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Achieving sobriety: A narrative investigation of women, identity, and relationships

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Achieving Sobriety: A Narrative Investigation of Women, Identity, and Relationships

by

Cara T. Mackie

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Dedication

To my advisor, teacher, and mentor, Dr. Arthur P. Bochner. Thank you for all your support and encouragement.

To my committee members, Dr. Carolyn Ellis, Dr. Stacy Holman Jones, Dr. James Cavendish, and Dr. Linda Chamberlain. Thank you for guiding me through this process. Thank you Linda for helping me discover the beauty of a sober life.

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To my niece, Nicole. May you grow to be a confident, strong, beautiful woman.

To the brave participants who shared with me their life stories and gave me the courage to complete this project. Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I explore the question of how women alcoholics achieve sobriety. Using narrative inquiry, I focus on the identity transformation that must occur in order to maintain sobriety and how a drinking self is deconstructed and reconstructed as a sober self.

Today, alcoholism is still viewed as stigmatizing in our society and in all Western cultures. The stigma of alcoholism makes it difficult for alcoholics to communicate their experiences to people who have not had similar experiences. However, storytelling in the presence of supportive people has been shown to be a prominent factor in the process of recovery for women and men. Over a period of a year, three women and I shared and reconstructed our experiences of living an alcoholic life, comparing and contrasting that life to our experiences we went through as we struggled to achieve sobriety. I elicited and listened to stories of drinking experiences, family, dating, turning points, and commitment to creating a sober lifestyle. I also reviewed and analyzed the stories told in memoirs written by three alcoholic women.

Through narrative, my participants and I made sense of why drinking was central to our lives and how our life stories were reconstructed and reframed as we tried to achieve sobriety. Our stories challenge the canonical narrative of the alcoholic, providing

multiple perspectives on these issues and giving voice to such silenced experiences as how to cope with shyness, the self-defeating thought process associated with the contradictions inherent in a drinking life, the turning points that can inspire women to give up drinking for good, and the relational consequences of committing to sobriety. The experiences shared in the stories told by these women give texture and depth to our understanding of the lived experiences of women alcoholics and the road they must travel to achieve self-respect and self-love through sobriety.

Prologue

This dissertation began with my own quest to imagine a narrative of sobriety that could provide a foundation for living a sober life. While enrolled in a Ph.D. seminar entitled Narrative Inquiry, I was asked to read and present a report on Arthur Frank's (1995) book, *The Wounded Storyteller*. At the time, I was still abusing alcohol, but I also was searching for a different life, one that would allow me to develop a more complete and prideful self. As I read through the chapters of his book, I found myself in Frank's (1995) definition of a quest story (p. 115). I wanted to be what Frank (1995) called "a communicative body," one no longer silenced. I began, hesitantly at first, to write my story of alcohol abuse, hoping to move into a new body free of shame that I could comfortably exist in and trust. When I gave my presentation, I shared my own wounds candidly. For the first time, I detailed my history of alcohol abuse, grief, and fear to an audience of my peers. I felt exposed, but also encouraged and proud.

I began to search for other stories of women and alcohol. I wanted to validate my experience and to know that I wasn't alone. I found Carolyn Knapp's (1996) *Drinking: A Love Story* memoir. This was the only text that helped and consoled me, while I was coming to terms with the idea that I had to quit drinking. I was using alcohol for every social interaction; I had been in multiple drinking-related car accidents; I felt guilty about drinking too much; I tried to slow down and drink only one or two drinks. Then, I tried to quit altogether, but after three months convinced myself that drinking wasn't the

problem. I blacked out almost every time I drank. I couldn't have just one drink. I was becoming violent when I drank and sad the morning after. I hated myself.

After attending a birthday party, where I was planning on just stopping by, but ended up blacking out and drinking all night, I laid in bed hung-over. Years of drinking flashed before me, my body shaking, head pounding, eyes blood shot. I started to wonder how this could happen. How could I stop by for one drink, then end up so wasted that I blacked out and stayed out all night? It didn't make sense to me. I knew that my drinking wasn't normal. These experiences would continue to happen, if I didn't do something-- and soon.

During the next year (2003), I committed myself to sobriety and began to feel empowered, enlightened, and encouraged. However, four months into sobriety, I found myself confused, crying all the time and depressed. I didn't know what was happening. A friend gave me the number of a support group on campus that she had attended for three years. This was an open group, dealing with general issues related to post-adolescent struggles. After making the call, I was referred to a *Friends and Family of Alcoholics* group. I started to attend this support group and found out that I needed the support and help of others who had similar experiences to help me make sense of my past. This was a rough time, and drinking sometimes seemed like a better alternative. Fortunately, I began individual counseling, where I was able to go deeper into what alcohol did to and for me.

I began to share my story openly and candidly and started researching the literature on alcohol abuse. Then I hit a point where I had retold and relived all that I could. I was moving away from my wounded body and wanted to live in the present instead of report on the past. I abandoned this research for one year out of a selfish, but

necessary, attempt to feel free of my alcoholic past. However, my story was already out there for others to read, analyze, and retell. This project became personal, grounded in my own life history. This project situates me in a sober life, contributing to my own sobriety.

Other people would pull me aside to confide in me, ask me questions, and ask me to share. I began to see that my voice gave others a point of connection and courage to share, which in turn, helped them stay sober. Women were telling me their stories, and some were telling their stories for the first time. I could see that these stories needed a voice so I returned to this project with a better understanding of what it meant to be a wounded storyteller and a renewed energy to engage in and with a larger conversation about women and sobriety. Thus, this dissertation was borne of my own life history and became a way of better understanding what it means and what it takes to live a sober life. I offer this dissertation as a gift to women like me who seek the comfort provided by stories of other women's struggles to achieve self-respect and sobriety.

Chapter 1

Introduction

‘Click, Clack, Click, Clack,’ my high heels drum on the beige-swirled marble floors. This restaurant is elegant. I admire the view, and a grand piano plays in the background.

“Hope you enjoy your dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Barron,” the Armani’s hostess remarks as our host grabs two menus and guides us to our seats. “Mr. and Mrs.,” I trouble in my mind. “I am not a Mrs., and if I were I would not have taken his last name.” My partner, James, smirks at me as if he is reading my mind.

“Feel free to enjoy some music after dinner,” the host says, pointing to a sitting area located next to a piano being played by a young lady in a ballroom gown. I look over the piano and gaze at the blue water. We are at the top of the Hyatt Hotel overlooking Tampa Bay, and the sun is beginning to set. What beauty beholds me!

“To your left is our wine cellar. We have a wine list at your table,” the host continues.

I glance over and take a deep breath. Wine bottles are stacked from beneath the floor level all the way up the vaulted ceiling. I exhale. We continue past the antipasto display, which is even more impressive than the wine cellar. I gaze at the food encased in glass. Jumbo shrimp, fresh calamari, oysters, littleneck clams, caviar, mussels, and scallops decorate the first half of the display. Various types of olives, cheeses, and

mushrooms marinate. Tomatoes, asparagus, vegetable salads, and various seafood salads finish the grand display. Finally, we arrive at our seats.

“Anthony will be around to get your drink order. Jake will take your food order, and if you need anything my name is Dominick. We will all be serving you tonight,” Dominick concludes. He exits, and I gaze out the window to my right at the sun slowly setting over the bay.

“Three servers. This menu looks amazing. We have to have the lobster martini salad,” I suggest as I glance over the menu.

“Champagne?” Anthony holds a bottle of crisp champagne over his right arm, leaning it against his forearm.

“No, thanks. We are not drinking,” my partner takes charge of the moment. He does so with such ease. I contemplate what I would have said, “No, thank you. Not tonight,” or, “We will have just water for now.” I would have blurted out some excuse for why we are not drinking, some justification for turning down a drink. I’d make sure everyone knows that I am not drinking for now, not that I won’t be drinking alcohol ever again.

Although, I feel comfortable having romantic dinners without alcohol or drinking just water at a bar or nightclub, I still feel a little awkward turning down a drink. When I say that I am not drinking there is more to it. It’s a choice, yes. However, the choice is connected to the many nights I blacked out. I decided to quit drinking because I have an abusive relationship to alcohol. I can’t drink normally; I have to accept that I will never be a normal drinker. I firmly believe this is the right choice for me, but I feel stigmatized by it, different from ‘normal’ people.

Since I still look so young, maybe people will think that I am not drinking because I am under the legal drinking age. Maybe some people don't think twice about it. Maybe I overestimate what others could be thinking. But when I look around this restaurant, I am reaffirmed. Every table has one candle burning and a half empty bottle of wine. Alcohol is everywhere.

The waiter fills our water glasses with sparkling water and grabs the wine list off our table. He returns with another bottle in hand. He slowly places this bottle over his right arm, nods, and says, "Non-Alcoholic."

"What a nice gesture," I think.

He pours James a drink. I watch. My partner takes a sip and nods back, "Very good." The waiter pours mine. The ambiance is set.

"The sun is scheduled to set at 8:35 p.m.," James says, pointing out the window as one of the waiters raises the blinds directly in front of us.

"It is such a clear night. Did you look up the schedule to plan our dinner at sunset?" I ask, sipping from my champagne glass.

"Maybe," James lifts his glass, "Cheers."

Sometimes it is just the motion of drinking that makes me feel better, the feelings of glass touching my lips. My body is tricked at first, releasing the same chemicals it would release, if I had been drinking alcohol. But soon my body recognizes (with relief) that this is NA. I feel relieved.

*

After dinner, my partner and I head for dessert and coffee. “I know the perfect place,” James says, and he takes us to a jazz club close to the restaurant. As we enter, I notice a few people smoking.

“I wonder if they are still serving food?” I ask. James shrugs his shoulders as he scans the menu. I notice a sign on each table: two-drink minimum. I ignore the sign because I have found chocolate fudge cheesecake. YUMMY!

Our waitress is an older woman with brittle-bleached hair. She wears a long tuxedo jacket and black stockings and appears to be the only one working.

“I wonder if they are still serving,” I repeat.

“It is only desert,” James responds.

“Yeah, but there are people smoking, and you can’t serve food if there are people smoking,” I obsess feeling suffocated by the smoke, the bottles, and the drinkers. Why shouldn’t I enjoy a night at a jazz bar? Two-drink minimum.

The waitress finally stops at our table. “We would like the chocolate cheesecake,” my partner begins.

“Kitchen’s closed. It closes at 10 p.m.,” she replies.

“Oh, darn. We were really looking forward to dessert,” James sighs.

“It’s real good, but everyone from the kitchen is gone,” she restates.

“We will have two decaf coffees,” I state.

“We don’t have decaf,” she says still smiling. I am sure she is getting just as frustrated as I am. We are obviously not going to be a big money-making table for her. Most of the people surrounding us are pretty tipsy and empty glasses line the bar. James grabs my knee under the table, looking at me. We don’t drink much caffeine either, and it

is 11 p.m. I feel put on the spot and a ton of pressure. I want to listen to music, but I want to get up and leave even more. Two-drink minimum stares at me.

“We will have two coffees then,” I reply.

“Just so you know all of our drinks are cocktail price. Our coffee and coke is cocktail price, so you might as well get something in the coffee,” she informs us, leaning in towards me.

I look at the price: \$7. That’s one expensive coffee. I want her to go away.

“We don’t drink,” James says, affirming our stance, “The coffees will be fine.”

“I will have to make a fresh pot, but you can have as many refills as you’d like,” she responds. I am not sure how to read that comment. On the one hand, she makes it sound as if we are inconveniencing her. On the other, she tells us we can have free refills.

What are we going to order next? Do we have to order two drinks? All I wanted to do was have chocolate cheesecake and listen to music.

“I am sorry. We can go somewhere else. The music is good here, but I don’t want to put you in this situation,” James rambles, hoping to salvage the night.

“It is not your fault. I can’t believe they don’t have decaf. They don’t make this place very NA friendly,” I reply, scanning the bar. Middle-aged men and women sit at the bar talking over each other. It is a Wednesday night and these regulars fill the room, drinking the night away. Our coffees finally arrive. I figured she had forgotten about us or wasn’t as concerned since we weren’t racking up the drinks.

“This is a fresh pot. I really like coffee,” she whispers in my ear, trying to ease the discomfort.

“What did she just say?” my partner asks with a slight raise of the brow.

“That she really likes coffee,” I am confused by her actions and comments. I figure maybe she knows that I can’t drink. Maybe she respects our decision not to drink? Maybe she wonders why we came here if we were not going to drink?

“We can order sparkling water next because I won’t have another cup of coffee,” I tell James.

“I am really sorry that this place is…” James begins.

“Don’t worry. It doesn’t bother me. I may come back sometime with my friends who do drink. It’s not comfortable for just the two of us. I feel more at ease when we are out at places like this with our friends who still drink,” I justify, finishing off my coffee.

“I feel liberated saying I don’t drink. It feels empowering,” James enforces. It’s easier for James because he doesn’t have a drinking problem. Why do I sometimes feel embarrassed and ashamed to say I don’t drink? Is it because I know I cannot drink? Is it because I would like to drink? Is it because I feel an overwhelming pressure to drink? Damned if I do, damned if I don’t. It’s a double bind.

The waitress starts to fill up our coffee cups again.

“We’ll have a bottled water,” James requests, “And you can bring us the check.”

*

My alcohol abusing past scars me. A romantic night out becomes a reminder of the choices I’ve made. My partner had to specially request Sparkling Cider for our dinner that night. This restaurant did not carry non-alcoholic champagne, and they had to order it for our night. “I still wanted to have a toast, and we needed something with bubbles,” James informed. We had our toast. The night was wonderful in so many ways, yet still left us with much to ponder about our choices. For example, that jazz bar. A two-drink

minimum is a ‘do not enter sign’ for recovering alcoholics. I can’t enter. From this side of the glass, I am aware of how much alcohol dominates our conversations and our lives. I live outside the social norm of drinking lives. I do not drink. I do not want to drink. But I also don’t want others to react to me as if I’m some kind of freak. I want to not feel ashamed that I can’t drink.

In this dissertation, I investigate the lived experience of sobriety for the purpose of helping women better understand the difficult transition to abstinence. Denzin (1987a) stated that a recovering or drinking alcoholic “shows us how far we may have to go before we are forced to change our lives and the social structure that we live in” (p. 202). The vicious cycle of relapse and addiction creeps through each recovering alcoholic. Vaillant (1983; 1995) reminded, “the damage it causes falls not only on the alcoholic themselves but on their families and friends as well—and this damage touches one American family out of three” (p. 1). I want other women to be able to find the resources they need and to use this text to help them as Knapp (1996) helped me. It is hard enough to admit that she needs help, and even harder to motivate to find help. I aim to fill in the gaps I found when I searched for help. A conversation on sobriety and alcoholism can help individuals in situations similar to mine, trying to sustain sobriety in a drinking culture and ease the dissonance felt in recovery.

*

This chapter begins with a story to help situate the reader in a drinking world from a recovering alcoholic’s view, introducing dilemmas and experiences faced by an alcoholic that can challenge her sobriety. These events happened to me, and I recreated the scene in as much detail to capture the experience as I remember it. Chapter Two

continues this conversation on drinking with a review of research literature on alcoholism and abstinence, women and alcohol, identity transformation in sobriety, close relationships and sobriety, and the body and addiction.

In Chapter Three, I review and analyze three drinking memoirs written by women. My goal is to give more depth and detail to the issues about women and drinking seen in Chapter Two. These memoirs leave us to wonder what happens to a woman after she quits drinking, which is the focus of my narrative chapters. Chapter Four details my methods for collecting these narratives and how I represent my interpretations of each story. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven represent the stories my participants told about their drinking lives and their sober lives. In Chapter Eight, I conclude with a discussion of each woman's story, the common language used to discuss the appeal of drinking, contradictions and fantasies that occur in these stories, and epiphanies that turned these women toward sobriety. I then share my analysis of what these stories mean and what it takes for each woman to transform into a sober self.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

“If we do not take the first drink, we never get drunk.”

-Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1991, p. 5

A recovering alcoholic avoids the first drink because she knows part of her wants to get drunk. Why play games and think, “I can have just one?” In *Living Sober*, the Alcoholics Anonymous World Services or A.A.W.S. (1991) offered a glimpse into sobriety, outlining methods for not only staying sober, but living sober: “instead of planning never to get drunk, or trying to limit the number of drinks or the amounts of alcohol, we have learned to concentrate on avoiding only one drink: the first drink” (p. 5). Avoiding that first drink is common rhetoric used in recovery texts on alcohol abuse (A.A.W.S., 1991; Bateson, 1972; Denzin, 1987a; Knapp, 1997; Vaillant, 1983, 1995). The phrases ‘one day at a time, one hour at a time, one step at a time’ cheer on many recovering alcoholics facing the temptation of the bottle. She negotiates what it means to and how she can successfully live sober among a drinking population. This chapter begins our conversation on alcohol and sobriety by first looking at numbers on alcohol abuse and then introducing us to the transitions that occur in sobriety.

Background

A call for sobriety. We live in a drinking world. As far back as 1966, Kinsey reported that “Approximately seventy million individuals in the United States drink

alcoholic beverages of some type and the figure will reach 100 million by 1970” (Kinsey, 1966, p. 3). And one out of thirteen adults or four to five million drinkers were classified alcoholic and two million more were problem drinkers (Kinsey, 1966). In 2001, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reported, “Nearly 14 million Americans-1 in 13 adults- abuse alcohol or are alcoholic. In addition, 53% of men and women in the United States report that one or more of their close relatives have a drinking problem” (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2001, para. 2). Three years later, in 2004, a study conducted by The Mayo Clinic found, “18 million Americans abuse alcohol” (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2004, para. 3). More specifically, the National Mental Health Association (2005) reported that up to 15% of adults are alcoholics or will become alcoholics. “Ten million Americans are alcoholics, and another 10 million are problem drinkers who may be on their way to becoming alcoholics” (National Mental Health Association, 2005, para. 4). Alcoholism is an epidemic.

Since the 1960s, the number of reported alcoholics and alcohol abusers has increased proportionately to the increase of population. The reported numbers maintain the status quo, meaning that prevalence of alcoholism has neither increased nor decreased. In the United States, alcohol is pervasive and drinking is a widely accepted and normative activity. Indeed, despite the large number of lives ruined by alcohol and drinking, alcoholism has not decreased over the years, and sobriety is still a stigmatizing marker. Denzin (1987a) articulated:

If, during the active stages of her alcoholism, the alcoholic also stood outside of the boundaries of society, then now, in recovery she is doubly outside that society. That is, by no longer drinking, the alcoholic can now pass as a ‘normal’ within

society. But this is a duplicitous ‘normalcy,’ for the recovering alcoholic carries the previous label of having been an alcoholic. And, knowing this, she looks somewhat askance at the normal world that previously judged her, knowing that it does not understand alcoholism as she does. (p. 168)

She is now marked as alcoholic and female. In 1985, Beider, O’Hagan, and Whiteside (1985) observed a trend linking women and drinking: “more women are consuming more alcohol, drinking is beginning at an earlier age, more women are drinking in public, the male preponderance in alcoholism is gradually diminishing” (p. 80). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office for Substance Abuse Prevention (1991) reported:

Although women drink less than men, the number of women who do drink is significant. Estimates indicate that of the 15.1 million people who abuse alcohol or are alcohol-dependent, 4.6 million are women. That means that roughly one-third of alcoholics are women. (para. 1)

The Pennsylvania State University Health Services (2002) found, “More women drink now than ever before. There are an estimated 2.25 million women with alcohol-related problems in the United States today” (para. 7). Diaz & Pino (2002) stated, “There are more than 2 million female alcoholics and their numbers are increasing faster than male alcoholics” (p. 4). Kirkpatrick (1999) reported a significantly higher number stating, “There are an estimated 7,500,000 women alcoholics in the United States alone” (para. 13). NIAAA (2005) reported, “An estimated 5.3 million women in the United States drink in a way that threatens their health, safety, and general well-being” (para. 13).

Some researchers have suggested that this increase in women alcoholics could be due to the rise in actually reporting female alcoholism (see Hornik, 1977, p. 17). Although the above researchers may have conflicting numbers, these studies represent a uniform need to better understand and recognize women and alcoholism.

In the past, studies of alcoholism have focused mainly on males, but as noted, previously, females are just as acutely affected by alcohol. The NIAAA (2006) suggested a gender bias begins with diagnosis: “Primary care physicians may fail to accurately identify women with alcohol use disorders because women tend to seek treatment for nonspecific health complaints, nervousness, anxiety, or insomnia” (para. 14). They also reported, however, that when women do seek help for alcohol abuse and follow through with a treatment program she was “nine times more likely to be abstinent than women who did not complete (*a program*), whereas men who completed treatment were only three times more likely to be abstinent than men who did not complete treatment” (NIAAA, 2006, para. 17). According to this study, women are more likely to stay sober once they get sober through treatment. This finding points to the need for more access to treatment for women addicted to alcohol. Greater focus on the lived experiences of women drinkers may help us better understand why women have a higher rate of recovery and abstinence when they complete these programs.

Getting sober. In the *Alcoholic Self*, Denzin (1987a) wrote about the divided, sober/intoxicated, self. He analyzed the alcoholic’s lived experience based on data from recovery meetings, detoxification gatherings, and interviews with recovering alcoholics over a five-year period of time. His study concentrated on the temporal alcoholic self and the speech patterns of AA that guided the self to sobriety. Denzin (1987a) concluded,

“Becoming sober involves living a nondrinking self into existence” (p.170). Looking straight at the Vodka label and stating, ‘Not today. Not this time. I do not drink.’

In order to live this transformation, an alcoholic must focus on the now, the sober now. A.A.W.S. (1991) suggested, “We can endure the temporary discomfort of not drinking for just one more hour; then one more, and so on” (p. 6). As she struggles through these hours, “we accept it (*alcoholism*) as a characteristic of our body...And instead of persisting on drinking, we prefer to figure out, and use, enjoyable ways of living without alcohol” (A.A.W.S., 1991, p. 9). In sobriety a female is not only figuring out how to not drink, but also how to find ‘enjoyable ways of living without alcohol.’

The phrase ‘without alcohol’ lingers, and I think about my body. Bodily pleasure. Living. Avoiding that first drink means living. Staying active. Replacing the thought, ‘I will not have a drink’ with ‘I will not have a drink because I have to go to the gym and train for my open water swim.’ I give myself something to take away from sobriety instead of denying my body and myself a drink (A.A.W.S., 1991; Kirkpatrick, 1990; Knapp, 1999; Valliant, 1995). Give my body something (an athletic goal to complete) instead of depriving it of an addiction. Fulfilling my goals, reminds me I am better in sobriety.

The further into sobriety she goes, the easier it becomes to forget the consequences of alcohol abuse. Eventually, the alcoholic discovers that staying sober “turns out to be not at all grim, boring, and uncomfortable, as we had feared but rather something we begin to enjoy...” (A.A.W.S., 1991, About that Title section, para. 5). We find eventually life in sobriety becomes less dramatic and less traumatic--no blacking out, causing scenes in bars, waking up next to strangers, calling friends and family at 4 a.m.,

and uncontrollable tears--life is clearer and stable. However, living sober means she allows herself to feel more. She will feel joy and pain. She can no longer mute her pain with alcohol and must learn how to cope with life's trials and tribulations. As Vaillant (1995) observed, "Not only are there problems of self-esteem, but there are also tangible deficits in life experience that must be made-up" (p. 276).

Vaillant and his colleagues (1983, 1995) conducted a longitudinal study of 600 men for 45 years (p. vii). Vaillant participated in this research for the later third of the study. The research included a combination of questionnaires and interviews conducted every few years starting with men in high school and following them through adulthood. The research team identified men with drinking problems and alcoholics. They traced the alcoholic's path through recovery, relapse and, in some cases, death. The author used this study to challenge ideas of disease or vice and definitions of alcoholism. He also analyzed various treatment choices. Fifteen years after his first text was published, Vaillant (1995) revised and updated this text. In his revisions, he concluded, "not that abstinence is good, but that uncontrolled, symptomatic abuse of alcohol is painful" (Vaillant, 1995, p. 277). He continued to give options for modified behavior treatment, but stated, "...it is equally important for them (*researchers promoting modified behavior*) to appreciate that abstinence may be a more practical and statistically a more useful therapeutic focus" (Vaillant, 1995, p. 303). However, abstinence can introduce a harsh reality as she begins to recognize that by not drinking she is about to change everything she once knew.

According to the *Living Sober* authors (1991), in the beginning, the words 'stay sober'--let alone *live sober*--offended many. Vaillant (1995) also recognized abstinence

as “an enormous stress to both recovering alcoholics and consumptives” (p. 276). A person must begin anew. Part of this stress that Vaillant (1995) discussed occurs from figuring out how to live sober. Smith (1992) added, “Recovery is progressive; as we work through the process of self-discovery, cleansing, and reconstruction, we change” (p. 120).

In Denzin’s (1987b) second book on alcoholism and recovery, *The Recovering Alcoholic*, he detailed this transformation. Denzin (1987b) focused on the treatment process and gathered field notes from AA meetings and treatment facilities that concentrate on inpatient therapy. He noted, “The recovering alcoholic, who I define as once-active alcoholic who no longer drinks, undergoes radical transformations in identity as the drinking self of the past is let go of” (Denzin, 1987b, p. 11). He continued to watch this change and examined the reworking of self and identity one goes through during group therapy, finding a sober identity and self. Denzin (1987b) stated, “Recovery turns on the relearning of emotional feelings” (p. 21). The individual is faced with the now, the real, and the sober feeling.

We can see the power and importance of this transformation in *Living Sober*, where A.A.W.S. (1991) discussed and called for a recovering alcoholic to stay and live sober. This text highlighted the positive outcomes of sobriety and how to stay sober in order to encourage and promote sobriety. However, I found that some alcoholics’ recovery stories show that often they will face many hours of sobriety alone, contemplating their ‘new’ and ‘old’ selves. She wonders if not drinking is really as rewarding as she’d hoped. Caroline Knapp (1999), a recovering alcoholic who wrote *Drinking: A Love Story* (1996), reminded us in her article Sober Truth (1999), “Sobriety is hard. No way around it” (para. 4). Knapp wrote this article five years into her sobriety,

and she explained that the first two years were triumphant, but she still felt inadequate in life. Avoiding the triggers to her longings meant ‘less fine dining, more take-out Chinese; fewer parties, more TV.’ Her life experiences shifted from late night happy hours at the bar to early movie nights on the couch. Once she learned to avoid these triggers and stay sober, she was faced with restructuring her life. Giving up that drinking world is one thing, but she stated, “The much greater difficulty involves ensuring that this smaller world is in fact a richer one, a place that’s more than merely safe” (Knapp, 1999, para. 6). A recovering alcoholic seeks to find enjoyment in this safe environment. And, yes, the troubles that ensued because of alcohol abuse slowly disappear, but the everyday becomes a new challenge.

Facing situations, such as work, relationships, school, and family, for the first time sober can feel earth shaking, and it becomes nearly impossible to NOT retreat into seclusion. She can get lost trying to figure it all out-- likes and dislikes, intimacy, fears. “The sudden transformation of drunkard to a teetotaler is analogous to the sudden change of heart, the abrupt religious conversion, and the scientist’s experience of Eureka,” (Valliant, 1995, p. 239). Shifts in identity lead to shifts in living. It is an abrupt and sudden shift recognizing that her use of alcohol is no longer under ‘voluntary control’ (A.A.W.S., 1991, 2001; Denzin, 1987a, b; Valliant, 1995). And just because she stops drinking, doesn’t mean the world around her quits drinking too. Turning down drink after drink becomes exhausting. Knapp (1999) stated:

Several years can pass before you realize just how nuts you were when you first put down alcohol, just how monumental the shift from drinking to nondrinking is,

just how much internal muck you have to wade through before you become even remotely clear-headed. (para. 15)

In sobriety, the alcoholic finds herself looking in the mirror and asking ‘who am I?’ She cuddles up with a movie every night to avoid the question, “What do you want to drink?” The alcoholic will face the temptation to drink, and the focus in recovery is how to not have that drink.

Living sober has many rewards, but there are bumps in the road. In recovery, a woman hopes those bumps don’t lead to a drink. In the AA handbook, A.A.W.S. (2001) stated, “If you are planning to stop drinking, there must be no reservation of any kind, nor any lurking notion that someday we will be immune to alcohol” (p. 33). I ask, “Does this idea go against the mantra ‘one day at a time,’ or ‘one hour at a time’?” If a person has ‘no reservations’ when approaching sobriety, would they need to ‘break it down into 24 hours’ (A.A.W.S., 1991)? What about people who don’t want to give up the notion of having a drink ‘some day,’ but have quit drinking for now. Are they setting themselves up for failure? It may be easier for a person to think in terms of ‘not drinking for now’ than ‘forever,’ in order to reframe feelings of deprivation or the feeling that I can’t have alcohol and I am different. I suspect that this mindset is the reason for the mantra ‘one day at a time.’ Many individuals entering treatment will have reservations about a complete change in lifestyle. Over time, these reservations may dissipate, especially as a person compares not drinking to the alternative--going on the way she had been.

AA offers opportunities to learn how to be social, stay sober and ease your way back into life. But what if a person chooses not to use AA--due to lack of comfort among the AA groups previously attended, feeling different than other members, not feeling

welcome or taken seriously, lack of interest in giving over to AA, disagreement with AA methods or text, not wanting to commit to the program, lack of time for meetings, resisting the grand narrative of sobriety, or lack of resources available (Dawson, Grant, Stinson, & Chou, 2006; see Klingemann, 2001; O'Reilly, 1997, p. 149-170; Suissa, 2003)? Some join the AA network to surround themselves with others in similar situations (nondrinkers) and to have the support of recovering alcoholics. But what if she is not a part of the AA social network? How does she stay sober? I have learned that regardless of treatment method, the goal for alcoholic is to be healthy and to like herself, and to be healthy according to successful recovering alcoholics means she cannot have that first drink (A.A.W.S., 1991, 2001; Denzin, 1987a, Kirkpatrick, 1986, 1990, 1999; Knapp, 1999). Denzin (1987b) pointed out alternative recovery methods (other than AA) are 'not well understood' (p. 12) or studied.

In this dissertation, I seek to add to the literature on recovery by exploring in detail personal experiences of alternative recovery processes, such as using groups other than AA, individual counseling, friendships, and/or family support. In recovery, the alcoholic grants the premise that she shall not have that first drink. She often hears how to not have that first drink (A.A.W.S., 1991, 2001; Denzin, 1987a; Knapp, 1999; Rotskoff, 2002), but what does that mean? How does she live sober within a drinking population?

