

By **BONNIE LEE**
With news about sovereign debt crisis shaking global economies, it is possible to draw parallels between the current state of affairs and what happens in families afflicted with addiction. To treat a problem, we first have to name the

Age of addiction

problem, so I will put on my addictions counsellor hat to sketch an analysis.

Addiction is best defined by three C's — craving, loss of control, and negative consequences. Two documentaries, "Enron" (2005) and "The Inside Job" (2010), and recent books like Sorkin's "Too Big to Fail" (2009) give us a behind-the-scenes look at the executives who ran Enron, and the cast of characters — Wall Street executives, government and academics — behind the 2008 market crash. The sovereign debt crisis can be viewed as Phase 2 of a spiralling of debt problems that began with Phase 1 of the bank and sub-prime mortgage crisis. Such amplifying recursive cycles of searing consequences are common to addictions in the absence of fundamental changes in the system.

In 2008, high-risk, vacuous financial products in the U.S. that were falsely advertised eventually collapsed, leaving a trail of destruction in the lives of investors and homeowners. In addiction, "tolerance" refers to cravings for increasingly higher dosages of a substance or activity in order to attain the same high. For an addict, the object of addiction has no limits — drugs, alcohol, sex, money. Multiple cross-addictions are common. The investigative documentaries exposed the market's underbelly, how many high-level corporate executives were not only addicted to greater thrills with higher stakes, but also abused drugs and shareholders' money to gratify their sex addiction with prostitutes. When addicts are in hot pursuit of their next fix, they act as one possessed, exhibiting extreme self-centredness with flagrant disregard for others, even members of their own family. Verbal, physical and sexual abuse and other moral transgressions are part of an addictive culture. Cover-up of addiction and its nasty consequences through manipulation, minimization, and lying are common.

Who has taken responsibility for the market crash? Executives and corporations have been let off the hook by massive government bailouts with public money in the name of global financial

stability. Co-dependency refers to family members who join in problem denial in order to keep peace. Co-dependency at institutional levels conceal, rather than confront consequences with "tough love," as in letting the banks and corporations fail and come to their own reckoning.

Credit rating agencies have been suspected of inflated ratings, and S&P only recently downgraded U.S. credit. Is this yet another deceit or denial in a dysfunctional system?

Our extreme form of late capitalism features cravings, limitless consumption, moral deterioration and dire consequences. The world is the family writ large. When parents live in addiction and co-dependency, the children follow suit. We are in this together, shaped by the ethos of the day. After the first crash, retirees watch their pensions dwindle and young people struggle to find jobs. Helplessness and malaise follow, a short road to depression. Depression, according to the World Health

Organization, is reaching epidemic proportions globally. Riots have broken out in Europe, signs of social anxiety and unrest. Meanwhile, corporate executives still amass huge bonuses with tax protection to guard their interest. Since 2000, the gap between rich and poor has widened sharply in the U.S. Social and health problems rise with wealth inequality. We forget how tightly bound are our collective fates, and that in the long run, no one wins at the expense of another.

Addiction is, in the end, a "loss of soul," a hollowing out of our human and spiritual core. A new story of human thriving needs to be told to reconnect with what makes us human — connections with each other, with life's meaning and higher purpose, and our precious Earth. Is there hope? Is recovery possible? That discussion involves not only the powerful, but all concerned citizens as we collectively re-map our path.

Bonnie Lee is an Associate Professor, Health Sciences (Addictions Counselling) and Research Affiliate, Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy, University of Lethbridge.



THE PUBLIC PROFESSOR

The Public Professor is written by faculty at the University of Lethbridge. It runs Saturdays.