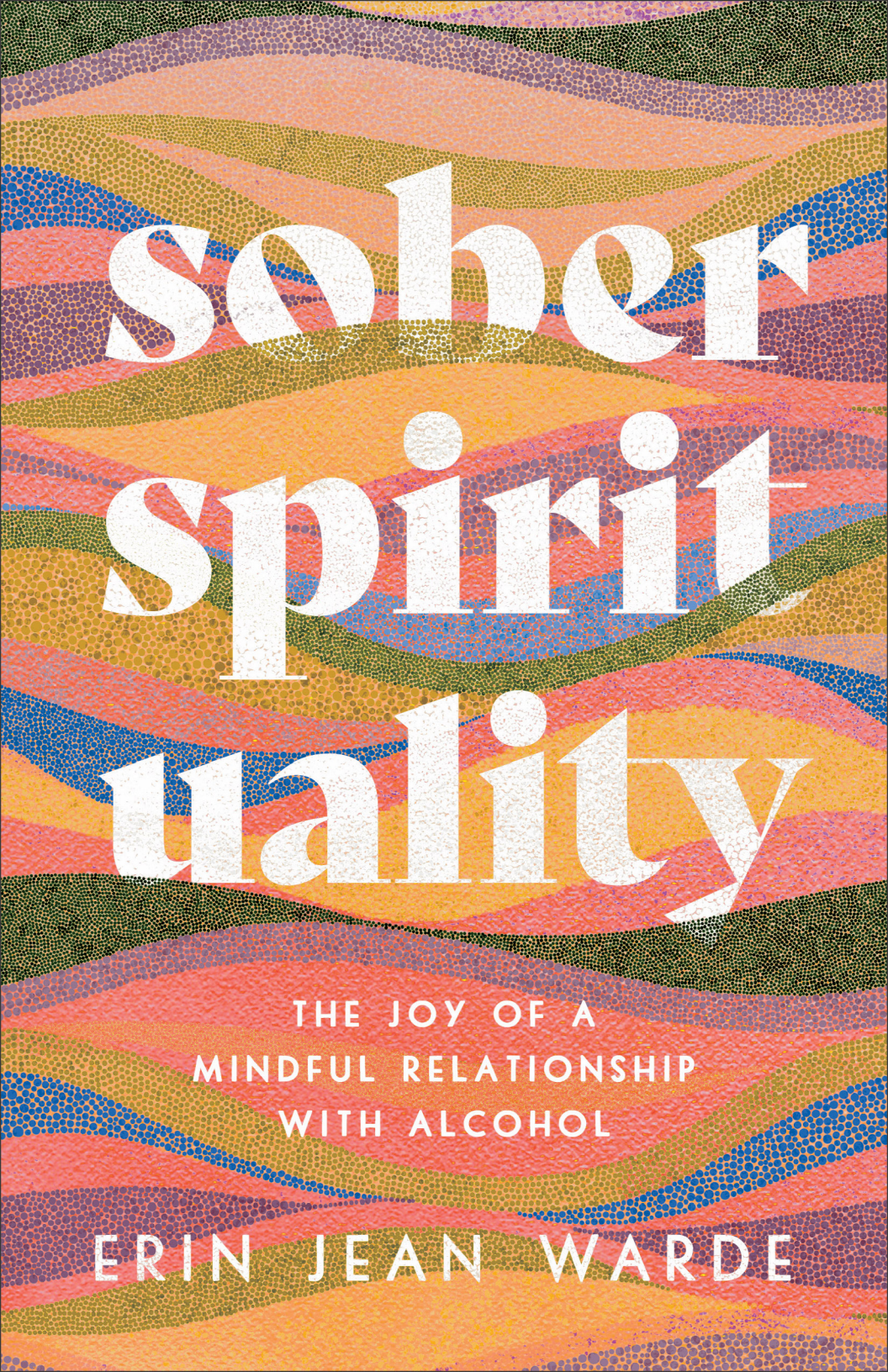
sober spirituality
THE JOY OF A MINDFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH ALCOHOL
ERIN JEAN WARDE

# sober spirituality

## THE JOY OF A MINDFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH ALCOHOL

ERIN JEAN WARDE

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# contents

# preface

ONE OF THE MOST gracious realities of sobriety is that it is an always evolving growth process. But grace can sometimes frustrate, so the ever-evolving nature of sobriety is both a gift and a challenge, because it means I'm never quite done, never quite settled. Still, there is joy in the forever journey because it also means I am able to grow inside myself and within the blessing of the Spirit.