Many researchers have focused on the definition of alcoholism (A.A.W.S., 1991, 2001; Bogenschutz, Tonigan, & Miller, 2006; Denzin, 1987a, b; Goodwin, 1976; O'Reilly, 1997; Rudy, 1986; Suissa, 2003; Vaillant, 1995), discussing whether alcoholism is genetic, a disease, or a moral flaw (Bateson, 1972; Denzin, 1987a, b;

Goodwin, 1976; Graham, 2003; Paris & Bradley, 2001; Rudy, 1986; Vaillant, 1995). They have also studied gender differences in alcoholism (Aaltonen & Mäkelä, 1994; Davis, 1997; Denzin, 1987a, b; Greenfield, 2002; Kelly, Halford & Young, 2002; Rotskoff, 2002; Room, 1996; Zakrzewski & Hector, 2004), deconstructing the social construction of 'alcoholic' (Bogenschutz et al., 2006; Denzin, 1987a, b; Graham, 2003; O'Reilly, 1997; Rudy, 1986), and analyzing AA, some focusing on whether AA works and treatments alternative to AA (Bateson, 1972; Bogenschutz et al., 2006; Davis, 1997; Denzin, 1987a, b; Flynn, 1999; Hoffmann, 2006; Humphreys, 2000; Klingemann, 2001; O'Halloran, 2003; Paris & Bradley, 2001; Rotunda & O'Farrell, 1998; Swora, 2001). Researchers have studied the lived experience of being alcoholic (A.A.W.S., 1991; Denzin, 1987a, b; Humphreys, 2000; Klingemann, 2001; O'Reilly, 1997; Paris & Bradley, 2001; Rotunda & O'Farrell, 1998; Zakrzewski & Hector, 2004), the effect of alcoholism (A.A.W.S., 2001; Goodwin, 1976, 1981; Graham, 2003; Paris & Bradley, 2001; Rotskoff, 2002; Rotunda & O'Farrell, 1998; Vaillant, 1995), and the social demographics of alcoholics (Denzin, 1987a, b; Greenfield, 2002; Kelly et al., 2002; Paris & Bradley, 2001; Suissa, 2003; Vaillant, 1995). I have read about alcohol's effect on loved ones, work relationships, and friends (Denzin, 1987b; Kelly et al, 2002; McCrady & Poalino, 1977; Rangarajan & Kelly, 2006; Rotskoff, 2002; Skutle, 1999; Vaughan, 1984), and learned that 'recovering alcoholics play catch-up' (Kirkpatrick, 1990; Knapp, 1999; Paris & Bradley, 2001, p. 653; Vaillant, 1995, p. 276). But what does it mean and how does it feel to play catch-up? How does she do so, if she was a heavy drinker? We need thick descriptions to show how the transition to sobriety works in our culture.

Alcoholism is still viewed as a stigma in our society (see Goffman, 1963; Denzin, 1987b; Smith, 1998; Zakrzewski & Hector, 2004), and in all Western cultures. Denzin (1987b) reminded, “The recovering alcoholic is, in a sense, an outsider to the broader drinking culture of American society” (p. 12). How do those recovering cope with this alienation? After reading about getting sober (A.A.W.S., 1991, 2001; Beattie & Longabaugh, 1997; Denzin, 1987b; Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 1999; Knapp, 1999; Vaillant, 1983, 1995), I became interested in exploring and showing in detail what it means to live sober as women tell it themselves.

A newfound life of sobriety can feel like a burden. Denzin (1987b) suggested that in recovery this person no longer wants to continue to try to be a ‘normal’ drinker. She no longer wants to be ‘normal.’ She wants to take on a new identity as a recovering alcoholic. In AA, she is acculturated into a group in order to no longer feel outside. Defining herself as a recovering alcoholic provides her a frame to view her past drinking self and gives her a goal to quit drinking and stay sober. For recovering alcoholics, ‘normal’--defined by controlled social drinking--becomes out of reach, and one feels inadequate (A.A.W.S., 1991; Knapp, 1999; Rudy, 1986). The way she knows about the world, experiences the world, and lives in the world shifts (Bateson, 1972). She must learn to let go of a drinking identity and the idea of ‘normal’ social drinking. She must reconstitute herself.

This dissertation asks, what is the lived experience of sobriety? What is the story line she tells; the plot? How does abstaining from alcohol affect her relationships? How does alcohol/sobriety shape her relational world? How is a relationship affected after she gets sober? In systems language, one changes, all change. How does she disclose

previous alcohol issues to a romantic partner, friend, family, or coworker? How does a couple/friendship negotiate when the other drinks and she is a recovering alcoholic? What does it mean for a single recovering alcoholic who once was dependent on alcohol to start dating again? How do you talk about your alcoholism? Is there threat, misunderstanding, or miscommunication? Why do people who are drinking become so uncomfortable with a person who doesn't drink? To better understand these questions and ideas about sobriety, I now turn this discussion to alcoholism, abstinence and identity transformation, relationships, and the body and addiction.

Speaking of Alcohol

Alcohol and memory. It is 2:30 a.m., and I am stumbling down a dark road with two friends from high school. We are laughing and reminiscing about past boyfriends, long drinking binges, and my crush from the gym. The next thing I know I am waking up, piecing the night together. I feel a horrible emptiness. I was sober for so long. Why did I have that drink? I felt safe with my good friends. They did not pressure me. I wanted to drink. So I did. But I blacked out. I remember laughing, flirting and kissing a stranger. I was having a good time. But now I feel like shit. I cheated on my boyfriend. Why did I have that first drink? I know better than that. How could this have happened?

My head pounds and my body aches. I hear my alarm echo in the background. I open my eyes slowly, scan the room and re-orientate myself to my surroundings. Where am I? I feel a paralyzing sadness as I roll over to turn off my alarm. I see the sun peak through my beige curtains. I am disappointed in myself. I don't get out of bed. It was so real, but "it was only a dream," I tell myself.

It was only a dream. The first time that I had this dream of booze and guilt, it felt surreal. It all takes place in the now. In the dream, I get drunk, blackout, and the next day I ridicule myself for drinking. I've had this dream three or four times over the past year; it is "the alcoholic dream" (A.A.W.S., 1991; Denzin, 1987b). It is always the same dream. For a majority of the dream, I am left feeling the consequences (guilt, fear, loneliness) of alcoholic drinking. Denzin (1987b) found that many of the AA members he interviewed had a similar dream. It starts out in a familiar setting, a place where the individual used to drink. She drinks too much, and the drinking turns into a nightmare--a fight with a loved one, throwing a glass, starting a fire, etc. (Denzin, 1987b, p. 148-149). She wakes up in sweats and feels anxious about the dream. The dream feels real because it often repeats what has occurred during her drinking days. Her body relives the emotions of the drinking experience in a dream. When she wakes up, the anxiety stays with her, reminding her of how her body felt after a drinking episode.

Denzin (1987b) reported that AA interprets these dreams as an unconscious wish or desire to drink. These recurring dreams tend to focus on the drinking act and consequences, acting as an alarm and preventing a person from acting on the desire to have a drink. I call it a sobriety alarm. A person is faced with reliving their last drink, and the possible consequences of having that first drink. The dream reminds me how much I value living sober, and how much I don't want to be the person that I was as a drinker.

The decision to live a sober life is a lifetime decision. It means being aware and staying aware, and it is a constant learning experience. I am interested in exploring how this awareness is learned and experienced and what it means to be and stay sober after treatment, but first I examine the literature on alcoholism because the meaning of sobriety

occurs in the context of and in connection to the idea and experience of alcohol abuse and alcoholism. I begin with definitions of alcoholism.

Defining alcoholism. I listen to the voices of the literature; hearing them means taking them to heart, looking at myself through the researcher's eyes. The list of definitions accumulates. I type in "alcoholism" on Google's search engine and search Answers.com (2005). I then look it up in "alcohol" in *Webster's New Dictionary* (1994). I see the following:

"impaired control over drinking"

"cannot abstain"

"powerless over alcohol"

"a disease."

Denzin (1987a), who studied alcoholism and struggled with his own alcohol abuse, provided the following definition, "I understand alcoholism to be a self-destructive form of activity in which the drinker compulsively drinks beyond the point where he or she can stop drinking for any extended period of time, even if he or she wants to" (p. 15). He continued, "An alcoholic is a person who defines himself or herself as an alcoholic" (Denzin, 1987a, p. 11). Vaillant (1995) offered a similar perspective: "Alcoholism is a disorder of great destructive power" (p. 1).

I am surprised to read in an article on using computer-based tests to identify attitudes towards disabilities by Thomas, Vaughn, and Doyle (2007) that alcoholism was listed as the first disability they studied along with cancer, mental illness, and paraplegia. As I continued to research the definitions of alcoholism, it was becoming clearer that there isn't a widely accepted definition.

The voice of A.A.W.S. (2001) stated, “We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking” (p. 30). Denzin (1987b) added, “It (*alcoholism*) is an uneasiness of self, time, emotionality, and social relationships with others” (p. 12). And Vaillant (1995) suggested:

Alcoholism is a unitary syndrome best defined by the redundancy and variety of individual symptoms. It is the variety of alcohol-related problems, not any unique criterion, that captures what clinicians really mean when they label a person alcoholic, when they believe, but can never prove, that the person’s use of alcohol has a ‘life of its own.’ (p. 43)

Many of these attempts to define alcoholism give us insight into the ambiguity that surrounds the understanding of this idea. Researchers may not be able to reach a universal definition of alcoholism, but they do suggest criteria that make it possible to label and point to an alcoholic in order to make sense out of alcoholism.

Some characteristics of alcoholics. Rudy (1986) described an alcoholic by stating, “Although drinkers can control whether they will drink or not, they cannot control the quantity once they have initiated drinking” (p. 82). The labeling began: “Moral explanations reflect individuals’ particular interpretations as they relate to becoming alcoholic. They suggest that a member’s alcoholism was developed or exacerbated by character flaw” (Rudy, 1986, p. 45). Bateson (1972) wrote, “Alcoholics, in their sober manifestations, are commonly dubbed ‘immature,’ ‘maternally fixated,’ ‘oral,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘passive-aggressive,’ ‘fearful of success,’ ‘oversensitive,’ ‘proud,’ ‘affable’ or simply ‘weak’ (p. 310). Rudy (1986) added, “The people at AA told me how the disease of alcoholism consisted of a mental obsession and a physical compulsion” (p.

82). “This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it—this utter inability to leave it alone, no matter how great the necessity or wish” (A.A.W.S., 2001, p. 34).

I am fascinated by the idea of obsession and interested in hearing more details about this obsession and ‘inability to leave it alone’ through the alcoholic’s story. Why is it so difficult for an alcoholic to leave alcohol alone? Denzin (1987b) found, “Persons in the 18-25-years age bracket, male or female, have lower recovery rates than do persons over 35. Wealth, a higher education, and a high-status occupation also appear to stand in the way of recovery” (p. 18). A recovering alcoholic is trying to not drink and is also faced with identifying as an alcoholic. Initially, most fight the labels. Once admitting that she has a problem, however, she must then filter through what this means for her and others, trying to fight the stigma attached to the term. Crawford found, “Alcoholics are liable to social rejection” (Crawford, 1987 as quoted by Malouff & Schutte, 2002, p. 96). She has to make sense of her alcohol abuse in a fashion that will make it possible for her to stay sober and be comfortable living with the ‘alcoholic’ label.

She accepts she cannot drink like other people. She is different. Unfortunately, drinking is so widely acceptable and alcohol is part of many social events. It’s a way to help ease social anxiety. Denzin (1987b) said:

The drinking of alcohol is a symbolic ritual and interactional act in our society. Americans connect the drinking of alcohol with the occasioned release of tension and anxiety. They drink so as to solidify lines of sociable identification with one another. They utilize certain alcoholic beverages as status markers of self-worth. They connect the drinking of alcohol with the pursuit and interactional realization of a valued social self. (p. 197)

People drink to celebrate the good and temporarily forget the bad. We live in a drinking culture. Denzin (1987a) continued, “American society, through mass media, cultures, schools, laws, and institutions of social control teaches individuals how to drink and use alcohol” (p. 192).

But it doesn't teach us how to get and stay sober. Or how to leave alcohol? How does she do sobriety? What does it mean? What is abstinence? She bears the weight of alcoholism because she is sober. Denzin (1987b) stated that in sobriety we find ways of defining self through interaction without alcohol, yet this goes against the social norm to drink and celebrate or to drink and drown sorrows (p. 197). He added, “The alcoholic finds that the foundations of his (*her*) self rest in structures that are outside the mainstream interactional worlds of modern American life” (Denzin, 1987b, p. 203). Refusing a drink places us outside of most of our society. What does it mean to be on the outside?

Speaking of Abstinence

Abstinence as treatment. According to Denzin (1987b), the only way to be in remission is to be abstinent. Abstinence is not having a drink, acknowledging her addiction and giving up trying to control her drinking habits. A.A.W.S. (2001) stated, “We know that no real alcoholic ever recovers control” (p. 30). A person cannot go back to social drinking once she becomes an alcoholic drinker. This alcoholic drinker hopefully will realize she has an addiction or a problem with drinking; she is alcoholic. With this realization, she can now seek help.

Kearney & O'Sullivan (2003) conducted a study on health behavior change, focusing on weight loss, smoking cessation, and alcohol and drug-abuse recovery. The

authors stated, “The condition leading to the process of health-behavior change was awareness of a growing body of distressing evidence that was incongruent with important long-standing values and goals” (Kearney & O’Sullivan, 2003, p. 142). During this change, a person becomes self-reflexive connecting her distress to drinking episodes. Knapp (1996) stated at AA she often heard, “Bad things didn’t happen every time I drank, but every time something bad did happen, drinking was involved” (p. 166). In order to deal with this idea, the alcoholic takes a hard look at her drinking patterns, and she realizes she needs to get out of her destructive relationship with alcohol. Alcohol is creating negativity and self-destruction in her life. This person wants and needs change. She must ‘give up’ drinking and ‘give up’ on drinking. Bateson (1972) discussed this idea of ‘giving up’ and claimed, “...the experience of defeat not only serves to convince the alcoholic that change is necessary; it is the first step in that change” (p. 313). Although this defeat is a first step towards sobriety, it can challenge a person’s ideology and self-perceptions. She has tried to be a normal drinker, striving to be like the rest. She has tried to control her drinking. And she now must admit she failed.

However, in *Living Sober* (1991), we are reminded that just because an alcoholic cannot drink “we need not be ashamed that we have a disease. It is no disgrace...It is not our fault” (p. 8). This notion is only learned and reinforced through repetition. Friends, family, A.A., counselors, group therapy must support this person and remind her that this is not a unique experience. Many suffer from alcohol abuse, and it may not be their fault. But only they can get sober and try to live without alcohol. A.A.W.S. (1991) pointed out, “Anyone can *get* sober. We have all done it lots of times. The trick is to stay and *live*

sober” (Why ‘Not Drinking’ section, para. 3)--to find positive meaning and self-esteem in the sober life.

To get sober is to give up alcohol; to live sober is to reconstruct a life without alcohol and find a ‘new’ self that is satisfied being sober. The alcoholic transforms herself, creating a narrative of sobriety. “Chemical dependents, codependents, and other persons suffering from addictions and compulsions suffer the emotional pain caused by a long history of low self-esteem” (Smith, 1992, p. 40). A person confronts this emotional pain while trying to stay sober. In sobriety we see, “a formerly unsure, insecure, indefinite person slowly gains self-assurance, confidence, and identity” (Smith, 1992, p. 41). This becomes part of the individual’s ‘new’ self and new narrative of sobriety; she is transformed by accepting drinking in the past and sobriety in the future.

This transformation involves not only giving up alcohol, but also giving up the alcoholic lifestyle and identity. For years, becoming sober or abstinent is a struggle that will consume many areas of her new life. She lives one day at a time negotiating how not to drink. “In fact, *every recovery from alcoholism began with one sober hour*” (A.A.W.S., 1991, p. 6). The hope is that this hour turns into a lifetime.

Although, many writers argued that sobriety is the only method of treatment (A.A.W.S., 1991, 2001; Denzin, 1987a&b; Knapp, 1996; Rudy, 1986; Swora, 2001; Vaillant 1983, 1995), a few argue against the wisdom of this path (see Klingemann, 2001; Suissa, 2003). Suissa (2003) stated:

The alternative paradigm praises a vision where the individual suffering from addiction is not an object, as in the disease discourse (loss of control on a permanent basis; once an alcoholic always and alcoholic), but instead is a

responsible social subject, able to decide to reduce, stop, continue drinking according to one's own personal and social choices. (p. 201)

However, voices of A.A.W.S (2001) dissent stating, "Physicians who are familiar with alcoholism agree there is no such thing as making a normal drinker out of an alcoholic" (p. 31). AA is the strongest proponent for abstinence and sobriety. AA rhetoric focuses on abstinence as the only treatment. Rotskoff (2002) reminded, "'Sobriety' denotes a state of consciousness in opposition to one affected by mind-altering substances" (p. 247). Rotskoff (2002) went on to say that AA has redefined sobriety to mean not only abstinence, but also the reconstruction of "a spiritual attitude toward one's place in the world" (p. 247).

In my research, I adopt this spiritual view of sobriety. Over the past decade, I have seen people try to go back to moderate drinking after years of alcoholic drinking. Each case that I have observed has been unsuccessful. They all start the same. For a while the person will drink 'normally.' She will have only a few drinks and then stop. But then there is that one time, then another time, when she can't stop. She ends up drinking too much, blacking out, and feeling guilty. The cycle continues as she tries to stop again. This is why I believe abstinence is the best form of treatment. However, I do not discredit any recovering alcoholic for trying to drink socially, and I can imagine that there may be people out there who have been able to go back to drinking moderately. I just haven't seen it and neither have the authors of *Living Sober* (1991). As AA members stated, we have all tried it and failed (A.A.W.S., 1991, p. 4).

Transformation and sobriety. I have journeyed through the ups and downs of living sober for five years. I have seen my world change, my social circle shrink, my

partner drift away, and my attitude change. I have found some comfort in Knapp's (1999) raw account of sobriety. She wrote, "Drinking creates a chasm between head and heart, and bridging the two takes surprisingly long," (Knapp, 1999, para. 5). Knapp discussed 'playing catch-up between head and heart,' allowing yourself to feel what you often medicated with alcohol. With a sober mind, she enters a new world where she is faced with grieving situations that occurred while drinking. For example, Knapp (1999) had to learn to grieve her parents' death. Both of Knapp's parents died during the course of her drinking career. Before sobriety, she self-medicated through alcohol to numb her grief and distance herself from their death.

In sobriety, these feelings of loss were no longer numbed and became vivid. Knapp (1999) explained sobriety as victorious, yet unremitting work. 'Avoid surprises.' I too am left facing the profound consequences of sobriety. Yes, it has been refreshing and a good sober sleep is meaningful. A truly rested body is achieved. I whole-heartedly agree that "the beauty of sober sleep, once it is achieved, is the sheer pleasure of waking up--no real hangover, no worries about what may have happened in last night's blackout. Instead, it means facing the new day refreshed, hopeful, and grateful," (A.A.W.S., 1991, p. 32). However, I have found that I am not the only one my sobriety affects, and the consequences and feelings are not always so glorious. Other people--friends, lovers, co-workers, and family--are not bound necessarily to be grateful.

I tell close friends that abstinence is best for me, but I cannot anticipate what my abstinence means for them. As Denzin (1987a) pointed out, "Recovery for the other is a wholly different process and it is not well understood" (p. 169). When a person transforms into sobriety, a new 'language of self is acquired.' How does this new

language affect others? “Recovery involves a radical rebuilding of the alcoholic’s relationships with others” (Denzin, 1987b, p. 20). With that being said, then how do others who are drinking fit into this new language and rebuilding, and how does abstinence fit into this 'othered' world?

Rudy (1986), a professor of sociology, studied the social construction of the AA ‘alcoholic’ through participant-observation at various AA meetings over a sixteen-month period, witnessing this transformation among many AA members. He stated, ‘the acceptance of different worldviews and lifestyles is the most significant element in what we view as conversion’ (Rudy, 1986, p. 19). The acceptance of these worldviews becomes the most significant transformation. A recovering alcoholic has new ideals and a new lifestyle from which to view the world. Sobriety ushers in a new experience of the world and a new view from which she sees the world.

Bateson (1972) spoke of this transformation while analyzing the complexity of this alcoholic mind and complications toward sobriety. While studying alcoholism and AA through a relational lens, he dissected the relationship a person has with alcohol and it’s greater power. During the first stage of transforming from alcoholic to ‘surrender,’ she gives over to the bottle in defeat, and ‘they (AA) try to have the alcoholic place alcoholism within the self’ (Bateson, 1972, p. 322). Previously, the alcoholic saw her alcoholism as ‘outside the self’; the ‘surrender’ not only has a shift in this vision and behavior, but also restructures her worldview, connecting context to self. This person is left negotiating this new identity with triggers of the past. Valliant (1995) viewed this conversion from drinking to recovery as a transformation affected by a long past. He relayed, “this self-discovery appears to be a highly personal process but one affected by

external circumstances” (p. 239). In this research, I examine this idea of external circumstance and context and look at the relational circumstances affecting and affected by sobriety. I focus on how an alcoholic discloses and negotiates this recovery identity to/with intimate partners, friends, and families.

Living sober as a life narrative. As stated above a recovering alcoholic faces an identity shift and lifestyle change. “By radically transforming himself or herself, the alcoholic transforms the world he or she lives in” (Denzin, 1987a, p.191). This change ushers in a transformation of self—a ‘new’ self. She is constantly reminded of this choice and change while trying to live in a drinking world. She must learn how to live sober along with being abstinent (A.A.W.S., 1991). Vaillant (1995) stated, “In the future, we need much more research into the prospective study of attainment of stable abstinence” (p. 246). In this dissertation, I seek to add to this literature by recounting stories of living sober and maintaining abstinence. These stories may help others maintain sobriety and hopefulness.

Through this literature review, I have found that one way to live sober is to share drinking experiences with others through stories. Storytelling becomes a way in which alcoholics understand their experience. Mark Freeman (1998), whose work focuses on narrative identity stated, “Narrative...is an attempt to give form to what is essentially formless and, perhaps, meaningless” (p. 29). Addiction and recovery take form through narrative. Our stories help us make sense out of past drinking experience, which often seemed like meaningless pieces or fragments of life. Narrative is a mode of making sense of addiction. Sharing and retelling her story helps aid others struggling with alcoholism and sobriety and reminds her of her struggles. Many employ storytelling as a means to

sobriety, living from the present. Alcoholics reconstruct the self through narrative (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 1999; Rotskoff, 2002; Swora, 2001).

In sobriety, the world is experienced through a new language--a new narrative. A person no longer drinks or speaks the language of a drinker. She faces learning what it means to be sober. "For AA members, sobriety is something that one must work at. AA members earn or gain sobriety through sharing their 'experience, strength, and hope' with others" (Rudy, 1986, p. 111). She learns to tell her story to keep her distance from alcohol and remember the consequences of drinking. "These stories follow a set of established narrative conventions, including the recitation of past drinking abuse and relative benefits of a sober lifestyle" (Rotskoff, 2002, p.139). Telling the story helps to remind her of her past as a drinker and to avoid the first drink (Denzin, 1987b).

It has been noted that AA meetings are based on the sharing of stories. "Indeed, storytelling is a primary means through which AA members reconstruct their identities as recovering alcoholics" (Rotskoff, 2002, p. 139). Kenneth Gergen (1999), a social psychologist and social constructionist, reminded, "... language is a major ingredient of our worlds of action; it constitutes social life itself" (p. 49). Stories verify and reinforce a new social world and, in this case, reinforce an identity as a recovering alcoholic. Through emotive expression and recounting, she eases into her new identity. Each AA member will at some point recall her past drinking life in order to let go and live in the present. Rudy (1986) explained:

The testimonial is made up of two parts: a story about how bad it was before AA and a story about how good it is now. AA members frequently refer to the

drinking part of the testimonial as a 'drunkalogue' and the second part as a 'sobriety story.' (p. 38)

When writing about social construction, Gergen (1999) addressed the 'ups' and 'downs' of lived experience. He stated, "To see life in these ways is to participate in a storied world" (p. 70). We understand the moment as it reveals the past and leads to a future. Therefore, to relive the 'ups' and 'downs,' a recovering alcoholic is participating in a storied world. To participate in the storied world of recovering alcoholics, she is calling for a new narrative to adopt in the future as the past 'drunkalogue' becomes replaced by the momentary 'sobriety story' and a commitment to sobriety.

Recovery stories also create a new storyline and a new social world is constructed through the shared experiences--shared stories. Rudy (1986) referred to this as, "giving it away." He continued, "giving it away' has a variety of interpretations in Mideastern City AA but the bottom line is sharing oneself with another person" (Rudy, 1986, p. 111). A person allows others to share in this drinking experience through storytelling. For Vaillant (1995), "One thing is clear, however: abstinence is achieved through the help of others" (p. 246). This can involve help from other recovering alcoholics, from family and friends, or counselors. Often this help comes from telling and 'giving away' her 'drunkalogue' to a readied listener, telling of her fears, drinking moments, and sobriety. These stories act as healing agents reducing the battle scars.

Denzin (1987a) stated, "Transforming into a recovering alcoholic who is a storyteller, the member learns how to talk about the self of the past from the standpoint of humor and dramatic irony" (p. 191). This irony reminds the person why she is sober. The story plays an important role in staying and living sober. At some point every recovering

alcoholic will face an internal struggle of having a drink and possible relapse. These stories are used to deter the person and remind her to stay away from that first drink. She must reframe her craving and avoid the idea that drinking was enjoyable.

Through storytelling, she turns drinking into a negative experience. “The first task of relapse prevention is the cognitive task of changing alcohol from friend to foe” (Vaillant, 1983, 1995, p. 247). She must remember that bad things did happen when alcohol was involved. These stories focus on alcoholic drinking as a negative experience. However, sometimes the craving becomes overwhelming and a person will relapse. This person’s relapse story will help others resist the temptation to drink. If a person is an alcoholic, then relapse will happen to them if they choose to drink (A.A.W.S., 1991; Swora, 2001). Rudy (1986) stated:

Additionally, slipping points out to the drinker and to abstinent members the vulnerability that each must face daily if he or she is to remain an ‘arrested alcoholic’...It allows the group to develop and share its information concerning drinking behavior with slippers and other members, and, according to Clancy (1964), it allows sober members to participate vicariously in the experiences of slippers. (p. 76)

Seeing and hearing this failure to drink ‘normal’ reminds the abstinent member that she too could fail. Thus, storytelling is a valued means of therapy. “The oral tradition that underlies the AA social structure keeps the culture alive” (Denzin, 1987b, p. 95).

Staying sober becomes a constant process of retelling and reframing lived experiences. Through storytelling a person also learns a new language of self (Denzin, 1987a, b). A person adopts a new narrative. Rudy (1985) relayed, “Rather than using

their alcoholism or a role associated with it to continue their behavior, they use it to cease their behavior” (p. 53). This view of alcohol reinvents itself through this storytelling process. Rudy (1986) continued, “Through general processes of socialization, AA members come to highlight, reinterpret, and reconstruct their experiences and views regarding drinking and alcoholism” (p. 53).

I believe that this oral tradition is also used among those not participating in AA.

The above notions of storytelling are used during interaction with family, friends, support groups, and counselors and acts as a means to stay sober and create a new identity across different modes of treatment outside the AA structure. Storytelling in AA has been studied frequently (Aaltonen & Mäkelä, 1994; Denzin, 1987a,b; Flynn, 1999; Halonen, 2006; Humphrey, 2000; O’Halloran, 2003; O’Reilly, 1997; Paris & Bradley, 2001; Rotskoff, 2002; Rudy, 1986; Smith, 1998; Swora, 2001), but we also need to study storied sobriety outside AA (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 1999) to further understand lived experiences of sobriety. And we can learn how other recovery methods can be successful at encouraging sobriety.

Language, social construction, and communication. Richardson (1990), a sociologist, pointed out, “Writing is not simply a ‘true’ representation of an objective ‘reality’; instead, language creates a particular view of reality” (p. 199). A recovering alcoholic’s reality takes on new meaning or construction as she journeys towards a sober self. Language gives voice to this transformation. She tries to understand her experience through telling, and she reaffirms her experience by telling others (Parry, 1991). She uses stories to make sense of experience, and to create and recreate reality. Narrative becomes a way of knowing the inner self and the outside world.

The outside drinking world once distracted her from knowing her inner self. She was numbed by alcohol. Her story was fragmented and trivialized by blackouts. She now languishes her struggle, her secrets. When she was living the storyline of an alcoholic drinker what stories did she tell? Are there some stories she was ashamed to tell? How does she recall her past drinking life?

There is the 'before I quit narrative' and the 'after I quit narrative.' This journey toward sobriety falls under Frank's (1995) definition of a quest story (p. 115). A recovering alcoholic begins as what Frank (1995) called a monadic body, an alone silent body. Alcoholism is a disease of silence. In recovery, she moves towards a communicative body where she now tells her story and reclaims her body. She no longer allows alcohol to control her. She quits trying to control alcohol. She quit drinking and in the process, she shares her story, languaging her pain instead of living in an alone silent body. The idea of sobriety includes reconstructing a self. Sobriety is communication--communicating a 'new' self. Discovering a new story. For this wounded storyteller, storytelling is a process of reclaiming her body. After confronting the illness and getting sober, I now "have access to different experiences, different knowing" (Frank, 1995, p.118). This knowledge is shared through storytelling.

Narrative can be used to heal, discover, connect, and live. Language and narrative is a way to be and understand. It helps create a shared reality and offers a reflective view into our actions. The alcoholic woman can see herself in relation to others, and together construct a narrative. But how does this break down when we are living in other people's storylines? She is not part of the majority of celebratory or self-medicating drinking

populations. If she is affirmed through the other (Laing, 1969), how does this breach affect her self-affirmation?

Speaking of Other: Relational Dimensions of Sobriety

Self and other. Denzin (1987b) pointed out that as a recovering alcoholic adopts a new storyline that is inconsistent with the ‘other.’ He stated that the reason AA works and so many go to AA is because at a meeting the attendees affirm each other by sharing the same language and storyline. Through this social constructionist lens, meaning is derived through relationships. Hence, Gergen (1995) wrote:

What we take to be true about the world or self, is not thus a product of individual mind. The individual mind (thought, experience) does not thus originate meaning, create language, or discover the nature of the world. Meanings are born of coordination among persons--agreements, negotiations, affirmations. (p. 48)

We make meaning of experiences together, creating a shared reality of thoughts and experiences. Gergen (1995) also stated that if a shared language did not exist then institutions would fail to exist (p. 49). If her worldviews and language are inconsistent, AA will provide the cohesive story of a recovering alcoholic and give newcomers a storyline to adopt. If she does not attend AA, where and how does this illness find a storyline and existence? She is forced into co-constructing a narrative with nonalcoholics or alcoholics living outside the AA structure.

According to Smith (1992), “Communication depends on a shared vocabulary and interpretation” (p. 167). If this does not occur, then a couple consisting of a nonalcoholic and a recovering alcoholic “will literally be speaking two different languages” (Smith, 1992, p. 167). If the recovering person is learning about her illness through a support

group, she must reinterpret her experience so that she and her partner can understand and live in her recovering world. It becomes difficult to express and communicate this bodily addiction to those who have never experienced alcohol's control. Therefore it becomes just as hard to communicate through a sober body. This body once held the stigma of alcoholic and now has to live in a drinking world without drinking.

Denzin (1987b) pointed out that often returning to this 'othered' world can be a struggle. He found that alcoholics felt, "nonalcoholics can neither understand his (*her*) illness nor talk his (*her*) language" (Denzin, 1987b, p. 65). This can lead to dissonance and often relapse. On top of the physical craving, a person is faced with the struggle of recreating a social relational world with nonalcoholic drinkers who do not understand her. Gergen (1995) wrote that without a shared language it would be even harder to carry out a recognizable love affair (p. 49). Recovering couples are faced with the task of negotiating what recovery and being sober means to each person as well as to the couple, while trying to figure out a shared language. If only one partner has issues with drinking, communication can be a daunting task. How does the other know what they cannot experience (see Laing, 1969)?

The interpersonal. Graham (2003) reported that both positive and negative experiences occur while drinking. Alcohol often reduces anxiety and tension leading to a more social experience. She stated:

The plasticity of alcohol was clearly demonstrated in a 1974 study (Pliner & Cappell 1974) of the influence of the presence of others in the drinking situation on the perceived effects of alcohol. This study found that those who consumed alcohol in the presence of others were more likely to perceive increased feelings

related to sociability (e.g. friendliness, euphoria) and more likely to exhibit objective indicators of sociability (e.g. smiling, laughing) compared with those who consumed a placebo beverage in the company of other people; on the other hand, those who consumed alcohol on the solitary condition perceived significantly more physiological changes (e.g. more sleepy, dizzy, less able to think clearly) compared with those consuming a placebo, and relatively few effects related to sociability. (Graham, 2003, p. 1022)

Not only is drinking a social event but her drinking experiences are often influenced by social interactions with others. The ‘other’ plays an integral role in the outcome of a drinking experience. “In a very literal sense, alcohol supposedly makes the individual see himself as and act as a part of the group” (Bateson, 1972, p. 329). A recovering alcoholic is now outside this social experience, and the other becomes a factor, a potentially negative one, associated with successful recovery. Just as drinking experiences are shaped by interactions, so are sober experiences. Bridging two different worlds can plague the alcoholic during her venture back into a social world after recovery.

