

LOVE IN A F*CKED UP WORLD PODCAST
EP16 HOLLY WHITAKER

Dean: I'm Dean Spade. Welcome back to Love in a F*cked Up World the podcast, where we talk about how to build and sustain strong connections to each other, because our movements are made of our relationships and are only as strong as they are. Welcome to our first episode of 2026.

I'm very excited about some upcoming things we'll be doing this month. I'll be recording episodes with Chani Nicholas and Morgan Bassichis. And the team is working on an episode about relationships between people in prison and across prison walls, for which we've been interviewing lots of people. I'm really excited for how that's coming together. I'm soon gonna be doing some Patreon Live conversations, including with my dear friends Dori Midnight and Holiday Simmons, and I also just posted a new video about resentment to Patreon, which you can watch for free at patreon.com/DeanSpade.

For this week's episode, I'm sharing an interview with Holly Whitaker, the author of Quit Like a Woman and host of the "co-regulation" podcast. I really enjoyed Quit Like a Woman. Holly puts various conversations that I've been having for years – about recovery and the benefits and challenges of 12-step programs – into a deeper context, looking closely at the origins of Alcoholics Anonymous, the role of the alcohol industry in shaping our understandings of addiction, and doing all of this through a feminist lens. Holly's life and journey are very different from mine and from most people I'm connected with, and I found it really eye-opening to read her account of struggling with alcohol and becoming sober, and the kinds of relational and emotional transformation she found on that path. I hope you'll find our conversation useful, and I recommend listening to it alongside our prior episode with Shira Hassan, and the bonus interview with Shira that you can find on our Patreon page. Shira is the author of Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction, and she and I also dug deep into questions about 12-step and sobriety.

I'm so delighted to be joined today on the podcast by Holly Whitaker, who is the founder of Tempest, a trauma-informed recovery program, and the author of the bestselling book that I highly recommend, Quit Like a Woman, and tons of other writing. Welcome to the podcast, Holly.

Holly: Oh my god, thank you so much for having me, Dean. It's like a really big honor.

Dean: I have been talking to people so much about your book. It's like all my friends are so tired of hearing me and listening to me talk about this book. There's so many things in it that I know we won't even get to them all today. But I really want people who listen to this podcast to get to hear your frameworks about a ton of issues

related to addiction and recovery that I think are, even though I've spent years thinking about and reading about addiction and being part of different kinds of recovery communities, there were so many insights that made me feel like, "oh, right, this is the accurate description of what I've experienced", or "this is a helpful way to think".

And so I really wanna spend some time with you today sharing some of those and hopefully drawing people into your work further. So the place I wanna start is that pretty far into the book, in Quit Like a Woman, you describe sobriety as freedom. And I wondered if you could start by talking about what you mean by this. The question of "what is freedom?" is central to so many of my favorite inquiries, and I'm curious to know what this means. Yeah.

Holly: I think it's interesting because we'll get into some of the work I'm doing now a little bit later, but I think that in the context of, I think about freedom a lot differently now. I think of freedom a lot currently as like 'freedom versus security', right? But to me, you know, when I was struggling with alcohol, when I was in active addiction, to me, being somebody that couldn't drink just seemed like the complete loss of freedom. Like that I could not do all of the things everyone else got to do. And that I had lost a certain privilege, and that now my life would be much smaller and I wouldn't have access to certain social situations, certain relationships, whatever. Like that it would just be controlled by not being able to control myself.

And for me, what freedom, I mean, just quite simply was: I don't have to think about alcohol anymore. I don't have to do what everyone else is doing. It really flipped from – a lot of what happened for me in my early recovery was going from "can't" to "don't have to". Like "I can't drink", versus, "oh my god, I never have to drink again. I never have to do that to myself again".

And I didn't realize that freedom was on offer. I thought that the only people that wouldn't drink were people that had lost their ability to, or you know, people that had certain religious affiliations, like Mormons. But I just never had considered that you could just opt out.

And I think that early feeling was that then you discover you can opt out of other things. Right? And so for me, that opt-out of the compulsory, you know, drug taking or the compulsory whatever, that was freedom to me, complete and total freedom. Like I said, it's shifted a little bit because recovery is an ideology and sobriety is an ideology.

Like these are very, very, very ideological things and they are control mechanisms in our society. And so I also think that, I would

say it differently now because I think once you start to think of yourself in terms of "I am sober, I don't do these things", um, you lose some other freedoms. So just kind of pulling it back to my original answer, freedom to not have to think about using drugs anymore. Freedom to not have to do something, the freedom to do anything but that.

Dean: Yeah, it just really moved me because, you know, like a lot of my work has been about freedom or liberation, like at a really broad level. Like how to live in a society that doesn't have police or prisons or borders, you know, these kinds of ideas. Or doesn't, you know, make you live or die based on having gender norms enforced on you.

But at an interpersonal level, I think about my own liberation as like, "I wanna be able to respond to what's actually happening now instead of being stuck in an old story or an old reaction". And when I read what you said, that was what that felt like to me. Like sobriety being, like being responsive to the conditions now. How is it working out for me to drink now? What do I think of it now? Instead of it as something I might be attached to. Like "fun" sounds like getting drunk, or "fun" sounds like, you know, could be other things people have intense connections with. Or like compulsive behaviors around like "freedom" means I'm actually getting to assess how this is for me, and decide.

And then it also made me think there's another piece in your book that's kinda about the letting go of the decision fatigue. Like not having to decide every night "am I gonna drink tonight?" But just being like "I'm just not going to", so then I don't have to be exhausted. Because by the end of the day, I think you write about this, by the end of the day, it's like deciding not to drink after you've made all the other decisions at work and at home all day. You know, it can be hard to bring our full brains to that decision.