This book exists within the gift and challenge of sobriety. It sets out to talk about something that cannot be captured, only explored. *Sober Spirituality* aims not to define sobriety but to foster a heart that is attentive to how our minds, bodies, and souls might be gently asking for a different way of life. This calling to a different way of life might be for you or it might be a calling to a different way of life to bring joy to others. As a reader, this means you will inevitably have different experiences of the book—and thank God! I imagine not everything here will be for you, but I trust the sentiments

will each be for someone and that we can celebrate how it will find its way to who it is meant for.

We can sometimes understandably take stigmatized topics very personally, and I encourage us to be aware of this so we can navigate the feeling if it arises. I spend time journeying through truth-telling around alcohol, which includes the difficulty of facing staggering statistics as well as illuminating how the societal norm of promoting alcohol can be harmful. My guess is that parts of this might feel convicting for those of us who have participated in promoting alcohol—an educated guess I can make as someone who is convicted herself.

This book is not written as a finger-wag but as a vessel through which I'm sharing my joy, the wisdom I have received, and my wholeness in mind, body, and soul. But I cannot share the joy and the wholeness without acknowledging where I started. When it came to promoting alcohol use, I was, to share Paul's sentiments, the worst of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). In this spirit, the inevitable challenge of this work is, from me, confessional, invitational, and offered with a grace that precedes and follows us.

I encourage journeying through this book knowing it is a marathon, not a sprint. I've included "Refresh and Reflect" prompts in each chapter, because even if you don't touch a single reflection question, I hope you will give yourself some time and space as you read. I expect this whole journey—the curiosity, the reckoning with truth, the holy listening to our minds, bodies, and souls—will require silence as much as the wisdom I hope you'll find in these pages.

*Sober Spirituality* attempts to gather wisdom from all the different areas of my heart and vocation: I am an Episcopal

priest, spiritual director, recovery coach, writer, speaker, lover of comedy, Enneagram 6, Twitter super-user, and more. The wisdom gathered reflects books that have put words around what my soul couldn't yet speak, the tender shares from those I have worked with as a recovery coach in both one-on-one and group settings, the outpouring of direct messages I received after I told social media I'm sober (and the DMs I still receive), the holy questions I've held in prayer and penitence with my spiritual directees, different sermons I've preached over the past ten years, and more. I'm not a doctor, therapist, or medical professional, but the depth of honesty I've witnessed through this work is nothing if not a truth-telling about health.

Madeleine L'Engle writes, "Joy is what has made the pain bearable and, in the end, creative rather than destructive."[1] I trust the journey through *Sober Spirituality* will offer you a sense of joy, but the pathway into real joy—the soul's joy—is one of taking a full assessment of our lives. Any honest look into our lives will reveal the pain we have had to face, the moments when we were forced to be at our most vulnerable, and these are the moments when we seek comfort wherever it wills to be found. I offer this book in a spirit of trust that the joy it welcomes will make the pain bearable. Books aside, I believe the joy of a mindful relationship with alcohol helps us withstand moments when we are at our most vulnerable; it is a joy that, if we let it, might usher us into a grace toward ourselves and others that helps us seek out wholeness of mind, body, and soul without hating ourselves in the process. This joy, in all its tumult, promises a life that is creative rather

1. Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (New York: HarperOne, 1972), 26.

than destructive. This joy invites us into a death signaling that resurrection is on the way.

May you be tender to yourself, to your pain, to your humanity, to who and how you are in this moment. May you never stray from this tenderness, knowing it is the birthplace of caring for yourself differently. And may you—through this curiosity, compassion, and care—embrace the grace as you weather the frustration that comes along with it, such that you find peace in being never quite done, never quite settled, ever growing in the Spirit.

# waking up

## An Unexpected Invitation to Joy through Sobriety

TO THIS DAY, I am not a morning person, even as I wake without an alarm by 7 a.m., my body emerging from the grogginess of a trazodone haze and into another day. Before I leave my bed, I will send a good morning tweet of a raccoon meme, even though I know the only way I will meditate is if I meditate before I open Twitter. If you can believe it, this is how I feel now that I love mornings. My mornings are a mixture of coffee, wishing I could go back to bed, and being grateful I have a morning at all: a chance to breathe and a body that no longer awakens to a hangover but to a different type of life. My mornings, even at their worst, feel like perfect wakings after years and years of hangovers. Sobriety redeemed my mornings from hangovers and transformed them into possibility. In the way God resurrected

me in sobriety, I am resurrected each day again and again. There is no fear in death because it is destroyed each day when I wake.

