

"Letter to a Dear Friend, Drinking"

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The Reading

Some years ago, I had a long term, dear friend who was in conflict with his or her children over the use of alcohol. Attempts by the children to confront the drinking resulted in two letters to the children from the parent. I want to share with you some portions of those letters, since my sermon is a response to them. This is not a present or former member of this church, but I am editing the letter to remove any danger of violating confidentiality. As I said in the newsletter, this is not aimed at any particular member of this congregation. The law of averages suggests it might be of particular interest to some, but not necessarily. Back in December, when I had to provide a subject for this morning, I knew I wanted to fight the temptation to address the subject of the inauguration because it was so predictable. At the end, I'll tell you why this happened to come to mind.

The first letter was labeled "Manifesto".

It seems like such a small thing, but it isn't. I want to live my life. I set out in my early years to do just that, and I had a plan. But life is what happens to you while you make those plans. And life did happen - to me and those around me - and here I am.

No life is lived without some regret, but in the words of that Frank Sinatra song of long ago, "mine are too few to mention."

. . . . Life molds us, but life is no Michelangelo. But we are where we are! And we are who we are. The trick is to know how to be who we are and where we are with that old above-mentioned artist still working on us- all the time until we die. The thing I've learned after [many] years of tossing in the sea of life is simple: Michelangelo and I are the same. I am my life, I paint my own portrait.

After your father died, I gave the paint brush to booze and let it paint me - not a pretty picture. Then I started to try to retrieve control by giving up and turning over my control to others - doctors, AA, my children, my friends, . . . counselors. etc. etc., etc. And this was good for my survival but I was not the artist at work. So now I must start to paint again. I may not do it like you would choose, but then, if I did, I would be different too.

. . . For eight years I have focused on a negation - don't drink and everything will be all right. So now I'm going to switch the emphasis to what I would like to do, now what I would like not to do. It's not a change of direction but a change of focus. I do not intend to spend the rest of my life "not drinking." . .

I must take control of my life again – paint my own picture. Most of my life has been lived lovingly and responsibly. I do not plan to change that. . . . I ask only that you let me live my life and paint my own picture. . . .

The second letter is more angry, in response to responses to the first..

I am angry at some of you for your day of judgement. You did not all participate in this damning of me, but I still want you included in this letter for I would like all of you to understand what I ave been dealing with. . .

You have judged me and found me wanting. You have heard your evidence and decided there is little hope. You have seen me make decisions that you have felt were wrong, and you have threatened me if I don't change my ways. . . And I should thank you? Surely you jest. Tell me how to love, my dear children.

I am weary of proving my worth. I either gave you something worth cherishing or I didn't. I am angry! And you know how hard this is for me.

Let me ask you a question? What if I had abandoned you when you made a decision of which I did not approve? [and several bad decisions made by the children are listed.] Everyone makes a bad decision now and again, but if we love, we don't abandon. We don't require. We are just there. You are not there for me. . . You have judged me and found me wanting.. . I now choose to live my life in a way that is comfortable for me. At [this point in my life], I think I have earned it. If I have a drink, it is not the end of the world. If I don't have a drink, the world will still go round. . . .

Here is what I plan to do.

I am going to try to drink like a normal person, but I will do it under the supervision of a physician. My doctor doesn't think it's possible and she may be right. I'm going to continue with my SMART group [that's a non-AA alcoholism group]. They don't think what I want is possible, and they may be right. My counselor, like the good one she is, doesn't take a position, but she says I must deal with control issues, anger, and my low self esteem. Well, I am angry. And I will not be blackmailed. Wouldn't it be wonderful if I were right?

You've heard it said of your uncle and your father, "They may be wrong but they're never in doubt." Well, I may be right, but I'm always in doubt. I wish I knew the right way to live my life and then had the personal power to adhere to the right. But I do not know. What I have to believe is that, even though I don't know what life I should live, certainly no one else can know either - at least not for sure. I am in process. I will probably never finish. But whatever your threats may be, I must learn to trust my own inner voice. At least I know as much (or more) than you do when it comes to me.

My friend enclosed these words she wrote on January 31st:

I am not immune to vanity

I don't embrace it, but I know its voice.

Out, out, you demon of my negative

Approach to me. I tremble in your sight.