Holly: And you just said something really interesting too, because there's another thing in here where you are talking about oppression. And I also think freedom from like, one of the things that I really try and highlight is that alcohol...like there's a...Jean Swallows was this lesbian that wrote like one of the only queer books on addiction and recovery, and the epigraph in her book is about all the ways that she had experienced oppression. And then there was this self oppression. There's this like self oppression that comes from being in a relationship with a substance or behavior that we choose.

And I think for, when I think about it, like specifically to alcohol, because alcohol is very different than other drugs. Alcohol is legal. It's mass marketed. It is like something that you are supposed to, the drug you're supposed to take. You're supposed to be able to take it, as opposed to all the other drugs that you're supposed to not

take or fuck with. And so I think like for me also, there was this, oh my god, this is, you know, I talk about like the Women's March in 2017 and how everyone is like throwing off the chains. And then celebrating with this substance that they are chained to in society. Like in society, that we are deeply manipulated into using the way that we use. And so I also think about it in terms of like, oh, freedom from this machine that wants me to be stuck in it, you know?

Dean: When I've talked to people about your book, a lot of them have been like, "oh, that's the person from whom I learned this critique of like alcohol marketing and like 'wine moms' and like this kind of stuff." Like a very particularly feminist anti-racist critique you have about the alcohol industry, and about the marketing slogan "Drink responsibly". And I would love it if you would share that analysis with people listening to this podcast.

Holly: But can you tell me what "Drink responsibly" meant to you before you read my book? Like if you had heard somebody, have you used that with people?

Dean: I've never told someone to "Drink responsibly". But I've seen it on alcohol commercials and it always feels to me like a disclaimer: "we're advertising how great this party is gonna be if you drink our booze, but like, don't drink and drive." It just sounded like a PSA to me.

Holly: Totally. Yeah. So Allan M Brandt was this guy that wrote this book called The Cigarette Century, and in it he talks about how the cigarette came to dominate culture. And one of the things that he talks about is the way that like we knew this thing was killing us. There was like loads of evidence, people were like having, you know, like dying and coughing up black stuff and the tobacco industry denied it.

And one of the ways that they denied it and continued to escape being held accountable for killing people with their product was what we call 'engineered controversy'. And their big controversy..there was like in the thirties, forties, fifties, all of this like mounting evidence that cigarettes actually did harm. Like scientifically proven, did harm to humans. And the tobacco industry just, the way that they skirted around it was saying that there wasn't enough evidence. And they just continued to say "well, we don't know for sure".

And Americans really needed that. They wanted to keep smoking. The tobacco industry hired a bunch of scientists, so it looks extremely scientific. These refusals were being posted in scientific journals. And so it was like the public really thought "there's inconclusive evidence here". And if you're like addicted to tobacco and you wanna keep smoking and you don't wanna face it, and that scientific report

might not be right, you're gonna typically believe it's not right.

So this engineered controversy, like "there isn't enough evidence to prove cigarettes are bad" held out for decades, right? Like for decades people bought into that and it kept the tobacco industry from essentially being held accountable financially, you know, like legally, all the things. And so when you look at "Drink responsibly", it's the same thing. The tobacco industry created like the TRC, the tobacco research whatever, and like this whole scientific arm that looked like a legitimate scientific outfit that was studying the dangers of tobacco. You know, the alcohol industry comes out with all of these things that they really pump to make it seem like they are very concerned about your health.

And so "Drink responsibly" is this term that was coined by the alcohol industry. If you go to drinkresponsibly.org or if you just look up "Drink responsibly", anything that is on the internet that is behind that message is paid for by an alcohol company.

This all started post-Prohibition. Alcohol was demonized during Prohibition. When Prohibition was repealed, the alcohol industry needed people to think that its product wasn't dangerous. They invented, you know, these ideas of like the alcoholic, the outta control person that drinks too much, to take a lot of the blame off of the substance. And so when we say "Drink responsibly", what we're doing is keeping Big Alcohol out of the court systems, warning labels off of alcohol bottles, like all that stuff that we now have because we held the tobacco industry to account.

So it's actually pretty fricking awful. And like the other thing is drinking responsibly is really funny because alcohol specifically dismantles our inhibition. It dismantles our executive function and our ability to actually be responsible. Like the part of us that makes us responsible is our prefrontal cortex, and that's what alcohol dismantles.

And so it's like also bullshit. It's a total scam.

Dean: Yeah. And I was really moved by the ways you talked about the notion that drinking responsibly is what good, normal adults can do. And then there's these few people out there who can't. And you say so beautifully in the book, we don't talk about cigarettes that way. We know that even, that any cigarette smoking is dangerous and that people, you know, have to manage that awareness. But the idea that alcohol consumption is appropriate and healthy except for, for these few people.

Holly: Right. And it keeps us all locked in this thing. Because you have this idea, right? There was like this idea of the alcoholic, which is not, there's no...like I just was reading this paper by Bruce

Alexander, who's this like very like legend in the alcohol research space. And he was saying he like wrote his final paper – he's 80 years old, he is retiring – and he wrote this paper saying that this is the only, like addiction is the only scientific field where the scholars get up at the beginning of the presentation and offer their own subjective definition of what it is. Meaning that we still don't have a unified understanding of what addiction is. That like, that's not cancer. You don't like...there is...we know what cancer is, right? Like we know what most things are. With addiction, it's just this kind of black box thing, right, that we don't really know what line you cross. How many drinks, like what does it actually look like when you've crossed into addiction, right?

And so you have a really confusing condition that's self-diagnosed. And then you also have this other fact that like the alcohol industry makes the majority of its profits from people that drink too much. I think 80% of the profits that are made in the industry come from people that are drinking too much. So, you know, not only is it all bunk, it's also like if people did "Drink responsibly", the industry would implode.

