



Judy Grisel, Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction

*Interview with Mark Longhurst
Alumni Quarterly, September 2019*

Unedited Transcript

Mark Longhurst: Hey everyone. This is Mark Longhurst, your Living School Alumni Quarterly Editor, and I'm speaking today with 2018 Living School alumna Judy Grisel. Judy is a neuroscientist specializing in addiction. She's a professor at Bucknell University and she's written a recent book entitled *Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction*. In this interview, Judy shares about her own journey as a recovering addict, what happens to the brain during addiction, and how The Living School shaped her process of writing the book.

You'll notice, unfortunately, that there is some significant feedback throughout the interview. The content I hope is rich enough to make it worth your listen. Take care, everyone.

Judy Grisel, Judith Grisel is a neuroscientist, a 2018 graduate of The Living School and has written a recent book entitled *Never Enough: The Neuroscience and Experience of Addiction*. I wanted to thank you, Judy, for taking some time to speak with me and to the alumni community.

Judy Grisel: Happy to be here.

Mark Longhurst: You are a neuroscientist and professor at University of Bucknell, and you also share quite frankly in the book about your own journey as a recovering addict yourself. I wanted to start with your own journey and ask how did the experience of being a former addict lead you to the experience of writing this book?

Judy Grisel: My first good drink was at 13 and for about 10 years I took as much of every drug that I could get my hands on that I possibly could. As a result of that, I was in pretty poor shape, by the time I turned 23. Shortly after my 23rd birthday, I ended up in treatment kind of by mistake. I didn't know exactly what I was getting into, and learned that there was this disease of addiction and that I had it, that if I had any hope of living, I needed to be abstinent and they'll like me. Like most addicts, I think I was so determined. I thought at my ripe young age, there, barely 23, "Don't tell me what I can do. I'm not going to quit using drugs. Drugs are the best thing in my life. They're really the only thing that gives me any solace at all."

And so I also thought that I would solve problem of addiction, and then I would be able to use. And so this is my backdoor and it's a testament to that tenacity of every drug addict rather than anything about me being strong, or smart or anything. But I managed after taking seven years to get my undergraduate and seven years in graduate school to become a professor, to study the neuroscience of addiction. I do genetics and pharmacology. So since I was about 30.

Mark Longhurst: Wow. What a-

Judy Grisel: Maybe a little longer.

Mark Longhurst: Incredible journey that you used. The education was such a part of your way out of and into the recovery process.

Judy Grisel: Yeah, I kind of think I'm... Addicts in general and I'm one of these that are pretty extreme. And so if you would just say "no," or just say, "Well, can you just drink a little bit less, you know, and not end up wrapping cars around telephone poles or something?"

I think that's not possible. So I needed almost a graduate school and university or a way to take my compulsive energy that was pretty powerful and use it for something that turned out not to be so destructive, and maybe even constructive.

Mark Longhurst: For those of us who are not familiar with what happens during addiction, what's going on in the brain that leads one to that experience of never enough?

Judy Grisel: Surely everyone is familiar with the physiological balances that we maintain. Like our body temperature, which is about 98 and a half degrees. If we get too hot, we sweat, we get too cold, we shiver. Losing heat or generating heat. Same with energy balances, water balance.

Well, it turns out the same principle homeostasis that drives that affective state or feeling state and we... If we try to feel, inflate our feelings state to feel really great all the time, which is what addictive drugs promise, you'll feel better no matter what's going on, you're going to be on top of the world and that is very compelling, but that doesn't work for the brain.

The brain needs to have baseline because if it doesn't have a stable, set point of feeling then it can't really tell what's going on. And so it proposes that set point by counteracting any stimulant that changes their feelings state.

By taking cocaine regularly, originally I felt really euphoric. Without cocaine, Eventually, I just felt dysphoric because the cocaine itself made life bearable. And I think maybe people relate to that with their coffee habits... Drink coffee all the time, it no longer really makes you super peppy. It just makes you capable of getting through the day. Where my body that's adapted to caffeine now is lethargic in the morning, difficult to put a sentence together, can't really have a conversation, or read a paragraph and focus until I get coffee. So then the coffee makes me feel normal. And that tolerable dependence due to the brain's adaptation is what makes addiction, really.

Mark Longhurst: That's really interesting and I didn't know about the adaptive process of the brain during addiction. And I'm wondering if when one journeys into recovery is the brain, likewise adapting? And what, what does that adaptation look like when you're coming out of an addiction process?

Judy Grisel: Yeah, absolutely. So addiction is a process of the brain adapting the drugs so that they have diminishing effects. That you feel normal with them and terrible without them. And that sort of drives the vicious cycle.

And recovery is a process of readapting the brain to the drug free state. And so at first it feels absolutely miserable. I smoked marijuana as much as I could every day and it got to the point where only by being stoned did I feel okay. When I wasn't high, the world was just bleak and empty and completely lacking meaning. It of course made me think, "Well if I smoke weed, I'll feel better about this." Which is the case really for every addiction, opiates make you feel euphoric and block pain and suffering. It gets to the point where an opiate addict doesn't feel high at all. They just don't feel miserable if they keep using.

