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BOOK REVIEW: Playing with Fire by Theo Fleury

with Kirstie McLellan Day, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., Toronto



In his memoir, Playing with Fire, Canadian hockey player Theo Fleury candidly outlines his mental health and addiction struggles. He describes a history of emotional distance/neglect from his parents when he was a child, and sexual abuse as a teen by a coach and supposed mentor. What really struck me was the "purposefulness" of his attempted self-destruction. In an attempt to blot out memories of powerlessness, violation and abandonment, he entered a several year course of alcohol, drugs, sex and gambling, with apparent limitless access to cash as a high-paid NHL star. While the book clearly has a cathartic purpose for him, he has shown great courage in his decision to become a role model of survival for other male survivors of childhood neglect and abuse.

Theo's story

Theo grew up in a small town in Manitoba and he says from the time he started playing hockey at the age of 6, until he got called up in 1989, he aspired to play in the NHL. At the age of 13 while at a hockey camp out of town, he met the man who would befriend him, advocate for him, mentor him and sexually abuse him. Theo discusses his confusion as a young teen, how this man who said he believed in Theo's skill and potential as a hockey player, who appeared to have connections to lead him to his goal of the NHL, whom his parents clearly trusted, was also repeatedly assaulting Theo sexually. (Many years later it would become public that the abuser had assaulted other men when they were in their teens including another NHL player, Sheldon Kennedy.)

The author describes well the powerlessness and confusion a victim of sexual assault experiences, as well as the self-hatred and frustration at not being able to stop the abuse. It is difficult for people to understand the power of manipulation and coercion exercised by many perpetrators of sexual abuse. Fleury bravely describes the influence of this experience from the standpoint of a youth victim. As male children, we are taught to be self-sufficient, to protect ourselves, to prevent incursion. For an athlete in a high-Testosterone sort of sport, this is even more prevalent. There is an illusion that young people are equipped to do this when manipulated by an adult. This is often not possible because the perpetrating adult has expertise in coercion and subterfuge. Fleury details the subsequent years of substance use and other addictions which facilitated his being able to tolerate the self-loathing he felt for not standing up to the abuse, and the way the abuse affected him psychologically.



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Gambling, Drug Abuse, Alcohol Dependence and "Sex Addiction"

Fleury describes in detail his many (often nightly) drinking and drug binges which inevitably led to a strip club or picking up a new woman at a bar. He talks about how his body became dependent on the substance, but also how psychologically he became dependent as a strategy to manage his demons (his feelings of incompetence and unworthiness, his memories of abuse.)

It interested me that he disagreed with the staff at the addiction treatment facility he attended when they suggested he had a sexual addiction.

"Some of what they told me was helpful, and some was just fuckin' ridiculous. They told me I cheated on (my wife) so much because I had a 'sex addiction'...Well, if that is true, then it turns out a lot of sex addicts play hockey."

(Playing with Fire, 2010, page 227)

While I certainly don't propose to speculate on the number of sex addicts who play hockey, it appears clear that Fleury's experience with women was not an example of healthy sexuality and more likely an experience of sexual addiction.

Healthy sexuality can be thought of as:

- a mutual experience/enjoyment of the sexual experience
- where both partners are equal/equivalent participants in the experience,
- where the goals are:
 - pleasure
 - connection with the other person
 - and a sense of presence in one's own body and sexual experience.

Unhealthy sexuality can be thought of as:

- compulsive
- not about the experience of the moment
- using sex as a distraction from depression, anxiety, stress, trauma.

There is a sense of mutuality in healthy sexuality; in unhealthy sexuality, a sense of using someone else for one's own gain, of objectifying, of depersonalizing. (No doubt Fleury's sexual partners were willing partners, also objectifying the attractive man, who was a famous person as



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well, but that does not take away from the appearance that much of his sexual behaviour, and the 'hunt' for these sexual partners, was not about sexual pleasure and more about avoiding other difficulties, and stoking a frail ego.)

Hitting Bottom...Again and Again

Addiction treatment models will speak about the importance of someone "hitting bottom" meaning the consequences of the addiction are so severe that the person's life couldn't get any worse. "Hitting bottom" then is assumed to be the 'wake-up call' that leads someone to change his (or her) behaviour by getting treatment, attending 12 step meetings, meeting a counsellor or by simply changing his own behaviour (moderating, abstaining.) If we look at what Theo Fleury describes as his experience, he 'hit bottom' over and over again. He'll describe a night of partying, booze, coke, women, no sleep, outrageous intoxication, tens of thousands of dollars spent, impact on his health, capacity to play, conflict with partner and family: then he'll describe how the same thing happened the next night, or a week later. It seems as if each story is going to be the one that leads to his admitting he has a problem and needs help with his addictions, and then there is yet another story of debauchery.

