

Some Unscientific Thoughts on Sobriety

written by Grant Maierhofer | December 14, 2015



"Isn't it tough not drinking? How do you manage it?"

"Oh," Walker said. "Well, I watch television." He laughed in embarrassment. "Evenings it's hard, you get blue. And I drink a lot of tomato juice with Tabasco." He cleared his throat. "I drink unsalted tomato juice because my blood pressure's a little high."

"That's neat," Shelley said. "That's prudent. Do you jog?"

"Not yet. They say I might start in a month or so. When my blood pressure's better. I'm starting to write again." (255) *Children of Light*, Robert Stone

In a number of months I'll have not drunk for roughly nine years. Although I'm often hesitant to make head or tail of these matters, a sort of reflection nonetheless seemed apt. For years one and two, and bits of change between then and now, I'd attend AA meetings, or NA meetings, or meet with a counselor who specialized in issues related to addiction. I'm not sure whether that was misguided, considering I'd decided in my third or fourth month of rehab that alternatives to AA or NA or standard means of sobriety-recovery simply didn't connect well with my thinking, but this was my approach in those early years.

I sobered up young which is touchy. I went to rehab once for a month when I was fifteen, then relapsed and returned a year later to turn seventeen while admitted and remain under someone's care for six months in round two. I started to drink and use whatever was at hand when I was eleven, and although the short span between then and my abstinence might seem too short, with my tendency toward the depressive and the complications arising from Type 1 Diabetes, it proved a sufficient jaunt to warrant cleaning up.

Of late, and for several years since first reading it, I think of the above-quoted moment in Robert Stone's brilliant novel of Hollywood decadence and drunkenness, *Children of Light*, when attempting to reaffirm the notion that I no longer drink or take drugs recreationally, without the earmarks of an overall ideology or worldview to bolster up this abstinence. This is not a plea, however, and not a declaration of suffering, but rather an attempt to

uss out the possibility of so living without the perspectival logic of an AA, an NA, a Rational Recovery, or otherwise. The passage in *Children of Light*, then, functions simultaneously as a pat on the back when I've found myself watching more television than sleeping on a daily/nightly basis—an OK, it's bad but don't off yourself just yet—and further affirmation of the necessity of ritual in the lived days of a human animal in the twenty-first century.

Much ado has been made of just where the line exists between “addict” or “alcoholic” and “normal drug user” or “everyday drinker,” so where I could I've attempted to keep matters simple to find sense. To my mind, the depressive—and therein exist further complications, but the serotonin/dopamine deficiency model resulting in low moods/energy, suicidal ideation, and a spectrum of emotional despondency might suffice—is like any human animal. The depressive seeks out ritual. The “normal” person seeks out ritual. The depressive's ritual might tend more toward destruction, and the “normal” person's more toward construction. There is no absolute, unfortunately, but as I've observed it “addicts” and “alcoholics” tend at least to carry aspects of the depressive, and hence develop destructive rituals to carve out some meaning in life that in turn overwhelm. The quasi-functioning human being does the same thing, and this can lead to “negative” results in turn, with so-called “workaholics,” or “co-dependents” stretching the ritual of their interaction with another into an “unhealthy,” over-reliant state. Again, an absolute rule would be impossible to find, but in my observation this has largely been the case, and in my own it certainly proved true. People become addicted to any range of things for any range of reasons, however, so my point in writing has less to do with attempting to identify the True Addictive Personality as with expressing my own attempt to abstain after addiction/alcoholism became a reality, and offering some conception of an alternative to typically-accepted modes of staying clean if only to embrace a spectrum-view of addiction/recovery, not unlike the spectrum in vogue of late in gender studies, disability studies, and explorations of human sexuality.

I drank and took pills as a ritualistic gesture that aligned with my gut instinct that being alive was “not all right,” to use Ligotti's terminology in his *Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. A toast to disinterest, to fear, to anger, perhaps. In meetings on quitting I'd realized I embodied what's known as the “trashcan,” if shoddy memory serves, who's less concerned with the particular flavor of a given high than the frequency and quantity. I once snuck into my neighbor's place and took a handful of nine or so Hydrocodone, and another handful of roughly equal portions of a drug of whose qualities or name I had no notion, taking both and spending an evening pacing around my mother's basement swilling piss teenager vodka. I once returned home from a girlfriend's place and caught an inkling, and so took a handful of however many Wellbutrin in attempts to make some push. I also did more straightforward things, drank and did cocaine with older persons, took meth a number of times (in my Wisconsin) and woke up oddly wounded; but given my aforesaid gutful approach to chemical intake, there was no rhyme or reason to my use. If there were drugs or drink apparent and I might ingest them with what money I had or no fear of trouble should I steal them, I would ingest

them. With time this led to mild legal trouble, time spent in kiddie jails and the like, and my resignation to the prospect of dying at twenty-one without much in the way of an emotional tug. It wasn't tragic, per se, and there are countless accounts of chemical abjection more worthy of your time than mine own, but it occurred, and confidence arose of my addictive/alcoholic head, and thus some means of staying quit became desirable.

