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Alcoholism: The Genetic Inheritance

By Kathleen W. FitzGerald, Ph.D.

For over thirty years the AMA has recognized alcoholism as a disease with identifiable and progressive symptoms that, if untreated, lead to mental damage, physical incapacity, and early death. Yet we still do not treat alcoholism as a disease, but as a sin, a social stigma, a moral aberration.

FitzGerald traces the roots of this disease to the alcoholic's unique and unusual body chemistry, laying to rest arguments for weakness of will or "alcoholic personality." *Jellinek's disease* is used as a synonym for alcoholism.

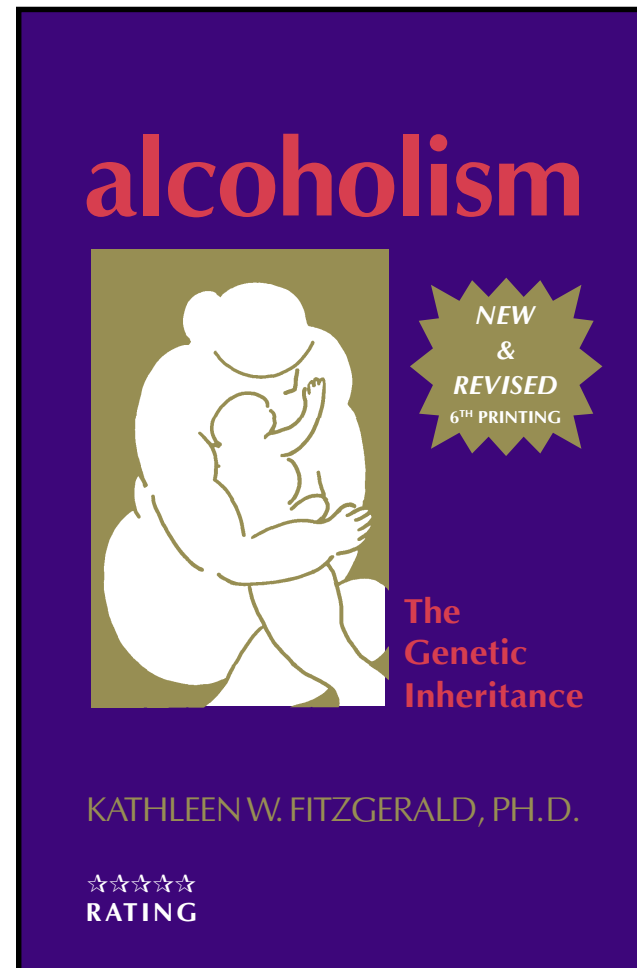
This sound and sensitive book addresses the very real pain that those who love an alcoholic must bear.

With compassion and honesty, the author speaks to these other victims - the family and friend - and gives voice to its silent victims - the children. Moving stories illustrate the universal suffering that everyone whose life is touched by alcoholism knows so well, inviting them out of isolation into their own recovery.

Rarely does a book on alcoholism focus its attention on the family and friends of an alcoholic; this one does, and it does so with depth and understanding. It translates the cold, scientific pathology of alcoholism into meaningful human terms.

No matter how alcoholism has touched your life, this is the one source book that offers you complete understanding, sound medical facts, and, most important, realistic help.

This revised paperback edition includes new chapters on Codependency, ACOA issues and other addictions.



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Chicago Tribune

LAKE

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2002

ALCOHOL ADDICTION

Just Say: Know



THE "SWITCH" IN THE BRAIN

Brain thirst, forgiveness & reclaiming the soul...

By Kathleen Whalen FitzGerald

IMAGINE A BEAUTIFUL SEPTEMBER evening the room darkening as the sun purples the sky and the curtains sway with the rhythm of the distant sea. Shadows play across the floor and swans fold themselves in for the night. A peace mellow, smooth, almost mystical.

POP! A *switch* gets flipped and the lights go *on!* Forever! Forget about peace and purple skies and sleeping swans. The lights glare and burn your eyes. There's no going back!