Dean: And there's almost, there's like shame and judgment built into it. It's like part of what I think keeps a lot of people from wanting to look closely at how drinking is going for them – for their health, or for their mental wellbeing, or their relationships – is like, I wanna be able to do this normally in the way that commercials and like a lifetime of marketing have told me is possible. And something about your writing showed that to me in a different way.

Holly: That's interesting, isn't it? 'Cause you've been looking at this for a long time.

Dean: Yeah. It's just, I'm still just like chewing on your book all the time. To that end, I have so many questions for you. Okay. There's a part in chapter eight of your book where you talked about how power is internal and not external.

Holly: Yeah.

Dean: And for me it felt really tied to my own anti-capitalist analysis and anti-state analysis. And I wondered if you can talk about why you see power as internal. Like why does that matter? What do you mean by that?

Holly: I think it comes a lot from the fact that I used to believe that you could acquire power externally. And I think, like my whole story is that, right? I was disempowered as a kid, you know, like major relational trauma, C-PTSD, like so many things. And I think that, you know, I'm gonna prove to the world I matter, right? And you go out there and you claim that power. And for me it was, I got a

degree and then I tried to work my way up through like startup culture in Silicon Valley, and all the way to the point where I ended up pretty...I raised \$25 million from investors, right? I nailed it.

And I think at the end of that I was probably the most disempowered, I mean, even after writing the book, right? Because it's very hard in our current culture and world to actually develop an internal idea of power. I don't think very many people understand this. I don't think very many people actually exhibit it.

And internal is just this thing that is untouchable, right? Like internal power to me is...the nonviolent movement, I think, captures it very well, right? Gandhi, I think, captures it. Martin Luther King captures it, right? Like anyone that has demonstrated nonviolent principles understands that your power comes from not going there.

Your power comes from holding, you know, love in your own heart, from not being closed down inside by what someone else is doing to you. And I think like, think of Nelson Mandela, right? Like people that have been in situations for years, they don't allow their minds or their hearts to be colonized. There's this idea in Buddhism like, you're gonna die one day and you, the only thing you're gonna take with you is your state of mind. Right? I think that we are so backwards in what actually, like all of what's happening right now in the second administration is just like...To me, we need it to be that obvious because we're so bad at understanding like, this is not power. This is the opposite of power. This is the saddest, most disempowered, toxic, you know, this would be, in Spiral Dynamics, red stage. You know, this is the ego outta control. This is as gross as it gets.

It's like a really beautiful example of what external power looks like and how faulty it is. And who can get it. Anyone can get it. Kristi Noem can get it. You know? Internal power is this thing that I think for me, at the end of the day, it only matters to me. Like I don't have to make sense to anyone else. It is between me and my own heart and my god. And that sense of, "this is cultivated, this is strong and no one can touch it". It's developing the ground inside of you that no one can shake, while the ground out there is shaky.

Can I ask you, does that, I feel like you have to understand what I'm talking and like know deeply what I'm talking about.

Dean: I mean, I think it's so juicy because for me it's simultaneously related to like a deep solitude. Like can I stand for what I believe in even when the winds are blowing hard? You know, trans people know about this, like people who, who make decisions that are so countercultural. And you talk in the book about how becoming sober is so countercultural, and people don't like it, and they push back on you and they're like, "promise me you won't be weird in any other ways". And then of course you become more weird as you become more

liberated and all this stuff.

But like, so in one way it is a lot about one's self. And for me it's also very much about collective action. It's like, I can be the only trans person at my job for years and years and experience constant you know, rubs around that, because I actually know, even if I'm in this room with a hundred people where the bad thing is happening, I know I actually belong to a community that's outside of this room.

And I think that's the way that when we're healing, and also when we're organizing, and standing up for anything, we need, we simultaneously need to find that grounding in ourselves. And we often get that by being connected to others, and to like genealogies of other feminists and other anti-racists and other resisters.

And there's something about the internal/external for me that felt really connecting to like my anarchist politics when you were writing about it, because it's like, yeah, like you're saying like presidential power, the power of states, obviously, you know, people feel in their lives as brutal violence and control. But also it's made of our fake...like if we all stop participating, something else could happen. And part of what we're trying to do in our movements is like generate a shared sense of our connection to one another, and our decision to like refuse, and have solidarity and push back and throw the tear gas canister back at them and you know, protect our neighbors from getting abducted. Like that kind of really push back.

And for me, that includes stuff beyond non-violence. I really believe in a diversity of tactics and really honor the armed resistance movements all over the world against colonialism. Like it's this broad sense of, this whole system of power is an illusion, and we actually create the world we live in and we want to collaborate with one another to create the world.

And it's not like that's easy, because we have these like terrifying opponents who have like nuclear arms and like, you know, boots on the street, all in our neighborhoods and stuff. Yet we believe it's possible to create something together. And we have to practice that both in groups _and_ connect to it deeply on our own so that we can, even when we're alone, we can still stand for what we believe in and feel ourselves and know why we think that's true. Which is hard because we're social animals, and so it can be hard at jobs or in families or in churches or whatever to stand up for ourselves, you know?

Holly: Yeah, on your own it is the hardest thing to do, especially when even people like, you know, like one of the things that you maybe think of too is just like standing in your own conviction, even when people that you want to agree with you don't. Right? Like I think one of the other things that just made me think about this, I think

there's also something in here about not living for yourself. And I think that has been something that's been on my mind a lot too, like since the election in last November.

I think Joanna Fusco, I don't know if you follow Lord Cowboy, "Sky" Fusco, they're an artist, like a visual artist, but also they're just, their writings have just been more and more about living for other people. And I feel like that has really, there's a sense that I feel like my power comes, the less concerned I am about my own welfare. And again not abandoning myself, not in that way, not in like the self abandonment way, but in a full way. The less I am self-protecting, the more other focused I am, the more powerful I get. Because what are you gonna do? Take my life? Fine. Take it. Like, I think that's just it. Like for me, a lot of it is to, like, getting to that point where I can show up truly and fully and actually live into the ethics I say I have.

