

# The drinking business

by Michael Finley

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"What Ails You?"

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Watching old movies, I'm struck by a recurring motif, where the businessman welcomes the visitor to his office and routinely pours him a drink of golden whiskey from a crystal decanter.

You got the feeling you'd get the whiskey if you'd just come in to pay your gas bill.

Which made me think two things. First: *Gee, they went out of their way to pack a few drinks into all those scenes. I'll bet it gave the actors something to do with their hands.*

Then, staring into the teacup of merlot I had nestled in my palm: *Hmm.*

After 100,000 years of practice, alcohol intake remains one of mankind's more sought-after biophysical rituals. Within moments of swallowing, the alcohol seeps into the stomach lining and radiates through the body and brain.

The reliability of alcohol is due to the size of its molecules. Where other substances are blocked from breaching the body's blood-brain barrier -- I know, that's a lot of *b's* -- alcohol is waved right in.

The instantaneous effects feel more social or spiritual to us than molecular: giddiness, conviviality, ebullience, euphoria. It's cheap, quick, and easy. For the moment, we set aside the potential for disintegration, death, and, somewhere between the two, job loss.

## Reason to celebrate

I have been pondering the relationship between alcohol and work. There are so many reasons to drink. We drink when we're successful. We drink after hours when we're gutting out a tough job, to relax ourselves. We drink to handle the stress of too much change, and we drink when there is not enough change, and we get bored. And we drink when a project goes kablooey, to console ourselves.

When you stand back and see that pattern, you start to wonder if one's true business isn't the drinking, and the phones and in-boxes are just props. Win, lose, or draw, your whistle gets wetted.

Depending on your occupation, the risk can be even higher. Soldiers, journalists, and traveling salesmen experience above-average levels of alcoholism. Explanations include the availability of alcohol, peer pressure, and lack of supervision.

Men appear to turn to the bottle more as a result of occupational stress can. One study found that men employed in high-stress jobs (jobs placing high psychological demands on them but allowing them low personal control) were 27 times more likely to experience

alcohol abuse or dependence than men in low strain jobs. The same occupational pattern didn't hold true for women.

It varies from country to country, and ethnicity to ethnicity. My Irish ancestors were terrifically susceptible. As my father, who had problems holding down a job before he quit drinking at age 55, once testified to me: "I know my limits. Problem is, I'm always drunk before I reach them."

Alcoholism was the first disease of leisure. As hunters morphed into farmers, there was time, and grain, to make merry with. As alcohol delivery technology improved, people suffered. In the 1700s London was afflicted with "gin disease," as people struggled to quaff distilled spirits by the glassful, as they did with beer and wine.

A recent CNN report says that vodka has killed almost as many Russians since World War II as the war itself -- 27 million<sup>i</sup>. In Japan, the tradition of getting-soused-on-the-Ginza-and-telling-your-boss-the-things-you-could-never-tell-him-sober-and-in-the-morning-you-can-all-pretend-you-drank-too-much-to-remember, seems to be a major safety valve for their overwrought business culture.

It was worse here once. Statistics from the 1830s<sup>ii</sup> -- the high water mark in American binge-drinking -- suggest that the average American over 15 drank 7 gallons of spirits annually.

Gradually, we've cut back. By the 1970s the "three-martini lunch" was common enough to be a cliché. No one talks about them any more. The continuous improvement movement came down hard on auto workers polishing off a quart of beer at midshift. Drunken workers and six sigma quality just didn't jive.

"Drinking is almost like tobacco now," says Greg Amer, medical director of adult chemical dependency program at Fairview University Hospitals. "It's socially unacceptable to get drunk at a business event. A person with alcohol tolerance has to have a drink or two before an event, to feel like it's a party."

## **Still and all**

Despite these advances, our drinking habits remain a closely guarded secret. No one in the office knows who's doing what on their own time. All you know is who's "obvious" from the official telltale signs (work quality falling off, absenteeism, experiencing accidents on the job, dressing down even when it's not Friday).

The best part of looking for a guy that matches that description is that it takes the rest of us off the hook. *Me, an alcoholic? I'm just a social drinker. Plus those two I take to get me sleepy at night.*<sup>iii</sup> *Plus that bottle I stash in the hedgerow. And the one in the safe deposit box.*

We drink, but we function pretty admirably. We're not mean to our families, we attend the church or synagogue of our choice. It's really just a hobby. Indeed, if you don't join in, you're not a team player.