Kearney & O’ Sullivan (2003) identified key influences in sustaining this behavior change as seen in previous qualitative studies dealing with the above changes. The author’s stated positive reinforcement and ‘critical self-appraisal’ of a specific crisis event reinforced her positive behavior change. It was not necessarily the event but the reflexive analysis of the event, connecting the event to the alcoholic drinking. Kearney and O’ Sullivan (2003) also noted, “alienation from former sources of social belonging, expressed as a sense of unfairness that others did not have to restrict their eating, smoking, or substance use, was reported by those who chose to return to their former

identities and behaviors” (p. 148). The idea of being other and outside of the social drinking crowd was a major factor in relapse. The other can influence positive behavior change, supporting the individual and reinforcing their progress, and negative behavior change, pointing out the abstainer’s lack of control over drinking and sense of belonging.

In a sober life, she is faced with explaining, justifying or reframing her choice of not drinking to others, who experience life through a different language. Others see an alcoholic beverage as a beverage and not a drug. They never lived the fearful experience that an active alcoholic often encountered, such as fear of being stopped by the police, embarrassment of the title alcoholic, or the pain of withdrawal (Denzin, 1987b). “The alcoholic’s other stands as an ‘outsider’ to the inner, lived experiences of the alcoholic who is attempting to control and manage his alcoholism” (Denzin, 1987b, p. 101).

The recovering alcoholic will be faced with family, friends, and coworkers in drinking settings. “Uncertain as to how he (*she*) will present himself (*herself*) to others, he (*she*) is caught between revealing his (*her*) new identity of ‘recovering alcoholic’ or hiding it” (Denzin, 1987b, p. 92). She has to figure out how to refuse a drink and let the other know that she doesn’t drink. Denzin (1987b) continued, “The desire to drink may return and he (*she*) may not know how to deal with it” (p. 92).

A.A.W.S. (1991) suggested that she must be upfront with acquaintances, letting the other know that ‘I am not drinking right now.’ This temptation and ‘other’ can threaten her progress and she has to remember there are hundreds of thousands of people on her side who are in recovery (A.A.W.S., 1991). She may feel alone during this time, watching the other carelessly drinking. Negative self-talk arises: *Why can’t I drink? I am the only one here not drinking. I am different than the majority.*

During these moments self-disclosure may help an alcoholic stay sober. However, the stigma associated with being alcoholic leads to inhibitions of self-disclosure. Denzin (1987b) highlighted this with pieces of three interviews. Each recovering alcoholic faced hanging out with friends in a drinking situation. After being sober for two weeks, nine months, and three years, each person was offered a drink by a friend (p. 178-179). When confronted each went back to drinking. Wanting to feel like a part of the group (as noted in Bateson 1972; Paris & Bradley, 2001; Zakrzewski & Hector, 2004) may overpower the will to stay sober. Avoiding this self-disclosure can ultimately lead one back to drinking.

It is imperative that “We have to stay sober for ourselves, no matter what other people do or fail to do” (A.A.W.S., 1991, p. 62). However, some researchers noted that interpersonal and social relationships are often more important than treatment programs in the maintenance of sobriety (as discussed by Beattie & Longabaugh, 1997). Hence, the more supportive an other, the better chance at lasting sobriety. In recovery we are reminded that, “the ‘alcoholism’ that the alcoholic confronts on a daily basis is experienced as a relationship with the world” (Denzin, 1987a, p. 18). It is the only way she existed in and knew her world.

Many scholars have noted that journeying back to this relational world can create uneasiness for all parties, as the recovering alcoholic returns ‘virtually a stranger.’ Vaillant (1995) suggested, “Reentry both into the occupation world and into family responsibilities should be made slowly” (p. 274). When she reenters relationships such as family, she encounters the old perspective (family) through a new identity (Denzin, 1987b, p. 77). A family may not recognize the individual and joining the two can be problematic.

The voices of A.A.W.S. (1991) reminded, “So as our experience shows, the first nondrinking days are likely to be periods of great emotional vulnerability” (p. 61). This vulnerability may continue for several months and often years. When a person is placed back into their role as partner this vulnerability is heightened. How does she enter back into the role as lover from this new identity? It is important to realize, as Smith (1992) observed, “As we progress in our recovery, we notice changes in the way we think, live, work, and play” (p. 48). During this time “we discover that our feelings and needs are changing...” (Smith, 1992, p. 48). These changes may cause uneasiness and confusion for the recovering alcoholic and her partner, leading to conflicts between the two.

Sobriety and love. Alcohol clouds emotions and can consume many relationships. As Spaner (2004) wrote, “Alcohol can create a false feeling of love and the need for companionship” (para. 4). Alcohol can intensify and exaggerate feelings, leading a woman to form unsafe relationships to avoid loneliness, as they seek love. As A.A.W.S. (1991) reminded about love, “Alcohol certainly did not ripen our comprehension of mature love, nor our ability to enter into and handle it if it did come our way” (p. 61). A woman’s emotional intelligence can be stifled as she fills her body and mind with alcohol.

She may end up knowing only her drinking self, and find it hard to be in a relationship with anyone other than alcohol. A.A.W.S. (1991) echoed this theme: “...our drinking lives left our emotional selves pinched, scraped, bent, and bruised, if not pretty firmly warped” (p. 61). Gorski (1992) pointed out in the forward to Smith’s text, *Recovering Couples*, “Most recovering people don’t know how to have a healthy relationship in recovery because they have never learned basic relationship skills” (p. xii).

Smith's (1992) text focused on partners dealing with recovery from alcoholism, addiction, and codependence. In *Recovering Couples*, she started with her own story and then presented her research on other couples (Smith, 1992).

Smith struggled with alcohol abuse for the first part of her marriage. Once she realized alcohol wasn't in control, she gave over to her 'higher power' and got sober. This sobriety impacted her family positively so she decided to write a primer for recovering couples. She noted that an alcoholic's intimate relationship is an important part of learning to live sober. Her partner plays a significant role in this recovery. How a couple negotiates this recovery can affect her progress and transformation.

For a recovering alcoholic, easing back into an intimate relationship can be a challenge. It may be the first time she has dealt with the trials and tribulations of a romantic love sober. There are no romantic dinners with wine and no late night celebrations with champagne. Everything she knew about having a partner has changed. In the process of getting to know her sober self, she faces getting reacquainted with her family, friends, and/or lover. If a person is single it is recommended that the newly sober person stay clear of emotional attachments for the first part of sobriety (A.A.W.S., 1991, p. 61). She should allow herself time to heal and grow. She has to learn to take care of herself before getting into a new romantic relationship. If a person is involved and is returning to a relationship that preceded her treatment, her sobriety becomes the couple's recovery.

The partner now faces a new lover whose top priority is sobriety. Once a person travels further along this path of sobriety she can then offer her partner a deeper commitment. However, this drastic change, especially in the beginning, can produce

anxiety between partners. The sober person is gaining confidence, feeling good about herself, and trying to negotiate a new life with her significant other. Smith (1992) pointed out, “To let your self-esteem blossom while limiting the damages to your relationship, you can be aware that your loved one may need to get acquainted with this new, confident you” (p. 41). As she and her partner get to know the new self, both face a change in lifestyles.

McAweeney, Zucker, Fitzgerald, Puttler, & Wong (2004) found, “the relationship between the alcoholic and his (*her*) partner appears to have had a reciprocal influence on each other’s drinking” (p. 226). In other words, a partner who attends support groups and becomes a part of the sobriety will have a positive impact on their partner’s recovery. A supportive partner will incorporate this new identity into his/her existing identity. In order to support the recovery, the intimate partner will be faced with making changes as well. Just as the recovering alcoholic only knew love through an alcoholic cloud, the other only knew love with the alcoholic through this same cloud. Couples will have to work twice as hard at their relationship. As Smith (1992) suggested, “The difference is that recovering couples do not know whether their relationship is normal or not” (p. 31). These couples will face this new relationship burdened by the weight of the old. During the first stages of sobriety, a woman is re-inventing herself, and this can impact her relationships. She’s not the same person her partner fell in love with.

In sobriety, she progresses through personal recovery first. Gorski (1992) noted, “First, the self; then, the possibility of healthy love. You must learn to identify and manage your own thoughts, feelings, and actions before you can have an effective relationship” (p. xiii). Smith (1992) added that sobriety is not just a personal struggle.

The pattern of her intimate relationship must change as well. “Couples are encouraged to reward abstinence and refrain from punishing sobriety, increase positive feelings and activities, and learn better communication skills” (Rotunda & O’Farrell, 1998, p. 61).

This can be the tricky part.

A female alcoholic enters back into a relationship that has already been changed by her sobriety. She asks her partner to come along for the ride. Some partners may not want to hop aboard. She is not asking her/him to stop drinking (maybe in some cases she is), but her partner is now living in a world where drinking is not safe. Her/his drinking affects the safety of her partner’s sobriety. This partner did not ask to be in this world. She/he now find herself/himself more aware and in need of negotiating her/his own relationship with drinking. Skutle (1999), a clinical researcher, conducted a study to determine the relationship between marital status, gender, and self-efficacy in sobriety. Patients, who were either married or cohabiting with a partner, were interviewed for an hour and filled out a self-administered questionnaire. The author concluded, “It seems that single people are more vulnerable in social drinking situations, when having fun or being offered drinks compared with couples who could influence each other more positively in that situation” (Skutle, 1999, p. 1224). Of course, exceptions occurred when the person has a problem drinker partner as well, and the couple “may have a negative reciprocal influence on each other” (Skutle, 1999, p. 1224).

Smith (1992) reminded that a supportive partner plays a significant role in recovery. And Skutle (1999) noted a difference in gender, sobriety, and partnership, indicating that among male recovering alcoholics, “marriage was associated with an increased likelihood of abstinence” (pg. 1220), but for female patients recovery may

mean leaving the relationship. Wives were more likely to become caregivers (see Rotskoff, 2002) and submit to an alcohol free life in order to help her partner with recovery. For women alcoholics, however, marriage had an opposite effect associated with negativity. There is a higher-risk for an alcoholic woman to have been in an abusive relationship characterized by destructive interpersonal patterns (Skutle, 1999, p. 1220). Marriage became more of a stressor for woman's sobriety, threatening her recovery.

A wife of a recovering alcoholic appears to be more accommodating and willing to accompany a partner through this change. According to Diaz & Pino's *UPDATE* newsletter on health behavior (2002), "9 out of 10 wives stay with alcoholic husbands, but only 1 in 10 husbands stay with an alcoholic wife" (p. 4). This number represents a dissonance in gender and sobriety. Heterosexual women face the prospect of having a less supportive partner, which can make it more difficult to stay sober. When she gets sober, her partner is forced to change as well. Morphogenesis or second order change (Bateson, 1972; Hoffman, 1981; Minuchin & Nichols, 1993; Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995) will occur. The entire system will change its basic structure. The partner of a recovering alcoholic may need to evaluate his or her own drinking behavior and commit to a sober life. It may be easier for a wife of a recovering alcoholic to not drink because the pressure for women to drink is different than the pressure felt by men, who drink more for power and camaraderie (Kirkpatrick, 1990). The expectation for men to drink is higher in our culture and men in this position face a stripping of masculinity (Zakrzewski & Hector, 2004) at the expense of their partner's sobriety. For some it may be easier to leave this situation, than commit to a sober lifestyle.

If a couple commits to this sober change, they learn to be a sober couple and must use communication to build a successful relationship. This becomes a relationship where both parties are learning about recovery. The recovering alcoholic must learn to reveal her 'new' self to her partner. In order for the couple to experience the same vocabulary, they must communicate about their feelings, experiences, and thoughts.

Communication skills are necessary for an effective recovery. A recovering person must first learn to recognize what she is feeling before learning to communicate. Often these feelings were numbed or silenced by alcohol. Smith (1992) stated, "This inability to tap into our thoughts and feelings blocks us from communicating with the person whose love and support we crave most" (p. 162). During and after recovery, it takes both partners' participation and cooperation in order to have successful communication. Both must be willing to listen and share their own thoughts and feelings. Together, they have to form new patterns of communication, ridding themselves of old ones that accommodated a reclusive drinker.

For a drinking couple, thoughts and feelings may have been shared exclusively through drinking episodes that turned into fights where neither listened. One or both may have been too intoxicated to remember the conversation. As sobriety progresses:

Those of us who are recovering from chemical dependence need more than a relationship; we need a partnership that, rather than being a threat to our sobriety, is a source of strength; rather than being a constant cause of emotional pain, is a secure foundation on which we can reach our full potential. (Smith, 1992, p. 11)

Sobriety does not come easily. There are many internal struggles and external influences. Her friends, family, co-workers, parents, siblings, and partners can shape her

sobriety, helping or discouraging her progress. This change can warrant fear from many facing this situation. Once sober this change affects not only her life, but affects all the close relationships surrounding her.

Her Body

The addicted body. Although alcoholism appears to be a social disorder the alcoholic is often alone in her own body. Drunkenness is a bodily experience that is often hard to language. Once sober, a person adopts a new unknown body. Many researchers have explored theories of the body, the body and performance, the disconnected body, and storying the body (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1993; Chernin, 1994; Dolan, 1993; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2001; Frank, 1995; Phelan, 1993; Schneider, 1997). Some have researched the addicted/alcoholic body (Denzin, 1987a; Franken, Rosso & van Honk, 2003; Weinberg, 2002). Denzin (1987a) stated:

Because self-feelings are embodied states of consciousness (Denzin, 1985) and because alcohol produces both minor and major alterations in his or her lived, physiological body, the alcoholic's sense of emotional experience is one in which bodily sensations play a major part...The drinking alcoholic's sense of self and emotionally is, then, quite literally alcoholic, for he or she experiences himself or herself only through the effects of alcohol. (p. 122)

Alcohol affects the organs of the body. As Denzin (1987a) recognized, the central nervous system is affected by alcohol, producing a different way of feeling, knowing, and being. An alcoholic knows herself through this affected state.

In this study, I share stories of experiencing the body in a state of sobriety. The sexual body, the numb body (Knapp, 1999; Paris & Bradley, 2001), the relational body,

the alone body, the anxious body, the healthy body, the changing body--how do sober physical experiences differ from alcoholic physical experiences? How does our body experience transformation?

Weinberg (2002), a sociologist, who focused on the use of medical terms such as addiction in various historical and contemporary contexts, acknowledged the social and culture construction of addiction, but reinforced that bodies crave. He reported there is a lack of literature focusing on the embodiment of addiction and the physical nature of addiction (p. 2). The author continued, "While the ostensible *symptoms* of addiction overwhelmingly consist in social and cultural transgressions, its underlying *nature* is generally located in one or another sort of bodily pathology, deficit or vulnerability" (Weinberg, 2002, p. 1). He wanted the reader to note the physical withdrawal symptoms and the body's craving as well as social and culture influence on addiction. He concluded by calling for a more practical look at addiction "at the level of our immediate bodily encounter with reality" (Weinberg, 2002, p. 2).

Weinberg (2002) recognized that the body is influenced and experienced in social contexts. The addictive urge, however, becomes a pre-reflexive and involuntary, embodied compulsion. As a woman beats this addiction, how does her body change? Denzin (1987a) stated, "He or she experiences a separation between an alcoholically distorted inner stream of consciousness and a painful, often bruised, bloated, and diseased body he or she lives from within" (p. 135). A person is suffering from both the mental distress of alcoholism as well as a body affected by the over consumption of alcohol.

It is an observable fact, of course, that our chief use of alcohol was egocentric--that is, we poured in into our own bodies, for the effect we felt within our own

skin. Sometimes, that effect momentarily helped us behave socially, or temporarily assuaged our inner lonesomeness. (A.A.W.S., 1991, p. 34)

This was her body, her experience. She owned this experience; no one could tell her what to do. No one forced this. She drank and her body got drunk. The mind is telling her not to, but the body still craves. This craving can outweigh the mind--matter over mind. As Weinberg (2002) noted, there is something about the body's addiction that interferes with and challenges sobriety.

The recovering body. Frank (1995) depicted the ill body as an inarticulate body. He used storytelling as discovery, but highlighted the body as the knower. The body has the cancer, the addiction, the disability, and the allergy. It is through storytelling that we make sense of the body and give voice to the ill body. The body shapes the person. The ill body is now the identity of the person. Frank (1995) stated, "The body sets in motion the need for new stories when its disease disrupts the old story" (p. 2). She adopts an alcoholic body. Even after a person enters into a remission society, a society where the illness is healed, she is marked by this illness and needs a new story. What stories does she tell to make sense of the sober body?

In moments of recovery, the body remembers what the mind may not recall. During blackouts the body is still experiencing. The mind, however, does not remember. These memories are never processed by the short-term memory--an alcohol induced amnesia. But body memory may be triggered during sobriety and anxiety rises while the mind wonders. Body memory.

While writing about the inseparability of body and language, Gingrich-Philbrook (2001) detailed the body's experience of a seizure. He stated, some report feeling a hand

brush along their back at the beginning of a seizure or like they are standing in the rain (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2001, p. 2). This is the body's memory, but the mind is telling them that this never happened--no one ran her/his hand across their backs. Gingrich-Philbrook (2001) stated, "What the body knows, in these moments, is something "I" sometimes don't want to know" (p. 2). This quote is relevant to the alcoholic body; what the alcoholic body knows the sober body may not want to know. At times there are flashes to this alcoholic body, but not memory of it. Gingrich-Philbrook (2001) continued to discuss the body and seizures stating, "The truth hurts and is indecipherable at once" (p. 2). A person may bite her/his tongue during a seizure, but does not remember biting it. However, the body does. The tongue bleeds and hurts long after the seizure. The body houses memories of seizures.

The sober body feels the anxiety from a drunken experience, which becomes part of her recovery story. The mind cannot recall what the body knows. For example, a person may have sex during a blackout. She does not remember having sex, but her body does. The body is bruised and hurts long after the drunken sexual experience. The body houses the drunken experience. When memory fails and cannot recall this experience, confusion and fear is produced. Little is written about the sober body, and about the sober body and memory. Body memory. Memory is mental and physical, and it is the disconnection that disturbs an alcoholic's piece of mind.

An alcoholic lives in a circular space of excessive drinking, blackouts, and self-reflection. Ironically, she drinks to forget that moments were lost to alcoholic amnesia. "The alcoholically reflective self mediates these thought patterns. It attempts to make sense out of them, but finds that its every effort to be coherent, logical, rational, and

orderly fails” (Denzin, 1987a, p. 109). The mind doesn’t remember what the body did. But the body remembers. My substance abuse counselor said it is like an old injury from surgery. Hypothetically speaking, she may have been under heavy anesthesia during an operation on her wrist. She does not remember any of the surgery. The patient feels okay, but when the nurse comes to redress the wound, she touches the spot that was harmed, and the patient feels a slight pain. Body memory. She may not remember when someone violated her, but when that spot is touched the body remembers.

Not only are there the body memory aspects of sobriety, but often her body goes through a physical transformation as well. Some people may lose weight, simply from cutting out the calories in alcohol. She becomes more aware of her body. She has more respect for it including, what she puts in it or allows to touch it.

The body feels the effects of alcohol and drinking as a bodily sensation. Her motor skills are affected, and the body moves to its own drumbeat. During blackouts, the body is still in motion. Unfortunately, the mind does not have a say over what the body is doing at these moments. In sobriety, she is left to deal with anxiety--elevated heart rate, sweating palms, churning stomach, hot flashes--while asking herself, ‘Why do I feel so uncomfortable being in my own body? What happened to my body?’ The wound is touched; the body remembers. We will learn to story the body as recovery progresses.

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Research literature on alcohol abuse revealed that alcohol is pervasive in our culture and women’s alcohol abuse (or the reporting of) is becoming more prevalent. Research suggested men and women drink for different reasons, and often anxiety, depressions and relationships affect women’s recovery, thus requiring different treatment

methods. As I collected statistics on alcohol abuse, I also found that definitions of alcoholism vary and the term is never quite pinned down. Researchers found it easier to report certain characteristics that can help identify alcoholic drinking than to define it. This ambiguity can make it difficult for a person who is questioning her drinking to seek help because it is easier for her to believe that she doesn't have a problem or fit these categories.

Various authors engaged this discussion of treatment and getting help and stress the challenges individuals face while getting sober. Getting sober lends itself to a shift in thinking and identity. A recovering alcoholic restores her life while experiencing an identity transformation. She reacquaints with herself, learning who she is without alcohol, as she enters back into an 'othered' drinking world. Research has concluded that the recovering alcoholic faces the process of reacquainting and redefining herself with family, friends, and coworkers as a transformed person. This can be a difficult process, and it is important that those who surround her support her.

In this dissertation, I focus on three main areas of transformation as suggested by the literature (as well as my own experience): sobriety as a transformation of identity, supportive and unsupportive interpersonal relationships, and the recovering body in sobriety. While conducting my research, I found that this transformation also included women's declaration of self-respect.

The goal of my research is to show how recovering alcoholic women perform sobriety through narrative. Many relational events and rituals focus heavily (though tacitly) on drinking: birthdays, wedding receptions, graduations, anniversaries, after parties, dinners, baptisms, dates, New Year's, sporting events, professional conferences,

etc. A recovering alcoholic seeking to live a sober life must negotiate each event, creating a safe space for her to maintain sobriety and keep her self-esteem. This may be why Knapp (1999) mentioned that she found herself attending fewer social events and watching more movies at home, thus removing the temptation and awkwardness of social interaction in drinking contexts. The more we learn about recovery and sobriety, the more we can encourage and support each other during these difficult times.

This dissertation attempts to show how three women and I construct and communicate a life without alcohol. I ask these women to make sense of their sobriety while talking through their alcohol abuse of the past. These women's past helps them understand their decision to not drink and reminds them that they don't want to be that drinking self.

To show this experience, I first turn to women's drinking memoirs. In this next chapter, I analyze three drinking stories to give the alcoholic a female voice. Their stories highlight the self-hatred and depression women experience in a drinking life as suggested by the research literature. I trace these women's introduction to alcoholic drinking, experiences in alcoholic drinking, and turning points that led to a final drink. We will see these women trying to slow down and watch the phases these women go through as they finally accept that they are problem drinkers.

Chapter 3

Multiple Representations of Women Alcoholics

This chapter extends the review of literature on women and alcoholism by focusing on three memoirs written by female alcoholics. My goal is to conduct a narrative analysis and thematically compare and contrast three memoirs: Carolyn Knapp's (1996) *Drinking: A Love Story*, Koren Zailckas' (2005) *Smashed*, and Jean Kirkpatrick's (1990) *Turnabout: New Help for the Woman Alcoholic*. My narrative analysis follows a progression of emplotted events, highlights a storyteller, and acknowledges 'an audience to whom the story is told.' According to Carr (1986), a narrative movement provides the audience with "a temporal closure, which can only be expressed by speaking of a beginning, middle, and an end" (p. 47). In relation to human experience, Carr (1986) observed that we not only narrate our lives in this temporal sequence, we experience our lives in this temporal sequence as well.

These three memoirs show that drinking progresses down this same temporal path with a beginning and a middle. The story of alcoholism usually ends either in sobriety or death. Some never find their way out and "in the last stage alcoholism can kill" (Knapp, 1996, p. 123; p. 61; p. 232). While searching for sobriety and recovery stories, I find that many begin with the first drink; all end with the last. I have chosen to focus on these memoirs to get a more detailed and in-depth description of the process an alcoholic goes through to get sober. I focus on how these women tell their wounded story (Frank, 1995).

According to Bochner (2002), storytelling involves people as characters, dramatic tension provoked by crisis or epiphany, plot leading to resolution, temporal events, and a moral that gives meaning to the story (p. 80). Often the storyteller is a character in her own story. In these memoirs, each story features a main character who comes to terms with the dramatic events of alcoholism. Through narrative movement, the readers or audiences are brought into this journey and often identify with the characters, finding connection to their own lives.

These three women use narrative to make sense of their past drinking self while learning about their present sober self. Their stories give voice to the self they disliked, acknowledging who they were in the past. Experiencing this addicted self honestly and vulnerably leads to the discovery of a ‘new’ self, a sober self. These memoirs reveal a drinking self entangled with self-hatred, regret, and unworthiness. By owning this self of the past, these women reframe their old experiences to achieve the ‘new’ self of sobriety. The self travels temporally through this addiction in the same manner we travel through life, with a beginning, middle, and an end.

The Memoir

The alcoholic story. Panic. Anxiety. I put my book down and begin to pace. Restlessness. Apprehension. Her description seeps under my skin. Maybe it’s the language of uncertainty, longing, addiction, fear, or pain that gets me hooked on memoirs. The voyeuristic nature of reading a life story often hinges on that of a pornographic effect. Aroused by the other’s act, entrapped in the outcome, guilty by indulging in someone else’s pleasure/pain. I’m ashamed for doing so. Although, pornography is perceived to be threatening to society, leading to much debate and

condemnation (Juffer, 1998), a memoir invites readers to view her private actions and her private life with that same act of peeking and witnessing, only the memoir seeks to provide insight into the cultural context of a life and the truth of the author's lived experiences. These authors bare their secrets to the reader; their bodies marked by addiction.

I read these books with the cover half open, violently shaking my head, sighing, offering advice, indulging in another's addiction. I comment along the way as if I am warning the virgin in a horror film. Watch out! Don't do that! Why is she running up the stairs! Why won't she just quit! With every new discovery, new confession, and page turned, I see the progression and uphill battle she engages when facing sobriety. I find it hard to put down the first two evocative narratives after I've finished; I need my next fix, but after Knapp (1996) and Zailckas (2005), I have trouble satisfying my craving.

A void. Wurtzel's (2002) memoir, *More, Now, Again*, is fast paced, like her addiction and longing for a white substance. She shares her addiction to alcohol, Ritalin, and her battle with depression. While in her twenties, Wurtzel begins to struggle with depression and her doctor prescribes Ritalin to help boost her antidepressant. She paints a vivid picture of what an addict will do to get her fix. While reading her story, I turn the page rapidly as if I'm addicted to her words. However, I feel anxious. I begin to realize that this text touches less on alcoholism and more on drug addiction. The tempo and the progression (yet quicker) are still similar to the other memoirs--the craving, self-torture, and abuse--mirroring that of alcoholism. She stated, "The simplest definition of addiction is when you want to stop doing something and can't" (Wurtzel, 2002, p. 20). I put the book down--it's not what I'm looking for. I want a memoir more focused on a specific

addiction--alcohol dependence. I scan the shelves at *Borders* and surf the book index. Various men, wearing employee name tags around their necks, approach me to see if I need help. I politely say, "Not yet, but thanks," and continue to look up book titles.

I browse the best sellers list and the nonfiction shelves. In both sections, I see *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey (2003), recently on Oprah's book club. I laugh at the thought of my fellow aspiring writers, hoping to make it on Oprah's book club; they claim if you make it there, then your book will sell. I see a book by Burroughs (2006) *Running with Scissors*, and I am reminded of his alcohol memoir: *Dry. A Memoir* (2003). I am surrounded by men: Hamill (1994) *A Drinking Life*; O'Reilly (1997) *Sobering Tales*; Sykes (2006) *What did I do Last Night?*; "Cot" Campbell (2007) *Memoirs of a Longshot*. My experience at *Borders* reinforces my assumption that women's voices on alcoholism have been relatively silent. They are difficult to find. I contemplate ending this chapter now, leaving the reader in silence, allowing the reader to feel the frustration I feel, and the silence these women feel. Ending this chapter now would symbolize the lack of representation women like me experience when facing alcohol abuse.

It's not that women aren't alcoholic, but few address alcohol abuse so publicly. While discussing alcoholism, women alcoholics not only suffer from the illness of alcoholism, but an additional stigma of being 'unladylike' (Kirkpatrick, 1990; Knapp, 1996; Zailckas, 2005). Gathering my cool, I head for the Women's Studies section, and I see a text entitled *A Woman Like You: Life Stories of Women Recovering from Alcoholism and Addiction* by Rachel V. and LeClair Bissell (1985); *Happy Hours: Alcohol in a Woman's Life* by Devon Jersild (2002); and *Counseling the Alcoholic Woman* by Joseph F. Perez (1994). Female researchers telling other's stories are

sprinkled among the male authors. I spend at least an hour reading the inside and back covers of books on alcoholism. Knapp's book stands out, and I decide if I end this chapter now, I would be doing her an injustice. If I end this chapter now, I would simply reinforce the silence.

The more stories we read and hear about women and alcoholism, the less afraid a woman will be to admit she is not in control of her drinking. It is important for women to share their stories in order to connect to a larger addiction culture. The more women who bare witness to this addiction the sooner our culture will be forced to see women as a part of our society and not "kept" at home. The more research on women and alcoholism or sobriety that exists, the easier it will be for women to find knowledge about this addiction that may encourage a path toward recovery and the sustainability of sobriety.

For decades, men have been in recovery. Kirkpatrick (1990) reinforces that sobriety is different for women. She stated, "Many men drink to feel powerful, to feel masterful, to feel in charge; women seem to drink from feelings of inadequacy, of loneliness, frustration, and depression" (Kirkpatrick, 1990, Preface section, para. 8). I realize that my experience in the Women's Studies section at *Borders* heightens my awareness of the plight of women in our society.

A couple shelves below Knapp's book, I see Zailckas' book and right next to it rests Wurtzel's book. I pick up this book again and contemplate the word addiction; the intense physical craving and mental obsession. Wurtzel's unhappiness, fears, temptations, and relapse give me insight into a culture of addiction--a female's addiction. Wurtzel represents the epitome of an addict; constant planning, escape, lack of confidence, and need for ingestion. Although, this text provides an evocative tale of addiction and insight

into a woman's search for meaning, search for voice, and search for happiness, I decide to continue my search for a text that is more aligned with alcoholism. I return her book to the shelf, craving a different sort of war story.

*

Two days later, I animatedly tell my story of frustration and searching for female memoirs and alcoholism to my substance abuse counselor. She scans her memory for other books she can think of, goes to her book case, then hands me *Turnabout: New Help for the Woman Alcoholic* by Jean Kirkpatrick (1990) founder of Women for Sobriety. It's the only book that comes to mind for her. Its pages are yellowed and the spine of the book is fragile. It dates back to 1978 and was reprinted in 1990.

Kirkpatrick is a pioneer in bringing attention to women's alcoholism and identity. In her book, she tells a raw account of her own addiction (Kirkpatrick, 1990). Her addiction is full-blown, intense; her language parallels the Ritalin/cocaine addiction of Wurtzel's struggle. In her text, Kirkpatrick (1990) skips the foreplay and heads into a world of relapse and alcohol abuse. No story of the first drink, just stories of addiction. Her style is somewhat unorthodox in comparison to other texts, which follow stages of conflict with an exposition, an introduction to the characters; a challenge, actions that disrupt the stability of a situation; a rising action, confronting heightened conflict; crisis, a turning point that makes resolution inevitable; climax, culmination of all the events adding to the drama; and a resolution where the drama relaxes into a new balance (Pelias, 1992, p. 123). Kirkpatrick (1990) begins by showing herself in the climax--middle of addiction and needing help. She then brings us back through moments of crisis. Throughout the various points in the text, I think Kirkpatrick has a resolution, but then

she goes back to drinking. However, in the end, she has a concrete resolution, leading her to sobriety.