Dean: Yeah, and I think there's something really complicated about that. For those of us who've been people pleasers or who've been martyrs, or who've put ourselves last on the list, like when I read your book, I see a process that moves away from that.

Like I have to be what everybody else wants and what everybody else thinks a woman is or a successful person is, or all the things you were trying to be that you were told would make you worthwhile. And then a finding of actual self-worth from which to explore forms of selflessness that I think are more complex and include still having boundaries and standards.

Holly: I think that is so well put and I'm really glad that you picked that up. Because that's a really important piece to this. Which is let's just like, I think what Dean is saying, just to like make sure it's really clear: when I got sober, I refused the narrative. I was not gonna call myself an alcoholic. I was not gonna go to rooms and confess all my shit. I wasn't gonna get a sponsor so that I had someone that I had to be accountable to. I didn't apolo-- I made amends to myself first. I literally did not go out and apologize to one fucking person. I spent a lot of time apologizing to myself. I did all of these things that are really counterintuitive to someone in recovery, and that is because I didn't have, my ego was demolished.

I didn't have a sense of self. There was no self to like be selfless with. And so I had to build myself up and take liberties. Stop being the first to apologize, just stop doing behaviors that were totally reinforcing this idea that I wasn't worthy. And I developed a sense of worth. And from that place, from that full place, I can access this in a really non compromising way where I don't compromise my boundaries or standards, and I'm really in integrity.

But I also wanna kind of say like, even when we're at our most ego

deflated, I still had a strong, like this was still very strong for me. I still was like, "I know what the thing to do is". You know what I mean? Like, I know what the way...I want to be in that place where I am, you know, able to like be fully giving with my life. But we have to inhabit our lives and ourselves.

Dean: Yeah, I think like this stuff is just like never fully resolved. Like we're all, we all swing between moments of grandiosity and self hatred. We all have areas in our lives where we don't see clearly what our behavior is doing to us or others. We all have to like ride this line between being permeable to other people's feedback, but also being like, "wait, I don't think that's grounded. That's, I'm not gonna take that on right now." It's just like there's so much subtlety. Or am I using something like working on something for others' wellbeing to you know, either virtue signal or to prove I'm good? If I'm doing those things, I'm likely to burn out doing it. Like are, what's, is there another purpose I can tune into? I think some of that stuff leads to resentment. That trying to be good that's really coming from an "I'm not good". There's just like so much in this.

, I think your book is interesting to me too because I've gotten a lot out of 12-step and also it was really cool to read someone be like, "you know what? This hyper focus on humility in 12-step, and like showing that you're not god really might clash with the healing journey of people who have been told their entire lives to be more humble because of their gender, racial, class status." There's like a formula there that I think, you know, people can find ways to interpret it lots of ways. But I really appreciate your account of like exactly why you were like, "this is not for me".

Holly: Fuck this. And I think like the humility piece just still gets me. Because just recently one of my friends was dating somebody. He was in the program, and she's not in the program (and by program I mean 12-step program). And she's a really confident, beautiful human being with a heart of gold, but that also is very loud and opinionated about her questions of the program and just owns it, you know?

And he told her he thinks that she could review her humility. And the thing I bring up in that book is, who the fuck has ever said that to somebody in a way that was not weaponized? Who has ever told somebody with the intent to really help them feel better, like "you could use some more humility"? And I think like, I mean maybe, maybe. But I think for the most part, especially when we're using it on anybody at any intersection, I don't believe that it is, I don't know. It's just, it's a wild thing to me to tell somebody to be humble or to tell somebody that their ego is showing or whatever it is that we have completely codified in this space as being like the sign of sickness. And so it's, yeah. I love rejecting those things and claiming, like allowing ourselves to maybe, you know, be the opposite for a while when we've probably been humble our whole fucking lives, you know?

Dean: And I think also it can be useful to talk to ourselves about, "oh, am I thinking really critical thoughts about other people? Am I being really controlling?" Like there are things where humility is a beautiful quality. But I think you're right that, especially in the context of the way that like social services and addiction treatment and so many things are about breaking people down, kind of, you know, and it's like --

Holly: Well, it's a hierarchy, right? It's like it comes from this very, very old place. It's all control mechanisms. I mean, it really, these are control mechanisms in this context. And like, it's really interesting because like when you say, but like, "oh, but humility is good". Like, I think it's like "of course it's good". People like you and I that probably...like, I don't think we're missing that self-awareness, you know? Like all I thought in those early days was "what the fuck am I doing? I can't believe I'm doing this". I was constantly questioning myself. Like I was taking liberties I wasn't supposed to take and I was dying on the inside. I struggled so hard with not using the program and not tying that to my ego being outta control. Or my lack of humility.

And I only got to that place I think by a miracle. Like because for my first year of not drinking, I really battled this "I should be going to AA, I should be, I'm doing it wrong. I'm gonna...you know? And that was from my own voice, and my own internal voice, and it was also from external voices of people that actually told me that. That I wasn't safe, that I was dangerous. And I think that was the voice in my head.

And so I think that, again, coming back to this, a lot of these ideas about making sure people remember ego and humility. Like we're talking about people that don't have awareness of those things. And I think that what I'm talking about in my own experience - and I think a lot of people that are listening to this' experience - we're probably overly self-aware. Were probably overly critical about these things.

And so again, like my medicine was pushing against that and taking up more space and doing things that were not, you know, that I had been socialized to not do.

Dean: Yeah. So, so often when I talk to friends about their relationships, they're so worried about being selfish. And I think the people I know mostly really should be worried, it's like, somewhere else. Like selfishness is not their worst problem.