Why must I always know that I am wrong;

That someone else knows more than I can dream

About - in dark nights as I die

The little death of overwhelming doubt?

Am I a really worthwhile child of God?

And who is this God that we talk about?

The Sermon

Dear Friend:

We have known each other for several decades. One of the things I believe we have in common is a discomfort with Puritans. Neither of us sees our self as "pure," and we are, frankly, perhaps overly proud of that. There is another thing: both of us are uncomfortable with people who try to run other people's lives. Both of us believe that people are generally best off when they are given the maximum of freedom to make their own mistakes, rather than having others impose their mistakes upon them. There is also a history of caring, mutual respect, and candor between us. All in all, it's been a good relationship.

Why this letter? One of your children has, with your permission, shared with me the two long letters you have sent your offspring in recent weeks in which you have addressed your drinking, and their trying to stop your drinking. Because I do care about you and am not hooked in emotionally as one of your kids, I feel as if I should offer you my response to what you have said. Because I feel that response deserves serious thought, of the kind I focus on sermons, and because I feel confident that some members of the congregation I serve may be dealing with similar issues, I decided to write this letter as a sermon. Knowing how these things can travel, and being committed to respecting your privacy, I will do everything I can to refrain from identifying you in any way, even though that requires some awkward sentences.

I find two distinct, although related issues in your current family controversy: one is alcohol and the other is what I would understand you to characterize as "meddling," although you have not used that word. I want to address them in that order because I believe the second is really the larger and more "theological" issue.

[alcoholics]

I have found over the years that the best definition of an alcoholic is "one whose use of alcohol causes problems in their family, social, or work life." Your letters testify to the fact that your use of alcohol is creating problems in your family life. You could say it is all "their problem," but they outnumber you. I have never, ever seen you falling down drunk, nor do you have any reputation for being that way. That is not the issue.

The use of alcoholic beverages is almost as old as recorded history. Most people have liked the effect of alcohol on their bodies. It relaxes them, lowers their inhibitions, their self-consciousness. It can anaesthetize pain - physical and psychic. When used in moderation it seems to lubricate social situations. In fact, recent studies show that when used in moderation alcohol may extend life by reducing the risk of heart attacks and strokes. Jesus, we are told, turned water into wine to add to wedding festivities - it's hard to see how Christians can explain that away and become teetotalers.

[Here, let me insert a quotation from the newest National Geographic which coincidentally arrived yesterday afternoon. A lead article is on "A 9,000 Year Love Affair."

University of Pennsylvania biomolecular archeologist Patrick McGovern believes . . . the mind-altering properties of booze have fired our creativity and fostered the development of language, the arts, and religion. "There's good evidence from all over the world that *alcoholic beverages are important to the development of human culture. . . . The domestication of plants is driven forward by the desire to have greater quantities of alcoholic beverage. It's not the only factor driving forward civilization, but it plays a central role.*"

The article goes on to acknowledge:

And then, of course, there is the other side of the story. There are the lengths to which people throughout history have gone to go on a bender. . . Throughout history, ethanol's intoxicating power has made it an object of concern – and sometimes outright prohibition. And through the ages, says Rod Phillips, author of "Alcohol: A History," most societies have struggled to strike a balance: Allow people to drink because it makes them happy and is a gift of the gods, but prevent them from drinking too much."

[Back to the original sermon]

The excessive use of alcohol has led to all kinds of difficulties in wars and politics and families. I don't think anyone has a really good explanation of why some people can use it moderately and some seem unable to do so - causes and effects blur badly. Some experts push for a genetic explanation and others for a social one. I don't see that it matters all that much. It is demonstrable that there are some people whose need for alcohol becomes so great that drinking it takes on a dominant role in their lives. It becomes a necessity rather than an option. You know the old story, "I can quit anytime I want to - why I've quit five times this week alone!" It can become a physical addiction, but the psychological dependency on it can be just as strong.

[the down side of alcohol]

For a moment, I want to take the kind of hard look at the impact of alcohol that is not usually associated with a liberal pulpit.

People drink, in part, because it alters their personalities. With a little alcohol, many people's personalities change somewhat. The problem is that so does their judgement. What seems to them an improvement may seem to those with whom they are interacting as a detriment.