While reading her text, I begin to realize that some alcoholics may not remember the first drink or when their addiction started. They wake up one day feeling in the middle of the story, already addicted. Tracing the beginning seems trivial. Was it the first drink? The first blackout? The first DUI? It feels natural to trace this addiction from the first drink; however, Kirkpatrick (1990) begins with addition and traces her attempt at sobriety, which in itself has a beginning, middle, and end.

The Storyline

Jean Kirkpatrick: A way out. In April 1990, Kirkpatrick republishes her 1978 memoir, *Turnabout: New Help for the Woman Alcoholic*, to promote a support group for women and sobriety. She begins her text with a preface that situates her story among a male-dominant population. She states, “But the AA program does not meet the needs of everyone, especially not women” (Preface section, para. 2). Kirkpatrick is a strong believer that women and men have different experiences getting sober, and we need to acknowledge this difference in order to promote abstinence. She continues, “Fewer than 10 percent of all alcoholics are in AA and fewer than 3 percent of women alcoholics” (Preface section, para. 2). She focuses heavily on providing a woman’s voice to this “disease” and on treating a woman’s “disease.” She credits woman’s movements of the 1960s with giving voice to our bodies and the governing of our own health, allowing her to feel empowered.

Kirkpatrick weaves research in her story, discussing alcoholism and alcohol abuse from a more “objective stance.” She presents a vivid account of her addicted body, giving

alcoholism a female face. From the first chapter of this text, the author reveals she has a drinking problem. The scene starts with her getting drinks for lunch and skipping the meal. As she arrives back to the office, she rushes towards the Xerox machine and trips over an office chair. With a broken foot, she is sent home from work to heal, but instead enters a battle with the bottle.

Her stories are quick paced, revealing her knowledge of addiction, but her inability to stop drinking. She drinks in the morning to curve withdrawal symptoms. In her eyes, drinking more alcohol is the only thing to get her through today; she will quit tomorrow. She states, “Taking the bottle with me, I went back to the bedroom and drank leisurely, for I had decided that I wouldn’t drink today. Just recover this early morning” (p. 7 & p. 57). Her idea of recovery is to drink to stop the shakes and the vomiting, so she’d scrimmage to find anything she could from the night before, then deal with quitting later. This becomes a recurring scene throughout the text.

Kirkpatrick often drinks heavily and says she will quit tomorrow. Tomorrow arrives and she has a few sips of anything she could find, which includes mouthwash just to take the edge off before beginning her sober journey. But her physical symptoms (dry heaving, shakes, and headaches) prompt more drinking. After Kirkpatrick’s first round of no work (due to her broken foot) parties, Sylvia enters. Sylvia is a psychiatric nurse who takes care of Kirkpatrick in the hospital after her first suicide attempt.

Kirkpatrick introduces us to Sylvia by stating, “Sylvia was coming today and she always got angry when I drank...Why should she always bug me about drinking?” (p. 7). For most of the book, Sylvia is Kirkpatrick’s caretaker and friend. Often Kirkpatrick wants to quit drinking for her, but continues to break her promises of getting sober.

Kirkpatrick depicts Sylvia as together and always willing to take care of others. She finds time to help other people as an RN and also helps Kirkpatrick as a friend. Her description often sounds envious, and she paints Sylvia as flawless.

Towards the end of the book, she describes Sylvia as “a baby-sitter” (p. 99). Sylvia takes her to doctor’s appointments, AA, picks her up after arrests, drives her to find her car after a night of blackout drinking and driving, drives her to court and to get her car fixed, etc. Sylvia shows up when Kirkpatrick hits a low, and Kirkpatrick always promises to get better. This relationship continues for years, and Sylvia witnesses Kirkpatrick’s many attempts to get and stay sober.

At one point, Kirkpatrick is attending AA and has been sober for three years; she is in the process of writing her dissertation and wins a dissertation grant. She is so excited that she wants to celebrate. After a trip to the grocery store, she feels unsatisfied. She rationalizes one drink. She knows where to get help if drinking becomes a problem again; she knows she cannot have a second drink. As her story goes (which becomes a running theme), one is not enough. At 3 a.m., unfamiliar people escort her home from the bar. This night leads to eleven more years of trying to get sober and eventually finishing her dissertation.

During these eleven years, Kirkpatrick gets sober and relapses, gets sober and relapses again and again. She learns that the detox will pass, but then she enters a battle with the mental obsession of alcoholism. She states, “If only I could get over the obsession with the thought of it!...But every minute of every day I thought about drinking” (p. 107). She continuously has moments of insight into her drinking and reasons for being sober. While reading, I often would think this is the last time she will

drink and her resolution to quit drinking will prevail, then bam, just like that, I'm sucked back into her drinking cycle. She believes each time is the last time.

During moments of perceived failure, Kirkpatrick heads back to the bottle. She continues to add up the bad, convincing herself that she has to quit drinking. Kirkpatrick is diagnosed with ulcers and cirrhosis and begins to get sick every time she drinks. However, this is still not enough to curb her obsession. After another try at AA and a few weeks of sobriety, Kirkpatrick finds she's alone and goes looking for friends. Everyone is engaged with drinking adventures. Out of frustration, she heads to the liquor store and begins a binge. She tries sobriety again, but feels pressure at a business meeting and drinks. The first drink starts another binge.

After trying AA again, she becomes better acquainted with the only other female in the group, Ruth. Ruth has a chaotic life as a mother and wife and begins to rely on Kirkpatrick outside of AA. Kirkpatrick begins to notice that this talking helps both of them better than AA. Although Ruth continues to attend AA, Kirkpatrick feels that reminiscing about the past and retelling drinking stories at AA only makes her want to drink more. She thinks AA meetings focus on the negative of drinking and not on the positive of not drinking. She needs more emotions work than AA offers. Her epiphany begins. Although Ruth plays a minor role in this text, she helps lay the foundation for Kirkpatrick's self-actualization and turn toward lasting sobriety.

Kirkpatrick begins piecing together her ideas of successful sobriety in between drinking bouts. She begins to realize that during sobriety she is not any happier than she is when she drinks. She is still depressed, hates herself, and now she doesn't even have her drinking circle. She feels more alone sober than drunk. She is on a quest to figure out

why, but then she drinks again. This pattern continues, and eventually Sylvia moves out of state, and in steps Florence, an old friend from New Hampshire. Kirkpatrick moves to Maine for the summer and rooms with Florence. They share insights about life, and Kirkpatrick begins to see a plan for sobriety. This event starts out innocently, but within a short period of time Florence becomes Kirkpatrick's caretaker, especially after she finds Kirkpatrick overdosed on pills. However, Florence will not continue this codependency and decides it would be better to end this vacation.

Kirkpatrick moves home early from this vacation to find her father's health beginning to decline. She feels cheated and wants to tell her dad, she will get better. Kirkpatrick and her father never talk about much (p. 115). She feels uncomfortable and self-conscious, hoping to impress her father with her attempts at not drinking. Moments of disagreements occur, and she usually exits before dinner. She promises to stop drinking, slow down, or stay sober. But she can stay sober only for a few weeks until she mentally abuses herself, feels overwhelmed and drinks again. Even after arrests, accidents, overdoses, cirrhosis, and insight into sobriety/drinking, she still continues to drink. Her father's death prompts another binge. She realizes after twenty-seven years of drinking, she wants to quit. After her father's death, she moves in with her mother, continuing to battle her obsession with drinking.

It takes more than a dramatic event to fuel a sustained sobriety. For Kirkpatrick, it takes a spiritual awakening of a sort to see her way to sobriety. Kirkpatrick begins replacing negativity with positive thinking. As she searches for sobriety, she engages in new rituals. She begins every morning with a meditation session, focusing on emotional growth. She searches through all her obsessive thoughts and negativity, lets go of her

'failures,' and concentrates on her 'self.' Instead of figuring out how she would quit drinking, she concentrates on how she would live without drinking. And instead of figuring out why she feels more alone in sobriety than drinking, she accepts her aloneness in the world. Learning about her personality and connecting to a Universal Spirit, she realizes sobriety is about creating a happy self.

After watching a news broadcast about an eighty-one year old man who made bricks for a living and became the best brick maker, Kirkpatrick is struck with the idea of sticking to one thing for an entire lifetime. It hits her that she has spent her entire life drinking and is an expert on drinking. This epiphany sparks her to lead a social movement for women abusing alcohol. Through ritual meditation and positive thinking, she recreates a sober self and is ready to share this with other women. She wants to help women that AA does not. She finds a purpose to live and stay sober. With this newfound momentum, she begins writing articles and planning seminars on alcoholism. She wants to share her insight with other women and focus on women's health.

Kirkpatrick begins her quest to share her insight with other women by writing out Thirteen Statements of Acceptance designed to change negativism into positivism (p. 161). These are to be read every morning after a period of mediation. She adds writing activities and journaling to help get women journey through self-acceptance and appreciation. By thinking you are a capable woman, you will become a capable woman. She wants to empower women to believe they can live sober. These self-help groups will meet to share their positive insight into being sober and being a woman. Women for Sobriety is born. Kirkpatrick believes in herself enough to stick by her method and form an organization that now holds meetings all over the world. These meetings are

unstructured and meet as often as women want. She wants to get away from the dreadful feeling she had while attending AA, and make sobriety less structured and more about living in the present. She does not focus on “the semantics of whether or not one is an alcoholic” (p. 181), but rather the real suffering endured by women with drinking problems and who want to alleviate their dependence on alcohol.

The moral of Kirkpatrick’s story is that drinking becomes the only thing an alcoholic knows, and women need to know that they are capable of leaving this alcoholic life and can get help and learn how to live sober. She realizes getting sober is more about respecting herself enough to stay sober. She creates her own steps to positive sobriety to help reshape her life. Fear, self-hatred, guilt, and insecurity accompanies her drinking career, and she finds once she is sober that these ideas still haunt her enough to create a relapse. She figures that once she begins to work through these issues, she is able to combat her urges to relapse.

She has to work on happiness as well as sobriety. In order to do so, she begins to focus on a holistic and spiritual approach to life. She nourishes herself with a healthy diet and vitamins, and nourishes her soul with morning meditation and connecting to nature. Kirkpatrick asks women to take time to watch the sun rise, write, think positive, and mostly encourage each other.

She feels that AA is more like a code to follow, not an encouragement to live. A woman must trust and believe in herself which, for an alcoholic woman, can be scary and deceptive. Kirkpatrick feels that if you repeat these WFS steps, you will start to believe them. We must be liberated from our past and move forward in the now.

Kirkpatrick has many insights into alcoholic living and has spent years getting sober. Once she begins to work on liking herself and not just drinking, she is able to maintain sobriety. She sees sobriety as hard work, but has dedicated the later years of her life to spreading her idea in hopes of helping other women. This philosophy also recognizes the importance of support groups and outside encouragement. Through personal narrative and research, she offers hope to those in similar situations.

Caroline Knapp: A dysfunctional romance. Caroline Knapp's (1996) memoir, *Drinking: A Love Story*, shows the passion that fuels an addiction. She admits to engaging in a love affair with alcohol for twenty-one years. Knapp starts her memoir recounting a moment of fear that occurred shortly before she quit drinking. This is a life changing moment where she sees her drinking actions endangering the lives of others. Fear spins her into a battle with her drinking self, and the external evidence that she needs to quit drinking is piling up.

During one Thanksgiving at her friend's house, she plays "the Rambunctious Friend of Mom's" with her friend's two daughters, when suddenly she decides to invent the 'Double Marsupial Hold.' This game requires the children to sandwich Knapp, while she holds onto both on them. She decides to run down the street with 130 pounds of kids hanging onto her. As she begins to run, she loses her balance, sending all three plugging towards the ground. She panics as she sees the five-year-old daughter's skull heading for the pavement. Luckily, Knapp manages to keep the little girl in her arms. Her own right knee suffers the first point of impact. The kids are okay, but she is rushed to the emergency room to get her knee stitched up. Reflecting on this event, Knapp states, "This is the truth: I was extremely drunk that night..." (p. xvi). This event scares her; she

recognizes that her drinking self put these kids and herself in jeopardy. Three month after this event, she checks into a rehab center and quits drinking.

Knapp does not start her drinking story with her first drink. She shares vignettes from various moments of her life, highlighting her involvement with alcohol. Her story doesn't follow a specific timeline of events; however, she does include a rise of action while sharing various drinking episodes that build towards a crisis, noting that a resolution of conflict is inevitable. She sets up her chapters by topics, such as addiction, substitution, drinking alone, and hitting bottom. Each chapter includes drinking memories and flashes forwards. Knapp shows the temporal evolution of her alcohol abuse. She allows the reader to follow her mixed up world and the entrapment that accompanied her drinking. She explains that towards the end of her drinking, she would lie, hide, and sneak around: "I drank when I was happy and I drank when I was anxious and I drank when I was bored and I drank when I was depressed, which was often" (pp. 1-2). She explains how important drinking had become and how it affected (or dictated) every aspect of her life.

Her memoir is a chaotic love story that covers her dating affairs, obsessive drinking, starving, and nearly dying. She shares the intricate planning, obsessing, and passion involved with drinking. Knapp states, "Yes: this is a love story. It's about passion, sensual pleasure, deep pulls, lust, fears, yearning hungers" (p. 5). She reveals that alcohol is like an abusive lover. You begin to forget and forgive the bad and end up back in the bottle just as some people end up back in an abusive relationship. Knapp wants the reader to understand the complex relationship and alliance an alcoholic forms with alcohol. She wants the reader to see just how much alcohol means to an alcoholic

and how hard it is to say good-bye--to end the romance. She doesn't just tell her own story, but rather incorporates snippets of other alcoholics' stories, people she meets along her journey.

Throughout her text, she compares herself to these other drinkers and recovering alcoholics. She uses these stories to understand her drinking and show the reader multiple accounts of how many lives alcoholism touches. These other's stories add to our cultural understanding of alcoholism by connecting to a larger alcoholic narrative. Knapp includes two sets of characters in her story. One set is from her drinking days and the other from her recovery.

As she refers to other drinking women, she rationalizes that she is 'not that bad', which allows her to continue drinking. She introduces us to Elaine, who is in her forties, divorced, and involved with a married man. At the time Knapp is in her twenties. When Elaine and Knapp get together and have drinks, Knapp watches her friend unfold. Elaine is sloppy and crying and obsessed with this man, who promises to leave his wife, but never will. Elaine threatens to leave him, but never does. Knapp connects Elaine's hardship with her constant boozing. She shows how alcohol can trap you in a situation, clouding your ability to make decisions and hindering one from seeing how bad the situation is. Knapp will often pinpoint alcohol as a negative factor in other's lives, while dismissing it in her own.

Even while sober, she compares herself to others in recovery. Sometimes questioning her drinking past. Knapp meets Abby at an AA meeting and they quickly become friends. They often meet before AA meetings and Abby begins to piece her life together as Knapp listens. Abby's brother was schizophrenic; he'd committed suicide. He

had sexually come on to Abby three days before he committed suicide. She'd fended him off, and she was the one to find his body in the garage, dead from carbon monoxide poisoning. She was fifteen. Abby also comes from a long line of alcoholics. Her mother is an alcoholic and so are her mother's siblings. Each married an alcoholic except her mother. Knapp again thinks she is not that bad, but reinforces that alcoholism takes on many different shapes and forms.

Like Kirkpatrick and Zailckas, Knapp's friendships are based on drinking. As one character exits another enters filling the same space of the previous character. By using so many characters in her story Knapp shows that alcoholism can affect anybody. And they find that every aspect of their life is affected by alcohol.

For example, when Knapp plans a trip to visit her parents, she obsesses over how much alcohol will be there, worrying whether there will be enough. Her parents live in a dry county, and it's a forty minute drive to the closest liquor store. She spends hours planning her drinking course of action. When she is out with friends, she always focuses on how much wine is left and how much more she might need. The goal of maintaining her appearance as a professional, together woman fuels much of this planning. She is constantly worried that others will notice just how much she is drinking. Her plan is to hide her drinking from everyone. She hides a bottle in her suitcase in case the alcohol runs out at her parents. While out with friends, she excuses herself to go to the bathroom and on her way to the bathroom, she stops at a bar to take a shot. She hides bottles around her house, even though she lives alone. All this planning really is doing is hiding her drinking obsession from herself, adding to her denial. If it is hidden, she too can't see just how much she is drinking.

On the outside, Knapp is a functioning alcoholic; she runs and edits the lifestyle section of *The Boston Phoenix*; her office is clean, she is well manicured, never misses a day of work, or a deadline. She often watches her drinking around her co-workers, trying never to appear out of control. However, underneath she is spinning out of control (p. 14); her drinking invites crisis after crisis. For years, sometimes even decades, this chaotic living is all an alcoholic knows. It keeps a person busy, but never allows them to move forward in life. Knapp states, “You hide behind the professional persona all day; then you leave the office and hide behind the drink” (p. 17). Often drinking allows Knapp to free herself from her thoughts, her low self-esteem and anxiety. It takes her decades to see how her self-esteem issues are wrapped up in her abuse of alcohol.

Another character in Knapp’s story is Eliza, who becomes Knapp’s main confidante in her late twenties. She plays a role in Knapp’s life similar to the role that Knapp plays in Elaine’s life. They go out to dinner and drink wine, and Knapp obsesses over the man she’s living and fighting with. She finds herself involved in an emotionally abusive relationship, and Eliza is there to listen. Eliza also becomes her scapegoat when Knapp starts dating multiple men. Knapp’s life becomes consumed with lying and hiding not only her drinking but also her love affairs.

Knapp’s twin sister, Becca, is a consistent supportive character throughout both her drinking and sobriety. For years, Becca expresses concern for Knapp’s drinking. She asks her to get help; she pleads with her (p. 237). Anytime Knapp confides in her about life dramas, Becca always hints at drinking as the culprit. Becca is in training as a psychiatrist, following in her father’s footsteps. She is married, nonalcoholic, and successful. At times Knapp’s envy of her sister fuels feelings of failure (p. 175), but her

sister is always there for her. When Knapp decides it is time to quit drinking, she calls her sister to ask her to find a rehab center. Becca helps and guides Knapp through this decision.

After Knapp quits drinking, she begins to have many relationships where alcohol is still the only connection. Only this time, a commitment to not drinking is the bond they share. She befriends many women who she meets at AA meetings. Unlike Kirkpatrick, Knapp attends AA (years later). She finds that there are fewer women than men, but more women are now attending AA. Most are just starting out with sobriety and together they journey through their past drinking into their present sober state. She uses these women's stories to show the various women who drank alcoholically and are having continued success with sobriety.

Janet used to drink alone at the same bar as Knapp did; however, they never knew each other until AA. According to Knapp, Janet is one of the most thoughtful people she knows; she really listens and cares about others. During college, Janet becomes a bulimic alcoholic. She binges on alcohol and food, then purges. She plots her next food related move. It becomes a mind-numbing obsession. She then hates herself for her action, but this hate later encourages bingeing and purging behavior, which is similar to the self-hating cycle of alcohol abuse. Often people will shift between addictions. Compulsion defeats logic, and she finds she's hung-over and sick. As her bulimia slows down, drinking overtakes her. Knapp and Janet meet for dinner and tea, sharing these stories.

Then there is Tess. Tess becomes one of Knapp's closest friends during rehab. She is a chronic relapser and highlights the severity of alcoholism as an addiction. She has been in and out of relapse programs, which scares Knapp.

Knapp reads that relapse is common and out of the six that were in her clique at rehab only two were still sober at the time she wrote this book. She listens to Tess's horror stories of drinking, sex, and being in and out of rehab centers for fourteen years. Tess explains that she had awakened in a hotel room one night with a strange man, and the next day he offered her money. Feeling ashamed, she walked out. But then she began to bleed heavily. She was pregnant and having a miscarriage.

These drinking stories fill Knapp's memoir. She stresses just how bad it can get and still the alcoholic keeps on drinking. Alcohol is perceived as one's lifeline, and some alcoholics never realize it is as poisonous as the apple that Snow White takes a bite from; only this is not a fairytale. For a while after rehab, Knapp and Tess keep in touch, but slowly Tess disappears, continuing to try to stay sober, but relapsing. Knapp wants her reader to see the effects that alcohol has on a person, changing who they really are and can be. She begins to learn more about alcoholism through these relationships with other women in recovery, and she reflects on their stories as well as her own.

Knapp also intersperses research on alcoholism, connecting alcoholism to a larger social problem. She notes, "The search for a fix, for a ready solution to what ails, has become a uniquely American undertaking, an ingrained part of consumer culture..." (p. 61). We are constantly searching for something more and live in a society of excessive consumerism. We need *Calgon* to take us away; drinking becomes her crux. Drinking becomes a reliable fix, but this is only superficial and momentary. Knapp finds herself drinking to forget, but having to wake-up the next day to remember. She states, "...alcohol makes everything better until it makes everything worse" (p. 66).

For these women drinking is romantic, but over time the romance turns into obsession, leaving life chaotic. Knapp dedicates much of her memoir to describing herself in relation to others, particularly romantic others. Much of Knapp's drinking is enmeshed with a romantic partner. For most of her adult life, she is in a long-term relationship.

At nineteen she begins dating a man named David and her drinking increases as this relationship gets more serious. He is a heavy drinker (not necessarily alcoholic) and for the next few years they date and drink. After graduating college they spend the summer together, and she finds herself questioning and doubting their relationship. Eventually, David moves away and their relationship fades.

She spends a few years alone, but at twenty-eight, she meets her next drinking love partner, Julian. Once again drinking takes the lead in this relationship. They drink elegant red and white wines, and right from the start alcohol dictates how they live. She finds herself wanting to change to fit his ideal. She begins wearing what he suggests, changing her hair, and becoming more self-conscious, feeling never good enough to please him.

They move in together shortly after they start dating, and their relationship falls apart immediately. They drink and fight and drink and fight. They date for over five years and, even after he practically forces her to move out, they continue to see each other on drunken nights. As Julian fades, but never leaves completely, Knapp begins a romance with Michael who is completely the opposite of Julian. She wants approval from Julian, but gets it from Michael. Knapp explains that Michael is kind and sweet. He is a freelance illustrator who she meets at work. He likes to drink, but as Knapp describes, he

isn't the least bit alcoholic. At first, he sees Knapp's drinking as fun and social, but as their relationship continues he grows concerned and wants to help. He never gets angry, and she begins to take advantage of his kindness. She lies and continues to see Julian behind Michael's back. For years, lying, cheating, and drinking dominate Knapp's life.

Her energy is wrapped up in guilt and dependence, and to add to this chaos, both her parents get sick and die in the last few years of her drinking. Knapp's father is diagnosed with a brain tumor, and his death prompts Knapp to jump overboard into drinking. She drinks every night until she passes out. Her mother dies a year later of breast cancer. As she drinks more because of these events, she eventually breaks through her denial, and she begins to think more about just how much she's drinking.

While trying to get sober each woman had brief moments of clarity when they realize they will have to quit drinking. After her father's death, Knapp begins to think more about not drinking. Over the years she tries to cut back, but never really connects that she might have to quit drinking. In her late twenties, she expresses concern for her drinking, but it isn't until her mid-thirties that not drinking is a possible solution. Knapp begins to realize that if she keeps drinking, she will push Michael, her sister, and her mental clarity further away. Drinking begins to become unpredictable and unreliable.

Like Zailckas and Kirkpatrick, she has no specific turning point. She begins to think more about her father's death. The night her father died, she decides to leave her parents' house while he was still alive and drink to oblivion. In the middle of the night, she gets a phone call that her father had died, and she realizes that she is still really drunk. Shortly after her father's death, her mother also dies. And then over Thanksgiving at her friend's house, she puts the two children's lives in danger because of the "Double

Marsupial Hold.” She is tangled up in two love affairs. Her work is not excelling, just maintaining. She finally connects all of these events to her alcohol abuse. An epiphany is building.

One hung-over afternoon, she is sitting at Michael’s table reading *Esquire* magazine, which contains an excerpt from Pete Hamill’s (1994) memoir *A Drinking Life*. She sees her own life story in his text. She sees herself drinking instead of making painful choices. At this point, she begins to shift and rearrange her thinking. She always thought she drank because she was unhappy. But maybe, she was unhappy because she drank. If she quit drinking, perhaps things would change. That afternoon, she sees her sister and asks for help. Two months later she goes to rehab.

She is in rehab for two weeks, where she is introduced to AA. Knapp finds AA to be a ‘positive brainwashing.’ She buys into all of it. It gives her something else besides drinking. For the first time, she will have to do everything sober. After twenty-one years of drinking, sobriety is a huge challenge. AA provides her with a shot of hope. She has to learn to be emotional and learn about herself, piece her life (childhood and adulthood) together. Knapp notes that you do get better, but this is more by default. Sobriety is more about “subjecting yourself to change.”

The moral of Knapp’s story is that alcoholism isn’t love at first sight, but “the relationship develops gradually, over many years, time punctuated by separation and reunion” (p. 6) and alcoholism doesn’t discriminate. The memoirs of all three women offer an example of this as they trace their addiction. Knapp gives us a glimpse into the years her love for alcohol grew into an addiction. She states, “...you wake up one morning and some indefinable tide has turned forever and you can’t go back. You need it;

it's a central part of who you are" (p. 6). Like Kirkpatrick and Zailckas, Knapp gives alcoholism the face of a quiet, successful woman. She highlights, "there is no simple reason why this happens...it's a slow gradual, insidious, elusive becoming" (p. 8).

Knapp continuously shows herself as an educated women struggling with denial. She shows how alcoholism can affect anybody and getting sober is not just about not drinking, but changing everything. She wants the reader to understand the compulsion and obsession that underlies alcoholic drinking. Metaphorically, alcohol is a lover, a constant companion. It becomes the most important thing in one's own life.

Knapp's story helped me better understanding how alcohol can become central in a woman's life. She shows us vulnerability, negativity, lying, cheating, and emotional abandonment. Her story gives voice to the female alcoholic and can help women in similar situations. Knapp states, "*People who aren't alcoholics do not lie in bed at two-thirty in the morning wondering if they're alcoholics. A good reality check*" (p. 271). She urges women to break through the denial and get help.

Koren Zailckas: A young female's view. At sixteen years old, Zailckas encounters her first blackout and her first drinking induced hospital visit. She states, "In the absence of memory, the night will be even more memorable" (p. xii). Zailckas (2005) begins her memoir, *Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood*, with a brief explanation of this event drawing in the reader by reminding us that it didn't start out this way and offers her story to "show the full life cycle of alcohol abuse" (p. xii). She recalls an instant attraction to alcohol, planning and waiting for more drinking moments. Her preface takes us through a condensed version of her drinking life.

Zailckas claims, “I am not an alcoholic” (p. xiv). I think back to Kirkpatrick’s discussion about semantics and definitions of the term alcoholic (p. 181), which made me question our current understanding of alcohol abuse or alcoholism. Zailckas continues to list reasons why she is not an alcoholic, no family history, no physical addiction, no hiding, no DUI charge, no drinking alone. But I wonder if she had continued along this path, would these experiences have occurred? As I trace the beginning, middle, and end of each book, I begin to see how Zailckas represents the beginning of this abusive pattern (drinking for fun, but slowly becoming reliant on drinking to have fun), Knapp the middle (hiding and lying about drinking), and Kirkpatrick the end (body riddled with disease)?

At twenty-three, Zailckas gives up drinking after connecting her drinking ‘I’ with her suffering “I”. As AA informed, “*Bad things didn’t happen every time I drank, but every time something bad did happen, drinking was involved*” (Knapp, 1996, p. 166). She begins to recount the bad from drinking and wants to change this pattern. She realizes that giving up drinking is the only thing that would encourage this change. As Zailckas narrates her past encounters, she includes a paragraph or two in each chapter of analytical distant observation and research.

According to Zailckas, in order to get an accurate view of her account, she has to take us back to the beginning--her first drink. Occurring eleven years before she wrote her book, she remembers it quite vividly. She was fourteen. Her relationship with alcohol begins at a weekend sleep over with Natalie, who becomes her newfound drinking buddy and the first character in her story. As the story unfolds, Zailckas befriends three or four girlfriends for a year or two at a time. Some traumatic event occurs while drinking; they

grow apart and then the next drinking girlfriend enters. Zailckas describes Natalie as somewhat of a rebel--sneaky, mischievous, and always pushing the limits (p. 8)--but also vulnerable and sad. These qualities can also describe the other good girlfriends that Zailckas includes in later sections of her memoir.

This particular sleep over weekend at Natalie's involves sneaking into the liquor chest. This event introduces Zailckas to a pattern of alcohol abuse. She doesn't claim to be peer pressured, but finds herself following Natalie's lead (almost feeling obligated), taking any adventure Natalie devises. While drinking with Natalie, she believes that drinking will level the differences, but foreshadows how really different they become. Natalie is energetic and happy in high school, Zailckas more reclusive and hidden. Zailckas uses alcohol to gain acceptance from Natalie, eventually using it to feel more comfortable and accepted by all.

The first time she drinks, she only has a shot. She watches how Natalie reacts to her with warmth and tenderness. She feels a new bond. As the girls exit for a birthday party, they fill up two bottles with Southern Comfort and hide them in their backpacks. With these bottles come popularity and Zailckas begins to feel mature, liked and less apprehensive. At an age when women's self-esteem is dwindling, Zailckas highlights the use of alcohol to compensate. This can be found with Knapp and Kirkpatrick as well.

As the booze effect begins to engulf Zailckas, she is not afraid to be alone (p. 22). She is relaxed and comfortable. Like many addicts, she craves this comfortable feeling, which she never felt without alcohol, more than she craves the drink itself. After this venture, Zailckas reveals the first time she got wasted (with Natalie), and a short-lived friendship with Billie, a girl who replaces Natalie while Natalie is away at boarding

school. Zailckas only mentions one character who is not engaging in this drinking behavior: Margaret.

Zailckas meets Margaret at ballet camp the summer before high school. They become pen pals and confidantes (p. 50). For months they update each other about boys and school, but eventually Zailckas begins to share her drinking stories. Margaret replies harshly. Unlike the other girls from school, she does not accept Zailckas' drinking self. She asks Zailckas to think more about her alcohol abuse. Zailckas takes offense, responding with a "mind your own business" letter. Just like that, the friendship is over. Just like that, drinking begins to cause trouble for Zailckas.

Zailckas reminisces about her firsts, which highlight the progression of her abuse: first drink, first time wasted, first offense (time getting caught by parents). From these innocent firsts, emerge nights of overindulgence and crisis. Eventually Natalie and Zailckas' friendship ends after a late night of drinking. Zailckas gets caught up in the moment, wanders away with a boy, and thinks Natalie is with another boy. As she exits the room not wanting to do anything sexual with this man, she cannot find Natalie, who is beyond drunk, incapable of moving, speaking, or remembering. When Zailckas finds her at a strange house along the beach, Natalie's clothes had been changed and she is alone throwing up. No one seems to know anything. The next day Natalie doesn't remember anything and barely talks to her friend. Zailckas feels responsible for this night and guilt eats at her; their friendships ends.

As her drinking increases, Zailckas repeatedly comes out of a blackout in the hospital because of alcohol poisoning. The first time, she has a blood alcohol level of .25; she is still only sixteen. Slowly this event becomes just a memory, and alcohol continues

to be a focal point in her life. In college, drinking becomes the norm. Zailckas states, “We can wear our alcohol abuse as proudly as our university sweatshirts...” (p. 111). The middle of her story invites us into daily alcohol abuse during college. In this section of her book, Zailckas interweaves many facts and figures about sorority and fraternity drinking as well as sexual assault and drinking.

Zailckas begins a drinking pattern that starts with drinking Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and ends up Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, etc. Within days she hits it off with a girl named Tess, who is very similar to Natalie--smokes, drinks, rebels and is outgoing. They drink together. Zailckas freshman year, she joins a sorority, which gives her more time and events for drinking. In the sorority, drinking is the defining factor, not money or designer clothes. She fits in because of drinking. Hanna, a fellow pledge takes the place of Tess, and Elle the place of Hanna, each an instant drinking friendship that eventually comes to an end.

