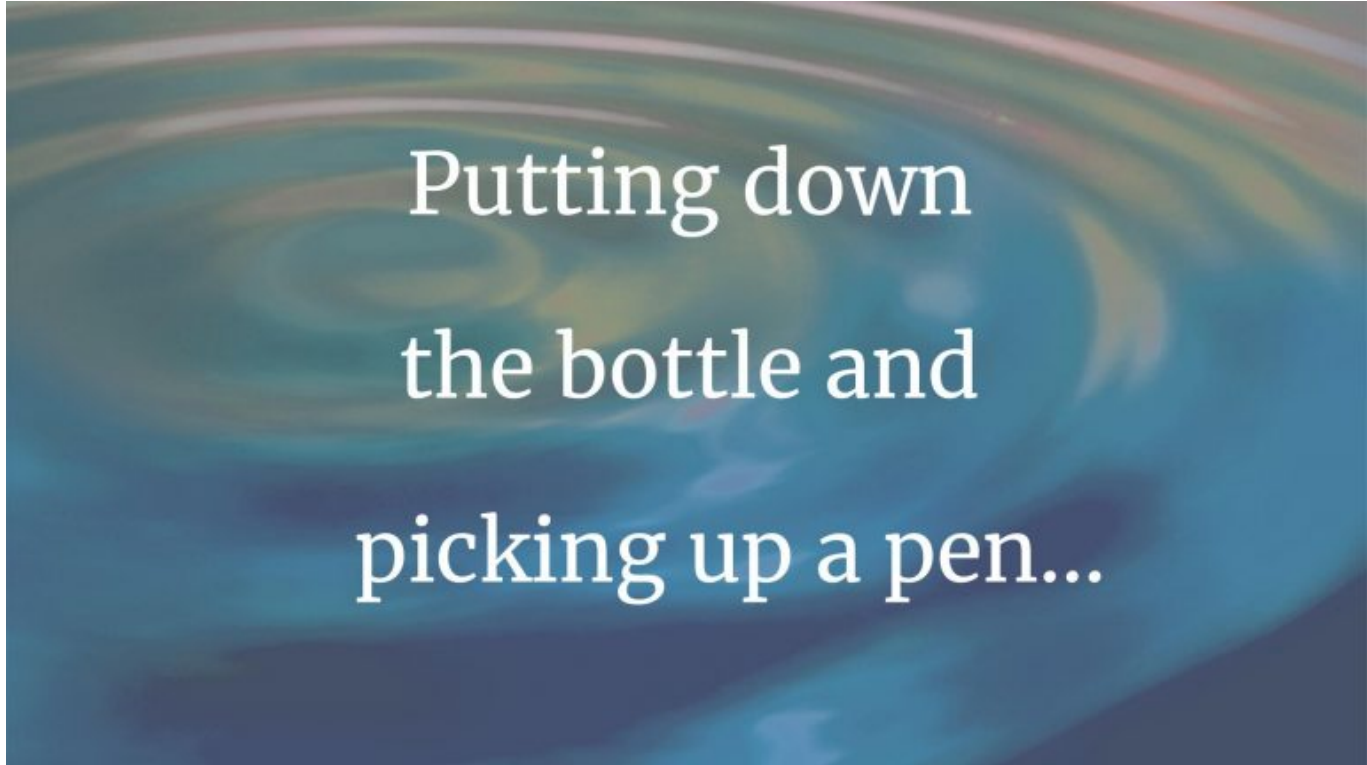


My Last Drink

Category: Stories

written by Eve Makoff | June 4, 2021



Putting down
the bottle and
picking up a pen...

The last time I had alcohol was on a blustery night in February of 2020, right before my college-age son's musical. I'd traveled from Los Angeles to his rural Ohio college campus, and I drank two glasses of cheap chardonnay in the college café with its burgundy walls and snug booths.

The next day, I roved the student bookstore, feeling transported back to my own dreamy days as an undergraduate literature student. As if tugged by an invisible thread, I made my way to the memoirs and picked up a book titled *The Recovering* by Leslie Jamison—the author's personal account of her journey out of alcoholism.

Not quite knowing why, I felt that I needed to read these pages.