I'll never forget a New Year's Party of UU Ministers and spouses [my first wife,] Linda and I attended [forty] years ago. We arrived late and the liquor had been flowing. Several of the participants were already well lubricated and we were stone sober. We never caught up. We had no wish to. Most of the discussions were passionate and pompous. Intelligent friends made sophomoric pronouncements that they perceived as eloquent insights into metaphysics. We felt like voyeurs who were seeing something we should not be seeing, but it gave us no thrill, and, in fact, made us sad. We left early.

A variety of studies have shown that alcohol affects judgement in many ways. People's ability to do math problems accurately is impaired by alcohol, and so is their ability to discern how they are doing. Likewise the performance of music, and the perception of its quality can be seriously affected. Simple reasoning, the processing of sense data, and the making of judgements all fall with the consumption of alcohol, and this is fact not speculation. Generally, those who think they are doing better are just lowering their standards without being aware that that is what they are doing.

Because alcohol slows down brain activity, affecting alertness, judgement, co-ordination and reaction time, alcohol consumption plays a major role in automobile accidents. Controlled tests have shown people who were drunk as skunks and veering all around a test track, actually believed that they were in full control of the car. Two years ago, an average of one person was killed every thirty-two minutes in an auto accident in which alcohol was involved - that was 41% of the total auto fatalities that year. Every thirty seconds someone was injured in an alcohol related auto accident. And the people driving drunk think they are doing just fine. Of course they could walk that line, but make it stop moving.

One study estimated that 64% of fires and burns were associated with blood alcohol levels that indicated intoxication. People who drink and smoke too often mellow out with a still burning cigarette, or make a kitchen misjudgement.

Many times, the people who are injured and killed as a result of alcohol are often not the party who was drinking, but relatives or friends or innocent strangers.

What I am getting at here is that we tend to filter out the bad news about alcohol and the damage it does to our society, because we do not want to appear to be Puritans. Liquor lobbyists seek to block the lowering of the acceptable blood alcohol level in drivers because the distillers fear that sales and profits would be impeded. The present legal level in many states is one at which severe impairment is common. We tend to want to play down the risks that we are taking with our lives, and the lives of loved ones. But are we aware when we are putting them in danger, or does the alcohol blind us to the realities?

I am not a Puritan who loses sleep worrying that someone somewhere might be having a good time. But I do believe we are responsible when we put others in jeopardy and we cannot beg off by saying we are hurting only ourselves.

I conducted a Memorial Service for the 26-year-old son of a church member. This young man was one of those young people who seem unable to fit into the world - one poet spoke of being "too gentle to survive among wolves." He could not carve out a niche for himself in industrial capitalistic society and he had been institutionalized more than once and had abused a variety of substances. The proximate cause of death was that he got drunk and consumed 200 aspirin tablets. No one knows for sure if death was his intent at that time - it hardly matters: death was the result.

Alcohol is involved in 20% of completed suicides, and those are just the overt ones. It is speculated that many alcohol related deaths are really suicides. Some suggest that self-death is the goal of many alcoholics. Gerald May has written:

I have come to view addiction as the sacred disease of the modern world. Addictions can be tragedies, but on occasion they can be gifts as well. Sooner or later in the terrible course of addiction one comes to what is called rock bottom. At this point one is forced either to reach out toward the wonderful mystery of life or to continue with a willfulness that will obviously end in death.

[You have plenty of reasons to drink]

I will come back to that progression toward rock bottom in a minute, but there is something I want to affirm first. I know a lot about your life. I know enough to understand why the anaesthesia of alcohol could be appealing. There were dimensions of hell in your long marriage, parts of that relationship were incredibly demeaning, while at the same time there were parts that were wonderful. You could not give up the good parts to get rid of the bad, but the bad ate at you, and accepting it ate at you, but you put up a good front for others - particularly your kids. And then your spouse died and you were emptied and left only with the memories, and they damned near killed you. For a while there you drank heavily and obviously enough that no one was fooled and you ended up in a 28 day treatment program. It seemed as if you had reached that "rock bottom" place.

