

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts

As we see another school year unfold, we at the Substance Abuse Council would again like to preview some books that we feel will be to your benefit as a reader, parent, student, even community member. We are all equally concerned for our community members and want to know that all are safe and healthy. We will profile the book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* by Gabor Mate, M.D. He writes a timely and profoundly original book where he looks at the epidemic of addictions in our society tells us why we are so prone to them and outlines what is needed to liberate ourselves from their hold on our emotions and behaviors. In this year we will follow Dr. Gabor Mate in his need for a clinic in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where he has a unique opportunity to know human beings who spend almost all their time as hungry ghosts.

Dr. Mate realizes that drug addicts are often dismissed and discounted as unworthy of empathy and respect. In telling their stories, his intent is twofold: to help their voices to be heard and to shed light on the origins and nature of their ill-fated struggle to overcome suffering through substance abuse. Month by month, we will outline one of his patients, and how he deals with them in a clinical manner. Each patient has agreed to have their story told in the hopes that it might be of assistance to others who struggle with addictions.

Dr. Mate is the staff physician for the nonprofit Portland Hotel Society. They have turned the building into housing for the nonhousable. Giving an aura of nostalgia that was lost on the patients; the rooms now are cramped with corroded plumbing or armies of cockroaches. The shops across the street are now closed, and the crowds stop coming. These streets and their back alleys serve as the centre of Canada's drug capital. For so many, the system had abandoned them, so this hotel was set up as a base for other services and programs. It took eight years of fundraising and four provincial government ministries and four private foundations to make the new Portland a reality. Now people finally have their own bathrooms, laundry facilities and a decent place to eat food. The cement hallways and the elevator are washed clean frequently, sometimes several times a day. Punctured by needle marks, some residents have chronic draining wounds. Blood seeps from blows and cuts inflicted by their fellow addicts or from pits patients have scratched in their skin during fits of cocaine-induced paranoia. Thus the challenges of keeping this facility as healthy as possible.

"The work can be intensely satisfying or deeply frustrating, depending on my own state of mind," says Dr. Mate. He often faces the refractory nature of people who value their health and well-being less than the immediate, drug-driven needs of the moment. His patient's addictions make every medical encounter a challenge. Where else does one find people in such poor health and yet so averse to taking care of themselves or even to allowing others to take care of them.

This is often the only home some of these addicts have had. The pain here in the Downtown Eastside reaches out with hands begging for drug money. It stares from eyes cold and hard or downcast with submission and shame. It speaks in cajoling tones or screams aggressively. Behind every look, every word, each violent act or disenchanting gesture is a history of anguish and degradation, a self-writ tale with new chapters added each day and scarcely a happy end. The skin, limbs or organs of the patients are often inflamed, and for that the ministrations can be at least temporarily adequate. But how to soothe souls inflamed by the intense torment

imposed first by childhood experiences almost too sordid to believe and then, with mechanical repetition, by the sufferers themselves? And how to offer them comfort when their sufferings are made worse every day by social ostracism.

The biggest tragedy about the Portland Hotel Society is "There are only two choices: either you're too much trouble to be allowed to live here or you're so much trouble you can live only here."
To be continued