Mark Longhurst: Is there any end point for the addictive process is the question?

Judy Grisel: Yeah. Well, the brain is an absolute master at adapting. I mean it's quite a lot of great qualities, but I think its finest quality is its ability to adapt to the environment. And so I don't think we'll find a way to outsmart all these years of evolution. And so the brain is always able to learn and to adapt.

I think the net effect is you can keep raising the dose and taking the drug more and more, but essentially, you're only trying to stay off the misery of withdrawal or the drug's absence. If you really wanted to expand drug you have to do it in an unadapted brain. And I think there's no way to get that except to cut off your head. You know, the brain is so good at it.

Mark Longhurst: This question is outside of your scientific field, but you are speaking to the alumni of The Living School. You are an alum of The Living School yourself. So what role does contemplation play in the addiction recovery process and how have you engaged contemplation in your own work and in your own process?

Judy Grisel: Well, that's probably a new book, but I will say that The Living School played a really important role in the book. The book's been kind of in the works for about 10 years and in a way, I just couldn't get myself out of the way to finish it. And it turned out, even though the original intent was to talk about some of my experience, that was really difficult to do compared to talking about the science I could do at nauseum.

So I had a friend who would say to me, "Okay, so contemplate and then write and then contemplate and then, write." But I didn't get that input until I got to The Living School. I think my prayer, I don't think, my prayer as I realized that while this book might actually see the light of day, became, "Let this book come through me. Let it be helpful.

Let me get out of the way so that the information and hopefully if there's any wisdom in there that wisdom that is not of me could come out." And really, until the very end I admit, I was terrified.

So I had to come to the plate because I had no other way since I don't use drugs and I couldn't... You know, it's like me, contemplation is the first non dead end I've tried, you know, the first strategy for living that has helped. It opens up my life rather than narrows it after awhile.

I'm hoping there's some of the wisdom of all three of Cynthia, and Jim, and Richard in there kind of embedded, which you might see. I acknowledge The Living School, and my circle cohort who were amazingly supportive, but really I felt like it was a kind of ground that I would return to when I got scared, or over my head. I often felt like I was out on a limb.

I think again, it wasn't so much science as it was kind of coming out as a recovering person but more as an addicted person because that's what I'm describing in a professional setting. And I really half-hoped the book would... Nobody would read it. And half-hoped it would have an impact.

Mark Longhurst: Thank you for sharing that experience. And what is it been like for you now on the other side of it? Having come out and gone public with your story and the science and all of it?

Judy Grisel: Well, I still feel very much in the midst of it. I'm surprised that the book has had some success. I mean, some of it is just, I still cannot wrap my head around. I was picked up by Terry Gross and on the way out of the Fresh Air Studios, they brought me by the book room, they call it, where they get about 300 books a week and pick two. I just can't... I'm not... I don't... I can't understand how that could have happened really. And it was a big help obviously to the book. And I'm hearing from a lot of people. I just talked to a guy this morning and he's in his 80s who called me from Stockton, California to say it really helped him. And I hear it from teenagers all the time, and everybody in between.

So we'll see if it has helpful influence. It's such a terrible epidemic that I think anything is better than nothing. But I'm trying to hold on to my sitting practice very tight because if anything, I need it more every day.

Mark Longhurst: There's this quote from the Gospel of Thomas at the beginning of your chapter on alcohol, and you've got good chapter names, the Sledgehammer: Alcohol, you call it. And then you have this quote and if I can find it, I'm going to read it says, "I stood to my feet in the midst of the cosmos appearing outwardly in flesh. I discovered that all were drunk and none were thirsty. And my soul ached for the children of humanity, for their hearts are blind and they cannot see from within. They have come into the cosmos empty and they are leaving it empty. At the moment you are inebriated, but when free from the effects of wine, you too may turn and stand."

And as a Living School alum myself, I read that and immediately noticed the work of contemplation and the work of contemplative texts. And I wondered, "What is it to be inebriated in the spirit, but free from the effects of wine for you?" And why did you and why did you begin that chapter with that quote?

Judy Grisel: Well, I first heard that in my first day I think at The Living School. And I was sitting on the floor and Cynthia was sharing, and we read that and talked about it. It spoke to me so much because I think that for me, alcohol and drugs were such a tool for trying to escape reality, and escape my existence, and escape the pain of living and not knowing, I guess the pain of the mystery, the pain of what seemed like distance, the pain of all my illusions.

I mean I just... I felt like I just wanted to block that out. And really from my very first drink, that was my goal and it was basically a death wish. And I think what that speaks so much to that part of me that couldn't bear to live and also it holds out this bit of hope about what it would be to stand in my shoes and take my place in the cosmos as a child of God, as someone who was meant to be. And you know, able to hold, I guess, the incredible beauty and the incredible terror of living. And that's something that I hadn't really heard articulated so well and it's, you know, a beautiful idea.

Mark Longhurst: I think that's a good one to end our conversation on. And with the hopes that all of us listening may have the courage to stand up in the cosmos with our feet on the ground with the terror and the beauty of living. So may it be so, and thank you again for taking the time to speak with me and the alumni community.

Judy Grisel: Thanks Mark.