... aversive. I have been an addict and I know lots of addicts, some of my best friends are addicts (laughing) but this is aversive. So the moral failing part, the stigma part, it does come back to our consciousness. And yet, when we take a moment to think about it we recognize about this that people got this way for a reason. They've had really shitty lives. Some of them have spent their entire childhoods in foster homes and not got the financial, societal, familial resources to build a life that furnishes them with other choices, other opportunities. So the moral failing thing doesn't seem to work anymore when we really reason the problem out.

Joe C: The big argument for bringing in the disease-model is that it would alleviate the shame of addiction. I don't believe that has happened. I don't think addicts feel less ashamed and I don't believe the stigma is gone. Who wants to hire a porn-addict for your daycare; who wants to have a cocaine addict managing your investment portfolio? The stigma is still there long after it was supposed to be eradicated by the disease-model.

Marc Lewis: I totally agree. You can say it takes the edge off for some people. “I can't help it, I'm an addict, I have a disease and therefore, that's why I do these disgraceful things.” But most of the addicts I talk to—I talk to a lot of addicts who are members of my blog community—and they don't like this. You're told you have a chronic brain disease that makes you do nasty things; that's not really good news. It doesn't make sense and it precludes, it forecloses on the sense of opportunity for growing out of it. If you have a chronic disease you don't just grow out of it.

Joe C: What I like about your first book is you talk about the experience of addiction, addict to addict—the thrill, the romance, the “I'm going to get high, here it comes”—right? Then you would describe it from a neurological point of view—what is actually going on chemically. I had never seen that before. I had read one and I had read the other but to blend it all into the same chapter, that's a remarkable thing.

Marc Lewis: Thank you.

Joe C: Yes, it's beautiful; it's one of a kind. And in your new book, it isn't purely anecdotal although there are some case histories. You also make scientific arguments as to why we should move from one model to the other.

If you can I'd like you read from one of your stories. Describe why you use case histories and then read from “Donna's Secret Identity” and we'll go from there.

Marc Lewis: I try to use the same formula in *Biology of Desire*, integrating the brain story with the life story. In a way, the brain stuff is less formidable. It's pretty easy, a pretty easy primer, I think. The stories, I found, are really fascinating. I got to know these people and I got to say, "Well, you did that! And then that's what happened? What was that like?"

Joe C: For sure; you can see that you're an engaged listener in the way you depict their stories. And even someone who disagrees with you philosophically, they have to love these stories.

Marc Lewis: I think so, too. Some people just skip the brain bits and read the stories.

Joe C: So let's read from Donna's story. How you conclude there is quite remarkable.

Marc Lewis: Okay, so this is Donna. She had a problem with prescription narcotics (opiates). What was most serious for her is that she got them from stealing from other people—her relatives. Her husband had serious back problems and really needed them but she would just help herself. She had a capacity to split her personality in a way. She was a very "good" person—a very generous, helpful member of her community; she nursed kids who had serious diseases. She helped the kids and their families deal with their problems. And then at night, she'd be visiting relatives and friends and she'd help herself to what was in the medicine chest. So with these seemingly conflicting, antagonistic aspects of her personality, she learned how to let them coexist. That was a serious problem for her. She was almost a split-personality—not quite. This wasn't good what she was doing but she was able to cope with it, able to keep it going until finally she got busted. Her in-laws set up cameras and caught her going through their drawers, stealing their medications.

Joe C: I just felt that—the shame of it. In another case, she's in (her cousin's) suitcase and she gets confronted.

Marc Lewis: The family came together and said, "You are a drug addict!" There was no way for her to squirm out of it. Here's the last paragraph of her chapter:

"I asked her if she felt she'd grown as an individual during her addiction and recovery. She laughed and told me that she's never felt so strong, so happy. Donna made it obvious that not only is addiction a developmental journey, but it's a journey that continues through the period of recovery. In fact, by the time I'd finished my interviews with Donna, the term 'recovery' no longer made sense to me. 'Recovery' implies going backward, becoming normal again. And it's a reasonable term if you consider addiction a disease. But many of the addicts I've spoken with—including Donna—see themselves as having moved forward, not backward, once they quit, or even while they were quitting. They often find they've become far more aware and self-directed than the person they were before their addiction. There's no easy way to explain this direction of change with the medical terminology of disease and recovery. Instead of recovering, it seems that addicts keep growing as does anyone who overcomes their difficulties through deliberation and insight."