This, if anything at all from all that muck and dross bears interest still years later, is all that interests me. It interests me because once I read a piece on an individual hopelessly addicted, and his eventual sobriety on taking a particular cocktail of non-high-inducing muscle relaxers—or somesuch—and the paucity I'd read elsewhere of such cases. Sobriety, recovery, addiction, depression, these are largely literary things, not unlike Christopher Looby's conception of sexuality as a literary thing. The memoir in each of these four maladies' is an abundant field, and no small number of scribblers have either drunk or drugged to get the word writ well, or cleaned up and found a sudden desire to piss and bleed atop some typewriter howling woe-is-me. This isn't merely for the professorial cough-syrup suckler, however, as that is boring. This is just a small declaration, perhaps, or somesuch leaning toward graffitied scrawls on Club 12/AA-recovery hall doors.

This is not to say they have no place. The life of the drunk is often long and winding, and thus on sobering up a total replacement of friendships, and behaviors must take place. There the mode makes sense. Elsewhere, however, or in the case of someone simultaneously bogged by depression and stupor, an alternative glance might prove helpful.

For myself, what is it I do. I'm unsure. Certainties: I take a low dose of Prozac, and Buspirone, on a daily basis. I walk, and talk to myself. I listen to loud things. I write loud things. I watch television, enormous amounts of television—here an interesting note might be made of the addictive tendency pulled from all citizens regardless of brain chemistry and the notion of “binge-watching,” but not just now—and when I think I've become an impossible slug of shit and disinterest, I watch yet more television. I read things, minor things, short things, occasionally long things, miserable things embodying disinterest, disinterested things embodying misery. The literary nature of the aforesaid applies to their solutions as well, methinks. Consider for instance the AA meeting itself, a place to chat, a group of citizens of likened plight. Find yourself a friend or two with whom to gripe at your status on this rock. Take comfort rather than concern from long conversations with your pet. Assert your discomfort in your skin and masturbate occasionally. Find out things and forget them and become someone you don't recognize. Make sense of it, live intensely subjectively then work a job that pulls your self from skin. Get a library card, check out materials, don't watch or read them and return them in a month when it's freezing cold.

It is never as if there's one clean answer, and this poses every problem we as a species have had. What I mean to express is inexpressible, unfortunately, except perhaps via the means of the fictive, the slippery

interplay of text and reality. Therein I've found some solace, and though not everyone buries themselves in types of texts to achieve some comfort, the process of ritualizing and re-ritualizing our lives remains constant. I stare at Gass' statement that he writes because he "hate[s]. A lot. Hard," and find my comforts. Military-minded citizens fold their bedsheets up to meet some standard. Cook and play your Dean Martin, your Emerson audiobooks, whathaveyou. The problem inevitably congeals its way into some new pursuit, and there I find myself.

One does well to think of *Nymph()*maniac and Joe's notion that she's someone who wanted something more from sunsets. One does well to think of *Touched with Fire* and the madness of a Byron. One does well to think of Poe, soused and seeping into wet brackish creeks in Baltimore. Are they numbing? Merely aspiring to mass escape? They are vying. They are reaching toward some imperceptible thing, a void beneath. Think of *Last Days Here* and Bobby Liebling, his minor works in Pentagram rendered timeless and unique by drugged heaps. Burroughs, King Junk, massive emptiness. It is boredom, it is that. We gutless dogs are bored to retching, I'd hazard. What of it? More vying, more emptiness.

An answer does not exist. Often I'll feel haunted. Occasionally I've slipped back into those rooms to dawdle a bit and listen mostly. It helps affirm, but nothing quite like the clear day, nor the besotted televisual mind. Watch something, be numbed, sure, but hope. I read an emptiness in most addiction literature as one reads emptiness into most literature content with a certain understanding of the subjective human experience. *Nothing* seems more apt in this respect, an addiction to insomnia perhaps, an obsession, a monomania. All we have is this sea of referents and texts, stitched together with observation and image, phrase and sentence. An underrated work of addiction literature perhaps being Cocteau's *Opium*. I'd written it off initially for its minor nature, but looking back its loose structure and diary's reach seems larger. The single line drawings of Cocteau dense with meaning for the emptied gutless dog.