I feel like part of, you know, one of the things that you talk about in the book that I just think we should say here is of course, that like it's a problem that 12-step is seen as the only way to address addiction in our society. And people are judged so thoroughly if it doesn't work for them or it's not their thing. And that, I mean, I'm

so glad that something exists that's free and is available everywhere and that works for a lot of people. Great. But like the idea that there's something wrong with you if you choose to address something working with addiction a different way is intense.

And one thing that's related to that, that I wanna bring up is in the book you lodge a very important critique about the idea of relapse. And I wonder if you would share about that with listeners, because I feel like that idea, the way it's scripted is like a 12-step way, that you really pointed out some limits to that in a way that was powerful for me.

Holly: Yeah. I mean, and I'm also working on a book on relapse right now. So what I wrote in Quit Like a Woman was, everywhere else in the world it's just called failure. And especially right now. Like I wrote the book, you know, in the 2010s, right, so the end of it, but still 2010s were all about like the TED Talk and failure porn, right? And so there were 'failure fests' and people built their career off their most embarrassing failures. And we love failure. And except when it's in this space, because when it's in this space, then it's really dangerous. It's this very dangerous, scary thing if you fail at your abstinence.

And so that was my critique in Quit Like a Woman, that it's just like, you know, and behavioral learning theory actually, like there is, there's no regret. Like there is only things that carry you forward. And that was how I really tried to contain it with in Quit Like a Woman. Like this is a thing that can carry you forward. This is not a "go back to day one. You lose all your points, you lose all your whatever".

But you know, since I wrote Quit Like a Woman I started using cannabis again. And the book I'm working on is called, you know, it's about relapse. And it's because even though, you know, all these progressive things are in my book. And even though I have all these ideas that are, you know, like progressive, and like so progressive, they're, you know, deemed like dangerous and fringe. But when I started using cannabis again, I only could see it through the lens of all the things that I said "we should not be seeing it". Because it's one thing to say about other people. It's a very different thing to be experiencing that yourself.

And so I think that my views around relapse are so different than even when I wrote Quit Like a Woman. And even more liberal. Because it's, I think it's like, the stat is 85 to 95% of people will use, like 85% of people that leave treatment use within the first year. It's a thing that happens.

And addiction is being seen less and less as a disease model. I don't believe it is. I wrote in Quit Like a Woman "there are theories and

one is disease". I completely disagree with the disease model at this point. It's debunked. And what is known is this is the learning model, right? Like we know this is an ongoing process. Like we will for the rest of our lives, like you said, be in process. And all of us will be in process with our habits and our compulsions, what we use too much of. What we're you know, like we all go through cycles where we get into different habit loops or whatever. And so for the rest of our lives, we are in a process and addiction is a ongoing process. Or recovery, whatever, however we wanna frame it. And this is just part of a process of change.

It is just, it's like really if you take out the scary, you know, fentanyl deaths and actually just like step back from it. And if you think about, let's just say somebody was like, "I wanna stop using social media. It's ruining my quality of life. I'm using it for 15 hours a week." This is a normal thing. I'm not saying something that is crazy. This is something that happens to, I don't even know how many of us, like so many of us. And we go through all of these, we do all of these things to make this change. We actually affect this change and we're not using social media and we're not, we're only picking up our phone for a couple hours a week. We've broken this compulsion. Well, you might have something happen where you just fall back into that, right? And you don't lose all the skills that you had from making those changes. And you also might not go exactly back to where you were. And now you have these different awarenesses and you're gonna make different decisions around it. And you might decide, oh yeah, like this is really bad for me. This is actually really interfering with my life. I'm gonna put it down again.

And there is nothing scary, embarrassing, that is a normal thing that like, no one is not gonna cop to. But like when it comes to certain substances, there are, because of a very long history that involves the war on drugs, that involves the treatment industry, the criminal legal system, like the reform movement, the revivalist movement. There's a long line of things that happened that led us to today. To believe that people that with a history of addictions can't be trusted. They need to be told what to do. Abstinence is the best for them. They should never try drugs again. They shouldn't use any drugs for that matter. They should actually never do anything that they might get out of control with again, including sex and love and eating and all of these things.

They are an addict. They now are in this different category that needs to be controlled. And if they use drugs again, that's terrifying. And they need to stop as soon as they do it. And they need to, you know what I mean? Like there is all of these expectations that we have around this specific thing in these specific people. And so for me, when I think of relapse, you know, like the very simple way that we can think about it is that it is a, it is like, my, like Carrie Wilkens says at CMC, "relapse is, you changed your mind". And again,

it's very different if you're somebody that just left rehab and you've been off opioids and you go back out and you use and you die. That's a very real scenario that happens all the time.

And so not every use case is the same. But relapse is just changing your mind. And then we adjust from there. Right? Something shifted. You've shifted. You're doing this and does it work? Right? I just did a really long podcast actually, with Carrie Wilkens about this because it's such a misunderstood topic. But you know, I'll stop there and see if you got anything.

Dean: I really appreciate that. I mean, I just, it actually made me remember when I wanted for years to reduce my sugar intake. And I just could tell that I used sugar in these ways that I felt was an addiction, and made me feel sick and tired in lots of ways. And I would like quit sugar for 30 days and then go back and eat it slowly. And then six months later I'd be like, "wow, I'm really at the peak again". And I would come down. And like over time I learned how to enjoy life and have not such high levels of sugar and feel a lot better. Like, nobody was judging me as like, you gotta, you know, it wasn't just black and white thinking, this binary thinking that people get. And instead it was like, oh, I'm learning how to eat differently in a way that will feel better. And I'm learning it through trial and error and through experiments and not, yeah, it's just a very different thing.