I started the book on the flight home just as my throat was starting to burn—the first signs of an illness (COVID?) that would take over my life for the next few weeks. Despite my discomfort, I savored every word, starting with the opening paragraph:

The first time I ever felt it—the buzz—I was almost thirteen...We were celebrating my brother's graduation, and I wore a long muslin dress that made me feel like a child, until I felt something else: initiated, aglow. The whole world stood accused: *You never told me it felt this good.*

I saw myself in the author's story, and I wanted to linger on each phrase. I read that book every day of my illness, imbibing the pages like a life-saving

medicine.

Being between jobs, I took advantage of this rare pause to create my own memoir. Looking backwards and inwards as I pored over pictures and journals, I pieced together my own journey with alcohol.

I too had been thirteen when I started to drink. Emotionally intense and sensitive by nature, I lacked the strong core that others seemed to possess. I thought that something was wrong with me—and I drank to lessen the discomfort and numb the pain.

I realize now that my sensitivity was colliding with a message I'd received, early in life, that to think about myself, my unhappiness, was self-indulgent and unseemly.

"You'll feel better when you figure out what you want to do with your life" was the mantra in my family—words that I interpreted as: *Once you stop thinking about yourself, you'll be happy.* So escape replaced introspection, and alcohol eased the way.

I was so young that my parents couldn't bring themselves to see what was happening, despite some obvious clues. My friends and I consumed large bottles of vodka that I hid in an old shed outside my bedroom window; we tossed the empties over the back fence. When our neighbor Mrs. Fulton called to inquire about the alcohol bottles in her yard, my parents were bemused, incredulous: *"Not our kids. No way. Can you imagine?"*

There were other stumbling blocks to facing what was bothering me. In my family, our value rested on service to others. My father was a physician, my mother a scientist who looked to cure diseases. Although my early journals reflected my wish to be a writer, the idea of focusing on self-expression felt out of the question. So I too became a physician, and eventually a medical director. I felt most comfortable helping the sickest, neediest patients—people whose suffering is much greater than my own. But in ignoring the hum of my mind saying *Something is missing*, I risked losing myself.

Amid the inner dissonance between my need to write and create, and the daily care that I gave to patients, my alcohol use blossomed. I drank to close the gulf between myself and others, to numb the sad feelings and to evade the voice inside telling me that I needed more in my life.

I didn't ever drink the way I thought an "alcoholic" would. Sure, I overindulged at parties, but I never got in trouble with the law, at work or in relationships. When I had three children in five years, I even gave up drinking completely. But later in life I settled into a few nightly glasses—a salve for the overwhelm of long days as a doctor, the usual relationship stresses and the challenge of balancing childrearing and work.

Did my husband and children notice a difference in me, once I settled in for the night with my glass of white wine? Did they see me drift away into a hazy place inside, where things felt easier to manage? Sometimes they did. But I'm also a quiet person by nature, and they accepted whatever I needed to do.

They knew that I worked hard—at medicine and at home.

As I began writing my memoir, I saw what I'd been doing to myself: stunting my emotional growth and hurting my health.

During the pandemic year, through coaching, therapy and writing, I delved into the feelings that had felt so unmanageable—conflicts at work and at home, the needs I thought that I had no right to express, the sadness that sometimes just lingered. I let the sensations of anger, frustration and depression press through my chest, tighten my center. And I learned that I could survive them without running away.

Initially, I didn't realize that recovery would require that I stop drinking completely. But as my body healed, my mind realized that I was stronger sober. And I never did have another drink after that windy night in Ohio.

Writing about my sensitivity—my lifelong aptitude for sponge-like absorption of every emotion in the room—I've discovered that, paradoxically, it is also my strength.

I now find my value in the powerful threads that silently, deeply, connect me to my patients, my colleagues and my family. And in my role as a medical director, I help to facilitate our expressions of collective grief in this year of pandemic devastation.

During my self-exploration, the terrain has felt treacherous at times—seeing my uncertain face in faded old pictures, reading my desperate poetry about not fitting in, about wanting to die. But in the process I've come closer to wholly embracing myself—both my skills and my soft heart—and the ways that I've contributed to my family and the world.

And living one year without alcohol, in a pandemic, has shown me that I don't need to look away or disappear. Instead, I can pause. I can dig in. I can learn. And I can grow.