

THE LOSS OF SUBSTANCE: ALCOHOL

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Alcohol was next on my list of bad habits to overcome. And although cigarettes and tobacco are pretty much guaranteed to kill you in the end, alcohol comes damn close and is, in my experience, a lot more destructive emotionally and psychologically. While tobacco is definitely in the process of killing some of my friends slowly, alcohol has been far more destructive to friends and extended family in actuality.

Unlike cigarettes, which had a death-grip on me, alcohol has been somewhat kinder overall to me personally. I never really got addicted to alcohol. I was never an alcoholic, although many I knew (and know) are. I liked to drink socially, but I was not one of those people who would drink alone. It never occurred to me. In my case, alcohol was always an excuse to be social, to throw caution to the wind and tell everyone how much I loved them. I was never a mean drunk, just a stupid one, a 'drunk' drunk.

And I was not much into the hard stuff. Sure, back in high school we used to dare each other to drink a 16 oz. tumbler of straight whiskey all at once, usually in the back of a car, and then watch ourselves throw up all over the street. That is what passed for fun back then. For me it was always just wine and beer, and after a while (a wine drunk is tough on you) it was just beer, and I like pilsner. My favorite beer brands were St. Pauli Girl and Becks. I never went for the dark lagers. Too sweet. I like it bitter and clear.

Back somewhere between the high school hard stuff and the later beer, I had a fling for wine, but I soon got cured of it, and more than once. Very early on, like in 1960, when I was living in Venice West in Santa Monica trying to be a beatnik (I was too late for that), I remember going to a party along the beach in a little house of a friend or at least someone I had heard of, perhaps it was Tamboo, the conga player. I had with me half a gallon of cheap wine. I must have been nineteen years old at the time and far from my home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Back then I thought I was an artist, a painter.

When I came through the door of the house where the party was being held, there were two federal narcotic agents waiting. They were frisking each person as they came in, looking for dope, and paid no attention to my wine or the fact that I was underage. They didn't even check my ID. I was directed to sit down along a wall with a string of other folks who already had gone through the same routine. So there I sat while the feds continued to welcome each new person as they came in. Needless to say, I was very nervous.

In my nervousness I opened the wine and started to take a sip or two. Well, before I knew it I had drunk the entire half gallon all by myself. Later, free and outside once again, I puked my guts out for hours. Nothing makes you sicker than a wine drunk, especially sweet wine. I vowed never to drink wine again. As it turned out, I had to repeat that procedure several more times in my life before I really got the message.

As I got a little older, my idea of a good time was to get one of those pretty little bottles of Mateus rosé wine, a loaf of French bread, some good olives, a block of feta cheese, and have a picnic. I believe I did that when I was courting Margaret, my wife. It was great fun.

But for me alcohol was mostly about beer. Even in the band days, when we were traveling all over playing music, it was beer I was drinking and sometimes too much. However, all in all, I am not a drinker. When that first flush of alcohol wore off, and I had hugged everyone I should hug, instead of trying to go higher, I would usually instead lay off and work it out of my system, drink some water, get some coffee, etc. I knew I could not push the envelope higher and get away with it, and my constitution is too sensitive to withstand heavy drinking. This is one of the few areas in my life where I displayed any common sense.

But social drinking did hang on in my life for many years. Like all my vices, as I began to age, I no longer could get away with what I easily shook off as a younger man. I can remember one time at a wedding of a friend and housemate I drank until I was about the last person there. I was asked to leave. Later, at home, I can remember being so terribly cold with a shaking fit that my kind wife had to put me in the bathtub in hot water just to keep me warm and get my body temperature back up. Now that was drunk.

As I aged I drank less but the hangovers became worse and lasted longer, until it was obvious to even me that this habit was on a downward spiral. By that time the recovery was not worth what little fun remained in the drinking. And this was not just an isolated incident. I put it to the test, many, many times, to make sure that there was no mistake. In the end, there was no mistake. My drinking days were over.

When that was perfectly clear to me, I took Buddhist lay vows which include not ever drinking again, and I never have. Of course, I did not give up anything that I had not already given up and worked out of my system, so where's the sacrifice? There wasn't any. I have never missed drinking other than perhaps the smell of good beer and I guess I still perk up at the sight of bottles of my favorite brand of beer. The logos are imprinted in my brain.

The bottom line is that I never really was addicted to alcohol other than perhaps socially. Before I move on to my next vice, I really should say something about those around me who have not been so fortunate. As mentioned, for me alcohol was never a big problem, but for many of my friends and loved ones that was not the case. If I look at all the vices I have seen in my life in those around me, none has been as rampant and destructive as alcohol. "Hells-Keyhole," a play on the word 'alcohol' was what my teacher Andrew McIver called it. I have seen it systematically destroy life after life. We all know this by now, or should.

Over the years I have had many, many alcoholic friends who are trying to get free of the stuff. Nothing is quite so dispiriting as to phone a dear friend and hear them struggle to control their speech so you don't know they have been drinking again. Of course you know right off. They have fallen off the wagon again and are in deep trouble, even to the point of asking for money to survive. Still others can't bring themselves to ask for help and have not even admitted to themselves that they have a problem and are sick. I have known many who would not admit to having a problem, yet they drink every day.

Although I don't care for the overly-religious tone of Alcoholics Anonymous, it really does work. I have seen it do wonders for friends of mine, some who find themselves going to meetings even two or three times a day! I have never been to a meeting myself, but many people I know have and it has literally saved their lives. I have had friends die of drug overdoses, hang themselves, etc., but nothing I have seen so systematically destroys lives, marriages, and families as alcohol. It is an almost perfect killing machine, and I don't need to go on and on about it. We all know about alcohol.

I do have one more comment to make on the effects of alcohol that I have observed through my own practice of using it, one that is not commonly known. This effect can be a little subtle, but check it out for yourself when you have the chance. Alcohol affects us psychologically and emotionally, and not just physically and probably does as much damage mentally and spiritually as bodily. Here is how:

A day to a day and a half AFTER drinking alcohol, I notice a very clear psychological change. It does not appear the morning after (when all the physical symptoms show up), but later on and more subtly. I become more emotional and vulnerable to the loss of confidence and self-assurance. Perhaps this is the 'depression' that is often associated with alcohol that we read about. It is similar to being prone to getting a cold when your resistance is down, when your immune system is impacted somehow.

The result is I tend to feel bad about myself, to take offense more easily, and to get a little paranoid and defensive. Of course this does go away in another day or so, unless I drink again, in which case the effect compounds into a syndrome and I really have trouble with getting out of it and feeling self-confident. Those who drink regularly gradually lose their sense of self confidence and can't regain it easily. This IMO is the plight of the alcoholic, a downward recursive syndrome that destroys confidence and eventually life itself. Check this out for yourself and see if I am right or is it just me?

In the next "Substance Blog," I will look at drugs I have known.