Joe C: And here, she touches on something really important. There is this language that *we are restored to sanity*; that we *have recovered* from a seemingly hopeless state. For one thing, this doesn't really honor the fact that our addiction was, at one point, the solution—a very effective solution—to an underlying problem (for many of us). We don't want to be returned to that state of rawness where we don't have the mechanism to cope, of feeling incomplete—that's not what we want; that wouldn't be "recovery." That's not where we want to go; we want to go somewhere else with better coping mechanisms.

Marc Lewis: Exactly. "Recovery," is entirely a medical term and based on the idea that our physical organs have a state of equilibrium—a homeostatic state—so you want your liver to stay the same, same with your heart. But with your brain, it's entirely different. You don't want your brain to go back to when it was 18 or 21 or whenever it was. You want it to keep developing; that's its job, to learn and evolve and adapt. So "recovery" is just the wrong word.

Joe C: And there is something qualitative about the word, "What's the quality of your recovery?" Really, if you use the term clean and sober, when you've achieved that you can go about contributing to your job, your family, society or your passions. That's great. We're all equal; there is something egalitarian about that. Recovery—the word—suggests a quality, "Where are you on the continuum of recovery?" or, "I wouldn't want that person's recovery." It becomes a very subjective word.

Marc Lewis: Absolutely; it's a normative word that is anchored in societal notions of what is the right way to be. And that has all kinds of other baggage with it. For example, some people—they need total abstinence; that's what they need. For others, they can be social drinkers. They can have controlled usage because there's a whole spectrum including harm-reduction. Sometimes even extreme users can go on using but lead much more happy and beneficial lives than they did before. I get the use of the word recovery—I get what they mean; we all know what they mean—but it's not the right word, it's not a perfect word, we're not quite there yet.

Joe C: There is something else I'd like you to read, it's page 176. I think you wrap up the whole idea of desire vs. disease.

Marc Lewis: Right. This is "Why Desire?" Which means, why do I call this book *The Biology of Desire* instead of *The Biology of Pleasure* or something like that? The reason is in neural terms, that the part of brain that does desire—that mediates desire—is not the same as the part of the brain that mediates pleasure. It's not the same thing. Desire is not actually fun; pleasure is fun.

Joe C: Exactly. Like at the end our drinking or drug abuse why do we keep going? We're not having fun; we're just numbing the pain. We don't get pleasure anymore yet we still desire it.

Marc Lewis: That's right. Even with sexual desire or romantic desire, the feeling of—you know all those songs about it hurts so much to be in love?—desire itself isn't really fun. It is what draws you to the thing that you expect to be fun—to be in that person's embrace or to be in the embrace of your drug of choice.

“So desire is really the big wheel in all our goal-directed activities. And addiction is no exception. The critical role of desire in the brain has been the focus of research in Berridge’s lab for well over a decade (I describe this guy earlier in the book. He’s a great researcher^v). Berridge was the first to argue that addiction is about wanting, not liking—desire not pleasure—while the rest of the field has been catching up slowly. The low profile of pleasure in addiction explains why Nathalie kept shooting heroin, Brian kept smoking meth and Johnny kept drinking, long after the enjoyment dimmed to an ember of its former glory. And why smokers are rarely heard to celebrate the pleasure they get from smoking—at least after the first cigarette of the day. Even the satisfaction afforded by relief doesn’t remain in attention for long. But the drive to *get* that relief, to acquire it, especially if it’s been out of reach for a while, takes on colossal proportions.