The weird thing about hangovers is that I adapted to them. They set the tone for the day: the muscles governing my movement would be sore, the head housing my mind would ache, the seat of my heart would feel broken, and the voices of my soul would speak only shame. I adapted to believing this is how days begin; I came to believe that every day I rested in God, I also had to rest in soreness, ache, heartbrokenness, and shame. I forgot there was another way. My drinking meant I was shaped to start each day inside a dark night of the soul, even as the rays of sun suggested I could begin again.

When I woke up hung over, mornings were always a marathon.

*Oh God, I forgot to get the coffee ready last night.*

*Wait, when is my first meeting today?*

*Am I supposed to wear clericals?*

Everything was off, everything was more difficult, and—in the chaos of questions—another question couldn't make itself to the front of my heart: Does life have to be this way?

Over time, I began to hide from myself in the mirror. It wasn't intentional, but I'd later realize—after traveling past the mirror seventy billion times to make my crappy coffee—that I always kept my head low. Amid my attempts to never catch my own eyes in the mirror, God caught sight of me each morning and, in the tender gaze of compassion, loved me to the end. It was a love I never lost but also a love I couldn't feel, because if I didn't want to look myself in the eyes, I certainly didn't want to stare into the face of God.

In sobriety, Jesus has seen the part of myself I find most vulnerable, the part of myself I have to work to show, which is of course the heart of myself that is the most true. Alcohol kept the beauty of myself safely hidden out of fear of what might happen if a woman began to believe she had the right to love herself the way God loves her. Alcohol hid me out of fear of what might happen if a woman began to believe that loving herself was not differentiated from her faith but an integral part of it. Shrouded inside everything from gender constructs to vestments to bottomless mimosas, I had been hiding from myself in the mirror because I couldn't look back and see myself anymore.

In sobriety, I started to look into mirrors and see something similar to what God might have had in mind when God gave me breath. I began to wonder if I was still as beloved as I had been before things got so hard, before all the drinking, and if I still retained some of the beauty from the moment when God decided to roll a breath over chaos, willing me to be. I'm still afraid of what loving this part of myself asks of me, because it demands a lot. But it's worth the fear, given what it has brought forth from me, which is nothing less than the abundant life that comes when we let Jesus awaken us to something other than a life of numbness. My life when I was drinking was not the worst life a person could have, but it wasn't abundant, it wasn't joyful, and it wasn't an offering of myself in my beauty and fullness to the world. When I was drinking, I was a breathing tomb, waiting for Christ to destroy my death and resurrect my soul. Now I am an incarnate witness to how the tender healing of God can gently speak into a heart and offer her a life worth living and the awareness that

she can trust herself because she is listening with a heart, soul, and mind awakened to God and to herself.

While I was in the first jumbled months of my attempt at sobriety that "stuck," I was drawn into a faith more mystical than concrete, because my sobriety is a mystical experience. I struggled to put words to it as much as I desired to do so. While what was happening could certainly be understood biologically and systematically and practically, the overarching narrative of my sobriety is that something mystical was happening to me. I was, in my choice to quit drinking, experiencing the greatest spiritual awakening I had ever known, and I revel in that continuous awakening to this day.

At the time, I had been ordained, had offered Communion to those with hands open to receive it, had blessed the graves of the faithful, had joined couples in holy matrimony, and had pronounced the forgiveness of God to the penitent—all because I felt called to participate in God's presence on this side of eternity. Yet sobriety stood in front of me as the most beautiful bridge between this world and the next, because it invited me into the mystery of God and myself. I never would have told you I was "drinking away" my life, because I never looked into my glass thinking, "I do not want to feel this and I do not want to be inside my body, so I will drink myself out of this feeling and this body." I lived as a priest with a foot in each world, so numb to both I could barely feel my feet on the earth, could barely notice the divinity begging to be palpable if only I would take the greatest risk by being awake to both worlds, for the greatest reward, living in them the way God wished for me to live.

I got curious about mysticism and fell in love with *Meditations of the Heart* by Howard Thurman. The first paragraph

became the cornerstone of my sobriety, the prayer that calls me back into the depths of my decision. Thurman writes:

> There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the "angel with the flaming sword." Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes "the angel with the flaming sword" to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of "the fluid area of your consent." This is your crucial link with the Eternal.[1]

Getting sober looked like traversing an inward sea, with sobriety offering me an island, a refuge, a way to get shipwrecked and saved at the same time. The altar here reminds me that even though sobriety has become my greatest healing, I didn't lose the calling to be a woman who lives her life in proximity to holiness, to sacred things, to these altars that gather outward, visible, hurting people like me in order to give us inward graces.