Your company can have the best intentions about alcohol and still not have an effect. A recent survey from the Hazelden Foundation uncovered something disturbing: even when

companies are farsighted enough to offer workers chemical dependency programs, many workers are afraid to take advantage of them.

Fears range from losing their jobs to falling off the promotion pathway to losing a license to practice.

"The stigma," says Carol Falkowski, director of research at Hazelden, "is still with us."

Hazelden VP William Moyers lays it on the line: "Left untreated, alcoholism can be a fatal disease. Millions of employees need substance abuse services, but they don't ask for them, because they're afraid of consequences."

Managers have to communicate to workers that they have nothing to fear. Of course, for that to be true, it has to *be* true. Are your workers safe to get healthy?

"The thing employers need to know is that treatment really works," says Mark Willenbring, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Minnesota and director of addictive disorders at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center. "Drinking is not a reason to give up on a worker."

The other thing, he says, is that people are desperate to be treated, but afraid. When his research team advertised for guinea pigs to test a new alcohol dependency drug, they were flooded by volunteers. "All had jobs and insurance," Willenbring says, "but they came to us because we promised privacy."

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Sidebar:

### **Just the Facts<sup>iv</sup>**

- There are thought to be 18 million hardcore alcoholics in the U.S.
- These 18 million people can expect to live 25 years less than the rest of us -- that's 450 million years of lost productivity and squandered training.
- Alcohol is thought to contribute to nearly 100,000 deaths a year.
- Women die more often from alcoholism than men because alcohol affects their bodies more negatively -- higher incidences of cirrhosis, circulatory disorders, and other illnesses.
- Alcohol is a contributing factor in about half of all homicides and a third of all suicides.
- Alcohol damage is permanent: 95% of alcoholics and 67% of heavy social drinkers have abnormal CAT scans.

The message coming through is that while we may insist that we can handle the bottle, the bottle is handling us.

Years ago, I was a student in a nonfiction class at The Loft, a Minneapolis-based writing program. The teacher was Lewis Hyde, an essayist with a knack for digging around at the mythological level of things to better understand our daily struggles.

Hyde suggested in a famous essay on the Minneapolis poet (and chronic alcoholic) John Berryman that alcohol is more than a hydrocarbon, that it is a distilled "spirit" that we turn to much as we would turn to a religious one, that drinking is a dance we do with death in order to feel like heroes. It's the same reason kids smoke cigarettes: by embracing death, they acquire leverage over their lives.

They're not being stupid. They know what they're doing. Hyde says they are choosing intoxication by an evil spirit rather than risking true inspiration from a healthy spirit, because, irony of ironies, health scares some people more than death. Drinking is their business.

That's why AA stresses the Higher Power -- because in the battle to overcome an evil spirit, you need some kind of good juju on your side. It's awful tough to do it alone, because the evil spirit has your number.

I remember because, years ago, as a student at the U, I was a big admirer of Berryman's and had it in my mind to sign up for his famous proseminar in American literature. I loved his dream images, that drew on old movies and songs -- like the decanter of whiskey in every executive suite.

And one wintry day while I was bicycling on the north side of the Washington Avenue bridge, John Berryman, who tried to quit many times but was unable to, and who saw his career and his place in American letters evaporate in a shimmering golden haze, climbed onto the railing on the south side and, they say, waved goodbye before letting go.

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Sidebar:

### **Are you an alcoholic?\***

Tough questions from Alcoholics Anonymous

- Do you wish people would mind their own business about your drinking?
- Has your drinking caused trouble at home?
- Do you ever try to get "extra" drinks at a party because you do not get enough?
- Do you tell yourself you can stop drinking anytime you want to, but you don't stop?
- Have you ever felt your life would be better if you didn't drink?

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<sup>i</sup> Johnson's Russia List, <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/6032-6.cfm>

<sup>ii</sup> Michigan State University

<sup>iii</sup> International standardized conversion table for defensive drinkers: TWO DRINKS = FOUR DRINKS.

<sup>iv</sup> Sources: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 1990; Institute for Health Policy, 1993; Journal of the American Medical Association, November, 1993; NIAAA, 1990; Secretary of Health and Human Services, 1993; Hazelden Foundation Statistics, 1997; Cala & Mastaglia, 1980

<sup>v</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/>