As her entanglement with alcohol continues, she begins dating. She uses alcohol to give her courage to do and say things she normally wouldn't. But being just drunk isn't good enough any more; she craves oblivion. Having a crush turns into a romance in the presence of alcohol. And Chris becomes more than a face in the crowd; he's a date. With alcohol, Zailckas feels more confident and “takes bigger chances” (p. 177). Over time Chris becomes an addiction, and drinking and Chris become a routine. They drink together, start to kiss, and she passes out. He is the only man throughout her drinking story with whom she wants to pursue a relationship. However, one night at a bar, she sees Chris “mouth to mouth” with another girl. From that point on, her dating becomes purely about being drunk with men she calls X (p. 255), interspersed with visits from Chris.

She describes a series of men she calls “drunks or depressives” (p. 205). Her encounters with these men are a horror story. Drinking makes her vulnerable, and Zailckas witnesses a succession of traumatic events. After a night of drinking with her ‘boyfriend’ doing drugs, she wakes up to him pushing then strangling her. After another blackout, Zailckas wakes up in a not so familiar room to a not so familiar guy. She assesses the situation and is shocked to find herself nude. She does not even like this guy. But now her virginity is gone; she is left piecing the night together. After alcohol poisoning, physical abuse, date rape, and the onset of depression, Zailckas still does not see her drinking as abusive, yet she tells of drowning herself in even more alcohol.

She relies on alcohol to erase her pain, fear, and rage only to find a new anxiety and guilt accompanying a hangover. She attempts to lay low and remove herself from the drinking scene by moving to New York for the summer. Alcohol finds her. She continues to drink in the same manner, and her anxiety grows. She starts to feel angry about her constant blackouts.

As she arrives back to school after the summer, she substitutes her alcohol abuse with working for her school newspaper. However, this is short lived and her first relapse back to heavy drinking occurs. She states, “There are more things I can’t remember than things I can” (p. 252). During this drinking period, she begins to have nights of belligerent drinking, anger, and violence. She no longer can use alcohol to get out of depression. Zailckas falls into a vicious cycle of drinking because of guilt and self-hatred, which only leads to more guilt and self-hatred from drinking, leading to more drinking.

After another summer off from school, she returns ready to “grow up and outgrow the life-stage behavior of binge drinking,” (p. 268) only to find this substance stronger

than her weak attempt to quit. After three months, she relapses. She moves away from her sorority house and the bars, hoping to escape the pressure of drinking. For two months she stays clear of alcohol. She doesn't express obsessive thinking about it, just a simple need to abstain.

Two months later, she relapses again. While out at a bar, she decides to have a shot with a friend for old times sake. This sparks more drinking and one friend, Vanessa, replaces another, Elle. She finds that her tolerance has not dropped and she warms back to alcohol as a long distance lover warms to her boyfriend after months of absence. She finds herself drinking every night, engaging again in unwanted or unwarranted sex, and using alcohol to forget. After graduation, she thinks her drinking will end, but it follows her to her new job in Manhattan, where she limits her drinking to a few drinks after work and bars on the weekend.

Within months of moving to Manhattan, she realizes abstinence will be hard. People look at her funny if she turns down a drink, so she drinks to network, but begins to avoid situations where drinking is a focus. Once again she finds herself waking up in a strange place with strange men. She begins to recount all the bad. She begins to see that "drinking is wrecking" her life (p. 320). She recounts waking up with her friend and two strange men, thinking about what could have happened. She begins to care about her "self" out of fear; the same fear that once led to her drinking to forget. She wants the bad to stop. She researches recovery but isn't sure what to look for. She goes to an AA meeting, but never goes inside. She knows something has to give, but what and how?

Zailckas claims there is no real turning point in her story. "There is no critical moment that might have changed my whole narrative" (p. xx). However, I see a person

who begins to get angry at alcohol. Just as the abuse occurs and grows over time so does her realization that she needs to quit drinking. She begins to feel worse with alcohol in her life and attempts to cut back three or four times. She tries to quit again, but when any life change like work or meeting new people comes along, she relies on alcohol to make her feel better, even though she knows it won't. It is an old habit and the only one she knows.

Zailckas begins to date a "good guy" named Matt. He rarely drinks, has a good job, is kind, doesn't smoke, and is "rock star" good looking. With the threat of a new romance and getting close to some one, Zailckas turns to alcohol to help her through. While spending time with Matt, she tries to pace her drinking so she does not get too drunk. However, this doesn't always work. After an evening of heavy boozing on New Year's Eve 2003, Zailckas becomes hostile, telling Matt she hates him over and over again. And then she goes into another bar, giving Matt the silent treatment. This situation highlights the unpredictable nature of drinking. Nothing has to happen externally to trigger this type of anger and hate. Her partner may never know what is happening and he is reeled into a pattern of drinking and fighting.

She continues to be rude to Matt the rest of the night, but as they exit the bar and enter the taxi, she rests her head on his lap. She is conscious enough to know that she has to change and that she will continue to have drunken outbursts. Her epiphany occurs during this taxi ride. She states, "A rare truth falls over me like the glare from the streetlights. I know that as long as I keep drinking, I will drive back everyone who is good-natured" (p. 330).

As her relationship with Matt unfolds, Zailckas begins to see how alcohol impedes her romantic life. Her boyfriend has only been hung-over three times (two of them with her); she brings drinking into the relationship. Their first date is at a bar and so is their second. She begins to rely on alcohol to be comfortable with this new partner. She also realizes that drinking will damage this relationship like it has all the rest. Zailckas makes the decision that she does not want to spend this relationship drinking. She begins to see just how bad it has gotten and just how bad she feels because of her abusive relationship with alcohol and alcohol's abusive nature. In order to quit for good, she has to acknowledge that she cannot ever drink normally. She has tried and failed over and over again.

Zailckas concludes with a brief glimpse into the beginning of sobriety. She states, "I'm not sure if I've found the 'good life' that the addiction counselor mentioned to me, but I've certainly uncovered a better one" (p. 330). During this time she begins to learn about herself. She is a shy person, and she knows she will never be outgoing. Alcohol creates a false sense of courage, and now she is regaining the courage to accept who she is. She sometimes finds herself recounting the bad drinking and spending hours being afraid, especially of men. But she is no longer adding to these anxieties with more drinking. She begins to learn how to be in a relationship, and Matt stops drinking in order to support her. She ends her text with hope and gratefulness. She knows that life may be difficult, but she chooses to live without alcohol. Zailckas doesn't explain her course of recovery or any mention of AA, but she does mention an abuse counselor (p. 330).

In the last few pages of her text, Zailckas highlights her moral, which is briefly mentioned in the preface. She states, "In the past decade alone, girls have closed the

gender gap in terms of drinking” (p. xv). There are ordinary drinking experiences among young women and girls that need to be acknowledged. She writes this book because, “Girls are drinking as much, and as early as boys” (p. xv). Her text shows a ‘normal,’ middle-class girl battling alcohol abuse, breaking through the stereotypes of masculine drinking. Zailckas also highlights reasons why women drink, repeating Kirkpatrick’s observation of poor self-esteem and unhappiness.

Alcohol abuse increases self-doubt and unworthiness. A woman alcoholic begins to see this in her surroundings, overhearing other females planning their drinking nights. Through her memoir, Zailackas calls attention to this abuse and asks women to love themselves, stop trying to please everyone, and rescue girls before they are lost in the sea of alcohol abuse. She offers the reader a detailed account of her drinking life and how drinking can become a major factor contributing to a chaotic life story. She courageously recounts these moments of hardship to offer the reader a young female’s account. Zailckas concludes, “Through the exchange of war stories, we learn that our failings aren’t only personal, they are cultural” (p. 338).

A Drinking Life: Comparing Stories

A relationship with the self. Kirkpatrick (1990), Knapp (1996), and Zailckas (2005) shared intimate details of their hidden drinking lives, painting a path towards sobriety. The saying: “There was always something that warranted a drink” rings true for these women. Each woman’s addiction began with an innocent drink at a young age and continued through college. As the years passed, each found that her relationship to alcohol became an obsession, a battle for control filled with self-hatred. These women had outward success; they appeared to be together women, but internally struggled with

identity and poor self-image. All three women are educated, middle-class, white females brought up in a “normal” home life in the Northeastern United States. As I look at the photos inside the back covers, I note their beauty. Their ages range from early twenties to mid-forties, giving us a wide overview of addiction. In Kirkpatrick’s (1990) memoir, she described the female alcoholic as, “boisterous, flirtatious, effusive, and sometimes loudmouthed. This may be the person she sometimes becomes, but more often she is secluded in the privacy of her apartment or home...She is shy, reclusive to a point, alienated, retrospective, and lacking self-esteem” (p. 21).

Kirkpatrick showed us this drinking persona, the person who entertains and hosts dinner parties. But without alcohol, she became introverted and withdrawn wallowing in self-pity. She highlighted that women’s drinking is cyclical: she often drinks because of feeling inadequate, this drinking leads to feeling guilty and further feelings of inadequacy, which then leads to further drinking. She did not pinpoint poor self-esteem as a cause of alcoholism (“the cause still eludes scientists” (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 21)), but as a difference in women and men’s drinking.

Knapp focused on the loneliness she felt in her introverted body. She stated, “I was painfully shy as a kid” (Knapp, 1996, p. 69), and she would hide behind her twin sister. When they started to grow-up and apart, she hid behind alcohol. Alcohol transformed her sober shy self into a courageous social being. From the outside, Knapp’s drinking appeared social. Alcohol brought her out of her shell and into the world (Knapp, 1996, p. 66 & p. 68) and drinking was used to transfer her into new personalities and ease distress and social anxieties. Knapp’s shy persona washed away as alcohol eased her into a new ‘dynamic’ drinking self. She stated, “For a long time, when it’s working, the drink

feels like a path to a kind of self-enlightenment, something that turns us into the person we wish to be, or the person we think we really are” (Knapp, 1996, p. 66).

Zailckas (2005) also described herself as introverted and cautious, somewhat phobic of groups (p. xx; p. 61; p. 330). She stated, “In the absence of alcohol, I’ve learned that I am not and have never been an extrovert” (Zailckas, 2005, p. 330). However, Zailckas depicted her drinking self as dynamic; she was the life of the party. She felt that drinking gave her the stamp of approval, but that approval was of a Zailckas who was outgoing and relaxed, which as she discovered couldn’t be further from her “true” self. As she warmed up on the sauce, she felt more confident (Zailckas, 2005, p. 62). However, as Kirkpatrick (1990) explained about alcoholic women, “She would awaken the following morning, after only a few hours of sleep, shaking, depressed, promising herself never again” (p. 23). After years of abuse, this extroverted drinking persona was just a delusion, and as Knapp (1996) highlighted, she recluded and became more introverted, drinking alone, and escaping from the outside (p. 76). As Zailckas alcohol abuse continued, she often woke up anxious and ashamed, shaking and hung-over (Zailckas, 2005, p. 232). Sobriety encourages her to accept herself, and learn how to be comfortable in this introverted self. But as Zailckas (2005) also observed, “drinking will always be more socially acceptable than abstaining” (p. xx).

We witnessed each woman beginning to spend more and more time alone, plotting her next drink and promising that she’ll stop. Her drinking relationship took priority over school and work as she balanced this separate identity. Kirkpatrick was a doctoral candidate in Sociology and worked for a grant program where she wrote technical textbooks for adults with a reading level of grade five. She explained this job as

'dull but well paying' (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 2). Drinking hindered her productivity in graduate school (it take her over eleven years to complete her dissertation), but she continued working a successful job.

Appearance: She is a together woman. Like Kirkpatrick, Knapp appeared to others to be "together." She is a graduate from Brown University, magna cum laude. She worked for an alternative paper in Boston, The Boston Phoenix, and wrote "one of the paper's most popular features" (Knapp, 1996, p. 12). She never missed a day of work. On the outside, she was productive and elegant, and always maintained her appearance (Knapp, 1996, p. 1 & p. 14). But on the inside, she was "falling apart." She noticed that she was not really progressing at work, only maintaining.

While in school, Zailckas began writing pieces for the entertainment section of the school paper. Two weeks after graduating from Syracuse University, Zailckas was offered a position as an advertising assistant for a men's magazine by an old boss. Even though she continued to drink, she still maintained her work ability and succeeded in school. However, she too found drinking more important (Zailckas, 2005, p. 291). After a few attempts at slowing down her drinking, Zailckas (2005) informed, "I drink because I always drink. 'I drink, therefore I am'" (p. 290). Her world was consumed with drinking, and she was forced to see just how bad it was. Drinking became her world (Kirkpatrick, 1990 p. 67; Knapp, 1996, p. 5; Zailckas, 2005, p. 137). Each tried to slow down her drinking, only to find she couldn't stop drinking (Kirkpatrick, 1990, pp. 116-128; Knapp, 1996, p. 58; Zailckas, 2005, p. 280). Withdrawal from drinking circles and trying to drink moderately was not a successful treatment for recovery; each had to find a way to

communicate her unhappiness and search for help (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 146; Knapp, 1996, p. 271; Zailckas, 2005, p. 320).

Together: She is not. Although each woman's path leads to communicating an addicted body and reclaiming a sober body, Kirkpatrick's alcoholism appeared to be more acute than the other two women and further advanced (if we can use those terms and/or describe the sequence of alcoholism). Alcoholism was in her body; she was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and ulcers.

Kirkpatrick (1990) drank to combat physical withdrawal symptoms (shakes, headaches, dry heaves, vomiting) and had attempted suicide more than once during a drinking binge (p. 19 & p. 120). Knapp was beginning to have some physical withdrawal symptoms, but these symptoms were not explained as disrupted or as advanced as Kirkpatrick's. Kirkpatrick discussed her symptoms with every drinking story and Knapp (1996) briefly explained that her withdrawal symptoms were getting worse (p. 10), but they were never a focal point of her abuse. Knapp did not mention suicide, but she continuously reminded us that she was suffering from depression. Zailckas (2005) did not discuss physical withdrawal symptoms, but did discuss contemplating but never attempting suicide (p. 59).

Kirkpatrick began her text with the addiction, jumping into the struggle for sobriety, and interspersed research chapters between her personal narrative connecting her story to a larger drinking culture and an even larger hidden culture of female alcoholics. She stated, "The women alcoholic is not something new, only the recognition of her" (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 20). Kirkpatrick used research chapters to speak about alcoholism and women in general, yet she alluded to her own self-disruptions. The

drinking woman begins to spend more time alone (which is highlighted in all three texts), and is incapable of communicating this loneliness while drinking.

All three women described the mental obsession and anguish related to abusive drinking. I am struck by the constant self-doubt, self-hatred, guilt, and talk of failure that line these pages. After an extended drinking episode, Kirkpatrick (1990) often assaulted herself, stating, “I hated myself, everything about myself...I’m lost (p. 6). I hated myself. I felt trapped (p. 15 & p. 55). I wanted to die (p. 19). I felt overwhelmed with my failure, my weakness” (p. 19; p.111; p. 142). She continued to discuss her fear of failure, love, death, and weakness. Her every thought was consumed by negativity and self-hatred. Knapp used alcohol to combat her anxiety, depression, and fear. She often felt like a failure at life--relationships, work, family (Knapp, 1996, p. 175). She repeatedly spoke of feeling self-conscious and “inferior and unprotected and scared...being too shamed” (Knapp, 1996, p. 16; p. 69; p. 201); the world felt unsafe (Knapp, 1996, p. 109). Knapp’s depression became more apparent, but drinking numbed this realization (Knapp, 1996, p. 108; p. 114; p. 116; p. 179; p. 201). She focused on alcohol initially easing this pain, but did not connect alcohol to depression.

Each woman pressured herself to be perfect--excel in academics, career paths, and outward image (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 2; Knapp, 1996, p. 12; Zailckas, 2005, p. 95). Eating disorders were often masked or induced with drinking, highlighting perfection and struggle for control over their chaotic drunken body (Knapp, 1996; Zailckas, 2005, p. 240). Knapp dedicated a chapter of her book to the idea of substituting one destructive obsessive behavior, such as anorexia, bulimia, or exercise addiction with another such as

abusing alcohol. She found many alcoholic women participated in one of these other destructive behaviors at some point in their lives.

For nearly three years, Knapp participated in anorexic behaviors. She ate an apple and one, one-inch cube of cheese for dinner every night during this time. After college, she obsessed and managed her food and eventually drops from weighing 120 pounds to weighing 83 pounds. Starving made her feel protected and in control (Knapp, 1996, p. 140). She counted calories and over-exercised, but she felt safe. Once drinking began to act as her protection, it felt like progress. As she drank more and gained the weight back, she progressed out of anorexia and into an obsession with alcohol. Knapp learned another way to numb her self-hatred and fear.

Zailckas also repeatedly expressed self-hatred and feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. She stated, “I too drink in no small part because I felt shamed, self-conscious, and small” (Zailckas, 2005, p. xvi). “I feel disfigured. I am shamed of my gnarled soul...” (Zailckas, 2005, p. 42). “I feel isolated. I swear I could die from loneliness and panic (Zailckas, 2005, p. 116); deep anxiety and depression” (Zailckas, 2005, p. 253; pp. 264-5; p. 297). Zailckas described herself as depressed and anxious and using alcohol to fill that void. She substituted her anxiety for a buzz, but found that after years of drinking she became angry while drinking and the joy of drinking was replaced with the necessity. She saw herself as empty, afraid of failure, and alone.

Relationships. All three women had a distant relationship with their parents. They’d spend time with them, but these women were preoccupied with the idea of being a failure (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 62; Knapp, 1996, p. 40; pp. 176-175; Zailckas, 2005, p. 42

& p. 265) and failing their parents. Often drinking was involved in their interactions, but talk with their parents rarely focused on their abuse of alcohol.

Kirkpatrick stayed further away from her parents because of her drinking and described her relationship as ‘not much of a relationship.’ She felt her parents were disappointed in her and she was not good enough. Knapp (1996) also described keeping her distance from her family (p. 152). She wasn’t sure why, but she visited less often. However, Knapp’s memoir focused heavily on her relationship with her parents. She made sense out of her alcoholism while making sense out of her relationship with her parents, her parents’ relationship with each other, and her father’s relationship with alcohol. These two women became hyperaware of their alcohol use and spent time hiding their use from their families. Drinking impaired their relationships with their parents and set up a false sense of parental judgment. Their parents may have known something about their daughter’s alcohol abuse, but did not acknowledge that they need to quit drinking (Knapp, 1996, p. 231; Zailckas, 2005, p. 79).

After the first time Zailckas’ parents caught her drinking, she realized her parents thought it was a phase. Her parents wondered if she was drinking and always acted suspicious, but never saw the drunken girl in front of them. She stated, “Every parent would rather believe that their child abstains--from sex, drugs, booze, and violence, all the cultish impulses” (Zailckas, 2005, p. 79). As these women grew, I notice that the parents of all three still wanted to believe that their child was not abusing alcohol.

During college, Zailckas’ mother said to her, “I’m not delusional; I know people drink in college. Just be responsible” (Zailckas, 2005, p. 132). For some it is just a phase, but for others it becomes a way of life. Her parents will later admit (about her drinking)

that it was easier for them when she was away. They didn't have to constantly be reminded of her alcohol use and could worry less. Zailckas began to rely on alcohol, and she too began to stay further away from her parents, creating a separation. All three women did have a relationship with their parents, but they felt it was superficial. Kirkpatrick and Knapp explained stopping by and having a drink with their dads. Usually, they'd sit and watch TV or maybe chat about nothing in particular. Neither would stay too long, and both would limit getting too drunk. Zailckas (2005) observed her parents drinking at the yearly Fourth of July party and stated, "They always seem so much happier then, less alone..." (p. 11). From this, she witnessed and learned that drinking could ease situations, but as she got older she learned that for her drinking hindered these same situations.

Drinking created a barrier, suspending these relationships. Each female did rely on her parents throughout the course of drinking and into sobriety. Kirkpatrick moved in with her mother to help out after her father's death, and it was then that she began her final attempt at sobriety. After her father's death, she did drink a few times, but every time she realized it wasn't what she wanted. She wanted to put forth effort to help her mother and help herself. It was during this time that she began to outline *Women for Sobriety*. She wished she could share this with her dad. She was figuring out a successful way for her to quit drinking and to get her life back in order (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 132).

Like Kirkpatrick, Knapp's father died during the course of her drinking, which led to heavier drinking. Knapp (1996) explained, "My father died and I jumped off the deep end" (p. 217). Her father was a drinker, and at an early age while watching her father, Knapp learned how drinking could loosen up a person and make them more open. Knapp

explained that her parents were rarely affectionate and never said, “I love you” to the children or each other. This environment was sterile, hindering any emotional display. Although, she never felt comfortable around her father, they had a bond that she couldn’t quite pin down and a strong attachment (Knapp, 1996, p. 33). Drinking with her father made Knapp feel at ease when she was with him. They never talked about alcoholism.

Knapp’s mother voiced concern about Knapp’s drinking, but believed that Knapp was taking care of it (Knapp, 1996, p. 3). Three years prior to her quitting, Knapp called her mother after a night of drinking. She only remembered fragments of the conversation, sobbing, slurring, and her mother expressing concern for her drinking. The next morning, Knapp called to apologize to her mother and again she promised that she would do something about it. She never knew how much her mom worried, and Knapp wanted to do something about her drinking, but this moment passed and she kept drinking. One year after her father’s death, her mother dies, and Knapp (1996) “continued to fall, blindly and all too willingly” (p. 217).

Kirkpatrick and Knapp drank more frequently after a parent’s death. These events were not the cause of sobriety, but pushed them so far down that they began to realize the only way up was to quit drinking. Each woman explained that this loss hit her harder in sobriety because drinking had numbed the pain (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 129; Knapp, 1996, p. 259). As a reader, I saw moments where a relationship with each parent could grow, but was hindered by alcohol, fear, and misconception.

During a drunk-dialing episode, Zailckas also called her mother and rambled about her anxiety. She claimed that she couldn’t breathe and she felt like the walls were crushing her. This was the only time that Zailckas expressed her emotions and cried for

help to her mother (Zailckas, 2005, p. 241). Her mother instantly booked a flight to come visit her, showing her support and offering her comfort. Although Zailckas spent most of this time hung-over from the party the night before her mother arrived, her mother tended to her, realizing but never hinting that Zailckas may be drinking too much. Once again drinking became too important, even more important than her mother's visit. Her mother showed her love and stroked her hair as she slept. Zailckas started to feel guilty and, staring into her mother's eyes, she was forced to see her problem.

A woman's drinking life: Men, chaos, blackouts. The strongest theme that ties these texts together is negative self-talk following a drinking binge. Each woman experienced a rebirth of self-image as they worked towards sobriety. In order to maintain stable abstinence, each woman found a 'new' self, worthy of acceptance and praise. This journey became a quest for sobriety and self-acceptance and not a trial and error of how to stay sober. Throughout Kirkpatrick's text, she focused on instances that highlight this negative self-talk and a chaotic drinking pattern. Towards the end, she explained the events leading up to her last drink in a more linear fashion.

Knapp and Zailckas plotted the timeline of their addiction, pinpointing a first time being drunk. However, Knapp did not follow a chronological order, but traced her drinking back into her twenties and thirties. Knapp (1996) specifically stated, "Our introduction was not dramatic; it wasn't love at first sight, I don't even remember my first taste of alcohol" (p. 6). She set up the pace of her text in this way (a gradual telling of her addiction), reflecting on of her past drinking in no specific temporal sequence. Knapp set up her story as a love story; her relationship to the bottle was like a connection to a lover. As her book concluded, she presented a more specific resolution, putting order to her

chaos both literally (she began to see her addiction as an addiction and recognized she needed to quit drinking) and figuratively when discussing her addiction (her story started to follow the order of events that lead her to sobriety).

With a much shorter drinking career, Zailckas followed a specific timeline of events from the first time to the last. She shared in chronological order, starting with middle school, then high school, into college, and ended with her brief stint of post graduation drinking, which took us into sobriety. She gave us brief narratives showing us “the full life cycle of” alcohol abuse and how her abuse progressed into getting sober. In Zailckas’ memoir, dramatic tension was less intense than the stories of the other women, and I wonder if this is because of the brevity of her timeline. Zailckas (2005) did not claim to be alcoholic, and stated, “I am a girl who abused alcohol, meaning I drank for the explicit purpose of getting drunk, getting brave, or medicating my moods” (p. xv). Both Knapp and Zailckas intermingled research about alcoholism with their stories (not necessarily full chapters).

Each author addressed entanglement with men and each theorized a larger hegemonic structure, where women’s voices are rarely heard and are viewed as weak. Kirkpatrick hinted at drinking as a cause for her lack of relationship involvement. In reference to her drinking life, she stated, “And somehow I was smart enough now to know that an involvement would be a disaster” (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 37). Kirkpatrick was a divorced female who was always popular, but her attitude about men changed after her divorce. She thought men were always trying to get involved, but she was not interested in their involvement. She had a hectic drinking life to pursue, which was time-consuming enough.

Besides balancing her relationships with Julian and Michael, Knapp found herself tangled up in a few drunken affairs that never amount to anything. Much of Knapp's drinking chaos encompassed men. For the most part, Knapp was romantically involved in serious long-term relationships. However, she did recall the disconnected morning after survey of the scene, waking up next to a man she may or may not know. She scanned the room, checked to see if her clothes are on, looked for a condom, and wished she could disappear (Knapp, 1996, p. 77). She was under the impression that drinking always makes it easier to feel sexy, flirt, and disconnect from the act of sex.

Zailckas (2005) had a few relationships during her drinking days, and explained, "There is no point in meeting men anymore" (p. 314). She felt that dating only added more chaos to her drinking, and she would not find any true companion at a bar while being intoxicated, which was the paradox of drinking relationships. Drinking allows her to be less inhibited and more social, but less likely to truly connect. In college, she had a steady flux of relationships, but like Knapp, each centered on drinking. Each encounter she had with a man ended up as a negative experience, and Zailckas (2005) began to develop a strong fear of men (p. 208). At this point in her text, she began to recount various experiences with fraternity boys. Zailckas focused on the negative exposure women experience at fraternity parties and the sexual abuse that occurs there. She believed that they should be banned and that fraternities breed aggression towards women (Zailckas, 2005, p. 228). She expressed frustration and blame, challenging these institutions to change.

Since Zailckas was in a sorority, most of her interactions with men were through the Greek system. Had she not been a part of the Greek system, she may have found these

experiences (date rape, abuse, lack of respect) still existing elsewhere on campus. Her experience may be more universal to college life (or life) in general, than just the Greek system. And as Kirkpatrick (1990) also stated, "I became always aware that men are, in the first place, sexual" (p. 37). These women expressed a lack of trust and safety in relation to men.

Knapp (1996) explained, "Alcohol felt like the cement in female sexuality..." (p. 86). Knapp's first sexual blackout experience occurred her sophomore year of college at a birthday party thrown for her. As she got drunk, she started dancing with another man. She felt their bodies connect on the dance floor, but flashing forward an hour or two she had no memory of what happened. She woke up in Bruce's bed. As she pieced the night together, she briefly remembered being shocked by Bruce pressing himself into her, then the blackout occurred. She was ashamed and scared, but soon drinking and sex would be all that Knapp would know--a way to disconnect body and experience. Zailckas (2005) echoed Knapp's drunken sexual experiences, waking up in strange men's beds, unsure of what happened the night before (p. 213 & p. 317). Drinking and sex began to scare Zailckas.

Kirkpatrick discussed her encounter with male dominance primarily as work related. She highlighted her work experience and patriarchic work environment. She was the only female in the office who was not in a clerical position, but she was often excluded from staff meetings. She noted that she was the highest educated, being the only one at the doctoral level. Although she was one of the most knowledgeable employees, she felt she was left out of many official meetings because she was a female. She was upset for not speaking up about this inequality, but let it pass. Her voice was seldom

heard, but she was so self-conscious about her drinking habits affecting her work that she allowed this injustice to continue. Kirkpatrick (1990) often mentioned being surrounded by men (p. 97) with a tone of feeling dominated.

Learning about femininity. Knapp explained feeling rage while discussing her relationship with her undergraduate advisor. After graduation, her advisor took her out to lunch. Shortly into lunch, the apparent sexual innuendoes surfaced. Knapp was living with her boyfriend at the time and was uncertain of how to handle this situation. After a few lunches with her advisor, they began seeing each other more regularly. She explained having no attraction to this man, yet she put herself in situations where they'd kiss and he'd grope. Eventually, she stopped seeing this man, and stated, "I didn't see him again, or even talk to him again, but from that point on, I could hate him, instead of merely fear him" (Knapp, 1996, p. 101). She felt unsafe, powerless, and treated as a sex object. Knapp (1996) described feeling threatened by men and angry at a society where it is okay (encouraged) for men to stare at women's breasts (p. 109-112).

Zailckas (2005) dedicated portions of her memoir to discussing male dominance (p. 44; p. 178; p. 190; pp. 334-339). Throughout the text, she explained her stance on a world that views women as weak and inferior. Zailckas concentrated her efforts to draw attention to women's abuse. From the beginning, she stated that society leads us to believe that life "could only be managed by masterful men" (Zailckas, 2005, p. xvii). Women are raised to be fearful-- always travel with a buddy, never walk alone at night, and always be aware of your surroundings. A woman is raised to feel anxious and, for some women, drinking eases this feeling.

Drinking creates a false sense of security and the courage to walk alone, have sex, and be aggressive. Along with this courage, women wake up with guilt. Zailckas (2005) pointed out, “We all mourn and make up for not just our own catastrophes, but also everyone else’s” (p. 220). Women feel personally responsible for taking care of their “buddy,” especially while drinking. Men do not carry this burden and “drinking confirms men’s gender roles” (Zailckas, 2005, pg. 257). Zailckas (2005) suggested that men drink for competition and to bond with other men, whereas women become less feminine, slutty, or emotional (p. 257), and have to take care of each other and make sure other females are safe.

Knapp interweaved brief sections about the objectified female. She stated that while growing up women are fed images of the good girl or sex bomb. But many women only learn to fear their bodies and drinking allows her to numb this fear. She stated, “We wake up in a haze some morning in some man’s bed not really remembering how we got there or what happened” (Knapp, 1996, p. 84). She described her friend Meg as not knowing that she could say no and not sleep with men she didn’t want to. She would drink more to forget, disconnecting her self from her body. Like Zailckas, Knapp (1996) suggested, “We found sex compelling and terrifying and foreign, and drank to deal with it, just drank our way through it” (p. 84).

Zailckas was enraged at our cultural perception of drinking and women. She believed that women were sold as sexy in beer commercials. Women’s drunken bodies were exploited through avenues like *Girls Gone Wild* and websites featuring men having sex with women who were apparently unconscious from drinking (Zailckas, 2005, p. 334). These experiences lead women into drinking more to forget the pain of a drunken

experience, waking up hating themselves. While discussing sex and alcohol, Knapp (1996) reminded, "Alcohol can numb fear, and allow you to fake it, and take you places you literally don't want to go: strange beds" (p. 86). Zailckas wanted women to get angry with this, but find other avenues to express this anger besides drinking. Women hold in their anger and try to be Miss Perfect; female rage is taboo (Knapp, 1996, p. 109). Zailckas (2005) expressed a larger, second order change is needed to avoid more women becoming emotionally dependent on alcohol (p. 335). As a woman, I find the information about sex videos and abuse alarming and discouraging. Zailckas portrayed her anger through her text, writing a critical cultural analysis of the perception of a drinking woman.

Kirkpatrick extended this discussion of inequality to gender in AA. She observed that there was one other woman at the AA meetings she attended, whose role at the meeting was described as taking care of the secretarial stuff. As one man informed, she was "our special gal," (Kirkpatrick, 1990, p. 102). Knapp also noted that there were few women and mainly men attend AA meetings. Kirkpatrick strongly believes that AA is not meant for women. She believes that women already beat themselves up enough while drinking and that forcing them to complete step after step of revisiting these moments is setting them up for failure. Women recognize their behavior while drinking and are already self-critical. Many appear to be severely depressed. She believes that some of the twelve AA steps just reinforce this critical behavior, which could lead her back to drinking.