You stayed with the program for a while, but you had trouble with the Puritans and their theology, and you had trouble living with the memories that haunt you when you are sober. Knowing how sensitive your family and friends were to your drinking, you began to drink secretly and you got away with it for a while. But drinking secretly is one of the clear signs that there is a

problem, and your solution at this point is to demand the right to do it out in the open. It is not a sign of good logic to work it out that if secret drinking is a problem, public drinking must be the solution. That is what AA calls "Stinkin' Thinkin'"

[individualism]

The core argument of your letters seems to be that it is the role of your family to stand back and passively watch you destroy yourself because that is your right. This raises one of the oldest of theological issues, posed by Cain after the death of Abel - "Am I my brother's [or we would add, my sister's] keeper? To what degree are we independent beings who may intersect for a time, as it serves us, but lack any fundamental claim on, or responsibility to, anyone else?"

There is little question where our culture stands. We have made an icon of the individual. Icon is probably not central enough - we do more than worship the individual, we define ourselves in that context. People have been held down, imprisoned, some would say, by families in the past. By cutting ourselves loose, we have seized the freedom to be creative, to go in the direction in which our passions lead us, to "take to the open road."

The rewards for that behavior are obvious all around us. Look at the prosperity which has come to us - look at the luxuries with which we live, the plenty which we can squander with hardly a thought. Individualism has indeed served us well.

We are so immersed in our way of life that we can scarcely grasp the fact that there are many places in the world which view human life very differently. It was not only in the Middle Ages that people were viewed not as individuals, but only in the context of family and community. [When I was in Rockford] our local Reform Rabbi spoke to our clergy Association about meeting, in Rockford, people who did not understand that some people are not Christians and have no interest in being Christians. They just don't get it, and act as if he is someone from outer space.

Individualism is like that. It is so much a part of who we are that we are blinded to the fact that there is another way of seeing human life. Some people believe that we are not self made nor self sustaining - that who we are is derived from relationships - relationships that make us dependent upon one another, rather than independent.

Many of us, for instance, take it as a given that when you bring a baby home from the hospital, the goal is to get it into its own room as quickly as possible to restore the privacy of the parents and enhance the individuality of the infant. Actually, it was only in the 1800's that pediatricians began encouraging American parents to put their children in a separate room, in order to enhance their individuality. That is not the norm today, and it is not just a matter of poverty in which families live in one room.

Dr James McKenna finds that the:

Common sentiment among sleep-sharing parents is that the urge to sleep alongside their little ones feels "instinctual" or "primal." [He] says this parental urge may stem from the thousands of years of human evolution during which family co-sleeping was the standard. In a winter 1996 article in MOTHERING magazine, McKenna summarize[d] his views on the anthropological relevance of family sleep sharing, noting that "... nighttime parent-infant co-sleeping during at least the first year of life is the universal, species-wide normative context for infant sleep, to which both parents and infants are biologically and psycho-socially adapted... Solitary infant sleep is an exceedingly recent, novel and alien experience for the human infant."

This is only one way that we are trained to view ourselves as independent, to create walls around ourselves, even when the walls become prisons and barriers to our relationships with others.

[isolation]

While we point with pride to the accomplishments that we relate to our independence, what about the other side of the coin? What about the rates of violence and substance abuse in our country in which we are also leaders? Are these beside the point, or are they directly related products of our isolation, of our belief in the fiction of our independence?

We are appalled by the concept of collectivism, just as people in more related societies are appalled by the concept of individualism? Who, they ask, would want to live cut off from the support of their family? To do so seems to them like choosing death or exile, just as immersion in a family raises for many of us the image of smothering to death, or being imprisoned.

The reality is that we need not be forced into a false dichotomy. "Isolating Individualism" and "total immersion" in family are not the only alternatives. There is a continuum here. Of late, there has been a growing emphasis on community in this country, to counter what Christopher Lasch called the Culture of Narcissism which characterized our nation in the 70's and 80's. People are saying that we need to look more closely at the connections, or lack of connections, between people. But that is a challenge in the face of our individualism.

[judgements]

My friend, you raise the catalog of errors in which your children engaged and on which you declined to judge them, and you demand the same detachment from them. But it seems as if the list was at your fingertips. It isn't so much that you didn't judge, but that you withheld communicating your judgement out of what you saw as respect for their individuality. Obviously, none of their errors thus far has proven fatal. Would you, could you have stood by if you believed their lives were truly in danger? There is some point at which "giving space" becomes neglect. Controlling others is usually a projection of our own needs, but what is it when we simply stand by passively in the face of pain and suffering and danger and do not do what we can?