My angel with the flaming sword is my sobriety and I owe my life to it, and to the God who gave me an angel to defend me. The Spirit whispered that I wasn't just worth *something*; I was worth the abundant love of God—a love that I knew I had but that I struggled to receive. From the ordination rite we learn I was called to "nourish Christ's people from the riches of his grace," and I had tried to do that faithfully for many years in the churches I served, but I struggled to let myself be one of Christ's people. I didn't know how to nourish myself from the riches of his grace, and I knew that if I

1. Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 15.

could receive the riches of his grace through sobriety I would be ever more ready to offer those riches to others. So I began to believe I was worthy of a life lived around the altar on the island inside my inward sea.

When I received an invitation to place bare feet on the hallowed ground of this island, I was ushered into joy—in the most tumultuous understanding of the word. I think joy often sounds like happiness and other fleeting conditions of humanity, but true joy has faithfulness embedded in it to the proverbial bone. During some of the most joyous experiences in the Bible, terror and amazement seize the recipients of good news. There is terror because the news threatens to change them, and there is amazement because of what might be possible if they are changed.

The joy kindled through mindfulness around alcohol invites you into that same terror and amazement. Joy, in its fullest sense, requires truth. If we are joyous because of falsehoods, our joy is incomplete, never leading us into wholeness because it cannot offer us what we ask of it. This is akin to how alcohol never delivers on its promises. Alcohol might promise to relax us, but we wake up sweating in anxiety at 2 a.m. It promises to help us celebrate, but it exacerbates our depression, so we go into a slump when we wish to be exuberant. Alcohol might promise to help us find connection and community, but instead we wake up the morning after a party wondering what we said, fearing that we might have done something to break the very relationships we desire to nourish. Frederick Buechner writes, "The gospel is bad news before it is good news," and this journey shows us a truth that might feel like bad news before we can feel

the goodness it provides.[2] In light of the fleeting nature of the promises of alcohol, we can be reconciled to the truth about it and become mindful in the face of that truth, which is good news. Yes, it's the kind of good news that brings us into a joy of equal parts terror and amazement, but this joy is founded on truth. It is a joy with faithfulness embedded to the proverbial bone of your soul, a joy that stands a chance of delivering on its promises.

Thurman proclaims that nothing passes my angel with a flaming sword to be placed upon my altar unless it is by my consent. The consent part was important to me as a woman taught to have almost none, after experiencing my formative years in Deep South fundamentalism. Consent is about believing we are worthy of having agency over ourselves—mind, body, and soul—and knowing we can set those standards without shame, doubt, or caving in on them to please someone else. I wasn't taught how to function inside my agency, or how to set standards and believe I was worthy of holding both myself and others to them. I was passive-aggressively living my whole life—a situation that was only exacerbated by a drug that took me out of the mind, body, and soul I wished to respect. Sobriety allows me to let my *yes* be *yes* and my *no* be *no* so that I honor the people I'm with instead of confusing my *yes* and my *no* in a way that causes resentment. This is yet another way I am becoming more joyful and more true.

We can navigate the fluid area of our consent using one of my least favorite words: mindfulness. Mindfulness is not wallowing; sometimes we need to not be so mindful. We still get to cope, we still get to be indulgent, because there's a

2. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperCollins, 1977), 7.

difference between assessing your need to zone out for your mental health and numbing as a way of life. Mindfulness is not an invitation to *make peace* with the way things are but the choice to *acknowledge* the way things are. When the news is bad news before it is good news, mindfulness means we tend to it when it's bad news too, not waiting until it becomes good to pay it any mind. We let things be as they are; we let them be with us according to the word of what is real around us and according to where we sit in that reality. Being able to sit in this reality can lead us into a greater reality that we will miss if we rush out of the difficulty: the joy, the moment bad news becomes good news. When we stay in the discomfort that mindfulness provides, we start the journey toward the goodness we are created for, because we journey into the truth that sets us free.

Stewarding my altar, to return to the image from Thurman, is possibly the hardest part of my sober life, because every day I engage with the fluidity Thurman has made me face. He could have used any word—he could have told me it is the *certain* area of my consent, the *secure* area of my consent, the *determined* area of my consent—but he used *fluidity*. Recovery isn't final, it's fluid. But in sobriety, it's not the external tension but the internal tension that gives me the greatest pause. Sure, there is external tension, because, wow, people don't want to talk about sobriety—like, let's absolutely change the topic to something more palatable like religion and politics. Still, external tension cannot rival how the fluid area of my consent brings up extreme inner tension. The fluidity isn't good or bad, it's just real. You can't get sober, you can't resurrect, if you're not ready to be placed fully inside the unknown.