This insight set up Kirkpatrick for her final chapter, which promoted a self-help program, *Women for Sobriety*. At the time of publication, she was five years into

sobriety and wanted to offer her experience as an aid for other women. Unlike Kirkpatrick, Knapp and Zailckas were in their first two years of sobriety. Their texts ended with a brief discussion about deciding to get sober and their newfound sober identity.

Stories of resolution. Knapp's story showed her strong obsession with alcohol and the influence that alcoholism exerted on her life. She expressed just how hard it was to see through denial and get help. Many alcoholics relapse, and Knapp painted sobriety as rewarding, yet constant work. Knapp (1996) stated, "I think about drinking, and not drinking, many many times each day, and sometimes I think I always will" (p. 266). Alcohol protected Knapp from growing up, and without alcohol she must feel and develop her 'emotional muscle.' Just because she gets sober does not mean the pain goes away, but it means she works through it. Knapp attended AA, and she learned a lot from the camaraderie she found at these meetings. She found AA a successful substitution for drinking. Knapp provided a detailed account of her love affair with alcohol and detailed the complexity of drinking and drinking alcoholically. She claimed that sobriety is about asking for help and practicing sobriety. She reminded, "We live in an alcohol-saturated world; it's simply impossible to avoid the stuff" (Knapp, 1996, p. 267). Alcohol masks insecurity, fear, shame, pleasure, and anger. The alcoholic loses her identity, and in sobriety is forced to wake up and start from scratch. She believed that without AA, she wouldn't be able to stay sober.

Zailckas (2005) was grateful for the little things that she now saw without her alcohol haze, and she has found something better than a drinking life (p. 332). All her friendships that flourished with the drama of drinking eventually came to an end, but she

refused to sit by and watch alcohol consume her. Zailckas concluded this chapter by calling for women to stand up and find a more productive outlet. She believes that alcohol only creates more harm and pain for women. Zailckas ended her book criticizing a culture that infests us with sex appeal and drinking and hopes that she can be a voice for women who are lost in the trenches of self-defeat.

*

All three women give voice to alcoholic women. Each text was set up to broaden understanding of alcohol abuse and how difficult it can be to get and stay sober. These women tied together personal narrative and research, offering the reader more than just tragedy. Each invited the reader into her story and continuously stressed alcohol's effect on the larger population. In the past, drinking has been viewed as masculine. These women show that women drink for different reasons than men. Women's drinking often relates to a lack of self-esteem. These authors draw attention to these differences by writing vulnerably, expressing the feelings of inequality and inadequacy they've experienced.

Often these women drank as much as men, trying to keep up with or appear as strong as them. However, these women were physically much smaller than the men. Imagine how much drunker these females were, while drinking the same amount. We hear about men drinking for competition, but women are involved in this as well and the result is higher blood alcohol levels. These authors want us to recognize these gender differences and engage in dialogue that will help women. They put their stories out there to be read, interpreted, used, analyzed, theorized, and judged. They showed us their imperfections and exposed their self-critical and self-abusive drinking lives. They attempted to get out

of this vicious cycle of drinking and hating, hating and drinking that was larger than they were and uncontrollable.

An active alcoholic often feels disjointed and unsure of herself. She experiences her drinking self as extrovert, her drinking self as introvert, and her sober self as an introvert trying to be extrovert. For years these authors labored under the illusion that the sober self as introvert was a weak and unattractive self, and they'd prefer drinking regardless of what the drinking self awakened. If the drinking self as introvert surfaced, she could always blame alcohol. For the alcoholic woman, three selves battle for dominance, dividing and destroying her integrity. "Women today, because they cannot bring their natural body into culture without shame and apology, are driven to attack and destroy that body" (Chernin, 1994, p. 186). Drinking becomes self-destructive. These memoirs challenge society's view of introversion and shyness, calling for women to nurture and accept these qualities.

From puberty to their mid-twenties, many women feel self-conscious and self-deprecating and suffer from low self-esteem. During these times many turn to eating disorders, mutilation, drugs, or alcohol. As Kirkpatrick (1990) stated, "Drinking fills an emptiness within self" (p. 21). I am somewhat overwhelmed by the negativity and constant self-doubt that coats these memoirs. And I wonder how we can ease our girls into womanhood without encouraging self-hatred and self-abuse and the impulse to turn to alcohol to free themselves of these feelings?

In sobriety, these women are left to discover 'new' selves and create a new identity. By tracing relapse, obsession, fear, and the beginning of recovery, each writer bestows a woman's face onto the alcoholic. They encourage other women to speak out

and be less afraid of being herself and, where present, accepting the introverted parts of her identity. Each author was in the beginning stages of not drinking, discovering her new sober self and proud to have left a drinking life. Each story ended on a positive--a sober life will be better than what she had before. All of these texts ended with hope and optimism, leaving me to wonder how important these qualities are to sustaining a sober life.

*

We heard these women tell stories of drinking experiences, their growing reliance on alcohol, and turning points that lead them to quit drinking. Each woman explored how she lost her self-respect to alcoholic drinking and faced many degrading situations. As she decided to quite drinking, she began to work on her self-esteem and began to like the self she was becoming without alcohol. Chapter Four will detail my methods of collecting more drinking women's stories and explain how each of the three interviews I conducted were translated into narrative and performative writing. I start this chapter by first introducing my participants, and then introducing my study. I use this chapter to relay the scene for each interview and set the tone for reading each narrative.

Chapter 4

Methods and Modes of Representation

In this chapter, I detail the procedures I used to collect, tell and interpret the stories I share in this dissertation. I review the choice I made in shaping the interviews into vignettes that might further our understanding of recovery and sobriety among alcoholic women. As I discussed in Chapter Three, I found that life after recovery was rarely reported on in these trade publications. I was disappointed to find that most of these stories conclude where I wanted to begin--with recovery/sobriety. As I planned my interviews, I decided to focus on narrating life before and after alcohol abuse.

A Call for Narratives

Choosing women. As suggested in Chapter One, I narrowed my study to women because women are less represented in alcohol research (Rotskoff, 2002). Also, according to support groups such as, Women for Sobriety (WFS), certain struggles that accompany sobriety appear to be unique to women (Kirkpatrick, 1986; 1990; 1999). This organization suggests that women in recovery face self-esteem issues and emotional needs that hinder recovery, which are not seen as often in recovering males. NIAAA (2006), also, noted this difference among female and male recovery, quoting Hesselbrock and Hesselbrock: “Women also tend to have a higher prevalence of anxiety and depressive disorders and more severe mental health problems” (para. 16). And although alcoholism is still seen as more of a male illness, (Aaltonen & Mäkelä, 1994; Dawson et

al., 2005; Vaillant, 1995, p.121-122; Rotskoff, 2002) women are drinking heavily and are affected just as much, if not more, by alcohol abuse (NIAAA, 2005, 2006). By studying women we can better understand this illness in context of women's lives to help with long-term, sustained recovery.

After deciding to focus on women, I narrowed my approach and created an outline for collecting life stories from women. I wanted to create a meeting that would feel more like a conversation than a set interview, though I did use open-ended questions to encourage my participants to share.

Participants. I began discussing this project with various individuals in my department, at the university gym, and in my support group at a local university. I gave my contact information out to people at these different locations, asking them to contact me if they were or knew anyone who might be interested in talking further about my project. I explained that I was hoping to interview women who had quit drinking for six months or more due to alcohol abuse issues and have stayed sober. I wanted to hear about the ways these women coped and lived without alcohol over an extended period of time, hence the minimum of six months without a drink.

Nicole. Shortly after spreading the word, a fellow graduate student approached me at our annual department's orientation party. I spoke for over an hour with her about my project during which time she gave me a detailed description of her sister, Nicole. She described Nicole as a dry drunk, a person who quits drinking but is very unhappy or can't seem to enjoy life and is stuck wondering if her drinking life was better. Nicole was unhappy and needed to move from a life of not drinking to a life of living and not drinking. She didn't get out much or have any type of social life. Nicole's sister thought

participating in this study would be good for her. “It might help her heal. It might help her open up and work through things she ignores,” I heard. I told her to have her sister email me so we could talk more.

I was excited at the possibility of speaking with Nicole, yet concerned for her at the same time. A day later, I received an introductory email from Nicole’s sister addressed to Nicole and to me. Later that afternoon, Nicole emailed me her contact information and expressed a great interest in telling her story. She said she believed we could help others with this project and thus she couldn’t wait to get started.

Nicole is a single female in her early forties. She has never been married and lives on her own, working full time. At eight years old, she had a brain tumor removed. This surgery caused her loss of sight. She can see outlines of images, and if she gets a few inches away from an object she can make it out. So she doesn’t see the alcohol that surrounds her. Nicole later admits that it is easier for her to be around alcohol because she is blind and she doesn’t see it.

Alex. My second participant, Alex, first approached me about participating in my project after a long workout at our local gym. I knew Alex through the gym and we instantly became friends. Alex and I connected on two levels: 1) we were extremely passionate about athletics and training and 2) we would always end up being the last ones standing after a night of boozing. Alex had heard of my project and my story over the years. She began to confide in me a year after I quit drinking as she began reflecting on her drinking life. Even as I watched Alex relapse, I continued to share and she did too. She encouraged me to do my project and when I began my research, she began her sobriety.

We shared books and both of us wrote our stories. She became an integral part of my sobriety as I watched her try to figure out if she could drink socially or not. As she became more convinced that she wanted to quit drinking, I supported her. After one of our workouts, she asked me more about what I was finding, how my research was going. We talked for a few hours about it. She became excited about my focus on storytelling. She was fascinated with my methods and my stories and told me she wanted to be a part of my study.

Alex is an academic who has been trained in more traditional research, using quantitative and qualitative methods. The idea of narrative and autoethnography (see Ellis, 1993, 2004) encouraged her participation. It was new to her and she couldn't wait to see the finished product. At thirty, Alex is a single professional who has four cats and is concentrating on sobriety, work, and dating.

Janet. Janet was a returning student in her late-forties, who recently took time off of school to take care of her family and pursue other interests. Janet is a single female as well and like the other women she has never been married. Her story is unique in that she was the only one who had attended A.A. meetings as a means to attain sobriety and she has more than twenty-five years of sobriety under her belt, quitting in her early twenties. Through word of mouth, Janet found out about my project, and we agreed she could offer an interesting retrospective view looking back after many years of sobriety.

Although, Janet was far removed from her drinking past she still had a lot of emotional connections to her past. Her past was laden with various traumatic events, more so than any other participant. Hers was a complicated story of alcohol and drug abuse. She had a lot to offer in terms of living sober, but as we continued with our

conversations her physical and mental health framed our meetings. We often had to reschedule, and I worked closely with Janet to make sure she was okay to continue. Out of respect and risk of disclosing identifying factors, her health issues will remain untold. At one point, I wasn't sure if we were going to finish our dialogues. But we shortened our meeting times and continued our meetings, which reflected both emotional recalling and analytical discourse.

Gathering Stories

In-depth interactive interviews. I collected sobriety narratives through in-depth interactive, interviews (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Kiesinger, 1998) allowing for a co-constructed interview (Jorgensen, 1991) to emerge. As our conversation continued, these interviews began to take the shape of narrative interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179). The informal open-ended nature of the interview elicited participants to retell/tell their story. All of the interviews were audio taped. I conducted three interviews with each person to build a stronger rapport with my participants in order to discover a more personal side to sobriety. I met with Nicole for two-hour interviews three different times with a week in between each meeting. Alex moved at the beginning of my study, but was an important voice to capture, so we decided on phone interviews. Alex and I spoke over the phone, and we spoke for two-hours three different times with about two weeks in between each conversation. Janet and I met for two hours the first meeting then about one and half hours the second and third meeting. There were several weeks in between these meetings due to Janet's health issues.

These multiple meetings allowed me to gather a detailed and rich sample of drinking life experience and stories of the gradual transformation into sobriety. Through

these in-depth interviews I was able to interview a few people in great detail to gather a more thorough analysis and complete story of lived experience. I followed Lindlof & Taylor's (2002) idea of narrative interviewing. They stated, "narrative interviews capture the 'whole story,' unlike other types of interviews, which take stories apart and reassemble the parts for their own analytic purpose" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 180). My participants' narratives offer a rich account of lived experiences, leading to more detailed accounts of the transition from alcoholism to sobriety.

These in-depth interviews also took the form of interactive, introspective conversations. Ellis (1991) suggested that we can use introspection to "generate interpretive material from both self and others useful for understanding the lived experience of emotions" (p. 23). A woman's self-realization of alcoholism is an emotional experience, leaving many moments of self-reflection, introspection, and silence. "Introspection is actively thinking about one's thoughts and feelings; it emerges from social interaction; it occurs in response to bodily sensations, mental processes, and external stimuli as well as affecting these same processes" (Ellis, 1991, p. 29). Interactive introspection requires both interviewer and interviewee to share and reflect. These interviews may involve both the researcher and the participant co-constructing data. Ellis (1991) stated, "While interactive introspection resembles an intensive interview, it is more interactive" (p. 30). This technique allows for the participants to replay and relay emotions as they are experienced in the moment.

Ellis (1991) also suggested that interactive introspection is a technique where "the researcher works back and forth with others to assist in their introspection, but the object of study is the emergent experiences from both parties" (p. 30). In this study, interviews

involved two individuals sharing short stories, where each one's stories elicit stories from the other, a result of seeing and hearing ourselves in the other's presence and voice. We shared in a similar fashion to Ellis et al. (1997) who referred to this kind of research conversation as interactive interviewing.

Setting. In order to encourage an interactive interview, my participants helped decide where to conduct our meetings. My goal was to create a safe environment for my participants to share. My participants felt embarrassed about some of their drinking mishaps and recognized the stigma attached to the idea of identifying as an alcoholic. Thus, I felt meeting in public where others might hear would be inappropriate. All participants decided in order to protect privacy that we would meet in a private setting.

Nicole and I had to consider her limited transportation and inability to drive. I met Nicole at her home where she felt the most comfortable. We met after Nicole got off work, which pushed our meetings late into the night. Nicole welcomed me with a variety of appetizers. Chips, dips, fruit and cheese decorated the center of her dining table. She also served coffee and desserts. I set-up my recorder on her table, and we talked over food.

Alex's move dictated the use of phone interviews. Two of the interviews were conducted while Alex was alone driving for long distances and one was conducted while Alex was at her home. I was at my home for all the interviews. I used a recorder that hooked into the phone for taping purposes.

Like Nicole, Janet felt safest at her home. She preferred early mornings and we met two mornings and one afternoon. She was more alert in the mornings and felt worn out when we met later. Janet is also a heavy smoker, and it was important to her to be

able to have as many cigarettes as she wanted. We sat in her living room, and I settled in on her overstuffed, leather couch. Due to my allergies, Janet sat on an ottoman near the window, cracking the patio door and window while she had a cigarette. My recorder was on the coffee table between us.

At the beginning of each meeting, I reviewed the consent form, asking for permission to share each story. I discussed confidentiality and explained that during the process of writing, transcribing and completing, all identifying factors would be removed. After the interviews were complete, I used a generic label of interviewee 1, 2, and 3 on all tapes and transcripts. In the final dissertation, I created unidentifiable characteristics and pseudonyms to represent each of these three women.

Emergent themes and questions. To help prepare for these interviews, I created a list of questions that I could refer to during the interviews. Each meeting had a different focus. During the first meeting, I was interested in hearing about her drinking life and the events leading up to her decision to quit drinking. The second meeting focused on living sober and how to cope and negotiate not drinking and identity shifts. The final interview examined the effect of not drinking on relationships in each woman's life.

During this process the following topics were covered:

Abusing alcohol- Her relationship with alcohol and her first drinking episode. Her history of alcohol abuse, any moments of relapse, fears of quitting or stigma attached to alcohol abuse. She described her interpretation of the cultural view of alcohol use and abuse and recalled stories that highlight the extent of addiction and losing control.

Turning points or epiphanies- Her realization of a drinking problem (various attempts at quitting). Coming to terms with addiction (memories of a last drink). Any triggers or moments where she felt her sobriety threatened.

Staying sober- Any support groups or people who have helped her stay sober. Detail her idea of fun, first times, idealizing/demonizing alcohol. She explained the toughest thing about not drinking and benefits of not drinking.

Relationships- Her changes in socializing, comparing and contrasting relationships from the drinking past to now. She talked through family interaction, reaction, and history. Shared her thoughts on dating and drinking. How not drinking affects others? She detailed her experiences while being sober around drinking others. How to talk about sobriety and what to say about alcohol abuse and recovery?

Transformation of character- She described differences in her drinking self and present self and her physical changes.

Giving Advice- Techniques for coping. What it takes to maintain sobriety? What would you say to other women in similar situations? Stories that reinforce not drinking as a positive experience.

Each interview involved the give and take of conversation, although I did refer to my list of questions and probes as I went along to see if I had by-passed any topics. The conversations were organic in nature. I began with a question or a story and then we both shared and engaged in telling stories. In order to show my empathy and non-judgmental attitude, I told stories about some of my own drinking experiences, creating a connection from which each woman could respond. Creating this context was important due to the vulnerability and personal examples that were shared. I sensed from the beginning that each woman wanted me to identify with their feelings, understand their use of language and effectively capture their experiences. These women felt more comfortable sharing with me knowing that I had similar experiences. Alcoholism lends itself to negative stereotyping and stigmatizing, so it was important to create a safe and supportive environment while facilitating each session.

For each interview, I wrote field notes on the scene and events that occurred before and during the interviews. After each interview, I wrote notes on upcoming

questions, comparing the different women's stories. I journaled my thoughts, feelings, and reactions. I identified themes that I found in my life running parallel to what I had heard in the interviews. From the field notes, I reconstructed the scene and feeling of each interview, creating a pace for telling.

Transcription. After the first set of interviews was complete, I had a third person transcribe the tapes. Upon return, I listened to each tape, reading through the transcription in order to fill in any blank spots or hard to understand parts and correct any mistyped information. Listening to these tapes again allowed me to better recall our conversation as I began the story writing process. I was able to write notes on the transcripts at this time to help me decide which stories to include. I describe this process in greater detail in the section on creating a story.

The second and third sets of interviews were sent out together and returned within seven days. Again, I listened to these tapes while reading through the transcripts, listening for emotions and ambient sound to help create the scene. This also allowed me to capture the pace and tone of the storyteller. Lying on the floor in my home office, I spent hours reliving the scenes while listening to the tapes. I closed my eyes to envision and imagine a good layout for each story.

I had a total of eleven tapes each ranging from 90 to 120 minutes. The transcripts totaled 166 pages. From these pages, I created stories to capture the voice and experiences of Nicole, Alex, and Janet. While reading these interview pages several times, I recognized similar themes running through them. I highlighted the dialogue that represented these themes and made notes on how I would create/tell these stories. These

stories now take the form of short vignettes, poetry, prose and dialogue. I weave these formats together to create a larger narrative about women and sobriety.

Narrative Representation

The story. I decided to share each story through a performative writing style (see Pollock, 2007) that would ideally create an alternative form of representation in order to relay “the messiness of lived experience and emotions” (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000, p. 2292). This transformation to sobriety dances from pride to fear to defeat to encouragement, emotions best captured, I feel, through alternative writing patterns. I used a style similar to Austin’s (1996) use of poetry in her lyrical piece, *Kaleidoscope*, which conveyed her experiences with Annie Ngana, capturing multiple facets of their African American friendship. Austin (1996) claimed, “poetry helped me express the tension, lyricism, and circularity of our interaction” (p. 207). I, too, felt poetry would help relay the emotions of my interviews and our interactions better than other forms of writing, though I also used prose and creative nonfictional forms of representation. My goal was to use modes of representation that allowed the reader to immerse herself or himself into the text and be a participant rather than a distant learner.

I also drew upon Christine Kiesinger’s (1995) dissertation research entitled *Anorexic and Bulimic Lives: Making Sense of Food and Eating*. Kiesinger captured the complexities of anorexia/bulimia through emotional retelling. She interviewed four women and also shared her own story through various literary forms. Kiesinger (1995) stated, “The poetic arrangement of words as they fall onto a page expresses the uncertainties, ambiguities, and subtleties of the interactive experience” (p. 182). I agree that these alternative writing forms can bring the reader closer to the participants’

experiences, to a place where they can identify with and emotionally experience the ambiguity, confusion, and struggle these women experience.

Creating each story. In the following chapters, I write in the first person, allowing each participant's voice to narrate her own experience. This writing strategy also encourages the reader to engage the story as I engaged the transcripts. After hours of rereading and negotiating what to include in the final stories, I first organized each chapter thematically. I also highlighted unique experiences that allowed each story to show another side of sobriety. For example, Nicole's relationship with her 'real' father and 'step' father played an important part in reminding her not to drink. Alex's dating history became an essential reference point for both her drinking and not-drinking life. Janet's multiple addictions and abusive father was a unique facet of her story, which brings one closer to her idiosyncratic character as well as her particular experiences with alcohol abuse and sobriety.

Each participant's unique experiences in tandem with the common themes accentuates sobriety as change, a metamorphoses of identity. It becomes clear that not drinking is a lifelong process of discovery, and all that she once knew will no longer be. These women may have some similar experiences, but each is a unique character who copes with the challenge of sobriety differently.

As I told each woman's story, I employed various writing techniques to aid the reader in how to read the section. I used present tense dialogue in each story, representing conversations that were found in the transcripts, reflections written as prose, monologues, and poetry from both my transcripts and field notes. Each writing structure attempts to produce a way to feel and/or capture emotions. I also added my personal reflections

and/or memories that were triggered during our interviews at various points in the story. Here, I let the reader know my vantage point, attempting to create a relationship with my reader as I develop the complexity of my character as researcher and participant. When reporting analysis, in the conclusion chapter, I used past tense telling to show reflection.

Voice and form. The first chapter on Nicole began with our first meeting. Here I used dialogue to bring the reader into the story as if they were engaged in the conversation. I used dialogue throughout this piece to move the reader through the scene and to create a present tense telling. At times I break this dialogue up with prose, short vignettes and monologues as Nicole reflected on a past event. These are longer stories that show the reader various turning points and drinking episodes in Nicole's life.

I used bold italics to represent a break in scene, showing my various reflections and feelings triggered during the interview. This break will allow the reader a moment to reflect on the story. I then returned to the dialogue. I used poetic structure in this piece to embrace Nicole's relationships with her two fathers. In this section Nicole's tone is that of letting go and moving forward. I ended this piece with a personal story of my own that reminded me of how important it is to remember, but also to move on.

Next, we travel through Alex's experience. During Alex's interview I was often reminded of my past. I began this chapter with a note to Alex. Throughout the piece, I used bold italics when stating my reflections and reactions to the interview. I am addressing Alex during these moments. After my first note to Alex, I began with a short interlude showing one of our drinking episodes. I allowed Alex to give us a glimpse into her history in the form of a short vignette. I again break this up with my responses and reactions.

While writing through Alex's story, I interweaved my autoethnography. I pulled the reader out of the present moment and into my flashback. I used italics to distinguish my story from Alex's. Toward the middle of this section, I used poetry to show confusion, fragmentation, and the process of deciding to quit. As I began to retell both her story and mine, our memories began to take on the same tone and voice. I used little dialogue in this chapter due to this enmeshed form. By the end of this piece, it was hard for me to separate my story from hers. At the end, I used poetry as our voices merge and become one.

Janet's story began with an emotional retelling of her substance abuse. For this particular scene, I used poetry to piece together this story, sharing the impact of her past. I brought us out of this emotion and into the present tense various times in this piece through dialogue constructed from various sections of the interviews. During these sections of dialogue the telling is more matter of fact and less emotive. I brought readers back into Janet's emotions with brief sections of prose, and then with more poetry.

I again used bold italics throughout the piece to show my reflections and reactions to the interview process. Toward the end of this piece, I quickly switched back and forth between dialogue, prose, monologues, and poetry, showing the various shifts in voice when telling, feeling, and reflecting on sobriety. I ended with dialogue as an attempt to create closure for both the teller and reader.

During this writing process, I carefully created one narrative from three separate interviews for each woman, piecing together relevant themes and unique experiences. The three separate narrative chapters follow this chapter. Then I share my interpretation of stories of alcohol abuse and sobriety told to me interactively by Nicole, Alex, and

Janet. I hope to, “draw an audience into an unfamiliar story world and allow it, as far as possible, to see, hear, and feel as the fieldworker saw, heard, and felt” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 103). Following Van Maanen’s (1988), impressionist tale, each account is similar to that of drawing, evoking, reflecting, and capturing a space and a life.

In the next three chapters, I take the reader into scenes from the lives of recovering alcoholic women. From hours of discourse, I created stories, dialogue, poetry that represents my interpretation of our interaction and their lived experience as told to me by Nicole, Alex, and Janet. I invite the readers to share the emotions of this experience and better understand the life that each woman lives, rewrites, and frames. Their stories invite us into the narrowing life of alcohol abuse, the epiphanies on which that life turns, and the changes that encourage and support a life lived sober.

Following these three stories, I discuss each story and the similar themes found across each story. I then detail my analysis and tie together the literature, memoirs, participants’ stories, and my interpretations.

Chapter 5

Nicole: Looking Back to Move Forward

“246...248...250,” I scan the addresses, looking for the new townhouse of my friend Josh.

The moonlight is bright acting as a flashlight as I squint to read the numbers.

“It has to be the next one. Should we park by the pool?” my boyfriend, James, inquires.

I am distant and do not answer. I am lost in my own thoughts, trying not to feel ashamed that I can’t drink, trying not to feel anger, sadness, pity.

“Cara, do we park by the pool or are there other guest spots?” he asks again.

I ignore the question, drifting further into my thoughts.

Silence.

“I am nervous, you know,” I begin.

“But you’ll know everyone here,” he assures, pulling into a parking spot near the pool.

“The idea of going to any social gathering where I don’t know people makes me apprehensive and anxious. It’s not that I might drink, but sometimes when I’m around alcohol I miss it. Sometimes I get angry that I can’t have a drink. I feel left out,” I admit.

“I am very proud of you. You have accomplished so much. Do you want me to not drink tonight?” he says in a loving tone.

I know that he wants to have a drink. He will feel left out if he isn't drinking. He is a social drinker. He doesn't have a 'drinking problem.' This is my problem. Sometimes, I resent that he drinks socially and enjoys having a drink or two. I hate it when he gets drunk. It reminds me too much of my drinking past. It reminds me of the false camaraderie that I once relied on to ease social settings. I sometimes feel left out when he is drinking and I am not. I feel like I am outside the experience and not included in the drunken exchanges.

"It's fine. You can drink," I say, realizing we are still trying to figure it all out. We struggle to negotiate the role that alcohol can play in our lives--in his life. I don't feel comfortable when he drinks and I don't.

I grab the gift bag, attach the birthday card to it, and open the car door.

"The party must be at that place," James points to the all cars.

I strain to see if I recognize any of the cars. James grabs my hand, and we walk towards the party.

*

My friend Josh is turning twenty-seven and his boyfriend is hosting this large birthday bash. I met Josh five years ago at work and quickly warmed up to him. He is fun, outgoing, creative, and smart. I am glad to be a part of this birthday event.

Normally, this group of friends doesn't drink, but this is the one day that Josh and his partner will let loose. Earlier in the week his partner bragged that his Sangria was sure to be the hit of the party. I have to be ready to be around the drinking and be okay with not being a part of it.

“Hey...You look great,” Josh grabs at my boyfriend, while hugging and informing me that I better watch out, he might have to steal him.

I hand Josh his gift and grab the boa from around his neck, “Happy birthday big boy,” I comment moving into his place through a small crowd.

The place is festive. Bunsen burners heat the food, set up buffet style. Desserts decorate the kitchen. Sangria is in the fridge and we are informed to go ahead and eat.

I begin small talk with a few other co-workers, grabbing a plate and studying the gourmet food display. The food is Cuban style, and I am impressed by the spread.

With plate in hand, I hear Josh roar, “Hey, Cindy. Oh my...Nicole you look fabulous. I am so glad you are here.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. It is my boy’s birthday,” Nicole replies.

I stare at Nicole, thinking about how interesting this first meeting is. We are at a drinking party. Two recovering alcoholics at a drinking party. Later, I find out that there were actually three at this party.

I feel anxiety as Cindy approaches.

“Cara, this is my sister Nicole,” Cindy introduces.

“It is so nice to finally meet you,” I comment unsure of what to say. I feel awkward. I scan the room, looking at all the wine. My mind races...

*

Two weeks later I meet Nicole at her house for our first interview. As I enter Nicole’s apartment, I notice she is average height and looks youthful. Blonde curls cascade down her cheeks. I set-up my recorder and look at my notes.

Nicole begins: “I always knew I was an alcoholic. I was afraid to quit drinking. I was afraid I wouldn’t have fun. And to be honest, this isn’t fun. I quit drinking six years ago. I am waiting for it to get better. I know that I need to be active and make it better, but for some reason the last six years have just passed me by. I am miserable. I feel awful. I feel this void now that I don’t drink. I always knew at parties or bars that I would be getting drunk. I always knew that I drank too much. Quitting drinking meant that I was different and I could no longer deny my drinking problem. That’s scary.”

*

“I always knew I was an alcoholic,” replays as I think back about Nicole. We didn’t say much to each other during our first meeting at Josh’s party. I simply observed like a good ethnographer would. I witnessed a woman struggling with sobriety, yet appearing at ease and am reminded why I need to do this research. I need to get her voice out there. Other women need to see that sobriety can be hard, but nonetheless rewarding.

*

I Drank

“I drank often,” Nicole begins to reminisce, bringing me out of my thoughts and back to her apartment. “And I drank a lot. I always felt so insecure and isolated, but drinking was a way to get involved and be included. It is kind of funny to say included because alcoholics feel included, but in the end we drank so much that we started to exclude everything but alcohol. Since I am blind, I think I often felt left out, especially in high school. It was easier to drink than to deal with it. Now, I have to cope with it all.”

“Now I allow myself to feel, then let it go. If I feel sad, I feel sad. But the feeling will pass. When I was drinking, if I felt sad the sadness never passed. It would creep up in my drinking, and I would get really drunk, blackout, and wake up worse off. It took a lot of negative experiences to see that I needed to quit drinking. Even though I always kind of suspected I had a problem, it wasn’t until my father’s funeral that I decided it was time to quit. I pretty much blacked out the entire funeral, and I don’t remember it. It is real tough not remembering this.”

“I don’t have that closure because I don’t remember the funeral. I didn’t have a very close relationship with my dad, but he was my dad, and I loved him for that. There were a lot of unresolved issues between us when he died, and it broke me. I could never resolve any of it now. I was very emotional. I had already been treated for clinical depression, and I was popping my medicine like it was candy. I think it was Xanax. I just couldn’t handle his death, so I started to drink even more.”

“Like I said I blacked out at the funeral. I wish I did remember. I don’t know if I really care to, but I wish I did. It was all too much. I drank heavy for the next year. I moved in with my sister, and she wasn’t very happy with me. I was getting scared about my drinking because I had started to realize that every time I drank I got really drunk and blacked out. And I remember one night I went to a party with my sister, and I said to her, ‘I don’t have to drink when I go to this party.’ I really wasn’t going to drink, but as soon as I walked in I started to hear the battle in my head.”

“‘Come on, just one,’ one of the voices said. ‘You don’t have to drink to have fun,’ the other voice answered. But sure enough as soon I saw a drink, I was pretty much drunk. I couldn’t have just one. And then there was New Year’s: Make-up perfectly

applied, high heels decorating my feet. I was feeling guilty about drinking. As the ball was dropping, and we were counting down to the New Year, I was timidly holding up a glass of wine. I don't remember anything else after that. When I woke up the next day I thought, 'Obviously, obviously, I can't win. I can't control it.' I knew at that moment that I would never be able to control it."