Admitting a Problem with Addiction

This highlights how difficult it is for many people to get to the point of admitting they have a problem which is definitely the first stage in healing from an addiction. This can be because the person really enjoys the experience of intoxication, the substance, the sex, the high. This was probably true for Fleury in the way he describes his experience. It can also be because the consequences of stopping seem so much worse than the consequences of continuing to use/act out. In Fleury's case, substance use, sex and gambling helped him to avoid his feelings of self-hatred, to avoid the traumatizing memories of abuse, to avoid his feelings of abandonment and neglect. He knew that stopping would likely bring these feelings and memories to the forefront and talks explicitly how he did not feel ready for that or capable of dealing with whatever might surface. He also spoke about his difficulty with success (and how he would undermine his own success), and his difficulty with just 'being' because he did not like himself:

"Number one and alone. And every time I got to the top, I fucked it up because I didn't like being there. maybe I felt that I didn't deserve it. And I had huge problems with being alone - it was like I couldn't have a relationship with myself."

(Playing with Fire, 2010, page 223)

Luckily some creative therapy at a treatment facility and work with a couple of psychotherapists who really seemed to 'get' him, helped him to recognize that he could potentially deal with the issues. (The work at the treatment facility and with the therapists actually happened/began several years before he finally became abstinent.)



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"Look What I Can Do!" aka "I'm the Man"

Something I watch for when I'm working with people with a problem with addiction is "bragging" about how many drinks they could drink in one evening, or how much coke they did in one binge, or how many sexual partners they had. There is a strange sense of competition or accomplishment that many people feel about "how much" or "how many" they were able to do/handle/manage/pull/snort, etc. It can be a reflection of a few things: the enjoyment of the addictive activity, a lack of self-esteem and a need to boost it, a competitive nature, for men a belief that 'you have to be able to take it/do the most/be the best'.

At certain points in the book, I became concerned that was a factor for Fleury and became part of what was driving him. At the same time, there was a concern that his talking about how much/how many/what period of time he was using/acting out was glorifying the behaviour. In my counselling room, I watch for stories like these because it almost seems like my client is re-entering the harmful aspects of his addiction and relishing that. That is unhelpful.

What is helpful is acknowledging the aspects of the addiction that were enjoyable (because there almost always are aspects of the addiction that are enjoyable) and accepting that the person with the addiction has to say good-bye to that. The person cannot feel the high any longer because it has become harmful to him, but he is going to miss that feeling, so it is a loss. Much like a feeling of bereavement.

The World is My Oyster - because I'm a Celebrity aka "I Hate Myself, but I Need You to Acknowledge that I'm the Centre of the Universe"

Something I've run into with many of my clients dealing with addictions is the phenomenon I think of as "I hate myself but I need you to acknowledge that I'm the centre of the universe." People may be able to recognize that they have a lot of self-hatred that is influencing their addictive behaviour (as well as their addictive behaviour further emphasizing their self-hatred.) On the other hand, these same people may have a sense of entitlement, a sense that they are special in a narcissistic sort of a way. A real dilemma: "I hate myself but you should pay a lot of attention to me because after all, I'm so special, (in the best possible way.)"

For a celebrity or person in the public eye, this becomes even more apparent, and Fleury describes this situation well. He could get drugs whenever he liked, he was accorded special status in bars, he was able to acquire a pseudonym to 'hide in plain sight' when he went to casinos. People are happy to enable the famous person's addiction either because they can profit from it, or for a brush with fame. I have run into this with some of my clients dealing with addictions who were in the public eye.



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What I can do as a therapist - whether the person is famous or not - is accept the person with what he brings. While he may have special skills and qualities in his capacity that make him successful as an elite athlete, a performing artist, or a politician, in my office he is a person dealing with day-to-day troubles, the influence of trauma, the influence of mental health issues. Most of us have special capacities - some people express them in the public eye, some in quieter ways - and most of us have troubles which can use some help to sort through. My client has to be ready to accept that there are troubles in the first place, and to accept that he is ready to receive help from a professional to work through them. I bring expertise in terms of the way I ask questions, the way I approach healing, my capacity to believe in success, but my client is the expert on his life. It's my job to help him recognize his capacity for success and to take steps to move in a new, healthier direction.

In Conclusion

Theo Fleury has written a courageous history of his struggles with addiction and mental health in his desire to provide hope for other men who have experienced abuse and its aftermath. He writes passionately about his life in the NHL and the strategy of the game. With equal passion he writes about his love for his family and friends who stood by him and tried to help him to battle his demons. In the end, he is able to say to himself, and to other survivors of childhood abuse, "You were just a kid. It was not your fault" (Playing with Fire, 2010, page 339), and that is inspirational.

Theo Fleury website

www.theofleury.life

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