

Pardon Me- I Do Not Drink!

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USA

I do not drink beverages that contain alcohol and I have suffered a lot due to it. After years of suffering, I have decided to do something about it. Without any apologies, I have decided to openly state my reasons for not drinking alcohol. I fully understand that I may no longer be included in certain affluent and high society get togethers after this rebellious behavior.

Let's first understand the issue at hand. In good old times, drinking alcohol was some sort of a taboo. One would do everything possible to hide it. At least, it was not a badge of honor. Wheels have turned. Now, those who do not drink are increasingly being ridiculed and find themselves explaining to their socially more advanced peers the reasons why they do not drink. When this transformation occurred in our thinking is unclear to me. However, ever since I was a medical student in 1980s, I noticed some degree of fascination among my fellow students for alcohol. Escape was easy at that time. There was no money for such luxury. The problem is now. I have lived in United States for more than 25 years. I can afford it. I am expected to drink, but still I don't. Lack of this "social skill" causes considerable difficulty when I visit my friends or family in India. After exchange of pleasantries, expensive alcohol along with Haldiram's snacks is served. And that's the beginning of the problem.

I request a bottle of water or Coca Cola.

Pepsi or Limca will also do. My shameless demand is followed by many counter offers. A different drink? May be wine? beer? After a few attempts to force me to take the glass, the host gives up. Things are never good after that. My unsophisticated, inept and anti-high society behavior is met with three separate emotions: pity, disgust and anger. Pity is most easy to understand: "Poor guy". Things must not be working out well in US. May be, he can not afford it. Disgust and anger are little more difficult to understand. Why should my not drinking makes others uncomfortable? I have been accused that I am trying to prove myself to be at a higher moral grounds than those who drink. Nothing could be far from truth than that. I have been told that I am not social. There may be some truth in that assertion. If sharing a liquor is the yardstick for social standing then it is a real possibility that I have fallen behind. Obviously, since I don't drink, I keep judgement and mental faculties intact. With no loose gossip divulged, it makes me a rather boring company. Many times, it is not directly told, but implied that I am no fun to be around. All because of not drinking! Generally, I have kept my composure in such situations. However, about two years ago, I lost my patience and with a straight face told my hosts the real reasons why I do not drink. I will come to that a little later.

I want to be 100% certain that everyone reading this piece recognizes that this

is not a lesson in morality. Alcohol has been around since the dawn of recorded history. Princes and paupers have enjoyed its intoxicating effect on their minds. There is nothing moral or immoral about drinking. There is no reason to glorify the habit either. It is just another drink which some people like, and enjoy responsibly with friends and family. However, others become addicted to it. Who will control his or her drinking of alcohol and who will be controlled by alcohol cannot be predicted at the outset. Whatever, but it is true that everyone who drinks is at risk of becoming an alcoholic.

Health issues of excessive alcohol consumption are well known to everyone and need not be repeated here. And who am I to say anything about it? It is none of my business if someone puts more value to the intoxicating effect of alcohol but ignore its damaging effects on liver, heart, pancreas, stomach, muscles, blood, nerves and brain. If someone shakes, hallucinates, falls, sustains injury, fired from job, goes to jail or dies due to alcohol, it is none of my business.

In fact you get to know a person better when he or she is intoxicated. Brain loses its ability; things are said straight from heart. For example, under the influence, a senior resident once called our head of Medicine Department a snake with two heads! The chief was a seasoned guy. He kept quiet. He knew that there is no point arguing with an intoxicated lady. Next day, everything was conveniently forgotten. Alcohol has a disinhibiting effect and many intoxicated people lose control. It impairs their judgement and ability to discriminate right from wrong. If you don't believe it,

go to certain famous streets of London past midnight. Under the influence, the many "civilized" people coming out of pubs fail to recognize whether they are in an open public place or in privacy of a restroom. You get the point. If alcohol can have such profound effect on educated and sophisticated people who have gone around the world for centuries uplifting and educating savages, imagine what it could do to an uncivilized person like me.

However, there are limits to which I can be neutral to other person's drinking addiction. If someone drives under the influence and injures or kills an innocent victim, it is my business. It is also my business if someone steals, creates public nuisance, hits or deprives a helpless child, or displays violence to vulnerable ladies, spouse and parents due to alcoholism. No matter how many of such shameful acts are reported in newspapers and electronic media, I refuse to become immune to such behavior. I need to fight back and see to it that anyone who is involved in such activities gets maximum possible punishment. A strong message of accountability is needed in such cases. A message of mercy is nothing less than complicity in this regard.

Please allow me now to state two main reasons why I do not drink alcohol. No, it is not an economic issue. It is not a moral issue either. Roots of how someone turns out in adult life can frequently be traced to past experience, especially in early childhood.

Growing up, I vividly recall a neighbor who was otherwise a quiet man, working a steady job to support his rather large family. He kept to himself from Monday to

Saturday. However, on Saturday nights and Sunday, he would transform into a devil's incarnation- shouting and beating up his kids with belts and canes. Scary, isn't it? I just could not understand it, but it was terrifying. Only when I was 4-5 years old I could gather that on Saturday night he drinks something that transforms him in this manner. I used to wonder, why would someone drink such a terrible thing. Why not drink Fanta? It took another few years to realize what it was. The seeds of hatred for this "unknown drink" had already germinated by this time.

And now I will divulge the most important reason because of which I never hit the bottle. This is a more than 30 years old story. I experienced something on my very first day of Internal Medicine rotation as a third year medical student that I can never forget. Proudly wearing the whitest possible white coat with stethoscope around my neck and "Hutchison's clinical methods" in coat pocket, I reached medical ward of LNJP hospital (called Irwin hospital at that time). Our group was asked to examine a man in his 40s with very protuberant abdomen. He had a lot of fluid in his abdomen. We learned that he had cirrhosis of liver due to excessive consumption of alcohol, causing this problem. After examining him, we moved to see another patient. About 10-15 minutes later, we heard a commotion. Some one was bleeding. It was the patient

we had just examined. He vomited large amount of blood. It can happen to patients with cirrhosis. Within next 5 minutes, he died - essentially bled to death in front of our eyes. We were all shaken and stirred. My senior resident took me to the side and said "look, this is what alcohol does to you- so, don't even think about drinking ever."

Would anyone like to know why I lost my cool two years ago? My host who was insisting me to drink was the same senior resident who cautioned me 30 years ago against drinking. I reminded him the story and explained to him why I don't drink. It was his words, his advice and his teaching in this regard that always stayed with me. It was very awkward but I had to do it. I graciously thank him for guiding me to do right thing in my formative years. I did not want to bring it up, but patience has its own limits and everyone has to grow up one day.

Now I have said it all. I am ready and willing to be dismissed from high society. I may be considered socially inept, but I do not care. I refuse to cave under "peer pressure". I put more value to my health than my image. Not drinking alcohol may not be my strength but certainly, it is not my weakness.

Editors' Note

Whether habit of drinking is good or bad is not an issue taken up by the author. The central idea is that one should be strong and true to one's conviction and everyone should respect choices and decisions of others.

- Dr. Prachi Bagla