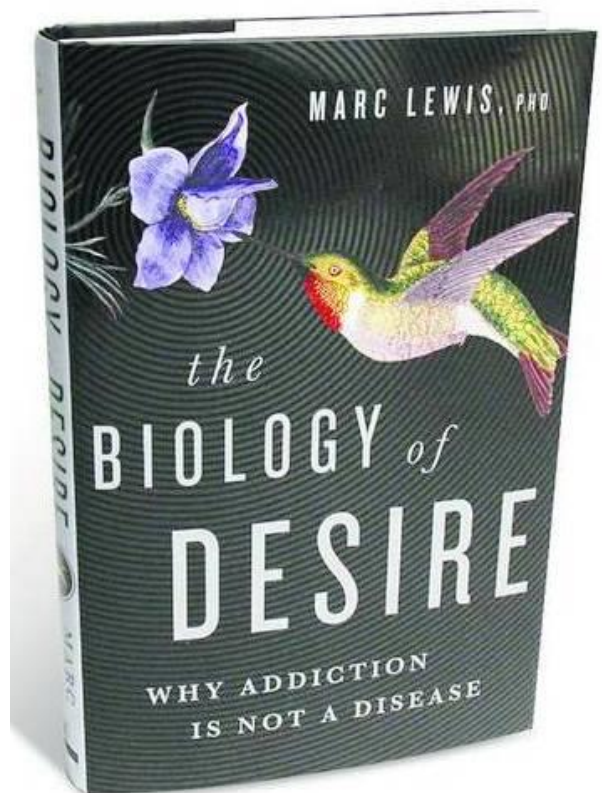
Not that pleasure isn’t important. There’s a reason why all species of fruit have evolved to produce sugar: so that mammals will eat them and spread their seeds. Pleasure is great for triggering desire—I *want more!* But once the connection is made in Act 1, Scene 1, the audience turns its attention almost exclusively to desire.

The biology of desire not only helps us understand addiction, it helps us understand why addiction is not a disease. Why it is, rather, an unfortunate outcome of a normal neural mechanism that evolved because it was useful.

Joe C: Exactly; we’re just like anyone else, only more so. And it explains why having the bottle, in the brown paper bag, on your way home—you don’t have the alcohol in your system yet, but you know *it* is coming—the cycle is already in play; you’re past the point of no return even though there has been no chemical interaction between the booze and the brain.

Marc Lewis: Yeah, you’ve launched. And there’s something very special about that. The anticipation, the excitement, it’s thrilling and it’s a bit hard to put into words. You can’t exactly say that this feeling isn’t a good feeling because going after the thing you know will make you feel better does feel good. But it’s not quite the same as the pleasure, the feeling, the flavor itself. It’s different; it’s anticipatory.

Joe C: Finally, why is this such a big deal? Why should we be talking about it? Who’s getting lost in the shuffle of this old modality of the disease-model?



Marc Lewis: Who's getting lost in the shuffle? A lot of people. I've just started doing some Skype-based counseling for addicts. It's something I never thought I'd do because I approached this from a scientific point of view, not a clinical one. I was talking to one guy who just got out of an incredibly expensive California rehab facility—one hundred thousand dollars per month. Someone's making a lot of money here. He was aghast. Yes it was a lovely resort; yes they had a lovely view of the ocean, great activities on the grounds, lovely food and so on. But the care was not what he needed. A lot of people were leaving there in no better shape than they came in. They had addiction counselors—some of whom were not very well trained—they had groups that sat around talking about the same thing over and over again and they had this medical model, the big pennant over the door, "This is a disease and you're here to get cured of this disease," when in fact the only way the medical model intersected with their lives is that he got his prescription for Suboxone, which is buprenorphine which is an opiate substitute. And he left with it so now he's addicted to buprenorphine instead of heroin. Well okay, that's better. It's a step in the right direction; he's not breaking the law and he's not spending as much money. But he's still an addict and he knows it. So the disease-model isn't helping him very much and there are a lot of other people who aren't being helped by it, either.

Joe C: It's a lazy way to go about things just because we've always used the same language. I mean, meteorologists do it: They say that the sun will rise at such-and-such a time and set at this time, even though they know the sun neither rises, nor sets because it doesn't rotate around the earth. That's old biblical language they are still using.

Marc Lewis: (laughing) That is a great analogy.

Joe C: Feel free to use it all you want. Thanks for spending some time with us. Where can people find you?

Marc Lewis: The website is still <http://www.memoirsofanaddictedbrain.com/> and the Twitter handle is [@addictedbrain](#) but in Vancouver my computer crashed and I lost my login and password.

