

Susan Thesenga talks about LOVE UNBROKEN:

Suggested Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to write LOVE UNBROKEN? Isn't it difficult to look back over a story with so much suffering?
2. There are many stories of addiction and recovery; what makes this one different?
3. What's the most important thing you learned about addiction with your daughter -- and that a parent or caretaker of an addict may not know?
4. What is *ayahuasca* exactly? How did you come to trust such an exotic means of treatment?
5. Isn't there a contradiction in using a psycho-active substance to treat a young person struggling with drug addiction? What's the difference between the experience of *ayahuasca* and the experience of so-called 'hard drugs'?
6. Isn't *ayahuasca* illegal in the US? Is it something you would actually recommend to people struggling with addiction?
7. The book details how you and your husband often disagreed on the next steps to take in dealing with Pamela's addiction. How did you resolve these differences?
8. What was the scariest moment throughout all the years of dealing with Pam's addiction? Were there ever times when you just wanted to give up? Could you have given up?
9. How is your family doing now? Are you still involved with the ayahuasca rituals?

Questions and Susan's answers:

1. *What motivated you to write LOVE UNBROKEN? Isn't it difficult to look back over a story with so much suffering?*

It was a story that needed to be told. First, I needed to write it for my own recovery. Each time I met again the traumas of the past, from a place of compassion, I found deeper acceptance and more peace. Many times I gave up on writing the story, but then a day later I would find myself compelled to sit at the computer and continue. I could not stop giving voice to what needed to be spoken.

The treatment of addicts in our culture is really inhumane. It's like the Middle Ages when the insane were jailed and beaten to try to get the devils out of them. Even

today, we put millions of addicted people in jail, often for years, at enormous expense to the taxpayer – people who are, in fact, ill and traumatized. Eighty percent of the people in jail for drug charges are there for simple possession, not for dealing. Jail often just makes despairing, traumatized addicts even more hopeless about their recovery.

My hope is that as people come to know my daughter Pamela through this story, they will start seeing addicts as real people with problems and traumas that need to be dealt with compassionately and kindly, not punitively. Further, I hope to open the door to new questions about what might help an addict. To read about the positive effects of *ayahuasca* and *ibogaine* in Pam's life may help some people involved in addiction treatment question the rigid assumption that no addict should ever use any kind of mind-altering substance.

Finally, I am writing for all those families where someone is suffering from serious illness—whether addiction, mental illness, autism, or the like—who may receive some comfort and support from hearing our story. Addiction is a family disease—everyone in the family is affected, and everyone needs support.

2. There are many stories of addiction and recovery; what makes this one different?

There are two major differences. First, a substantial part of our healing came to us through participating in shamanic ceremonies with *ayahuasca*, a psycho-active tea made from two South American rainforest plants, consumed within the context of a legal Brazilian church. Conventional addiction treatment alone did not work for Pam. So our path of recovery is unique in addiction literature.

Second, our book goes way beyond the usual addiction and recovery story because Pam's descent into street life hit a bottom from which few ever recover. Additionally, our spiritual opening was more profound than in most addiction stories.

3. What's the most important thing you learned about addiction with your daughter -- and that a parent or caretaker of an addict may not know?

The single most important thing I learned was to view my daughter through the eyes of unconditional love. I kept loving her no matter what her behavior and no matter how degrading her fall into addiction. This does not mean that I enabled her drug use in any way; I didn't. I set very firm boundaries with her. But, like all addicts, Pam was wracked by guilt and confined by her terrible self-image as a loser and a failure. Her negative picture of herself was reinforced by a society which regards addicts as criminals. Only when she was treated with respect and compassion for the terrible sickness from which she suffered could she begin to break the stranglehold of her negative self-image, to be honest about her addiction, and to feel that she deserved a real life free of drugs. When she was ready for recovery, I helped her to find the right

places for rehab, places where she was treated with respect and compassion, which then further helped her to develop these positive qualities toward herself.

4. *What is ayahuasca exactly? How did you come to trust such an exotic means of treatment?*

Ayahuasca is a tea made from brewing two rainforest plants with water. It has been used as both a religious sacrament and a healing medicine by shamans and indigenous people in the Amazon basin for millennia. It has been tested and proved to not be harmful to humans, and in fact it has been determined to have positive effects on its users. Thousands of reputable research papers from all over the world have been published which establish this scientifically.