So this brings me to this question that I'm really curious about. You know, it's uh, so visible and obvious right now in the lives of all the people I love and all around me that so many people are in crisis these days. And people are struggling with imbalanced relationships to like lots of different coping mechanisms. We're really turning to our coping mechanisms in these hard times.

Holly: Yeah.

Dean: Which can include addictions of all kinds. And I wonder like what you recommend to people listening who are supporting loved , experiencing addiction?

Holly: Hmm. I think like the first thing is I wanna talk to everybody, because all of us are gonna do that. We're all finding, everyone uses coping mechanisms. Like that's just it. Everyone has a nervous system. Everyone has trauma, and everyone has coping mechanisms. And so I think that just to everybody, my thoughts around this right now are for us to, um, give ourselves a fucking break. To truly, really right now realize we are in massive dysregulation globally, individually, communally, and energy's real.

People are having, it's, I can't even say what's happening to all the people around us without tearing up. So we don't exist in a bubble

separate from that. You can be living in, you know, like me in the country, you feel this and you are responding to this. And then just, you know, not only that, then you have the actual real situation, you know? Where do you work? Do you have a paycheck right now? Do you have, you know, were are you on SNAP? Are you gonna go...like whatever it is, all these things that actually face us.

And I think like my general advice to everybody is it just needs to be as simple as possible. It really does. It is just like truly a matter of like if we don't take care of our own nervous systems, we're spreading that to everyone else. And like it is not copping out or not being a good global citizen to take care of yourself and do the bare minimum to make sure that you are regulated, as much as you can be. I just think like in general, it's just like doing the best we can with what we have.

For people that are supporting loved ones, um, I think a lot of times in this space there's like a real paternal relationship between, you know, quote unquote "non-addicts" and "addicts". And I've always really rubbed at that because I've had so many people over the years come to me and say "I've got this friend and they're doing this thing and I need to help them. I need to stop them." And a lot of people will come in without actually even knowing anything about themselves. Right? "There's a problem over there." And so I love CMC and the Center for Motivation and Change, um, and the Foundation for Motivation and Change. I love their book Beyond Addiction, I think it is the guide for families and friends. And I think all of their resources, they're harm reduction, they are, I mean, they're just leading edge kind of stuff. But I think that my advice to people that are supporting somebody is that we're part of an ecosystem and that there is no person over there that needs to be fixed. We all need help and support. And that you are part of that equation too.

And so my piece of advice to people always is that the problem isn't over there. You are in this too. You deserve care and support, and for you to be navigating this as a participant rather than somebody that has a responsibility, if that makes any sense.

Like we're all just trying to co-regulate, right? We're all just trying to kind of be there. And so it's not, a lot of people treat this like, "I've gotta fix this. It's so dangerous. They gotta stop, I need to..." That's just not it. That's just like never it. It is always curiosity. It is always including ourselves in the equation. And moving at a pace that just treats it, you know, like it is, which is a very complicated situation that requires a lot of time, support, nuance and, a lot.

Is that helpful?

Dean: It's so helpful. I thought of so many things. One thing I

thought of was you, in talking in the book about you're brushing your teeth. And like, just like how can we all learn to do the most basic self-care things for ourselves, even when we're really activated by someone else's behavior or, or worried for a beloved person. That's the best time to make sure we're eating, to try to sleep, to realize we're having a big reaction, even if it does feel like the spotlight is on them.

Holly: Yeah.

Dean: And I was just also thinking about in these stressful times over the last year, I've noticed I'm much more heavily overworking, which is one of my coping mechanisms. Um, you know, trying to make sense of the world. I create context by doing too many things and having too many collaborations and being overly responsive to every single person's request. And it's just one of the things I work with over the years, and that I've also used a 12 step program about. And it really helps me when people close in tell me that it's impacting them.

Like when loved ones are like, you're not as available. Or you know, and it's not, and especially if it's done with non-judgment. But just like "I'm letting you know", that there's a vulnerability. Whereas when they become paternalistic and are like "you don't seem well", then I get really defensive. But if they're just like "this is the impact on me", I notice I'm so much more open. And I think a lot of times we want to tell other people that they're not doing well, and we actually go to a kind of grandiose place about someone else's coping mechanism or addiction. And I don't know, somehow my instinct is that I think if more of us try to be like "this is how it's landing on me and I'm here for you", there's maybe a little more room.

Holly: It's so important. What you just said is like, it really is. It's like it's so smart. It is actually like a harm reduction measure. And it's something that Carrie talks about - Carrie and Jeff talk about in their book because it is, it's so different, right, than "you are doing this". It's so different than "I'm feeling this when you do that". It's like such a different conversation. And you also allow, then you can also set boundaries, right, of like "and because of this, this is what I'm going to do for myself in this situation". And so I think that it's such a smart thing you brought up. And it's such a mature way to, and a hard way to address it.

But yeah.

Dean: It's hard. I realize we should wrap up soon, but I wanna talk about this really beautiful interaction we had leading up to our first conversation where you had read Love In a Fucked Up World, and you gave me this very grounded, caring feedback about how I use the word 'alcoholic' in the book. Because I use that word to talk about my mom in the book.

And I think it's really unusual in our culture for people to give each other feedback like that. Like you gave me direct feedback, even though we hadn't met yet. That we had I felt like a warm admiring feeling and we knew we were gonna have a conversation. And my belief is that when we do give that kind of direct feedback, we actually build trust and deepen connections. Even though it can often be scary, like is this gonna close the connection if I share -

Holly: Yeah.

Dean: - feedback with someone. And I wondered if we might talk about that exchange, both so people can learn like what I learned from you, and about the use of that word. You changed my thinking on that. And also because it's cool to hear about building a relationship through an exchange like that.

So I don't know if you wanna share anything about what that was like for you and what the idea was that you shared with me.