My sobriety is nonnegotiable. There is nothing in my life I will not remove to protect it. My relationships, my vocation, my commitments—they are all honored through my sobriety, and nothing placed in competition with sobriety will win, because there is no competition with resurrection and its irreversible power. My sobriety allows me to love deeply, to receive a joy that will never leave or forsake me. Sobriety allows me to gather myself up and place my soul on the altar, so of course this is my crucial link with the Eternal.

Resurrecting into a joyful life is a profound gift, but it requires that you accept death first, even though you can't possibly know whether this time, somehow, death won't be the end. It is, without question, a leap of faith, because no matter how much I tell you that changing your relationship with alcohol could radically change your life, you will not know whether it is true until you change your relationship with alcohol. Changing your relationship with alcohol means heading into the sea and trusting there is an island on the horizon, an altar to receive your prayers, and an angel to defend you. Changing your relationship with alcohol means trusting that bad news only promises good news is on the way.

## refresh and reflect

When you wake up tomorrow, take some time to sit with yourself. Don't be too rigid about it—it doesn't have to be the first thing you do when you wake up—but try to slow down just long enough to see how you feel. How are your muscles, your head, your stomach? How are you talking to yourself, and is it kind or cruel? How do you feel in your soul?

# from fundamentalist to whiskeypalian

## When Church Is the Hardest Place to Be Sober

I GREW UP NONRELIGIOUS, then got saved at a hell house and joined a Baptist church in Alabama, which led me to fundamentalism (that's a whole other book). When I got to college, I stayed inside the Baptist church but began to wonder whether there was something outside it. I began to do dangerous things, like declaring an English major, which incited me to take an honors composition class with a professor who I would later learn is Episcopalian. This led me down the path I had been told could lead to destruction: reading the Bible as literature. In classes, I felt my mind and heart expand, while church began to feel constrictive. I had more

questions than answers and began to believe things I couldn't say in church. However, I had a Baptist college minister who let me wonder and introduced me to some of the books that changed my faith.

While I chose to leave that place of worship, I left with deep grief, because my college minister had loved me through it. He had even given me tools. It's one thing when the Episcopalian English professor tells you that Genesis is poetry; it's another thing entirely when the Baptist campus minister says you might love Brian McLaren. While I wanted to selfishly take that minister with me, I also knew that when we have to go, we have to go, and there's no stopgap on grief.

I took a break from Christianity inside my mind, though I didn't really tell anyone. I wasn't sure what was going on inside me and felt fairly confident the Holy Spirit knew that, so I kept my mouth shut. I wasn't just feeling stifled; I wanted to do things good Baptist girls didn't do. Inside this agnosticism and newfound hedonism, I began to make new friends. When my friend Joseph invited me to a coffee shop Bible study with a priest who didn't recoil when I said I don't believe in hell, I knew my transformation from fundamentalist Christian to Episcopalian was complete. In this new faith context, I discovered that the beliefs I had been ashamed of, the beliefs I had come to believe made me different, could instead be a way for me to unite to others. My doubts didn't have to separate me from the church; they could join me to the Body of Christ. I believed I could be reconciled to my own faith and to the faith of the Church.[1]

1. When I capitalize "Church" by itself, I am referring to the wider church body rather than to specific worship communities.

A buzzword right now is *deconstruction,* which I honor and hold space for as a spiritual director. I deconstructed before Twitter because I am now an elder millennial. It was difficult, but through the Episcopal Church I found a place where I could question, be mad, and lean into mystery. The Book of Common Prayer, coupled with the Bible, provided me with such a beautiful way to conceive of God that I finally felt as though I could be Christian again. To get there I had to come to a primary realization: I was angry at institutions, not God. God has been faithful to me, but institutions are not always faithful to us. I stopped conflating the actions of an institution with the actions of God. I began to worship a liberating God, seeing what I thought was the liberating activity of God in the Episcopal Church, where women are welcome behind the altars and full inclusion of LGBTQ people *is* encouraged—which for an Alabamian former fundamentalist was about as wild and liberating as I could imagine.

The crisis I experienced when I left fundamentalism was similar to the spiritual crisis I entered when I left alcohol behind. Although I have stayed inside the Episcopal Church, where I was introduced to Christians who drink, from early sobriety to now I have wondered whether there is something for me outside it, whether there is a world where my faith is encouraged and my sobriety held as sacred.

For years I wanted to quit, but felt like I couldn't, because I feared that quitting drinking would change my relationships generally but especially within the Episcopal Church—the same way I feared that believing in different things would exclude me from fundamentalist pews. I had been to too many conferences full of Episcopalians where the real community happened over booze; I worried no one would want

to connect without the pseudo-communion of drinks at the conference hotel bar. Even before I quit, I began to do dangerous things like reading sobriety blogs. When I got home and dug into those blogs (often after going out for drinks), my mind and heart expanded while my relationship with the Church and my social life began to feel constrictive. Of all the places I never wanted to share questions about my sober curiosity, the Church was at the top of that list. I couldn't imagine Church people knowing I had stopped drinking, so I didn't stop drinking.

