

Chapter Two

Being *and* Your Biological Self

While I was working at the inpatient psychiatric unit of a New York City hospital, I got to know Roxy, a young woman who dreamed of breaking into Manhattan's fashion world. My designer suits got her attention, and she complimented me on them — on numerous occasions, sadly, as I had to admit her because her use of alcohol and drugs brought her to the edge again and again. One day I walked into the unit and was told that Roxy had been brought in by ambulance but

died in the emergency room. Her liver failed.
My heart sank.

Later, I met with Roxy's loving and loyal mother, who needed help understanding the help understanding the autopsy report, which to her seemed written in a foreign tongue. She shared with me how hard the last weeks had been, and I sensed that she was wondering what else she might have done for Roxy. I had the same question in my head, and I too felt the loss. Grieving, however, was not part of my professional role (or at least that's what I used to think).

I explained that Roxy had died of acute liver failure. Even though it was rather unusual for someone so young, alcohol can cause rapid and unexpected liver failure (acute alcoholic hepatitis). I explained how difficult it is for people, once addicted, to escape the

dangerous cycle they've begun. And although I couldn't explain why her daughter was gone at such a young age, I could assure her that the Being within was now freed from the torment of her last years.

Addiction so often brings with it feelings of shame or disgust, and still the worthy Being at the heart of the troubled life remains. By no means was Roxy's death timely, but I hoped that her mother felt some connection to the greater process at hand.

The Body-Spirit Link

The spirit that is wrapped in our human nature draws pleasures from the body too numerous to list: pleasures not only of the senses but of the intellect and of the social connections our physical bodies facilitate. And yet, the body also makes that Being vulnerable

to illness and injury . . . inevitably, to death. Perhaps the most tragic of those vulnerabilities is addiction to drugs, but there are other deficits connected to the brain's chemistry and the survival strategies embedded in its synapses.

This chapter will examine these vulnerabilities. First, we will see that how the brain functions is a factor that makes addiction so difficult to overcome. Then we'll look at medications that can be used to offset biological defects in the brain — and their overall role in achieving a healthy human–Being connection. Finally, we'll see how the body's self-medication — the hardwired impulse of the fight-or-flight response — can cause significant, even devastating, problems in a world that no longer features saber-toothed tigers and cave-dwelling tribes. In each case, recognition of the Being within can

help us create for ourselves a rewarding life.