The day the *switch* got tripped in my head, I didn't feel a thing. When I went from normal to abnormal, I didn't hear or see or taste anything different. No one turned around and stared at me as if I had made an egregious social error. Everything was cool.

But it wasn't cool at all. Biochemically, it was as if I had joined the Marines or the convent and the subsequent days and weeks and years of my life were to be ordered by a higher authority, one I dare not question. From that day forward, I was hooked on alcohol.

There are 18 million of us Americans with "turned-on" *switches*; the same 18 million with alcoholism or Jellinek's Disease. Our illness is a brain illness and the brain is an organ, like the heart or lungs or spleen. Organs have structures and chemicals that make them function properly. Our illness certainly effects the mind, but it resides in the myriad chemicals and deep, convoluted structures of the brain.

Our unique and most personal packaging is laid out in our DNA, those threads of life binding one generation to another, rushing forth with the dark blue of our eyes, our crooked smiles, our love for symmetry or prayer. And our irreversible *switches*.

My *switch* was tripped 25 years ago. On that day, perhaps all those dear people of mine buried in the hill-top cemetery overlooking the winding Ohio River - Tom, Mayme, Anna, Laura, Denis and Delia - and those tucked away in big, old Calvary Cemetery in Cleveland - Katie, John, Bridget, Annie, Nellie and Pat - lifted their cold

and stony hands, put them on their marble foreheads and wept into their watery graves.

Native Americans hold that we must protect and nurture the life of Mother Earth, not for ourselves or our children or our children's children, but for those unto the Seventh Generation. When I count backward to the Seven Generations before me - I have had 127 mothers and 127 fathers, most of whom lived their lives by the heat of a turf fire and prayed that the leaves of the potato not turn black and starve them to death.

I can only wonder at the sheer number of my parents who carried those vulnerable genes, who held within their brains those *switches* that once tripped, meant a life of alcoholism, of insanity, of death and destruction for their families. I wonder if when we meet, in a few days or few years from now, they'll say they're sorry for threading me down that troublesome DNA. If they say that to me, I'll tell them its really ok. A miracle happened and I'm sober today.

I had always thought alcoholics were stupid, bad and self-obsessed. (My father had crucified us with his drinking until the day he died, so I was an authority!) I wasn't stupid, bad or self-obsessed: I was finishing a doctoral program at Northwestern University, had been a nun for 13 years and was addicted to responsibility. I didn't get it.

My life became a living hell. I would stand at my lovely Lake Forest kitchen sink, look out at my lovely Lake Forest trees, stare at my sweet little Lake Forest babies, 8 months and 2 years old, and pray, "*Dear Jesus, don't make me drink!!*" Then I'd pour myself a tumbler of Jack Daniels. With ice. I was knee-deep in hell with a thirst that drove me mad.

When I got to AA, they told me that I had an illness that made me dependent upon alcohol. I felt suddenly

giddy that I wasn't crazy, but "illness" really didn't work for me. My sponsor, sensitive to my Northwestern elitism, wisely called my condition a "pathology". When they talked about "crossing that thin, red line", I knew what they meant.