"It was as if God came down and said, 'You know, I will fix your whole life if you quit drinking right now or if you can control your drinking.' I knew I couldn't control it, so I quit. I was too involved with alcohol. I had one moment of clarity. It was a very small moment where I knew I had to quit. To be honest, if I hadn't quit then, I don't think I would have ever had that moment again, and I would have never quit."

"I'm surprised I actually did it. I am very proud of it. But just like that, I quit."

"I never thought I would be the one not drinking. I could not imagine not drinking. But I quit. When I drank I would wake-up in the morning with a hangover and remorse. I would feel too much regret and shame that I drank so much. It was a terrible roller coaster. I would hate myself for losing control and drinking too much, and then I would go out and drink to cope with the feelings, then wake up hating myself again. Ashamed."

"I even get flushed thinking about it now. I still feel ashamed. I just don't want to talk about it, but I know that I have to. I need to let go of that shame so I can move forward with recovery. It is tough thinking back to all the drinking."

"It's just..."

Nicole pauses for a minute. I feel in the grip of her sudden silence.

“A normal drinker wouldn’t repeatedly wake up in bed the next day beside somebody they never met before. It’s just so embarrassing.”

*

Nicole passes me a plate, and I thank her for her hospitality. Every time we meet Nicole sets out bowls with different snack food. Carrots and dip, strawberries and chocolate, chips and salsa, cheese, crackers--all carefully placed in serving bowls. The aroma of coffee brewing lingers through the apartment. My recorder is on the kitchen table, and we sit in front of the food.

“Did anyone every mention to you that they thought you had a drinking problem?” I ask as Nicole hands me a napkin.

“My mother said something to me when I was about twenty-four. I moved closer to her, and she saw all the signs,” Nicole replies, moving her hair from her face.

“How did she approach you?” I ask.

“She was very vocal. It wasn’t like she said, ‘Honey, I love you and you know we need to talk.’ It was, ‘You are an alcohol! Ahh!’” Nicole retells.

“Really. Did she ever talk to you about drinking or alcoholism when you were younger? Did she explain what she meant?” I ask, watching Nicole fidget in her chair.

“No. I resent my mother for that. She is my mother. She is supposed to take care of me. She never told me anything. She never talked to me about drinking and men and getting mixed up in it all. She set me up for failure. But now as I am older, I do see that my mother was facing her own battles. She had two kids with disabilities. She was on her second marriage. There was a lot going on,” Nicole reflects, pausing to take a sip from her soda.

“How old were you when you mother remarried?” I ask, trying to follow.

“I was four. My stepfather raised me since I was four.”

Blackout

I blacked out a lot.

If I looked at a beer

I'd blackout

I never asked what happened when

I blacked out.

I never talked to anyone about it.

Cara, you are the first person

I have ever mentioned this to.

I really didn't want to know what I did or said.

I'd blackout

for five hours.

I'd never know what happened.

It just wasn't me.

So I didn't have to know.

If I pretended it didn't happen,

then it didn't happen.

Why be reminded of how drunk you got?

I'd rather not know.

It was too painful.

I had too much remorse.

I was
too
embarrassed.

*

“I saw a lady, who is a friend of the family, a year after my father’s funeral whom I guess I saw at the funeral. She came up to me and said, ‘I haven’t seen you since your father’s funeral,’ but you see I didn’t remember my father’s funeral. I was too drunk. I really wish I did remember it. I had to face a blackout. My face turned red and I got flush. I was so ashamed. I tried to ignore the feeling, but it was in my gut. But the times I didn’t blackout were fun, so it wasn’t always bad. If it were all that bad, we wouldn’t continue to do this, would we?”

My Drinking Self

The only self. “I started playing denial games with myself when I was seventeen. Seventeen. I had my first drink at fifteen or sixteen. I hung out with all guys and at every get together there was lots of alcohol. I was usually nervous and uncomfortable and alcohol made me feel more comfortable. It made me feel better and fun. That was my first impression of alcohol. It made me a fun person.”

“By seventeen, I already knew I had a problem. I’d say to myself, ‘I can only drink beer because wine gets me too drunk. Tonight, I’ll drink wine because I had a bad reaction to beer. Maybe I can’t drink either. I’ll have to just have whiskey,’ I found myself rationalizing and planning my life around alcohol. I would drink water in between. I’ll drink two cokes then bourbon. Then the one bourbon turns into nine. I started playing these games with myself at a young age. I guess I always knew that I had

a drinking problem, even from the beginning. I don't think a normal drinker sits down and plans out her night in reference to drinking. I would say, 'Okay. We are going to get drunk tonight. You know this will happen so pace yourself. Make sure you drink lots of water.' Deep down I knew I was different."

"But you surround yourself with others who drink like you do, so it's really hard to see that it is a problem. Since drinking is so widely accepted, if you are a functioning alcoholic it is really hard to see it. I often felt so guilty about drinking that I knew something was wrong."

*

"I witnessed my father drink himself to death. I moved in with him when I was seventeen. I lived with him for about two years. After my stepfather and my mother got a divorce, she sent two of us to go live with my father. My brother is a year-and-a-half older than I, and he got to physically watch my father. It affected him a little more. My mother was so beat down."

"But she sent us to live with an alcoholic. My father was drinking every day. I felt bad for him, and then I was angry and resented him. I wasn't as aware of how bad the drinking was. My brother would actually pour my father's alcohol down the sink. He would hide it from him too. I didn't really know all of this at the time, but all I did know was by the end of the night my dad was really drunk."

"I couldn't see him drunk, but I could still tell. He would drink and drink and drink so by the end of the night, he was really wasted. During this time, I really started drinking. My parents' (mom and step-dad's) divorce was really hard. I didn't talk to anyone about it. I just drank more. My brother became an alcoholic too."

“I’ll talk to him about this every once in a while now. He has been sober for fifteen years. My dad did eventually quit drinking, and I thought this was going to be the time when he reconnected with us. It wasn’t. He was cold. He was impersonal. Very stern. He was an asshole. I thought he would become a father, and I was really disappointed. My dad was sober for eight years before he died, and we never connected.”

*

Daddy,

I was your little girl. I will always be your little girl. But the pain. The rejection. I tried to be the best for you. I tried to be perfect. All I ever wanted was to please you. All I ever wanted was your approval. But you drank too much, and when you got sober you were cold. You were distant. How dare you?

*

I’m not like him. “I never wanted to be cold like my father, but when I drank I was cold and would get so angry. When I found out the guy I was dating at the time cheated on me it haunted me. We had dated for six years. We really had a horrible drinking relationship. He was a drug addict and stole from me. I was so drunk with him and got stuck in this horrible place. I needed him to help feed my codependence. When he cheated on me, I got a bottle of Jack Daniels, and I knew once I cracked the seal, I’d be gone.”

“Better to blackout than to feel this pain. When I woke up the next morning, the house was destroyed. I needed to talk to him about it. I wouldn’t have known if a hurricane came through here or not. It was destroyed. I haven’t thought about this in a

while. I had no idea what I did. When I walked out into the living room, I got that feeling in my stomach. I felt nauseous. What the fuck?”

“To this day, I still don’t know what I did. But everything was broke and tossed all over the place. There would be moments like this and I would just try to forget. Sometimes he’d show me bite marks and ask me if I remembered biting him. I would get angry and violent. It was all in my blackouts. It wasn’t me.”

*

I remember my drinking relationship. For over a year, I lived with a guy who drank a lot. We drank a lot. We loved each other, but add alcohol and that passion became violent. I became violent. I would get so angry with him. Bruises on my wrist, fingertips embedded into my fair skin. He had to hold my arms so tight to keep me from hitting him that he left his mark on me. I never remembered it. But sure enough my partner would wake with bruises on his chest from me swinging as hard as I could. He’d grab me to keep me from punching him. I was in a blackout. I never knew what happened.

*

I am brought back into the moment as Nicole rises from the table and heads to the kitchen to pour us more water. I grab a handful of strawberries and flip through my notes.

“Drinking becomes too comfortable,” Nicole stutters through her thoughts.

“You just get stuck,” I reply.

“Yeah, stuck. My boyfriend knew about all those blackouts, but we never talked about it. It was comfortable. We were comfortable. He was still there after all that fighting. He was comfortable too. In a way all the chaos became predictable, so we both

stayed in it because we were afraid of the unknown,” Nicole retells, handing me my glass of water.

“It is hard to let go of what we know and what we have become so accustomed even if it isn’t healthy for us,” I reply.

“When we did break-up it was hard. It was real hard. I said to myself, ‘I am not going to party as much since he’s not here.’ But of course that didn’t last very long. It wasn’t long before I was back to drinking just the same,” Nicole shares.

“Yeah, you think if you remove yourself from the situation and things get better the drinking will eventually taper off. But you find yourself still drinking, even after all that,” I sigh, shaking my head.

“I decided to leave the city to remove myself from all of it. I left my drinking circle, my job, my blackouts, my life. I moved here to start fresh. But alcohol will find you,” Nicole hands me a napkin.

“We just don’t know at the time that drinking is such a problem. We think if we fix everything else then alcohol will go away. But all this just makes us realize that we have to let go of drinking. Because it wasn’t letting go of us,” I reply, thinking about my attempts to fix everything but my drinking problem.

“I didn’t know at the time that I would have to quit drinking too. It took me a little longer to get there. But seeing how easy it was to get right back into my old routine was a rude awakening,” Nicole informs.

“What about dating, now?” I ask.

“Sober or not...I would still pick a bad boy,” Nicole giggles.

“Oh, I know what you mean,” I smirk.

“I know that drinking had a huge influence on my dating life. Heck, I wouldn’t have even sat down next to a man who didn’t drink, let alone date him. So today I wonder about my judgment,” Nicole says, moving her plate out of the way.

“I, too, wonder what my type is like. I never had a chance to figure it out. I was drinking so much. Now, at this age it is pretty hard to meet guys. At least it is hard to meet guys who have little need for alcohol. We’ve eliminated a lot of bachelors,” I reply.

“I know that my judgment was so screwed up. It has taken until now to get to a place where I’m ready to put myself out there,” Nicole says, placing her curls out of her face. She continues, “The idea of dating can be really sad and threatening because when you get into a serious relationship you are going to have to talk about this stuff with them.”

*

I get lost in my thoughts. I think about the idea of dating. Dating and not drinking:
Sometimes, I am scared of not drinking. I emailed Alex, my second interviewee, today expressing my grief and fear. I wrote to her:

Hey Alex,

Thank you so much for the call. I really appreciate it!!! I am also very proud of you. I have recently approached the dating scene and to be honest I think I am going to throw in the towel!!! I want to lock myself away from it all.

I am so scared. Scared to feel. Scared to get hurt. Scared to entertain and make plans. Scared to be sexual. Scared to be different. Scared to not be able to drink myself through all of it.

You have been so brave, Alex. I will give you a call next week to fill you in. I am getting ready to head to my parents for the weekend. Again thank you for everything!

Cara

And she replied.

Cara-

You're welcome! Don't throw in the towel on the dating scene. Trust me! I have been dating four guys at the same time recently. All were okay. Last night I had one of the best dates ever because I took a chance. I can't wait to tell you all about it. Please give me a call over the weekend!

-Alex

It is hard trying to not drink when entering the unknown. And Nicole reminds me of this uncertainty and fear. She evokes my insecurities.

*

The tape recorder pops. I jump, reach for the tape recorder and switch to a blank tape. I push record and Nicole continues, "I have a picture of this man in my mind. Then all of a sudden I'm with him. And now I can't imagine being in a relationship with someone the way it was then when I drank and then being able to continue this relationship after a change like this."

"We have changed so much. To be introduced back into your same life, but sober," I add.

"I jumped into a relationship after I ended things with my ex of six years. I just wanted a commitment so bad from my long-term boyfriend and he wouldn't give it to me. So I jumped into a relationship with the first person I found that would commit. That

didn't last long. I never would have done something like that if I weren't drinking. It's just different when you're drinking. Your feelings are just different," Nicole tells, rummaging through her memories.

"It's much harder now because we are always in the moment...thinking. I met a guy more recently, but the timing just wasn't right. I was busy with school; he was getting ready to move. Same old love story. It's a bit more complicated, but regardless I have so much reservation about being with a man," I begin.

"I was always uncomfortable with male attention. I am not so sure I like the attention," Nicole chimes in, searching her thoughts.

"It all reminded me a lot of how much I wish I were drinking. I would probably be sleeping with him, engaging in a whirlwind romance, letting things just take their course. Instead, we have decided to just be friends to avoid any future heartache. I am okay with all this. But drinking would have allowed me to just let go of thinking too much and let me do something without the inhibition. And I really wanted to sleep with him, but I was afraid I'd become too attached," I add to the rummaging.

"I mean how do sober people do all that stuff...date...have sex...go to dinner with someone? I mean now I just wish I was drunk sometimes," Nicole questions.

"It's like we're fifteen all over again. Trying to figure out who we are. What we are like? Whom we are compatible with?"

"The only thing I can do is not think about drinking. Not focus on alcohol in relation to dating. Everything is more vivid, more real. We just have to get used to it. I have to say, 'Okay, I'm going out on a date and I'm sober. There is nothing more to it.'

There is nothing more to it,” Nicole concludes, standing to clear the table and making some room for desserts.

*

“There is nothing more to it. Or is there?” I repeat to myself. There’s no escaping into a fantasy world or the unreal.

*

This is real. Nicole continues, “Fourteen bottles of beer on the wall...I really would love to feel tipsy. I would love to experience that warm, calm feeling I get after the first glass of wine. The feeling I get before I couldn’t remember any more of a drinking night. I loved my red wine. I do miss it. The thing is that I would always get drunk, and I never could just have one. In fact, I would already be drunk right now, if I still drank. I’d call in sick to work tomorrow. But the drinking is no longer as much the issue. I wouldn’t drink. I wouldn’t risk it. However, this whole living and doing is a bit tough.”

“I just feel awful in my body. I feel awful. I am not able to feel complete. I am not quite living sober, yet. Right now I am going through a really tough year. I am so full of regret. I think about all that I did when drinking, and there is so much regret.”

“In the beginning, I just curled up in bed. When I wanted to drink, I curled up in bed. It was scary. I didn’t want to be around drinking. I didn’t want to have the longing feeling and think about how bad I wanted that stuff. It was too easy to stop everything by drinking. I would just blackout and all the pain would be gone. Luckily, that longing didn’t last too long after I quit drinking. It’s not the drinking, but the living.”

“Now, I get nervous before I go into a social setting, but it always ends up being okay. I don’t know why I get so anxious about interacting. I guess sometimes I feel self-

conscious around drinkers because I think that they are bored with me or wonder if I am making them uncomfortable. I don't want to look like a party pooper. I wonder if they are having fun. I know that I sure haven't been able to learn how to have fun. This is my biggest fear. What if I can never let loose like I did when I drank? What if I can never have fun?"

"When I was drinking, I could always call someone up and say, 'Hey, come pick me up.' I always had someone to drink with. Now, it is weird. Who do I call and say, 'Hey, want to go to the mall?' I just don't feel comfortable. I just can't hop into my car and drive to visit someone to distract me because I am blind. I get stuck in my head."

"Sometimes, I feel like I am holding back because I don't drink. I mean I couldn't imagine experiencing Ireland without being able to drink. When you are sober you think about those kinds of things. I don't get out as much as I should. I don't even like to talk about any of this. The shame comes back. In fact, you are the first person I have ever talked to about most for this stuff. I just never thought anybody would understand, especially a nondrinker. But I know you get it. I know you aren't judging me."

"I never wanted to expose myself. I was in counseling for three or four years, and I avoided all of these issues. I talked about everything else, but I never got into my drinking. My next step is to head back to counseling. I need to go back and work through these drinking experiences to move forward."

"These last six years have been tough. Both my dads died. It's really hard, but I can't change anything. I used to reach for the bottle, but now I know I will be okay. I feel sad, angry, indifferent, but at least I remember it all."

*

I listen to her sadness and wonder how I can help things change. I wonder if maybe things would be better if she could hop in her car and drive to get away. I wonder if she could see, would she still feel so alone and devastated? Would she really leave? I know there are many times when I can't force myself to leave. I can't force myself out of this sadness that I feel for not being able to be a part of the drinking world. But we just have to do it, we cannot drink.

*

You Have to Keep Moving

When my stepfather died

two years ago, I didn't drink.

If anything

had

pushed back into

my old ways of drinking,

that would have been it.

He

really was my dad.

He

loved me unconditionally.

He

saw me make mistakes,

and he

loved me no matter what.

He

never preached at me.

We had a great relationship.

I just thought

about how disappointed

he would be

if I had started

drinking again.

I didn't drink.

*

“I didn't drink at my stepfather's funeral. My sister brought over wine during Thanksgiving, and it is still on top of my fridge. It doesn't bother me. I think, 'You may drink. I don't drink.' I know when I am safe. I wouldn't put myself in that position where I wanted to drink. Not now. Not at this stage in my life.”

“At my stepfather's memorial service, there was a big Irish-type celebration and everyone was drinking. We scattered his ashes and after we had a toast, I lifted a glass of champagne and cheered, but then I put it down... not a problem. Sometimes, you just don't want to explain yourself. It is easy to just say cheers and walk away than refuse a drink. Saying no can sometimes draw too much attention to it. And it is no big deal.”

*

The phone rings, bringing Nicole out of her memories. She pauses before she answers, collecting her thoughts. She walks toward the kitchen, looking at the Caller ID.

“Can I call you back? I am still in the middle of something,” I hear Nicole say. She hangs up the phone and walks back over to the table.

“That was this guy that I was dating. It was totally wrong. Sometimes it isn’t about the alcohol. Sometimes we get ourselves into things regardless. I have been trying to end things with this one, but he won’t accept it,” Nicole shares, offering more soda.

“At least this time, you are ending things before it gets too crazy. You know if you were still drinking, you would say one thing about ending it, but then as soon as you drank, you’d call him. You’d be stuck again,” I say and think about how stuck you really get when drinking is involved in a break-up. Drinking always clouded my judgment.

“I really want a life, and I am going to get it,” Nicole states, breaking our silence.

“I think you deserve to. You have to make it happen,” I reply.

“It’s like we need to go through this process with our self-esteem and if we can get to the other side without drinking, then we have a lot to be proud of. It’s like you can conquer anything,” Nicole’s tone changes from sadness in our previous conversation to self-affirmation.

“It’s definitely worth being proud of. It takes a lot for anyone to be comfortable in her own skin,” I agree.

“I am not sad that I am an alcoholic. I don’t mourn it any more. I don’t feel sorry for myself. I don’t curl up in my bed at the thought of a drink. I am really okay with it. The fact is I cannot have a drink. I just can’t,” Nicole repeats.

That’s it, I am an alcoholic. Nothing more. I drift off into my thoughts.

“I mean there’s people who have the same life story as I have. I am not so unique. I feel unique. I feel like I am the only one, but I am not. I have to remember that. There are other people out there going through the same thing,” she shares.

“We have to keep the conversation going in order to remind others that they are no alone,” I add.

“If you build it, they will come,” she encourages.

“We can get our stories out there.”

“Sobriety is number one,” she continues, “but I am ready to start on other areas of my life. I want a social life. I was thinking about going back to graduate school, joining a gym. I am ready.”

“You feel strong enough to go out and take on another challenge. You have a high standard. You quit drinking, you have grown so much. Now you are ready for that next step,” I catch up to her thoughts.

“I am even ready to date,” Nicole adds.

“That is a huge step. I think you are such a strong person. You know yourself so well that you are ready to share that person with some one,” I think about if I am ready, knowing I am not. After four years, I still am not ready.

“I know what I like and what I want. I finally know what I want. I want someone who likes the arts and loves to dance. I need a stable person who views me as an equal,” Nicole verbally paints her partner.

I nod, studying her words.

*

“What keeps you going? What keeps you from drinking?” I ask.

“I just can’t control things. I had no self-respect. The disrespect that I showed myself is enough to keep me from drinking,” Nicole contemplates.

I check the tape to make sure it is still recording. Nicole grabs her candy dish, offering me some chocolate. I indulge, thinking about how much I need to go for a run. We chat about working out, and both grab another candy.

“I just hated myself. Now every situation is real. Tomorrow is a bad day because it’s the anniversary of my dad’s death. ‘I just have to get through tomorrow,’ is what I think when it gets bad. I know that I can do it. And that is a big step. I trust myself and respect myself enough to not drink,” she reinforces, standing to clean up our snacks.

“Here, let me help you,” I stand, picking up my plate.

Nicole stops, grabs my plate and places it back down on the table. She pauses for a moment then grabs my notepad and begins shaking it like an Etch and Sketch. Her pace and tone speed up, sounding almost frantic, but very matter of fact.

“I was just thinking about my ex. He was a fucking asshole. He cheated on me and lied. He would send me flowers and buy me stuff, but he stole from me. And here I go romanticizing and missing him... ‘Awww!’ Then I shake my head like an Etch and Sketch. Drinking is exactly the same way. You see people having so much fun drinking. And I think, ‘Awww!’ And I shake my head and know tomorrow they will be throwing up; they won’t remember what happened. I redraw the sketching and don’t have to worry about that any more. Every once in a while I have to remind myself of my past to keep moving forward. I got to cope,” Nicole asserts, holding my notepad sideways and shaking it like an Etch and Sketch.

I pick my plate up and head into the kitchen. I admire her analogy and honesty.

“Is there anything else I can help you clean up?” I ask.

“Please, don’t worry about this mess. I am just glad we have been able to talk. We have to keep these conversations going.”

“I agree. Please, let me take you out for dinner,” I suggest.

“We need to go out sometime. All this talk reminds me that I never have to wake up missing pieces of the night before. I never have to wake up red-faced, flushed, or nervous about the night before. I never have to worry about my confidence being shaken because of my shameful drunken adventure. I am just better now,” Nicole confirms, walking back to the table.

I follow and grab my bag from her couch. I gather my recorder and notepad.

“You know I can have fun. I had a really good time at Josh’s birthday party. I was comfortable. I can be social,” Nicole adds.

*

“In our society drinking is often romanticized, but we can’t get caught up in the fantasy. We live in reality all the time now. No, escaping it. No blackouts. No excuses. What advice would you give to someone who is trying to quit or just quit drinking?” I ask.

Nicole stands over the kitchen sink, staring out the window. I listen to her breathe. I wait for her response.

*

“It’s just...” Nicole begins, “you really need to wrap yourself around people who love you unconditionally. They’re the ones who will kick you out into the streets if

needed, but will also take you back in when you are ready, when you are sober. I never really found A.A. to be helpful, but it would be great to have some type of support systems. I'd like to see more women and sobriety groups. It helps to connect with someone."

"Our connection is helping me move forward. It is easier to do it with others than by yourself. In fact, I don't think you can do this by yourself."

"I really thought that I could continue drinking. But I proved to myself that was false. When you wake up saying aloud to yourself, 'I need to quit drinking,' you can't avoid it. But you have to be ready to give it all up. Not just the alcohol, but the life, the friends, the identity."

"Have you seen *28 Days*? It is so true. Don't make a grand decision within a year. Don't create a new relationship in the first year. Get rid of your friends. I wouldn't have been able to quit drinking, if I still hung out with my drinking friends. It would be too easy to drink again. Too familiar."

"Happiness is important. Try to find somebody to talk to. You will need to be nurtured."

"Women need to be nurtured. Women's issues are really unique in recovery. So much comes out. Waking up next to strange men, eating disorders, rape, violence--all can trip a person up. It all comes back in sobriety, and you can't rely on alcohol to help you forget. And we must remember to move forward and grow."

*

I wanted to forget:

My body lays exposed. As I come to, a man is thrusting his body on me. His penis touches my stomach as a wet substance excretes from it.

“What are you doing?” I yell. He stares at me, grabbing for my shirt.

“What are you doing?” I lay vulnerable.

“Are you kidding me?” he yells back and continues, “You mean, you...” He stops. I stand to dress--confused, ashamed, disgusted.

“You didn’t just have sex with me? Did you?” I ask.

He becomes violent and mean.

“I can’t believe you,” he responds.

“Did you?” I yell.

I feel his strong grip on my biceps. His hands wrap around my arms. He begins to shake me, “What are you talking about?”

“What just happened?” I scream.

His grip hurts my arm, and I try to rip my body away from him. But he throws me across the room. My side hits his dresser as I fall to the ground. I curl up against the wall, cringing.

“I am sorry. It’s just...Here take this,” he hands me the rest of my clothes. I cry and stand to exit. He hugs me before I leave. I feel numb.

This man was a good friend. He knew that I never would have had sex with him. He knew that I wasn’t ready to have a sexually relationship. I didn’t believe in sex without commitment. When I called him the next day, I again asked him if we had sex.

As if the bruises on my hips and pain didn't answer the question. He said, "No!" And I believed him. I believed him because believing was easier than accepting the truth.

*

It wasn't until I was in a serious intimate relationship four years later that this experience started to haunt me. Before, I drank to forget it. I drank to numb myself in any sexual or intimate situations. I added to nights of meaningless sex. I let my body get more injured. I kept on drinking.

But when I fell in love and started to experience my body sober, I fell to pieces. I felt scared, wounded, battered. I couldn't run away from that night any longer. I had to accept that it happened. I couldn't be numb any longer. I needed to move beyond it and love my sexual body, not despise it. I needed to remember.

I didn't remember, but my body did.

That had been my first sexual experience. I was seventeen.

*

"You don't want to forget because remembering keeps us sober. It keeps it all very real. But you can get through it. I can get through it," Nicole's voice brings me back, "It only made you stronger. You did get through it. You learned. You are no longer numb."

I nod, gathering my book bag. I stand in Nicole's living room, looking into her eyes. Nicole and I embrace.

As I open the door a cool breeze picks up. It is almost 11:30 p.m. The moonlight guides me to my car. I sit with my car door open, jotting down a few notes. I sit in silence, replaying some of our conversation. I take it all in, and the night doesn't appear

so dark any more. She helps me remember and I help her grow. Together we 'do sobriety.' Together we move forward unafraid, unashamed, and not alone.

*

For a few months after our last interview, I tried to keep in touch with Nicole, but she broke every plan we made. Was she really ready to share? Was she ready to get out and move forward? Do I know too much of her life now? I wondered about her discomfort and vulnerability as I prepared for my next interview.

Chapter 6

Alex (and I): Learning to Love Yourself (Ourselves)

I remember when Alex showed up at my house. Make-up running down her cheeks. Her long dark hair tangled. Her thoughts scattered. She was drunk. I wasn't judging her, but she looked guilty. She tried to convince me that she wasn't that drunk and she wasn't drinking that much. We played a game with ourselves and eventually the game ended and we drank.

*

I met Alex six years ago through a mutual friend. We slowly became good friends. Alcohol connected us. We would be the last two standing, the last two out, the last two laughing, the last two to leave the party. We didn't spend much time together sober. The time we did spend together sober was working out and training for various athletic competitions, but we both obsessed about our next drink. Even as we challenged ourselves athletically, drinking was our top priority.

Alex is a superb athlete who carries herself with a slight aura of arrogance. Maybe it was her height, standing 5'11" that made her so matter of fact, or so highly confident? Maybe it was a way of covering up the night before, of acting in control? She was in control of every area of life except her drinking.

Alex is thirty-one, two years older than I. I admire her will power. She has always been successful, working through her issues of perfectionism, finishing her Ph.D., losing

the weight she gained in college (70 pounds), teaching for the University, running her own business, and sitting on her condo's Board of Directors. While drinking, she gave outward appearance of success, but inside she felt broken and was abusing alcohol.

As I listen to the rhythmic tone of Alex's voice, I am reminded of my own story, my drinking life. Alex's story is similar to my own, and as I listen to her I find myself pulled to reveal my 'self' to her. I share. Although we have many interests in common, in the beginning, we connected through drinking. I could rely on her and she could rely on me to get drunk. We both craved intoxication.

*

Loud music. Men surround. We dance. Lipstick stains the empty cups once filled with beer or wine scattered around her living room. Make-up perfectly applied now runs down our faces.

We dance.

I see a half empty beer. We both reach for it; fingertips touch. You smile; we both tug at the bottle. We share the beer both trying to stay high, gripping it tightly. Neither of us will release this last drink.

And we dance.

The Beginning

Remembering. The phone rings and I double-check my recorder, anxious to get this interview started. I am looking forward to sharing, and learning more about Alex. We decide to do a phone interview because Alex recently transferred to a new location. It has been awhile since I have spoken with Alex, and I am nervous to see how she is doing without alcohol.

“Alex?” I ask, the connection breaking up.

“Let me call you right back. I am just getting on the highway, and we can talk while I drive. You do know that there is a time difference,” Alex responds.

I laugh. I was so nervous that I called her an hour early. I didn’t think about the time difference.

I wait.

Listening to her voice on the other end of the line, I feel as if I’m looking at myself in the mirror. And the phone rings again. I push record. We start to make sense out of our drinking lives.

*

Alex:

“I knew that I drank differently than most. I wanted to keep drinking. I couldn’t get enough. Drinking had a euphoric impact on me. I wanted to stay buzzed all night. So I would keep drinking, but eventually I passed the buzz and became obnoxiously drunk. I didn’t always become so bad, but there were enough times that I pushed it to embarrass me. I would really get down on myself after a night of over doing it. I would wake up hung-over, depressed, and hating myself.”

“I was pretty textbook. I had a high tolerance and a blackout here and there. I would say, ‘Oh, I can quit,’ then I would quit for a month or two, but start up again. I would say, ‘I will just have one or two drinks,’ but that would only last for a couple months. Inevitably, I would lose control and wind up blacked out. It was the same pattern every time. I would drink a couple beers one or two nights, then drink a few more the

next time, and then the next time I'd push it until I was too drunk. This pattern went on for two or three years. I knew it all along. I knew I was different."

"I sometimes get lost in my memories of drinking. This one sounds comical, but it was really horrible! I was in college and a bunch of us decided to take a trip to Miami. The first night we were there we decided to go to a concert that had various Caribbean bands playing. We were surrounded by a bunch of people from the Caribbean. I was drinking and drinking and drinking. I was the white girl dancing, and I thought I was hot-shit. We were in this huge auditorium and the next thing I knew I was up on stage. The band that was performing at the time decided to have a dance contest. So there I was up on stage in a dance off. Naturally, I was the first to get booed off, and I was pissed."

"I was so drunk that I wandered backstage and went out this door that led to the back of the concert hall. I didn't realize it, but once the door shut it was locked. I was banging on the door to get back in, getting angrier. It was so loud inside that no one could hear me. So, I got this brilliant idea that I would climb the security fence that surrounds the auditorium. I climbed the fence and fell into a canal that was filled with gunky water."

"I was stuck in the canal. I was so drunk that I couldn't get out of the canal. I was there for almost an hour and finally someone saw me and helped me out of the canal. I was disgustingly wet. What did I do? I went back into the concert. Kept drinking. I started getting mad that my friends didn't come looking for me. So now I was yelling at them, causing a big scene. I then insisted on driving us back to our hotel. And I did, even though I was too fucked up I drove."

“I remember most of this night, but only bits and pieces. I woke up embarrassed and feeling horrible.”

*

Alex’s story reminds me of the drinking past we shared. I left Alex at the bar once. I watched her from a distance, getting drunk. Others surrounded us--drinking, talking, and laughing. I watched. I had quit drinking a year before this, but I was trying to be social. And as the night came to an end, I gathered the drunken bunch. It took me almost an hour to gather everybody. No one was ready to leave. I finally got the car and waited out front for the crew to stumble over. But she was not with them.