Using alcoholism as an example, there was a time when the experts taught that families and friends could only sit back and wait until the drinker reached rock bottom, and then encourage them if they survived. That was, in part, a confession of helplessness and a celebration of individualism. More recently, there has been a change in philosophy which says that the encounter with reality can be hastened, that the bottom of the pit can be raised if the family and friends are willing to take the heat of lovingly confronting the drinker with the reality of their impact on others.

[the limitations of the interveners]

That is a great theory and it would work a whole lot better if drinkers didn't have such well-honed defense mechanisms and interveners didn't have their own needs and flaws because of which they offer the subject of the intervention easy outs.

I would not, for a moment, say that your children are paragons of virtue, nor that they have not had their own agendas in confronting you, nor that they have always done it in the best possible ways. If you are looking for ways of deflecting what they are saying to you, the options are abundant. They can be controlling; they can be insensitive and humiliating; they have hurt you in the past; they have made their own mistakes: the list goes on and on. There are lots of reasons for you not to hear them.

I believe there is something else, however. Beneath their bumbling and their anger and their frustration, there is love - imperfect love, to be sure, but love if you are willing to hear it. Grown though they be, they are still affected by what you do. It causes them pain to see you engaging in behavior which is self-destructive, and, honestly, there are ways in which your drinking can put their families in jeopardy. To stand back and say nothing, as you propose, would be to surrender, to be less caring and responsible than you have brought them up to be. And yet, they cannot take the responsibility for your life and your decisions away from you without crippling you, without making you a dependent child.

The easiest choices lie at the extremes: to control completely or to abdicate any responsibility. What is harder is to find a middle place where they do what they appropriately can, without taking the ultimate responsibility that does belong to you. Wow is that hard! That land between the extremes is filled with boobytraps that can blow up in our faces. We certainly experience that challenge as parents, and we experience it in later life as adult children, and we experience it as loving friends. There come times when we cannot just stand by, but the risks of shattering a relationship are real when we try to have an impact on what our loved one is doing.

We are bound to one another, and yet we cherish and need the "spaces in our togetherness." It's bloody impossible not to screw up.

I do not believe your kids are really telling you that their love for you is conditional. As badly as they may be bungling the message, I hear them telling you that what you view as a private decision is not, really private. It has an impact on them - an impact that you are dismissing as irrelevant because it infringes on your freedom. You have listed the people who are convinced that the path you are following leads to trouble, and yet you dismiss them all as if this were some heroic mission in which you are pursuing the holy grail and they were demons trying to block your progress. At some point the question must be asked, is the good produced by alcohol in your system really worth the risk?

[the "bottom line"]

There is a bottom line to this on which you and I are in agreement: **you** will, in the final analysis, make the decisions you need to make. All I am asking you is to try to look at the larger rather than the smaller picture. This is not just an issue of your being free to seek pleasure and solace without interference. What you choose to do, or choose not to do in this regard, has impact on more than yourself: it affects the whole circle of people who care about you. There are times when I am convinced that we care more about you, and have more respect for you, than you do.

We will not stop loving you, whatever you choose to do, but we hope you will consider our legitimate concerns about what you are doing to yourself and to us, and will factor those into the decisions you make.

With love,

Your friend,

Dave

[postscript]

So, the situation is such today that I can add a postscript. That dear friend was actually Karen's mother, Rollene Wells. She and I were friends for almost five decades since her husband was a student in the theological school when I was. [He was an air force retiree.] As most of you know, Rollene died just after Thanksgiving and I discovered that she had left instructions that I was to deliver the eulogy at her Memorial Service. My sermon obviously did not alienate her. In fact, it was not too long after I shared it with her that she became, as they say, a "friend of Bill." She was sober for almost twenty years and she became a significant figure in the AA community in Richmond. A significant number of the people at her Memorial Service were also "friends of Bill." [I am not suggesting that my sermon was the cause for her sobriety, only that it didn't hurt.]

My reason for sharing this story, about which Rollene was ultimately so open, is to testify that a story like this can have a happy ending.