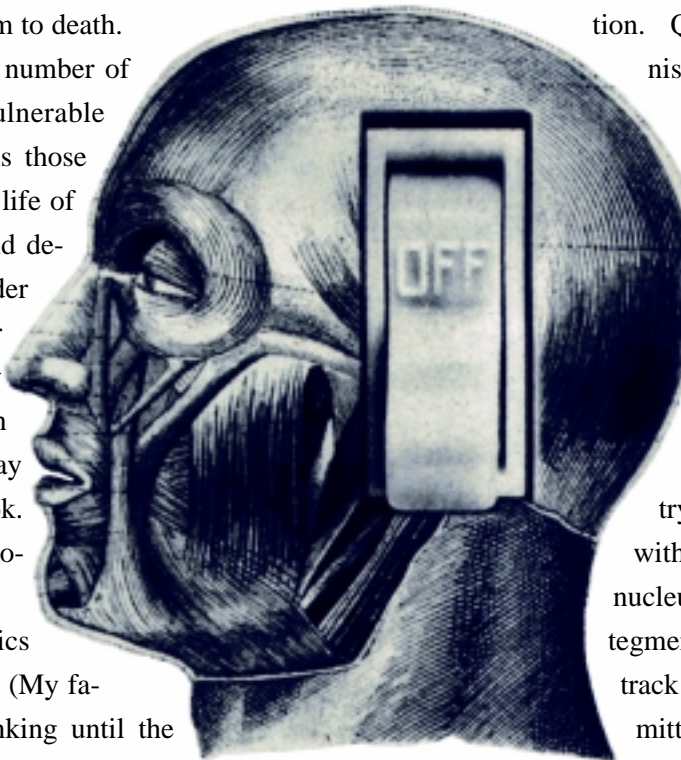
However, it wasn't until Dr. Alan Lesher, writing in a 1997 *Science* article, "Addiction is a Brain Disease and It Matters", addressed the mechanism in the brain that changes the use or abuse of alcohol to addiction. Quite simply, he called this mechanism a *switch*.

Why does the *switch* get tripped in some and not in others? The answer lies in a systemic vulnerability, involving irregular genes, proteins and chromosomes, rendering some of us easy targets for addiction. The tenuous system crashes, flipping the *switch*.

In laboratories across the country, neurobiologists are looking deep within the oldest part of the brain, the nucleus accumbens (Nac), and the ventral tegmental area (VTA) of the midbrain to track ADH gene clusters, GABA transmitters and D2 dopamine receptors.

Scientists are discovering inborn chemical imbalances that create negative emotional states in the pre-alcoholic. When alcohol hits these chemicals, relief comes to the screaming, reward-deficient brain. It finally feels "normal". This accounts for the greater tolerance of the early alcoholic and the painful withdrawal of the more advanced. Black-outs, the union card of the real alcoholic, are experienced, early on or later, regularly or periodically. (This is not to be confused with "passing out" which takes no real genetic talent.)

Ten percent of us Americans are alcoholic, our burning *switches* flash like lightening bugs on a hot summer



night. If there are 50 people on the car of your train, picture five with "*on-switches*". If there are 38,500 fans at a Cubs game, nearly 4,000 are *switched on*. If there are 200 people on your block, 20 are "*on*".

The terrible tragedy of Jellinek's disease, or alcoholism, is that it plays Chernobyl to our families, our children, and the Seven Generations waiting in the wings. Of all Americans, one-half have a close family member with alcoholism. One in four of our children have an alcoholic parent.

Each year there are as many victims of drunk drivers, 16,000, as there are people who live in Winnetka and Kenilworth combined. Jellinek's disease costs us over \$276 billion annually, roughly \$1,000 for every man, woman and child. In the Federal Budget for 2001, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism received \$272 million; the National Eye Institute received \$440 million. No one liked Chernobyl.

Our cultural repertoire includes the haunting print for the musical, *Les Miserables*. Eponine, the Parisian street waif, looks out at us with her dark, wounded eyes. A skimpy rag of a dress falls from her bare shoulder and her tangled little-girl hair blows in the wind.

When the *switch* went on in my brain, I was Eponine. The cells of my brain were naked, unprotected street urchins, unable to withstand the onslaught of alcohol. Then a special group of other *switched-on* women let me know it wasn't my fault, that all of us so genetically vulnerable are totally powerless against the force of alcohol. They suggested that I not take a drink that day and come back the next day. That was many years ago.

Gratefully, I haven't picked up a drink today and understand serenity a little more than yesterday. I go to my meetings so I never forget that the *switch* remains on.

Today I stand beneath the shade of the ancient trees on the green and grassy hills where the members of my family lie buried. I have truly forgiven my father for an illness he never requested. I ask that the earth lie softly on him and that he be at peace.