Joe C: Hey, we know some social media wiz-kids. "Hey you, if you're out there and you can coach Marc through retrieval, <http://www.memoirsofanaddictedbrain.com/contact/>

So here's what Marc is up against...

Dr. George Koob, an internationally-recognized expert on alcohol and stress, and the neurobiology of alcohol and drug addiction, began his tenure as Director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) on January 27, 2014. The brain disease model of addiction is strongly supported, as advocates claim, by scientific evidence. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Director **Dr. Nora Volkow** is easy to find on Youtube. HBO did a series on Addiction and Dr. Volkow was one of many articulate voices of modern advocacy for addicts and addiction research. Both Volkow and NIAAA Director Dr. George Koob advocate the idea of neurological research that paints addiction as a brain disease. While that is the popular view of neurologists, we have heard today that there is no consensus, that discovery and discussion is

ongoing. The story of addiction is ongoing and we all have a vested interest in every rock being tuned and new ideas being explored.

I talked to Gretta Vosper when her tentative status as being fit for duty as the leader of United Church congregation was making news. Gretta made a good point that by bringing this up now, in this way, the powers that be have polarized the whole church. If they throw her out, people will leave in protest. And now, if they don't throw her out, people will leave the church in protest.

It only stands to reason that preachers have a range from just doing their job – from atheists, to some of it's true and some of it may not be, all the way to literalists who defend the most conservative interpretation of the word of the Lord.

Let me share with you a little of Gretta's discussion with Mary Hines on CBC. Below, we link to the whole show, which I recommend you take in.

Some of you will recall that *Tapestry* did a show about AA that included three members of Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers Group in Toronto whose group was made world-famous by a rogue Intergroup that broke from AA's tradition of radical inclusion and de-listed the agnostic groups based on their own made-up rule that groups can't read a secular interpretation of AA's Twelve Steps and call themselves an AA group. So Toronto Intergroup took away two groups right to participate and the right to be heard at Intergroup. This absurd discrimination evoked the laws on unintended consequences and what were two secular AA groups in the Greater Toronto Area are now eight secular AA groups as Intergroup imposed martial law and AA members voted with their feet in support of a more inclusive AA. Anyway, I'll link to that CBC *Tapestry* show as well as the one with Gretta Vosper called, *Letting Go*.



Mary Hynes: Your Twitter feed says, "Irritating the church into the 21st century. I think the question that a lot of listeners would have is, "What kept you in the church at that point? If your beliefs changed to the point where you say, 'Scripture—I'm just not feeling it anymore,' or to the point where your website proclaims you as an atheist, what ties you to the United Church of Canada, anymore?"

Gretta Vosper: I thought that what I was doing—in terms of ministry, not in terms of leading in this direction—was a very significant and integral part of many people's lives. Bringing people together in community, exposing them to material that can challenge them, can transform them and

support them, then watching them go through those moments of transformation, well that's a

very significant piece, for individuals and for community. That's one of the concerns I have about the demise of the liberal church; we're losing places where that can happen in a very healthy and fulfilling way. So I'm committed to that.

I am loyal to the church. The United Church of Canada has done such incredible things through the course of its history. But I think that shine in the history of the United Church was when we were about stepping outside of our prescribed box and saying, "It is right for women to be recognized for their leadership in the church and it is right for people who have been divorced to have equal rights and of course we do have to speak about abortion and about LGBTQ rights and all of these issues, one after the other."

And to me, *this* is the next issue. This is the box that we need to get liberal denominations out of.

Mary Hynes: So when you say, "this," are you talking about what belief is?

Gretta Vosper: I'm talking about what belief is and about the language that we use. While most of my colleagues and I were taught in a certain manner in theological college, most of my colleagues use a very metaphorical understanding of "God." They don't think of a supernatural, divine being interfering in the lives of human beings. But at the same time there's that language—there's that complicity moment again—as soon as you use that language you are giving permission to allow that language to be used for something very different, and B) to make it very difficult for people to get beyond a very concrete understanding of it.

God is a very fickle god. He can be used by anybody for anything. And so, if we continue to use that word and name that being, whether we are using it metaphorically or not, we are giving people permission to use it for ill-purposes.