My first real attempt at sobriety was the one I thought would work best for a full-time priest: Lent. I wasn't ready to say I was "trying to quit" and hoped a forty-day pious excuse would give me the time to figure it out. Time and again, people reminded me that technically every Sunday is a feast day because it is the Lord's Day, and no one is expected to observe fasts on feast days, so I could still drink one day a week. Even inside the safest excuse to take a sober curious break, I was not free from people encouraging me to drink. From the first attempt, I wasn't supported in my desire to change my relationship with alcohol, especially as a priest. The lack of support culminated in an interior fear that burrowed into my soul: if I quit, I will become an outsider in the Church. This became a roadblock to my recovery.

## Alcohol and the Church

One phenomenon I've noticed is the connection between alcohol culture and progressive ideals, including within spiritual communities. Obviously I can't speak to every progressive

community, and there are progressive sober spaces, but I'm noticing how often progressive churches define their identity on the basis of who they are not. Many of us left fundamentalism to join a community that felt more connected to social justice. However, we now face a specific binary serving to both denigrate churches and alienate people who are changing their relationship with alcohol: being progressive means you're part of a "drinking church," and conservative fundamentalist churches are for teetotalers. But identities built on who we are not fail to represent our true selves—they're projections.

I can't bring to mind one specific comment, online or off—because there are so many—in which progressive Christians make jokes about how they're "not like those fundamentalists" by somehow illustrating how much they drink or that they drink at church. In a past life, I also made these comments. However, this alienates those of us who have changed our relationship with alcohol, because the inclusivity of the church becomes the exclusivity of the church. Plenty of sober folks are looking for progressive spaces, because some of us have awakened to the social justice concerns around us. The need to identify as a drinking church denigrates us spiritually, because we have let drinking a depressant become a primary identity point. The Church is best known for its belief in the liberating and transformative love of God. Of course, progressive churches with alcohol cultures can be known for the love of God, but this identity marker tempers the impact our spiritual communities could have on the world, because if you hold a pint glass out in front of God as if that's the draw, I won't make it past the beer to meet the God you worship.

Brené Brown says "common enemy intimacy" is a type of relationship built on a foundation of rebelling against what we are not. She writes:

> Common enemy intimacy is counterfeit connection and the opposite of true belonging. If the bond we share with others is simply that we hate the same people, the intimacy we experience is often intense, immediately gratifying, and an easy way to discharge outrage and pain. It is not, however, fuel for real connection. It's fuel that runs hot, burns fast, and leaves a trail of polluted emotion. And if we live with any level of self-awareness, it's also the kind of intimacy that can leave us with the intense regrets of an integrity hangover. *Did I really participate in that? Is that moving us forward? Am I engaging in, quite literally, the exact same behavior that I find loathsome in others?*[2]

I understand how common enemy intimacy works in spiritual communities, because I participated in it through cynicism against anything that felt remotely similar to fundamentalism. But common enemy intimacy did not help me heal from fundamentalism, because it was the same judgment and spiritual superiority I hated in fundamentalism, but now with incense! We understandably end up forming these types of relationships because we have been hurt, but in response to hurt we need to be able to heal, and this won't heal us. Considering how common enemy intimacy and alcohol try to discharge pain without healing it, is it any surprise that the mixture of the two—especially in spiritual communities

2. Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Random House, 2017), 136. Emphasis original.

built on sacred texts of healing—results in communities that will need to heal themselves before they can offer healing to anyone else?

The impact of connecting alcohol to identity is grave on the personal and communal levels because this connection is integrally related to our minds, bodies, and souls. The ways we are formed by identity can be conscious and subconscious, and our identity shapes everything—from what we say to how we pray, all the way down to our daily habits.

The habit part is especially important, because habits become some of the biggest barriers we face if we decide to change our relationship with alcohol. James Clear, in *Atomic Habits*, explains how we often try to change habits on the basis of our hopes for what we want to achieve, but he suggests identity-based habits, which focus on who we wish to become.[3] This is powerful, he writes, because "when your behavior and your identity are aligned, you are no longer pursuing behavior change. You are simply acting like the type of person you already believe you are," and moving toward a positive relationship between who we are and how we act is motivational.[4] However, there's always a flip side, and this one is vital if we want to change our relationship with alcohol: "The biggest barrier to positive change at any level—individual, team, society—is identity conflict."[5] So then, becoming mindful about our relationship with alcohol would allow us, at any level—individual, team, society—to move out of the identity conflict keeping us stuck in destructive habits.