My husband first encountered the use of *ayahuasca* in Brazil, where it is used as a sacrament in the Brazilian church of the *Santo Daime*. He was in a spiritually bleak place at the time and needed some infusion of faith. He was also looking for help to break a lifetime of addiction to cigarettes. A friend recommended he try this church and it had a remarkable effect on him. Overnight his addiction to nicotine was lifted and he has never had any craving for nicotine since that time.

I started drinking the sacrament shortly thereafter and found enormous relief from a lifetime of believing I had been deprived of affection as a child. Suddenly I encountered this vast field of unconditional love that underlay everything and I realized that this was what I had been craving my whole life. Receiving this love filled me up completely and healed my apparent deprivation.

Pamela had been a very disturbed adopted child and nothing we had tried had helped her; no form of therapy or medication had ever reached into her deep despair and self-loathing. She asked us if she could drink the sacrament. We took a big risk and let her do it while she was still a teenager. She had a dramatic and irreversible opening to a higher power. Her words were, "Now I know God is real and inside me. And that means that I can be healed." These words reflected a profound shift in her consciousness that felt like a miracle at the time.

5. *Isn't there a contradiction in using a psycho-active substance to treat a young person struggling with drug addiction? What's the difference between the experience of ayahuasca and the experience of so-called 'hard drugs'?*

This question reflects a common misunderstanding about the nature of psycho-active substances. Dr. Andrew Weil, a noted authority on wellness and natural medicines, attempted to address this in his book *From Chocolate to Morphine: Everything You Need to Know about Mind-Altering Drugs*. Some drugs are legal; others are illegal. Some legal drugs are helpful, and others are harmful. That's also true of illegal drugs—many are harmful, but some are helpful if used in the right way.

Unfortunately, the U.S. legal system lumps all such substances in the same category, as if they were all equally dangerous, but this is not the case. For example, the obviously dangerous and physically harmful drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine are put in the same category as marijuana and peyote, a psycho-active cactus used as a sacrament by Native Americans. This crude categorization has meant that it has been impossible to do legitimate research on any of these drugs, even those which are potentially of medical or spiritual/religious benefit. Research into psychedelics has been repressed for over forty years, though it is just now beginning to open up with some very positive results.

At the same time, TV and popular culture are full of ads for pills to alter our minds and feelings. And of course alcohol and nicotine are both pushed relentlessly, even though they are both known to be potentially addictive and harmful to health. Our culture is very mixed up about what is helpful and what is harmful in the area of mind-altering substances.

Native cultures, on the other hand, are very clear that certain mind-altering substances such as *ayahuasca* are not only beneficial, but should be considered sacred because they open up an experience of the divine. These plants are not addictive, and when used in the proper setting, are consistently beneficial to those who consume them.

Another interesting feature of mind-altering substances in native cultures is that they are frequently used in initiation or coming-of-age rituals. The young person is given the substance in a ceremonial ritual, by elders who know what they are doing, and then the person seeks a vision or passes through some tests that are part of the initiation ritual. He tests his limits, including sometimes facing death and insanity, and comes out a much stronger person who knows himself and knows his place in the tribe. It has often seemed to me that our lack of true initiation rituals is a serious cultural deficiency. Maybe some drug-using young people are inappropriately and unconsciously trying to enact such rituals themselves.

As for *ayahuasca* being used in the treatment of drug addiction, there is a very promising treatment center in Peru, started by a French doctor, which does just that. At this center *ayahuasca* is used within the Peruvian shamanic tradition. This treatment center has a much higher success rate than treatment centers in the U.S. A Canadian doctor has also done serious research with addicts and *ayahuasca*. Much more research needs to be done about the potential benefits of *ayahuasca* and other mind-altering substances in the treatment of addiction.

6. Isn't ayahuasca illegal in the US? Is it something you would actually recommend to people struggling with addiction?

No. When *ayahuasca* is used as a sacrament in the context of a recognized Brazilian religion, the United States Supreme Court has ruled (unanimously, in 2006) that its use is protected under the constitutional right to freedom of religion. It is similar to the case of *peyote* (a psycho-active cactus) which is considered perfectly legal when it is consumed in the context of the Native American Church.