Holly: Yeah, I mean it, it's really hard because I think that, I don't use the word addict. I don't call anyone an addict. I use it in this kind of sensationalized, pejorative way, like "the addict". But I think "the addict" in our society is the scapegoat. I do. I think it's the entire scapegoat. I think that what you are seeing right now is addiction on a mass scale, right? Like what is happening in Washington is addiction. What is happening in, you know, like wealth inequity is, or like the wealth gap is addiction, right? No one needs to be a billionaire, but no one even really needs to have like much more than like a few million in the bank. Like we do not need what we have. We are so addicted.

And so I think that because we can't reckon with the larger addictions that our society runs on, we have to look at "the addict" and keep "the addict" at the, like they are society's scapegoat. They're the worst, they're the most dehumanized. And in Love In a Fucked Up World it's just one of the most beautifully written books and it's so, it goes to such lengths to use gentle, inclusive language, and we just refuse to do that for people with addictions.

Whenever I post, I consistently post one thing and it says "stop calling people addicts". I lose the most followers every time I post that. It's the most controversial thing I say that people hate the most. And it doesn't make sense to like, it, it like on some scale doesn't make sense to me. And it's this heartbreaking thing where I am reading the most progressive things, and then I read and "the addict". And like Gabor Maté is a perfect example. What wonderful things has this man done for us? And yet he calls everyone, he calls them addicts like they are his pets. I just don't fucking get it. Like I don't, it makes me furious. And so I, I don't understand why we haven't moved

the needle on this.

And so it's very like, I wouldn't reach out to anybody. I think it was because you are who you are and because you understand the importance of language. Like you wouldn't even call AA mutual aid, right? Like you are so to the T. And you won't call AA mutual aid for very good reason because it does not take on a political stance. It has no political opinion. There is the mutual part of it, but there's no actual furthering some kind of social agenda, right?

And so you were so clear on stuff like that, you know what I mean? And yet, like still it's lost on you, you know, that like alcoholic is this eugenicist term that was coined in the 1930s in order to basically relieve the alcohol industry of like their responsibility for killing people with alcohol, you know?

And so I wrote this to you because I want someone like you to know that. And I, it's not everyone, I just, I rarely in conversation even contest it anymore when people even refer to me as an alcoholic or whatever. But I really brought it to you because I thought, wow, this is somebody that has spent so much time and it shows me the degree to which we are so far behind in this area around language and person-first language.

So. I wrote you a note, and I think like I didn't even think twice about it 'cause I figured like you probably get notes like this all the time. And you probably send notes like that. And so I just sent it to you 'cause I was like, "Hey, I've got some thoughts." And I love getting notes like that from people. I really like feedback that's critical if I've done something that could be improved upon, when it's given lovingly and with the intention to really further something for all of us. And so I didn't think twice about it. And you received it, obviously so generously, and you wanna talk about your response and how you felt when I sent it?

Dean: Yeah. I mean, it was so cool because I also would never use the word addict because I'm so aware of, you know, I was raised up in my early twenties in my first political work was in the harm reduction movement. But the word 'alcoholic' lived in my mind in this other way, I think in part because so many people I know have gotten sober in AA and self-identify as alcoholics.

Holly: Yeah.

Dean: And it was just like you just flipped the switch, you know? It was like so obvious to me what you shared, and especially reading your book and really going deep with the "Drink responsibly" ideology and how convenient it is for the alcohol industry for us to all believe that there are certain types of people who are alcoholics and the rest of us need to prove we're not that and "Drink responsibly".

Yeah. So since so many people I know, find that word maybe like personally empowering around their commitment to not drinking, and use that word in a way towards themselves that they don't mean to be derogatory. I didn't think enough about how it is exactly the same as the reasons I don't use the word addict.

And so I don't, I just felt like, you know, feedback is truly a gift. I was like, wow, this brilliant person who's thought about this so much took time to write me an email and offer me things to read and like care for my process and for my integrity. And offer me a chance to come into my integrity. And I just, I felt like so much love for you, like what generosity you had expressed in doing this. Like you have a lot going on and you like took time not only to read my book, but also to read it carefully and tell me what was working. I don't know, I just, our exchange to me was like how I want... 'cause there's a lot of criticism that flies back and forth in our movements.

Holly: Sure.

Dean: And it's good. It's actually good for people to give each other feedback. It's really good if we can give it lovingly and receive it lovingly. And that's not always easy. But I just was like, wow, this is like a perfect stranger who I'm having this kind of experience with that I really want. And I do get a lot of messages from people giving me really thoughtful criticism about language I use all the time. And sometimes I agree with them and sometimes I don't. And I love that 'cause that is part of like our community practice. And this was just an example of it that I thought could be made public. And I hope to give people a little faith that we can get closer by sharing what we know with each other instead of writing each other off, or not listening to each other's feedback.

Holly: It was one of my favorite things. And I'm planning a trip, like my fifth trip with my friend Catherine, who I met because I, years ago on a podcast, I said something like "I think you can get sober, but I don't think you can stay sober without finding god" or something. Something so messed up that was just of my own experience. An unexamined thought that was wrong.

Catherine is atheist and wrote me the most generous and beautiful note, and they're one of my best friends now, you know? And so I think that I draw closer to people that care and want to share what they know because they're doing it for a reason. They're doing it because it matters to them, you know?

And I just thought like, wow, if Dean, like to me, you having that knowledge, or at least that perspective, given who you are and your platform and what you do, could go so far. You know, and I just wanna say here that your book just blew my, I mean, Love In a Fucked Up

World_, it is, I think I have it right here. I don't know if I showed it to you when we talked before, but it's like the whole fucking thing is just [underlined], do you see all that? The whole thing.

Anyway, the point is I just _consumed_ it, and I felt like it was one of the most progressive harm reduction books in relationships that exist. Like I've read all the relationship books too, because this stuff is so closely tied and what you've done is create, I think, yeah, it's like a harm reduction book for relationships.