3. James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones* (New York: Avery, 2018), 31.
4. Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 34–35.
5. Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 35.

Additionally, mindlessness regarding a culture of drug use in our community often means we don't take responsibility for the destructive jokes and general messaging about alcohol. When we do this, we help to fuel the identity crisis that keeps people stuck in harm. It is our responsibility to change those practices in our community.

Spirituality is a bid for connection with Spirit and self, but using alcohol as a bid for connection in our communities results in exclusivity because it alienates people who are wary of using drugs to form relationships. This bid for connection also ultimately leads to disconnection as alcohol can cause anxiety or depression or lead to strains on relationships because of what people do or say while intoxicated. The common refrain of "all are welcome" must ring true when a person changes their relationship with alcohol, so much so that those who have awakened to God and themselves through sobriety and mindfulness want to tell their spiritual community about the beautiful change in their lives. Unfortunately, perpetuating alcohol culture in spiritual spaces means all aren't welcome, because the space either doesn't invite those stories or, through messaging, actively dismisses their beauty.

## Surviving Deconstruction

In the earliest days of my sober curiosity, much as during my movement out of fundamentalism, I kept my mouth shut. My deconstruction from drinking culture was no less raw and grievous than the deconstruction before it. I still cling to the words of the Book of Common Prayer, but now my questions are about why my sobriety makes me feel alien to the Church, why my anger is at the very spiritual home that offered me

safe haven, and why I'm leaning so far into the mystery of God that I'm willing to give up my health insurance in order to fight against our culture's overwhelming encouragement of addiction.

Yet I won't stop believing in a liberating God, and if I can survive deconstructing fundamentalism and alcohol culture, I can survive anything. I had to lose fundamentalism to find God; I had to lose alcohol to find myself. In finding God and myself, something new awakened in me spiritually; my life changed and I was overcome with the presence of the Spirit resting upon me, which I received with a clarity I knew only sobriety could provide.

Deconstruction asked me to examine what I had always been told about God and to challenge it, question it, and notice how I might have been told things that were untrue. I began to wonder whether the voices I had trusted were worthy of my trust. It was grievous, because there was loss, as well as grief's best friend: anger. And yet deconstructing my faith led me into a relationship with God, myself, and the world around me that was joyful, rooted in trust, connected to truth, and abundant. My awakening in sobriety took on the same form as I went through the heartbreaking process of seeing how I had been taught lies about alcohol, such as that it has health benefits. I had to own my role in perpetuating the harm of alcohol. I had to wake up to how alcohol (its use and the criminalization of its use) is weaponized against marginalized communities and their ability to thrive, and I had to recognize how alcohol fuels internal messages of self-hatred and shame.

While the notion of deconstructing our understandings of sobriety might feel daunting, mindfulness around alcohol

invites us into the possibility of a joyful relationship with God, ourselves, and the world. When I think of the barriers before us, I'm immediately reminded of a huge part of this work that I'll keep talking about: cognitive dissonance. To put it simply, cognitive dissonance is the experience of tension between our beliefs and our actions. Because we are built to avoid discomfort, we find reasons to reject whatever information suggests we are acting outside our beliefs so that we can justify our actions. This lowers our discomfort because we've found a way to match our beliefs and actions. Different insights we hear might show us a loophole so we can try to escape the dissonance by avoiding information that would help us reckon with the disconnect between our beliefs and actions. The more I learn about alcohol, the more I realize how much time and energy our culture has spent creating structures to offer us loopholes out of our cognitive dissonance around alcohol. We construct loopholes in regard to both drinking and sobriety, which creates a double whammy.

Here's how the double whammy might unfold. Pay attention the next time a public figure with a problematic relationship with drugs or a celebrity who is in recovery gets canceled or criticized for their actions. Often the comments aren't just about whatever caught the eye of the news: people will add that the person is a drunk or an addict, making the sweeping generalization that the person never should have been trusted in the first place because of their struggle with drugs. The comments will likely make a false connection between people who struggle with substances and people who cause harm. By all means, hold people accountable for their wrong actions, but if we can't do this without making connections

that stigmatize people who struggle, we perpetuate the harm we criticize.

Even if a celebrity hasn't done something wrong, being publicly sober can bring harsh criticism. I've witnessed how, after sober comedians do something silly in a TikTok video, people in the comments start suggesting that they have probably relapsed—as if it's impossible to be entertaining without being high. These commenters might think they're just commenting on the news, but they're revealing judgment and lack of compassion for people who struggle by associating such people with harm and dishonesty. Don't forget that your friends see your comments. Message received by the sober curious: I will be judged for struggling with alcohol, whether I get sober or not, and people won't be able to trust me.

