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## Alcohol and American Life

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### **It's the Holidays. How About Just One?**

By Jim Atkinson

I had my last drink nearly 16 years ago, so you'd think I would have assimilated pretty much every bit of unpleasantness associated with clean and sober life in a society that remains thoroughly sodden with alcohol. But I still can't quite handle the holidays.

It's not that I'm driven to drink; just to a certain uncomfortable distraction that doesn't leave until the holiday season thankfully does. And it's not just that the holidays seem to have been invented for the express purpose of promoting — no, necessitating — irresponsible alcoholic consumption.

There's something in the alone-in-the-crowdness of the holiday party circuit, the forced pleasantries and laughter, the charge to be friendly and engaging — but only in a trivial and superficial way — that is very much like the existential condition of the alcoholic psyche. So the holidays not only remind me of drink; they remind me of how it felt to be a drunk.

In fact, I have frequently been overheard to explain to the sort of person who still finds it good sport to ask me how I came to be addicted to alcohol and what it's like now to be stone cold sober, “You know how you feel at Christmas at the umpteenth family gathering or company cocktail party. You really need that drink, right? That's the way I used to feel all the time.”

And as with one's first adolescent love, a certain euphoric recall about the drinking life remains lodged in the psyche of any drunk no matter how many years he has remained sober. Even after 16 years, especially at holiday time, a tiny voice still occasionally visits, asking, “Why can't you just have one?”

Addiction scientists have puzzled over what distinguishes the alcoholic psyche from the “normal” one, or even, the mentally ill one. While some association between abusive drinking and both bipolar disorder and depression has been found, your garden-variety drunk does not go on manic flights of fancy or hear voices or hallucinate; he isn't even all that prone to clinical depression. The best I can say from personal experience is that we all tend to be afflicted by a low-grade dysphoria, a sort of constant melancholy that causes feelings of unease, isolation and dissatisfaction with life — an “inexplicable ache,” I once heard it called.

But is this nature or nurture? I personally have come to believe in a construction proposed by Dr. Mark Willenbring, director of the division of treatment and recovery research at the National

Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, which says it's both. Willenbring argues that the main thing that alcoholics share is a natural tolerance for alcohol, which leads them to overindulge without knowing it. Repeated overindulgence, in turn, changes their brain chemistry and literally creates the inexplicable ache by altering the activity of two systems: the brain's "reward system," which sends the message that drinking feels good; and the excitatory and stress response systems, which become "recruited" and, over time, produce an elevated anxiety when one is without alcohol in his system.

This would pretty much track my personal experience. It always took more to get me drunk, and the irony is, I always thought that was a good thing. Particularly during my 20's, when everyone was drinking pretty heavily, I could still drink my friends under the table and inspire compliments from them for it. On one occasion, a bunch of us gathered at a friend's apartment to watch a Dallas Cowboys football game. The drinking was heavy and mixed — from beer to scotch and back again, as I recall. At one point late in the fourth quarter, I noticed that all of my buddies had passed out — leaving only me to watch the Cowboys lose while I happily mixed a nightcap.

My natural tolerance is probably why, in the mid-80's I was able to score a nice book contract to write "The View from Nowhere," a fairly shameless nationwide pub crawl in search of America's best hard drinking bars. My appearance on the "Today Show" in 1987 to hype the book was proof positive, as it were, that this particular metabolic capability was a boon to my writing career, and would make me less, not more, prone to developing a drinking problem.

But over time, drinking twice as much just to "get there" and feeling proud that I was still not slurring my words took its toll. Without realizing it, I crossed over from mere psychological addiction (a problematic, but self-manageable condition) to physical addiction, which involves blackouts and dangerous withdrawal symptoms, and for which medical intervention is necessary.

It was the under-the-radar aspect of my addiction that still amazes me. I know this is a sensation shared by other drunks because every time I enter an Alcoholics Anonymous room, I am struck not by the expressions of guilt or defiance or even boredom that I see. I am struck by a more or less uniform look of cosmic bafflement on the faces of my fellow addicts. How in the world did this happen?

If you are among the 80 percent of people who drink "normally," think of your relationship to booze as a minor friendship that strikes up at certain times of the week, or even the year. Think of the drunk's as a torrid, reckless and self-destructive affair. Whiskey she is a bad lover, and all that. It is a decidedly adolescent affair, a kind of puppy love that overtakes all good judgment and reason. In that sense, I've come to understand that, if compulsive drinking is about different genes, it also about a certain arrested development that can't be liberated until the addict takes the cure.

So how about that one holiday drink? Should I?

The current drift of public thinking about alcohol dependence suggests that perhaps I could. Among the many victims of the Internet age is the notion that anybody with a drinking problem is an alcoholic, period, and needs to go to treatment for 28 days and A.A. thereafter. Today, largely because of the exchanges of addicts on line, there is a growing lobby to treat at least some problem drinkers with more lenience. Google the term "moderate drinking" and you'll find a fistful of Web-based organizations like Drink/Link and Moderation Management that preach a slightly more liberal message than AA: that a lot of drinkers who overindulge can be taught to moderate their drinking.

So if I were sobering up today, I suppose I would have more options than I did 16 years ago. But I don't think that my common sense decisions would be any different. I now know that I'm not totally incorrigible when it comes to the sauce. But I also know that my drinking was more than a bad habit or a passing fancy.

If I decided to take a drink at a party, I might be able to tough it out for that night, but I know that the next day, another drink would be someplace in my mind. That someplace might be a manageable place, but would it be worth the considerable hassle of having to think twice every time I took a sip?

Besides, my newly wired brain doesn't really have the interest to try. I've worked too hard at this, learned too much, have too much pride in accomplishing something that a lot of folks with this problem don't — a solid sobriety that has lasted at least as long as my addiction did — to risk a relapse.

But what to do about the holidays? I rather like the view of radio talk show host Don Imus, himself a recovering alcoholic who has been sober 20 years. When the subject of parties came up on his radio show a few years back, Imus noted that he was invited to many but went to very few, for one simple reason: "I don't drink."

This seemed to me to be one of the more sensible things ever said about parties or alcoholism. So as the holiday season gets underway, I try to look at it this way. No one really wants to go to all those parties. I'm one of the lucky ones who has an excuse to beg off.

**Jim Atkinson is a writer at large for Texas Monthly and the author of two books, "Evidence of Love, A True Story of Passion and Death in the Suburbs" and "The View from Nowhere."**