Mary Hynes: So this might be a good time to talk about your congregation, to talk about West Hill United. Is this a church where the word God isn't used, is it used in quotation marks, tell me a little bit about what goes on at West Hill.

Gretta Vosper: I think the reason that West Hill has been able to survive and to get so far down this post-theistic trail is because it still looks like church. You stand up, you sit down, pass the plate, sing the songs, it looks like church in that way. But you won't hear any language that pre-supposes that there is a divine being, we don't use the word "god" or if I do use the word, "god," it is always followed, "by which I mean ... (dot, dot, dot)." If I use the word "sacred," "by which I mean ..." I will define these words because I don't want there to be an assumption out there that I mean something else by them. So you do not hear the word, "god," we do not privilege the scriptures ... so on Sunday we read a poem by Ellen Bass. We read from a variety of sources and we do not identify Jesus Christ as *the* way. There are a lot of churches that are getting closer to the followings of Jesus but we recognize that there are so many people who poured their life out to others in the way that Jesus is purported to have done, trying to make life better, to stretch the idea of who's included and to irradiate the idea of those who are not. We feature all of them; we don't privilege Jesus as a particularly brilliant leader.

Mary Hynes: Can you give me a feel for the readings, the music, the sound—what the substance of it is?

Gretta Vosper: A service would feel like a regular church service. Our music, my husband Scott Kernsis writes a lot of the music, he is a former evangelical with a lot of experience in contemporary Christian music world, so he brings that flavor and style. We never sing anything that you don't understand because it's cloaked in third century theology—none of that. We do use traditional hymns but we have re-written all the words when we have had the copyright permission to do so. It may look a lot like a regular church service. When we gather together for what used to be “community prayer time” is now called “community sharing”. People offer into the space their delights, what's happened through the week, what's put them on top of the world or they offer those difficult paths that they happen to be walking along and I speak of this as weaving ourselves more deeply into community.

Mary Hines: Gretta Vosper, it's been a pleasure to talk to you; thank you.

Gretta Vosper: It's been a delight. Thank you, Mary.^{vi}

In the same way AA's Toronto Intergroup debacle acted with fear and hostility and lacked the perspective of looking to the future and asking what do people want and need and how can we accommodate them, the United Church is painted into the same corner. What would it take for the United Church or any church to move the average parishioner age from the late 60s to the national average age? Well, it would likely take something radical, something controversial, something like an atheist minister committed to doing good deeds within the church and not being crucified for her beliefs.

According to Christianity's own folklore, there was once another rebel 2,000 years ago who didn't tow the party-line, who put people and deeds ahead of obedience and dogma. The character Pontius Pilate was faced with a dilemma of what to do with a man who had committed no crime, but that the general public had turned on , demanding blood. Even 2,000 ago, according to Christian scripture, some Jews followed Jesus and some dismissed him as a fool. He was seen to be an anarchist and a threat to the establishment.

I have to admit right now that I found Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Super Star* way more compelling as a form of storytelling than Catechism. I like his depiction of the tragic Pilate who, while just doing his job in everyone's best interest, was cast by history as the villain.

I am not painting Gretta Vosper as a modern day messiah and, I assure you, neither would she. But, if the church is successful at casting her out, will the next generation look at this deed as a progressive, purifying act or will they judge the United Church with the same disdain we cast upon homophobia, misogyny or racism, today?