Now, couple these types of sweeping judgments with the cultural message that quitting drinking makes you boring, or that it excludes you from social connections, because we need alcohol to experience fun and community. When people tweet "a dry party isn't a party!" or complain about how boring it was to go to a dry wedding (as if a couple's job on one of the most beautiful and intimate days of their lives is to pay for us to get a buzz), their friends who are secretly sober are also on Twitter. And we can read the comments, plus the replies. Or how about the fact that churches, in an attempt to "bring in more people," offer events that are often centered on drinking—as if alcohol is the draw, a way we show possible newcomers we are "fun"? Message received by the sober curious: the people I love perceive sober people as not fun and alcohol as central to building community, and if I quit, I will lose people and communities I care about.

With these scenarios in place, the fears of judgment, losing friends, and losing community work together to keep people drinking past the point when they might want to stop or change how they drink, and these fears keep them so overwhelmed that they don't know how to ask for help. It often goes like this:

- I don't like how I drink. I have this nagging feeling that my drinking isn't good for me.
- But sobriety doesn't seem fun, exciting, or aligned with who I am or how I wish to live my life.
- I'm stuck in the dissonance. I don't like how I drink, but quitting would appear to attack my identity, given what I've been told about drinking and sobriety.
- To escape the dissonance, I'm trying to reconcile my drinking with the gut feeling that these patterns are making my life more miserable, because I'm afraid I'll lose my friends. So, even in the face of mounting evidence that I don't like how I drink and want things to change, I'm also subconsciously trying to find ways to preserve my current way of life.
- Even when someone who has quit describes their drinking in a way that captures my own drinking habits, my inner voice will counter: if you had a problem, *x*, *y*, or *z* would have happened already.
- In the swirl of the conflict, seeking a way out of the challenge, cognitive dissonance has one very specific message for me: *x*, *y*, and *z* haven't happened, so you don't have a problem—and you can't be expected to live without friends.

Cognitive dissonance rarely happens because of one specific instance. This is why the messaging—both direct and indirect—is hugely significant. What might feel like silly tweets or comments among friends are all ways in which we could be alienating people who are struggling, encouraging our friends to stay in patterns of self-harm, and showing our true beliefs to our favorite people in the world without ever realizing it. This accidental alienation, encouragement toward self-harm, and revelation of hurtful beliefs affect the souls of the both the messenger and the recipient.

The messaging I received about hurtful theology worked in much the same way. Sometimes it was direct, at other times implied. Over time, messages are received, and those messages shape how we show up in the world, whether we feel loved, whether we feel connected to God, and whether we take the chance of revealing to the outside world who we truly are inside our souls. The great news amid the challenges of messaging is that, as we have learned through so many people who are now healing from the trauma of Christian fundamentalism, healing is available. Healing from fundamentalism requires truthbearers: people willing to receive the hard truth and change their ways, acting with the courage to challenge the status quo. Healing from the harm caused by promotion of alcohol will require the same kind of truthbearers. Changing oppressive dominant messaging can bring the toxicity that threatens us out into the open, and only when we reveal the wound can healing begin.

If we let it, changing our relationship with alcohol can mean entering the joy that is equal parts terror and amazement, and inside that joy we can, as beloved children of God, be freed from some of our harm and awakened to a way of

life that lets us show up in the world more fully. Through the clarity this work provides and our decision to be sober or drink differently, we can better trust that we are loved and connected to God without the barriers of alcohol-induced shame. We can also be freed from our judgment about others, which surely brightens and lightens the soul.

I often imagine what our world, and our spiritual communities, might look like if we took a chance on revealing to the outside world who we truly are. I believe with all my soul that our world, and our spiritual lives, will thrive if we face how messages around alcohol have caused harm. But this must be done in a way that doesn't foster shame, because shame will only send us back into harm. I believe we will thrive if we turn toward healing our relationship with alcohol, such that we can release the alcohol-laden messages calling us to numb ourselves. Only then will we create a heart of spirituality that understands itself as a primary way to reduce the harm of alcohol. A sober spirituality will allow us to usher people into the fullness of who they are, release the judgment that takes us away from God and ourselves, love others deeply amid any condition of humanity, nourish the spiritual closeness that can offer peace, and bear witness to the beauty of a world full of people who are trying to be awakened to themselves, one another, and the Spirit.

## refresh and reflect

Think about some of the messages you have received over time.

- Alcohol: What do you believe alcohol offers you?
- Spiritual community: What makes being in a spiritual community meaningful?
- Identity: What parts of yourself feel most important to you?