



Observing Ten Years of Sobriety

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TL;DR: Save your congratulations. I don't like them.

I have thought about what I would say today for a while. Would it be unnecessary, long-winded, pretentious, and unintentionally self-aggrandizing? Of course it would.

I had my last drink of alcohol on this day, November 18th, ten years ago. I remember it quite distinctly. At the tail end of a two month trip, ostensibly to help my father recover from knee surgery, I had a layover from Pensacola to Las Cruces at the Dallas Fort Worth Airport. At the time, living in the desert, my access to good (or in this case tolerable) seafood was rare, so I always treated the Pappadeaux restaurant in Terminal A as my final respite before returning to the barren land.

I ordered, as I usually did, a half dozen raw oysters, a shrimp "poboy", and an Abita Amber. It may not be a fancy beer, but there are only two beers I drank: PBR and Abita Amber. So, for me, I was feeling fancy that day.

I was, at least what I'd consider, a regular-heavy drinker in college. Out doing something that involved alcohol every night, but typically still getting all my work done. B-caliber work, but I did it at the bar, after all. Balancing partying, course work, and lab contributions felt like a superpower. At 22, I was fulfilled socially, academically, and intellectually.

Some people ease out of their college drinking. Some people burn out immediately. Some people carry on, balancing.

I took balancing work and drinking to graduate school, and I excelled. I won an award! And an assistantship! I was the stats guy in my cohort, and I was always happy to help my classmates. My second year, I got myself involved in a situation that could be best summed up by Robin Williams' character in World's Greatest Dad: "I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel all alone." I felt isolated. I didn't handle it well. I kept a secret. People were no longer happy to see me. I drank to ameliorate the dull distress of that isolation. I receded. I got worse. I drank more. I didn't get my work done. I lost friends.

But I was fine. Because, after enough exceptions made for me by my department that allowed me to finish, I did. I completed my program and was accepted to a PhD program in the driest place on earth - New Mexico.

The drinking persisted. Not because I was isolated anymore, but because the work was hard. I was no longer able to skate by on what others would accuse me of thinking was my natural "charm"

and “intellect”. When I did work, it was good! I received high marks on my instruction. I generated novel ideas for research, I completed coursework for an entirely unnecessary minor in business statistics. But when I didn’t want to work, I drank. I drank to dull the anxiety I would otherwise have experienced knowing I wasn’t doing my work. I wasn’t bearing down on my comps. I wasn’t making progress on my dissertation. And do you know what’s great at making you get all that work done? That’s right! Your orbital prefrontal cortex! And do you know which is one of the first parts of your brain to shut down from alcohol? That’s right! Your orbital prefrontal cortex!

When I finally asked for help, I was running out of time to meet the next milestone - and I wasn’t going to make it. My peers, the department faculty, the administration, all figured it was a ploy to get an extension in order to not be kicked out of the program. That was true, in part. I wanted to finish my PhD, but I needed to quit drinking. I needed my program in order to quit drinking.

Of all the people who dismissed me as simply an unserious, lazy, party-hard-er, one person listened - my advisor, Dr. David Trafimow. David’s role in my predicament was an interesting one, because David doesn’t drink. David has never drank. David has never not thought hard, or read hard, or worked hard. He is incredibly brilliant and prolific. So, when I went to him and said “David, my drinking is out of control. I want to finish this program for me, for you, for my parents, but I now realize I don’t have the capacity nor the tools to do it myself,” he didn’t hesitate to say “Okay. Let’s figure out how.”

I was granted a leave of absence from my PhD program. I had drawn up a plan, a list of conditions I had set for myself and communicated to the department, for me to spend the rest of the semester trying to quit. I spent weeks on the internet searching for and calling recovery centers. There were simply no options for someone with no money to go and dry out. I searched New Mexico. I searched Northwest Florida for when I would be back helping my father. There were options for the wealthy families of Pensacola to send their old-money children to, but nothing I could afford, let alone ask my family to pay for. All I needed was a place I could go for a week to provide medical support and observation while I detoxed. Not a long term recovery center. Not a private, expensive resort. Not a place to make detoxing comfortable. I needed a place that could make sure quitting 1) wouldn’t be more harmful and would 2) provide support so that drinking again wasn’t the best possible way to alleviate the heart palpitations, racing pulse, dehydration, diarrhea, inability to eat and drink, and ultimately the worst gout attacks of my life.

I spent two extremely unfruitful months back in Pensacola. I was still drinking, and now I was hiding more than ever. I had failed at this endeavor when I left for the airport to return to Las Cruces. But I also knew that if I didn’t make good on this sobriety soon, I wouldn’t be able to return to my program to complete my degree. That’s when, at Pappadeaux in the Dallas Fort Worth airport, I did what I had rarely done since high school - I didn’t finish my beer.

The hardest part of quitting wasn’t the decision to quit. It was the quitting. I had social support. Cat Wu came and sat with me. Just sat. Sat with the most physically uncomfortable, brain-scattered, vomiting, humorless Michael Pyle that ever existed. If you’re not particularly fond of my comedic or philosophical musings, this would have been a great time to hang out with me. I was merely a Star Trek TOS-watching pile of goo just trying to not throw up the precious water I had forced myself to drink. Ikumi Doucette took all of my money, because I knew even five dollars would be good for enough rum to make things better for even a little bit. Sten Hasselquist and Robert Martinez came by and checked in on me.

The next two weeks were awful. When your body has established for itself a biological homeostasis that only fully operates with at least a *little* alcohol in it, it doesn’t let you go very long without

demanding that you feed it what it expects. It starts with a racing pulse and sweating. Then your body rejects food - first by way of regurgitation. Then your body simply ignores water, passing it through with no absorption, which aids in the second way your body rejects food. You're tired because you can't sleep, you can't sleep because your heart is racing, you can't relax because you're debating whether your pulse is worth going to the ER for. You can't think. All you can do is sit there. The only thing that occurs to you is that you could relax, you could sleep and eat and think again if you just went to the store and got yourself a little bit of alcohol.

After about two weeks, the withdrawal symptoms began to subside. But, as I hadn't retained any water over the prior two or so weeks, my dehydration led to the absolutely worst gout attack of my life. Boy, a little medical supervision probably would have gone a long way.

I haven't had a drink since. I have had numerous successes and failures in the past ten years, none directly related to alcohol. But none of them - not one success, not one failure - would have been possible if I hadn't had my last half an Abita Amber on this day ten years ago.

Quitting alcohol cold turkey, because I couldn't afford medical support, was the worst, most painful, and dangerous experience of my life. I had people in my life who stepped up for me, but they were simply not capable of providing the support I should have had to make quitting safe, tolerable, and accessible. When I advocate for more tax-funded social services, it's to make the decision for the people that need help easier for them.