It's so good. It's so good.

Dean: That means so much to me. It's so sweet to see that you highlighted things. I love, I love that. It just, you know, like I don't know if...I wish that I could tell my young self that I would ever write something that people would find useful. And you know, just thinking about all the moments of doubt we all have as we try to put our ideas out and share and do our things in the world, and just so touching to me that it is of service.

And I am so grateful to you for your writing and all of the ways you share ideas and yeah, I mean, your book has just been such a pleasure to me and I can't stop talking about it. And it's also, uh, sent me to read a bunch of other things, like the things you cite in your book, I then went on to read several of them because -

Holly: Oh gosh. Yeah.

Dean: I mean, they're so juicy, you know?

Holly: There's so much good stuff. There's really a really good book that was written. It's called Many Roads, One Journey, and if anybody has been sparked by this conversation, there was a woman named Charlotte Kasl that wrote a book that was so progressive in the 1990s about all of this stuff and about addiction treatment and, and recovery and addiction that was just, I don't know, phenomenal. Phenomenal. I don't know if you found that one, but it's one of my favorites.

Dean: I'll read that one. One other thing that I just wanna say is we were talking before we started this recording about how we're both like seekers, like we both like tried a million things to try to heal because we wanna feel better. And there's this concept by this queer theorist, Eve Sedgwick, about 'paranoid reading' and 'reparative reading'. And the idea is that both kinds of reading are useful.

So a paranoid reading is, you know, where I'm looking for, like, what's wrong with this? What did they miss? I'm looking at the cracks. I'm seeing the ways that mainstream ideas undermine the wholeness of the thinking or whatever.

And a reparative reading is, I'm looking for what's useful in here. I'm looking for what might be helpful. And I really think those of us who are trying to transform ourselves and the world and our relationships need to really be able to do both. We need to be able to look at things critically _of course_, and see what's missing. And also try to find something useful when that's what's around. Right? And I think even the way you talk about 12-step in your book, it's really like "this is what's useful about it for some people, this is what's not working for me." Like that's so helpful. And like your experience with your friend of being like, "oh, like spirituality is central to my recovery. Wow. This person's telling me not for her, or not for them". Like that kind of, and I think reading, especially reading the self-help genre and the genre around addiction, it's just there's a lot of stuff in there that doesn't rhyme with my community's experiences or leaves people out, or that uses language that I find pathologizing or ableist or whatever.

And then that's part of why I wanted to write Love In a Fucked Up World is to like move some ideas out of those literatures since I couldn't really recommend those books. But I also am just like always trying to help myself read. Or even when I'm reading about like the ecological crisis, sometimes I'm reading people who like are missing a huge part of my politics. Like they're not anti-colonial, but they're writing really clearly about ice sheets. Or whatever, you know. And it's like just being able to try to gather useful information and sometimes like reframe it or take it to the next place it needs to go, or marry it with other pieces of information that are somewhere else or other ways of knowing. I feel like that is something that your book does with a whole set of literatures that I found, you know, just like relieving and also kinda like a shortcut for me to a lot of really great ideas.

So I'm really grateful.

Holly: I just wanna comment on this. Um, you said reparative and what was the first one?

Dean: Paranoid.

Holly: I've never heard that, but I will read anyone. I mean, I'm just, I think that this is something really important, like in our current culture where we cancel things and like write things off whole. A lot of my best ideas have come from terrible people that did not have it all right.

And I think that on the note that you just had of like taking it a little further is, I will read anyone. I'm not scared of reading people who I deeply disagree with and even who write problematic things because I think that we are limited by what history will allow.

Like history is full of stuff that is problematic, but also if we overlook these things, then we end up missing really important pieces of the puzzle and we have to look both. Like critically and sometimes just uncritically, right?

Dean: Yeah. And we can be rigorous with ourselves about how we share things and how we wanna bring the politics that we're exposed to and working toward, and like how we hear other people's feedback. And also I think at the same time, use tools that were only partially developed or that missed pieces. And I think there's, I think those things aren't mutually exclusive and maybe there's sometimes almost a feeling of like purity or like -

Holly: I was just like, it's so puritanical. Just to be like, "oh, we're not gonna look at that guy's stuff because he did this". And it's like, well, I mean, aren't we like trying to dismantle purity culture? Like don't we wanna compost things and get dirty and like, you know?

Dean: Right. And is it about reputation sometimes? I think also just like, is it about ego and wanting to appear pure when we all, none of us are. Yeah. And to be or look good. Yeah. I think that so many of us. Doing more things not to try to be good, but because they feel deeply aligned is so much more...

Holly: They feel right to do.

Dean: ...successful. Yeah.

Holly: Yeah. Yeah. I agree.

Dean: Holly, thank you so, so much. I really loved getting to talk to you again.

Holly: Oh, this was just wonderful. Thank you for these thoughtful questions and, and giving me the space to talk with you about them.

Dean: Thanks so much to Holly Whitaker for having this conversation with me.

Thank you for joining me for the latest episode of Love in a F*cked Up World. This podcast is based on my book of the same title, which is out now from Algonquin Press. I hope you'll pick it up from an independent bookstore in your community, and please don't buy it from Amazon or Audible.

Love in a F*cked Up World is hosted by me, Dean Spade. It is produced and edited by Hope Dector. Thank you to Ciro, Eugene, Derekh, Kelsey, Lindsay, Jessica, Raindrop, Nicole and everyone else who helped with the podcast. Our theme music is "I've Been Wondering" by

The Ballet.

We need each other now more than ever, and I hope this podcast offers tools and ideas that can help us to build and sustain strong relationships and strong movements.

I hope that you'll keep listening, subscribe, and share this episode with people in your life.