I do not actively recommend *ayahuasca* for anyone, addict or otherwise. Drinking this tea is a serious, non-recreational undertaking that must be approached with respect, humility and courage. It can take people into very scary places as well as open them up spiritually. It has intense side effects of purging the body through vomiting and diarrhea. Those who feel called to this experience will be shown the way; I do not provide any information about how it may be found.

At the same time, I do wish the *Santo Daimé* and UDV churches (the Brazilian churches who use this sacrament) were readily accessible in the United States to anyone, including addicts, who might feel called to this path. While most addicts need treatment, many also benefit from a regular spiritual practice and association with a church. It would be wonderful if these churches were available to those who want this particular avenue for opening to a higher power.

7. The book details how you and your husband often disagreed on the next steps to take in dealing with Pamela's addiction. How did you resolve these differences?

Fortunately my husband Donovan and I already had a firm foundation of love, mutual respect, and total honesty in our relationship before we had to meet the challenge of our daughter's addiction. Having an addicted child often destroys a marriage. There were some very tough moments in which we took opposite positions about the best way to parent our addict—he tending toward “tough love” which I sometimes judged as lacking heart, and me tending toward maintaining contact no matter what, an attitude which he sometimes judged as co-dependent. This polarization of the parents is typical in the family disease of addiction.

We followed the advice we received to spend time nurturing our relationship so that we were not torn apart by the challenge we were facing. We listened respectfully to each other when we had our differences. Over time, we trusted that we were each committed to doing the best we could for our daughter, even if we disagreed about what that was. He has said that he could see that I was more invested in helping Pam which, in his eyes, gave me more natural authority in the matter. Often when we disagreed, he would simply surrender to my leadership.

Mostly, however, we just had to weather the hard times in faith that they would someday pass.

8. What was the scariest moment throughout all the years of dealing with Pam's

addiction? Were there ever times when you just wanted to give up? Could you have given up?

The scariest moment came when we were living in Salvador, a city on the northeast coast of Brazil. We thought we were taking a sabbatical with our fourteen-year-old daughter in this beautiful seaside town, which we were enjoying immensely. Unknown to us, Pamela started slipping into serious cocaine addiction. She was maintaining her schoolwork, and reporting in to us regularly, but secretly she was losing control of her life. She not only became addicted to cocaine and alcohol, but also got “addicted” to her dealer-boyfriend. On a school holiday in early December 1995, she disappeared from our condominium and didn’t return. I found out that she had gone with her boyfriend to the *favela* (slum) where he lived, but I could not possibly locate her, much less rescue her. The police there were useless. She spoke fluent Portuguese (the language of Brazil) whereas we did not.

We were helpless. I was shattered. I had my first (and only) full-blown panic attack. I was terrified not only for her safety, but for my own sanity. My shivering body was completely out of control--flopping and flailing about on the bed. This was early on in our journey with Pam, and I had been in denial prior to this runaway. It was a rude awakening.

Sure, there were times I wanted to give up. I just wanted the whole painful melodrama to go away and for her to get well and for me to stop hurting. But, fortunately for me and for my daughter, it wasn’t really an option for me to stop loving her or to lose all hope for her. I could not close my heart either to her or to my own pain. And then I discovered something amazing: the more of my own pain I felt, the bigger and more resilient my heart became, and the deeper became my love and compassion for my daughter.

Eventually I came in direct contact with the presence of an unconditional love that is always and already present. It is a foundational love that appears when everything else has been lost or broken. It is what I am calling “love unbroken” in the book. This presence holds all our life dramas with utmost compassion. The encounter with that love was worth all the pain I had to go through.

9. How is your family doing now? Are you still involved with the ayahuasca rituals?

Our family is doing very well. Pamela is a good single mother to two young children, and Donovan and I are deeply involved with the children and with Pam. She and I are very close. We talk several times a day, and I spend two days or more per week with her and the children.

At the moment Donovan and I are not drinking *ayahuasca*. The experience we had was immensely valuable. We went deeply into it, and now seem to be out the other end, so to speak. I cannot predict what the future will bring.