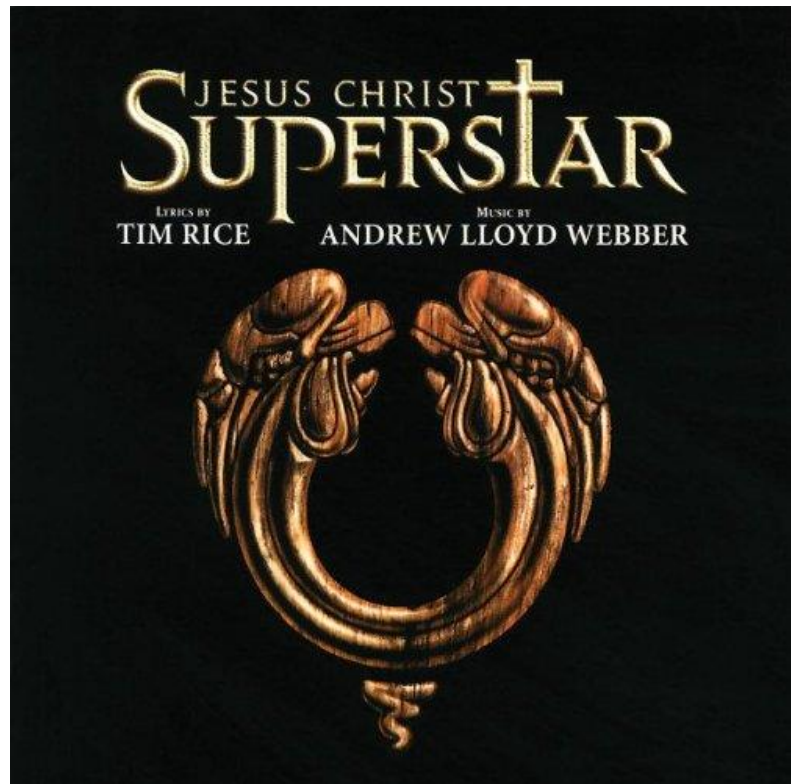
Indulge me for a minute or a minute: 30 to be exact while I take in a nostalgic fix from memory lane and my vinyl collection. From *Jesus Christ Super Star*, this is “Pilate's Dream” as Pilate foreshadows his fate.

I dreamed I met a Galilean
A most amazing man
He had that look
You very rarely find
The haunting hunted kind

I asked him
To say what had happened
How it all began
I asked again
He never said a word
As if he hadn't heard

And next the room was full
Of wild and angry men
They seemed to hate this man
They fell on him and then
Disappeared again

Then I saw thousands of millions
Crying for this man
And then I heard them
Mentioning my name
And leaving me the blame^{vii}



“Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all his laws.” – John Adams (1735 – 1826)

As Gretta Vosper is trying to frustrate the United Church into the 21st century, Adams brought the USA into the 19th century as he was the second president of the United States of America from 1791 to 1801. “Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all his laws.” If the “god’s laws” that Adams references are as found in Psalms and Matthew, old and new testament passages include, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” So blessed are the humble, the right-sized, the seeking for they hold the keys to the kingdom.

In the case of both Gretta vs. the religious authority and Marc vs. Medical authority, these rebellious individuals make truth their higher purpose, not authority. Worshiping tradition or popular opinion seems to be to be creating false idols and then bowing before them.

In the case of how 12-Step/12-Tradition fellowships are structured, there is no central authority. The group is the highest authority in AA and that group holds no power over its members. The elders hold no power over the group, the collective conscience is the group’s guide and anyone who disagrees with the authority of that group conscience can go start her or his own group,

needing no one's approval. All one needs is but one like-minded individual. One person does not a group make; two or more can constitute a "group".

So, that's enough for today, I would say. Thank you Marc Lewis for spending some time with us and for two great books, *The Biology of Desire* and *Memoirs of an Addicted Brain*. And good luck to Gretta Vosper and the United Church and to everyone who is helping to irritate society into embracing the 21st century. And thank you to you, the listener. Now it's your turn—should you wish—to have your say on Twitter, Facebook or news@rebelliondogspublishing.com If you are moved to bark back, Rebellion Dogs is listening.

ⁱ Vosper, Gretta, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*, Toronto: Harper Collins, 2008, p. 284

ⁱⁱ <http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/08/05/atheist-united-church-minister-challenges-review-that-could-lead-to-firing.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2015/01/20/will-gretta-vosper-do-the-honorable-thing/>

^{iv} Gladwell, Malcolm, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants* (Audio Book) 2013: Blackstone Audio Inc., Introduction @ 5:45

^v <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/psych/research&labs/berridge/research/affectiveneuroscience.html>

^{vi} <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/letting-go-with-miriam-katin-and-gretta-vosper-1.1912808>

^{vii} Lloyd-Webber, Andrew, *Jesus Christ Super Star*, 1970: "Pilate's Dream"