I went in to get her. She huffed and puffed and pleaded her case. “I am not leaving, he’s giving me a ride home,” she pointed to the bartender. I knew he was gay. Earlier, he had given my guy friend his number. I wondered what she was thinking as she leaned in towards him, batting her eyes and rubbing his chest. And I knew she wasn’t. I knew she wasn’t coherently thinking only because that was how I was after too many drinks. Stubborn, rude, belligerent. She wanted to drink more. She wanted to keep her high. So I left her at the bar.

*

Alex:

“I think I was genetically predisposed to alcoholism and then made myself chemically dependent from the heavy amount I drank. My parents weren’t alcoholics, but they each had a parent who was. My mother was very careful not to drink. She really watched me closely because her father was a raging alcoholic. I was pretty sheltered from the alcohol abuse.”

“So I really had no idea that from my first drink at fourteen, my drinking would be different. At fourteen, my friends and I snuck a bottle of wine. I didn’t get drunk then, nor did I drink a lot in high school. But as soon as I got in college, I drank uncontrollably with frequent blackouts. And it was different. I was the perfect candidate. I really think it’s the combination of family genes and learned behavior.”

“I was always concerned with my drinking, because I would feel so guilty the next day. Emotionally, it drained me. I would rationalize that everyone is doing it. But no one else was living the hell I felt the day after a binge. I was miserable. I’d obsess about drinking too much, cry, and then drink all over again the next day. That’s all I did in college and graduate school. I sometimes wonder how I got through both.”

*

I admire Alex’s honesty, but wonder about her distant emotionless retelling. She talks about reading book after book on addiction and how she had all the classic symptoms. She psychoanalyzes her family and her drinking career.

I remember when she talked herself into trying moderate drinking. I was worried because she sounded so convincing. “It is all about moderation,” she said, “A person can learn to drink normally.” I wondered if this were true. And if it were true, then why was I so afraid. She was so convincing that I had almost believed her. But then I watched as she tried and tried. Now her tone is different. She needed to try to drink normally to know for sure that she could never do it. She couldn’t control her drinking. But as she retells, I hear a woman with an empty tone, telling a fairly rational rendition of alcohol abuse. I worry about Alex drinking again.

*

If Only...

Alex:

“For years, I thought if I could only get this or that issue in my life under control, then my drinking would be okay. I was convinced that even though I drank differently drinking wasn’t the problem.”

The problem:

Change: Senior year of college

Parents getting a divorce after
twenty-six years.

This can’t be happening.

Excuses, hatred, depression.

I am not comfortable in my body.

My flesh expanded too much.

I feel fat. I hate myself.

Self-deprecation, pain, fear.

Five years of counseling:

Distant father

Mother dating my ex!

My fucked-up life.

I deserve a drink.

*

Cara:

I think about my past. In the beginning, I wanted to be drunk all the time. I didn't want to be sober. I drank dangerously to escape social anxiety. I wanted to be high. But as I grew up, my alcoholism progressed. I just couldn't control the amount I drank. Even if I wanted to have only a drink or two, I couldn't. Towards the end, I tried to drink socially without getting drunk. I failed.

In high school, I drank in excess. My drinking was competitive. I played drinking games. I also drank more to be different. In one sense drinking made you a part of the social crowd and helped you assimilate, but I took it a step further by drinking more than most. I no longer was among the crowd, but superior to the crowd because I could out drink the majority. I was under the impression that guys liked hanging out with girls who could hold their liquor, not throw up or get too emotional. I drank to get drunk. There wasn't any socializing. The point was to be drunk. This was all I knew. This is how I learned how to drink. I remember thinking they needed to invent a nine pack of beer because nine bottles was the perfect amount. I only weighed 112 pounds.

I remember the first time I had a buzz. Every time I had drunk before that I had gotten really drunk, and I learned that I really enjoyed being buzzed. I remember laughing, being more friendly and less afraid to interact. And I remembered everything the next day. I wanted to feel this uninhibited all the time. I defined myself as a shy person who was afraid of being judged, made fun off, and not being liked. I wanted everyone to like me. Because of this, I didn't know how to act or didn't say much when I was around new people. I was insecure.

Even when I started to grow out of some of my insecurities, I was still quieter than most people around large groups of people. But I also liked to be the center of attention. This combination is a hard one, so I turned to alcohol to help me achieve it. Alcohol helped ease my anxiety and numbed this part of socializing. I would really monitor my drinking around most people, because I didn't want to appear out of control. Once I was beyond buzzed, I wasn't sure how I acted. I tried to drink socially in graduate school, but it was already too late. My body only knew how to get drunk. For a few nights, I could have a couple drinks and stop, which was great. But eventually, a night would come where I would go too far and blackout.

I didn't realize I drank differently than most until I tried to quit drinking for the second time. I had had a few binges that scared me, and I knew I was drinking too much. I was blacking out a lot. I would go to the bar by myself and meet new people every time. I never really remembered much the next day. A memory of a kiss here and there. An argument. Laughter. Tears. It was all a blur. I figured I should quit drinking to help me clear my head. I didn't know that once an alcoholic has that first drink, she wouldn't be able to stop. I didn't know having that first drink would lead me back into the same pattern I was trying to change.

For a while I started to get things in order in my life. After I was sober for only three months, I decided I could have a drink.

I went out alone. I got drunk.

None of my friends could go to this concert I wanted to go to so I went alone. I wanted to feel independent. I just got my license back after being suspended from my DUI and wasn't going to drink too much because I couldn't get caught drinking and driving. I

figured I would watch the concert and head home. However, my first drink after three months turned into an all night affair.

It started with the guy I met at the outside bar. He was my age and chaperoned his sister to the show. I had really bad seats to the concert so for a while I headed to the bar. He and I sat and talked for most of the night. Then this girl entered the bar. She was quite a bit taller than I, long blond hair, real friendly. She had seats right in the first row, but you had to show the ticket stub to get down there. So I followed her to her section and waited to go down. The guy watching the entrance was being strict even though the show was almost over. Eventually a couple leaving handed me one of their stubs, and I went down to the first row next to the girl to see the encore.

I was really drunk by this time, and I only remember fragments of the rest of the night. After the concert, I went to a bar that was right across the street. There was a cover band playing, and I decided to get on stage and dance and sing with the band. I looked down into the crowd and saw my roommate and friend there to pick me up. I don't remember calling them, but I guess I did after the concert. I fought with them, pleading my case. I was not ready to go; the night was young. They left.

The next thing I remember, I was at the bar talking to an older man, and we decided to go to another bar. He was going to drive my car. So we headed out the door, venturing to find my car. He drove to a bar down town. I don't remember much of this part. I do remember leaving the bar when it closed with this same guy.

We couldn't remember where we had parked. We walked around downtown searching for my car. At one point I decided that I no longer wanted to be with this guy so I started to run. I don't know what I thought this would accomplish, but I kept running

and then I hid behind buildings. At first he ran and followed, but then he slowed down. I tried to lose him. This must have worked because the next thing I know I was walking around downtown all by myself. I flagged down a cop. I explained to the cop that I couldn't find my car and asked if he could give me a ride home. He explained that where I lived was not in his jurisdiction. So he let me continue to wonder around very drunk looking for my car. It was almost 4 a.m. I still couldn't find my car, which was a blessing.

Eventually, I flagged down a cop again and it happened to be the same cop. He called my roommate, who finally picked up the phone and agreed to come and get me. Then the cop left as I waited for my roommate, who had already been down here once. The next day a friend drove me around downtown looking for my car.

This type of thing happened more than once. I was embarrassed. I learned that I couldn't have just one drink. I really wanted to try to control my drinking, not give it up entirely.

*

Using. Alex's voice brings me back to our conversation.

Alex:

“It wasn't always so bad. In sobriety we focus on the negative to remind us that we can't drink. But if it were always that bad, then why would we do it. There were plenty of nights that alcohol allowed me to connect with another person on a more intimate level, and I am not talking necessarily about sexually. I just mean on a more personal level. In fact, the bad nights were far fewer than the fun nights, but I would just get so embarrassed after a bad night. And when a night was bad it was bad enough to make any one think twice about ever drinking again.”

“You just cannot control how the night will end up and this is too unpredictable. I went on a cruise with my girlfriends and we drank a few drinks here and there. I didn’t over do it. We all had a blast.”

“One weekend, I went camping with the people I worked with. I didn’t get too drunk. We just had innocent fun. Game nights were fun. You want these nights to never end. You strive to get that same high back, but sometimes you end up losing control. There is just something about waking up wondering about what you said the night before and searching for your car. It scares the shit out of you. It is a wake up call.”

*

Alex, you were upset with me when I quit drinking. You were proud, but I was too much pain for you. I reminded you of your abuse. We grew apart, but watched each other from a distance. Always checking in. We hoped that we would eventually arrive at the same destination, but our paths led us down different roads to get there.

*

Alex:

“Like Caroline Knapp said, it’s true you wake up one day and you can’t go back. The tide had turned and you realize you can never go back to being a normal drinker (if you were ever). You have to accept, ‘I cannot drink because I am different.’ And who wants to be different. It’s a tough realization.”

“I see people express disappointment when I tell them I don’t drink. I went on an interview last year after I had been sober for one month, and I met the department chair at an Irish Pub. He was ordering beers, but I wasn’t. I told him I was training for an athletic

event. The last thing I wanted to do was offend him by turning down a drink while I was at my first interview. I didn't want to tell him I couldn't drink because I have a problem."

"The next night I went to dinner with the faculty, and the women were all drinking margaritas. I knew that my not drinking bothered them. They looked at me like 'Miss Princess.' I didn't fit into their culture. I truly believe to a large extent that my not getting this job was directly related to me not socializing in the way they wanted me to socialize."

"I was offered a job at two out of the three places I interviewed, so I have to wonder about the way not drinking plays into other's perceptions of me. And I needed to work in a less social department."

"I think not drinking can be threatening and makes people who drink heavily feel uncomfortable. It challenges the status quo."

"Now, if someone asks me to happy hour, and I say, 'No. I am not much of a drinker,' it makes me sound as if I am not as much fun. My counter-argument is, 'I'm a hell of a lot more fun when I'm sober.' You don't want to see me drunk because you will not like me. You might be more fun when you drink. I am not. You'll want me to be sober."

One More Try

My phone begins to beep, and I see that my battery is dying. I quickly run to my office to grab my other cordless phone. "Alex, hold on one second?" I ask, switching phones.

"Okay, now where were we? I am sorry about that. My phone was beeping at me," I inform.

“Let me tell you about the last time I thought I was really in control and tried to prove to myself that I could drink socially,” Alex begins, “I thought it would be different this time because I was different. I didn’t know how to date and not drink. So I drank. I was doing really well. I mainly drank a few drinks with the guy I was dating every once in a while. I followed his lead. Up until my last drinking bout, I managed to have only a few drinks each time for about three months. The last night really knocked me on my ass. I had controlled my drinking with this man, and I never, never got drunk.”

“And therein lays the problem, when an alcoholic drinks they are playing Russian roulette. My luck had run out.”

“I remember my very last drink:

I went to a wedding with this guy I was dating. And we were drinking. Since I don’t have a filter, it didn’t occur to me that I was drinking too much. So I kept drinking, and I ended up just acting stupid. I was here with this guy, and I was hanging all over and flirting with every other guy. I was being loud and obnoxious. At the time, I didn’t see that. I just thought I was having a good time. He was appalled by my behavior.”

“My intention was to have a nice romantic night with him at his friend’s wedding. I really liked this guy. The alcohol was just supposed to enhance the experience, but again because I am not able to control it, it just went too crazy. The next thing I remember was waking up at seven in the morning. I had thrown up all over the floor. I couldn’t remember what else I did.”

“My guy friend filled me in on what happened. I could tell he was still appalled. I was just devastated. I saw other people from the wedding that afternoon and they made comments like, ‘You really had a good time’ or some rendition. I know a lot of people

were drunk, but I was just so embarrassed and ashamed that I had let myself get so out of control.”

“This showed me that I had to change and drinking was just too damn unpredictable. I saw that I had to quit drinking entirely. The guy left that morning. He was planning to leave that afternoon, but he left earlier. He didn’t know what to do. I was alone in the hotel room, hung-over, and upset. It wasn’t like I could say, ‘Oh, sorry about last night. I got too drunk,’ because there was so much more there. He never knew I had a problem, and I wasn’t ready to discuss it. I was just starting to see it as real.”

“I never really heard from him again. I was upset that I never admitted to him that I had a problem, but I wasn’t ready to even admit that to myself. But this last night drinking really made it real, and I had hit my rock bottom. Waking up with throw-up on me, smelling like the bar, head pounding, chills, sweats, memory loss. I had to get sober or I would die. I may not die a physical death, but emotionally I was on life support. I hated myself.”

*

Cara:

I know the hate. I know the pain I suffered through.

I didn’t drink around Mark the first few times we met. I really liked him, and I didn’t want to do anything stupid. I was already trying to slow down, and I wasn’t drinking that often. Mark was the last guy I dated before I quit drinking. He was also the first guy I had dated in two years since I had broken things off with my college ex and moved out of our place.

Mark and I moved into our relationship fast. I met him while he was on vacation, and we spent every minute together laughing, talking, and planning our life together. As he left for the airport, he promised he'd be back. And he was. Two weeks later, he drove down from New Jersey. We only had the weekend, but it was perfect. We made our next plan, and he looked into transferring here. He was in the military and said he could move here next year.

It all felt so right. He visited one more time that summer for a week. During this visit, we went out for drinks with a few friends. This was the first time I had a drink around him and the first time I had been drunk since I had decided to slow down. This was a fun high, and he only got to see the 'party girl' me. We went to a comedy club, then dancing, and then back to my place. We got very drunk and had fun.

The next night, we went out and I only drank a couple drinks. I thought, "I could do this. I could drink socially." We eventually were intimate, and I felt safe. I wasn't sloppy drunk. I remembered being with him. It was a nice change. I let go of my fear that I might have a drinking problem. I relaxed back into drinking. Mark met my family that weekend, and it was becoming a serious relationship. We both got caught up in the moment.

The last time I saw Mark, I flew out to visit him. We had been dating a little over two months. We had been drunk together three times. I arrived Friday, and he had our weekend planned. We headed out early Saturday to drive around downtown, then down to the water. Everywhere we stopped, we visited a bar. Eventually, we hit every bar there was, drinking a few beers at each.

As we were walking through downtown, I saw a framed poster that I wanted to buy. Mark talked me out of it because we had a lot more walking around to do. He said we could stop here on the way out and get it. The one thing Mark didn't know was that when I wanted something bad enough, I could act like a child if I didn't get it. I was only buzzed and decided he was right; we could stop by and get it on the way out.

By dinnertime I was really drunk. I wanted to add something to my dinner order and the server said I couldn't and out came the drunken, bitchy, never seen before self. I got angry and complained to the manager. I am sure Mark was embarrassed. Finally, I settled on something to eat. And at that point the night begins to fragment in my memory.

I didn't see any of the city, but I saw every bar. I wasn't even in the mood to drink. On our walk back to the car, I remembered my poster. Of course the store was closed, and I threw a fit. First I wouldn't talk to him the whole ride home. Then I yelled at him about not getting it. I threw a tantrum.

The next morning, I could barely get out of bed. We lay around all day. I felt so stupid. I apologized over and over. He seemed ok. That night we drank again. The next day he had to work, and I lay in bed all day. I never left his room except to eat. I was too hung-over.

The rest of the week I didn't drink. I went jogging and decided I was too unpredictable to drink around him. As he drove me to the airport, I thought things were fine. I called him when I got back to town and briefly talked about our next visit. I never heard from him again. I was devastated. So I drank. Two months later I would realize that I had a serious problem and I quit drinking for good.

Enough is Enough

Cara:

I looked at myself in the mirror

dark circles

pale skin

smeared make-up.

I cried. I cried for all the

blackouts

fragmented nights

meaningless conversations

empty intimacy.

I was lonely.

I abused alcohol.

I felt empty.

For so long, I thought alcohol

helped me better cope

and ease me into life relationships.

But alcohol stole

my self-esteem

my ability to laugh or

smile.

Drinking was a form of self-hatred.

My last drink:

I only wanted one drink.

I ended up drunk

blacking out

crying

screaming

alone

driving drunk

sad.

I never felt high that night.

I only slipped into an unimaginable low,

and

I knew if I kept drinking

this feeling would happen again.

I never wanted to feel this empty.

I

needed

help.

Something

had to give.

I quit.

*

Of course it wasn't easy. For the first six months, I cried a lot. I withdrew from any socializing. I pitied myself. "Why me? I just want to be a normal drinker." I beat myself for not being normal. I hated myself for not being able to have a drink on a date, go out with the girls and hang out with guys. I was no longer in denial of my problem, but I was having a hard time accepting my new lifestyle.

I tried to socialize with old friends. I wouldn't leave the scene, but it got too hard to balance. I finally went to group therapy that focused on alcohol abuse. This was my first step towards taking responsibility for my addiction. I would arrive every Friday at 8 a.m. Sometimes, I would be the only person there, but I was there. I eventually went into individual counseling. I went every week until I felt more comfortable. I began to remember and process a lot of bad memories. My counselor helped me make sense of my drinking life, the blackouts, and my hesitations to quit, validating my fears of change and what it would take to life without drinking.

I wanted to drink a lot in my first year of sobriety, but I knew I couldn't go back to that life. I would slip back into the old routine. I just knew this would get better. I believed in sobriety and began to believe in myself. Not drinking was the only way to begin to like myself.

*

Alex:

"For the most part, it wasn't even a matter of getting drunk."

I have to be honest,

I never really liked being drunk.

Blackouts

Hangovers

Sex with strangers

Yelling, screaming, crying

Shame, Embarrassment

Loud, flirting, uncontrolled.

I wanted to be buzzed.

I wanted to be buzzed all the time and sometimes it would work.

I drank alone to get this high

Three-liter bottles of wine

Several six packs

This became the norm.

I just wanted to be and stay buzzed.

Numb.

Anesthetized.

*

Alex:

“I did drink alone at times. I thought that I would grow out of it. I figured once school was done that I would slow down. Or once I was out of this crowd I would slow down. But alcohol will find you. It permeates our culture. It is everywhere. It makes it hard for us to decipher whether or not we have a drinking problem because a lot of people our age are drinking the same. The messages are everywhere. ‘It’s two for one. It’s happy hour. Get drunk.’”

“I started to watch twenty-six...twenty-seven...twenty-eight pass me by, and I was still passionately drinking. I had to face it, ‘Drinking was not going to phase out. Alright Alex, this is fucking reality. You are an alcoholic. You can’t drink.’ What good is it for me to entertain the thought of it or remember the good?”

“Right now, I can’t fathom drinking. You could tell me that I would only have one bad day for the next six months of drinking, and I would say no way. I choose to not drink.”

“When I used to go to a party, I was always worried that there wouldn’t be enough alcohol. I watched to make sure we didn’t run out. Much of my time as a drinker was spent either getting over drinking too much or thinking about drinking. It was a very subconscious thing. I didn’t realize the ill effect of my drinking (weight gain, tiredness, emotional chaos) or how many hours a day I was consumed with drinking, planning to drink or thinking about drinking until I quit drinking. You end up having a lot of free time after you quit drinking.”

*

I think about Alex. I think about drinking. I wanted to drink today. The craving randomly seeped into my consciousness. Will the thoughts ever disappear? It has been years since I had a drink. I know I cannot drink. But the mind plays tricks, and I was left with thoughts of how it would feel just to get high. I wanted to feel that first drink melting away my inhibitions, my nerves, my day.

I was taking a spinning class. This is an aerobics class on a stationary bike. It was a Tuesday evening before dinner. My heart rate was up, my legs burning, sweat dripping from my body forming a small puddle on the hardwood floor. I was in a zone,

giving it my all. Then the thoughts slipped in, just like that. I was exercising and the thoughts so casually entered my mind. I really wanted a drink. A cold beer or vodka martini. I never tried a chocolate martini before. Oh, how I wish I could try one. I thought just one. But I know I cannot have just one.

I would get drunk, then hate myself for losing control. It's just a thought, but a powerful one. These thoughts don't just go away because you decide to quit. This is an addiction. A powerful craving. There will be better days.

*

Alex:

“You realize how much of your time was spent concerned with alcohol. And it was all so superficial. Most of the time you don't really remember full conversations. You hang out with people more to get drunk then actually to get to know them. You wake up thinking, ‘That was fun,’ but I look back and wonder, ‘Come on. Was that really that much fun?’ It seems so forged.”

Even if other people

didn't think

I was acting embarrassing or angry,

I was still just as crazy.

I would still wake up thinking,

‘Oh my,

I

can't

believe

I
did
that.

I
wonder
if
I
really
did
that.'

It wears on you.

*

Alcohol still connects us, but now it's the absence of alcohol. Alex has not had a drink since December 20, 2004. I haven't had a drink since October 20, 2002. We respect and understand each other. She knew me then and knows me better now.

"I'd never wish this on anyone, but we are lucky to have met each other at the time we did. We experienced this journey in a similar fashion. I don't think many people can say they have that. You can't get sober alone," Alex says in a soft tone. I hear her voice. She pauses, takes a deep breath. 'You can do this,' I think.

*

Alex:

"There are no special how to guides when it comes to getting sober. Everyone is different. Everyone's abuse takes on a life of it's own. I've tried AA a few times. But

everyone spends so much time retelling their ‘bad stories’ that I thought it was miserable. I don’t want to sit around reliving the past. I want to live in the now. Today, I live moment to moment. Although, I think AA’s philosophy is beneficial for a lot of people, I had a problem with the emphasis on a higher power. I do believe in the spiritual component to healing. And I think there is a physical addition, but I think you have to take responsibility.”

“I don’t want to constantly think about drinking. I am aware, but I don’t want to retell the stories over and over again.”

“I also agree that you have to change your lifestyle. You have to treat alcoholism holistically. I believe in meditation, massage, exercise, positive thinking, physical, mental, and spiritual healing. I have to do this for myself. I just never fit in at AA. I believe alcoholism is a disease, but there is a rational component to it. You have to take responsibility for having that first drink.”

“I had great social support. My mom, who is a substance abuse counselor, my best friend, Jan, and you helped me through my roughest times. You need support and people who will be there for you during and after self-discovery. It’s about changing who you are. After a while, you look back and can’t recognize the person you were when you drank. That person seems unreal.”

“I was scared to change. When I first quit drinking, I was obsessed with not drinking. Not with drinking, but with not drinking. I was afraid I would slip back into drinking again, like I did so many times before. I refused to date. Dating was always connected to drinking. So this time, I didn’t date.”

“I was afraid of the word alcoholic. I didn’t want to be seen as different or have that kind of stigma. I tried everything. What it comes down to is this, ‘I am an alcoholic.’ Saying that ‘I am an alcoholic’ implies that I cannot drink ever. It makes it easier than trying to find some type of middle ground. There was no middle ground. It is the only thing that works. I cannot drink.”

“I had to go through my various relapses to get to where I am at today. Ninety percent of the stupid things I did or said was under the influence. I had a very hard time accepting that. For me to be sober, I had to really believe that this was the only way. If I didn’t believe it, then I would try to drink again. I have looked into other groups such as Women for Sobriety, Rational Recovery, etc.”

“If I ever truly start thinking about drinking, I mean really thinking it is okay, I will be heading to a meeting. This is too important. It has to be the top priority. I tried to deal with everything else in my life, hoping alcohol would go away. It didn’t. So, I had to leave it. I was already in group counseling. I had never talked about drinking in group before. When I did, it was a pretty big deal. It makes it all the more real, and you become accountable.”

“Without drinking, I have been able to pick up the pieces and put myself back together. I don’t ever want to lose my self-respect again. I physically feel better about myself; spiritually I feel a connection for the first time. When I was drinking, life just past me by. For all of life’s complications, complexities, and sometimes ups and downs, I would never give up the last two years of sobriety to go back to drinking. I have felt better about myself and wouldn’t risk feeling so negative again.”

*

Alex's voice is different this time. She is focused and believes in herself. She believes in her sobriety. I wonder what it means to find yourself, to get to know yourself. What if our true self was getting high on whatever and living in our subconscious like we did when we were eighteen? What if being mind-altered brings us to a new level of existence? These questions trick me and challenge me to test the limits.

I know drinking is off limits, but there is a part of me that every once in a while wants to try something, anything to calm my mind and get out of stone cold sobriety where your mind never rests. Alex smoked pot for about a week. Anything is tempting. But for me drug use was always connected to drinking. The temptation lingers. I contemplate mushrooms. But it has been years since I had a drug induced high. They say you laugh a lot. I continue to wonder. I was a rebel too, and it is hard living such a sober life. Do you like the you that you become after the drinking is gone and the party is over?

*

Trying to Live Sober

Alex:

“There will always be challenges along the way. I mean, how long could I avoid dating? Dating was my main fear. I never dated without alcohol. There were a few guys I was attracted to, but as soon as I hear, ‘Hey, let’s go out for a drink,’ I immediately dismiss the idea of dating him. Granted I don’t know their level of drinking, but just the idea and thought is a red flag for me. I stay clear of these dates. It is hard because I always thought that wine went well with a romantic dinner. How was I to be romantic

sober? Candlelight flickers in the background; an empty glass staring at me. That first date was hard. And my first relationship was even harder.”

“It is like you are doing every thing for the first time. First sex, first argument, first intimacy, first communicating, first emotionality. I think it is a lot to handle. I am just getting to know myself in relation to others. And I ask them to come along for the ride. It is hard for them to understand the addiction and if they haven’t experienced it, it is even harder to talk about.”

“But you do it. You just do it.”

“Steve and I went to Costco the other day, and he wanted to buy a bottle of wine. Now, Steve and I have been dating for a few months. He isn’t an alcoholic and drinks a glass of wine with dinner or a scotch on the rocks every once in a while. He really only drinks one. I don’t even think he has ever been drunk. He is very aware of my situation and makes sure I am okay with him drinking.”

“I have told him everything and have expressed every detail of my addiction with him. I am not sure I would divulge everything like this again. It was all so raw, and I felt like I had to talk to him about it. I probably over did it. But this was the first time I had tried to date, and I was still figuring out how I felt about it. I thought if I kept him up to speed about how I was thinking and feeling, he would better understand my actions and me. I don’t know if someone who hasn’t experienced this could really understand it. I may have exhausted the subject.”

“So we were going to Costco, and he wanted to buy a bottle of wine. I said, ‘Well, you can go over there. I’m not going to go into the wine section. It’s just not something I need to do.’”

“He questioned me, ‘Are you concerned about what it will do?’”

“I told him, ‘No, I just don’t want to tempt myself.’ It was not that I would want to drink. It just doesn’t make sense to me to go over there since I wouldn’t be drinking. How could he understand?”

“And then there was New Year’s Eve. I am sure Steve didn’t mean anything by it because alcohol is a normal part of celebrations. We were getting ready for the evening and he said, ‘I am looking forward to toasting champagne at midnight.’”

“I think he was just meaning in general, not with me. But I got kind of snappy and said, ‘Please don’t do that. I don’t want to hear anyone glamorizing alcohol. You can talk about that with anybody else, but please don’t glamorize it with me.’”

“He didn’t know how to take what I said. He replied, ‘Does that mean you live in fear that you might drink again?’”

“I tried to keep calm. It’s hard for him to get it. ‘No, I don’t live in fear. I just don’t care to have that kind of conversation. It is just pointless.’ I might have been snappy, but I guess I am still learning how to relay my feeling and learning my boundaries. I think he recognizes that I am still learning about myself. It is hard when all you’ve known for the last fifteen years is your drinking self. I have only known my sober self for two years.”

“In one sense, I would tell him I don’t want this to be a big deal, so you don’t have to change your habits, but then I would snap at him when he would say something about alcohol. I was giving him mixed messages.”

“It adds a lot of stress. Just the other day Steve said, ‘I know what you want, but I am not sure who you are.’ And he’s right. One moment I am carefree, everything is cool,

then the next I am nick-picky, 'I don't like this. I don't like that.' I wonder if this is just the first time I have been sober enough to dislike things about someone and then feel I should express it. But I am always going to be analytic and without alcohol these voices are never silent."

"I am sure I went overboard with him. I gushed. I let him read my journals, cried to him, expressed my fear. It was all very emotional. This is a lot for anyone to handle. I think in the future this won't be as emotional since I already have gotten things out there. I think I was dramatic at times, and I wonder is it sobriety or me? Would I have acted like this if I were drinking? Would I have felt the same?"

"Steve has become an important part of my life, but we are on and off a lot because we both are unsure of things. In the beginning he was respectful and concerned. Now, I think he is bothered with it. Maybe he isn't the type that's able to handle this. Maybe no man can. But maybe there is someone else who is more sympathetic to the situation."

"You have to set boundaries and know your limits. You have to discuss them with your partner. Although they may not understand what you are going through, they still need to know what is going to upset you and what is safest for you. If this doesn't work then you need to let him go. Sobriety has to be more important than any man. I think it will be harder to find someone who isn't immersed in the drinking culture, especially at our age. But you can't settle for anything less or you are selling yourself short. Alcohol or lack thereof shouldn't be an issue."

"In the future when I date, I will be very upfront and non-apologetic. I will tell them, 'I don't drink because I'm an alcoholic.' I won't over do it. I think I will know

myself even better, and I won't overreact or be so hyperaware or sensitive. I mean to a point you have to let them know up front about things and say, 'Look there are certain contexts where the idea of alcohol bothers me, and to be honest they might change.' I will be asking this from you, and I am not going to try to be someone I am not."

"I find that not having alcohol can complicate things as well. My relationship with Steve was too serious because we didn't have anything that eased our inhibitions. It takes more work to have fun and it just doesn't happen. Our conversations always turned intellectual. I also think that a lot of shit is coming up that I would have simply ignored when I was drinking so I have found myself very critical. I have to remind him, 'I don't know who I am because this is the first time I've been sober.'"

"Steve listened to me in the beginning, but I think he began to just shut-off. I don't think he could fall in love with me. It is hard not questioning, 'What if it is me? What if no one will love me? What if no one can accept my alcoholism?' I find it hard to let go of Steve because of all these questions. And just because you love so much about the person, in the final analysis the relationship just might not work."

*

Cara:

For four years, I have been trying to figure out what role alcohol can play in my intimate relationship. James and I started dating two months after I quit drinking. We are really very different only I didn't know that at the time we started dating because I didn't know my sober self.

I knew James from my drinking life, but I still thought it would work out. When we first met, he was in a popular band and a bartender. I was at his bar every night. But after a few months we both had relocated and kept in touch every so often.

Three years later he decided he was in love with me and we should be together. I was skeptical. I had just quit drinking and knew him and his past. He convinced me he had slowed down and was changing, which was true. But I wasn't just slowing down; everything in my life as I once knew it was about to change.

We did and still do care so deeply for each other. So I gave in and gave it a chance. However, we weren't ready.

*

I arrive to James's a little nervous. This will be my first New Year's Eve out socializing and not drinking. I was sober last New Year's Eve, but James and I went to dinner and to see the symphony. We made love for the first time. We celebrated each other. This was the beginning of our exclusive dating relationship. Since that day, we have had to face many hardships. We have worked on many parts of our relationship. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go out with James and his friends this New Year's Eve, but I knew we had to try to be social.

As the night got late, my nervousness turned into anger. James went off with his friends, fluttering around the bar. I stood by myself, alone, watching the band conclude. The band ended, and I just stood there. James was drunk. I was ready to leave. But we didn't. James decided we needed to go to an after-party. I sat on the couch, fighting the tears, watching pipes filled with pot pass in front of me. This was supposed to be our

night. He was supposed to tell me I looked beautiful and stare deep into my eyes, kissing me as we welcome in the New Year. Instead, he drank and I was alone.

*

We have had talk after talk about alcohol. We have almost broken up because of the strain my not drinking adds to our life. James is by no means an alcoholic, but he likes to drink. He doesn't drink when it is just us, but he will over indulge from time to time in social settings. I have stopped being a part of his social setting because I don't want to be around alcohol. He glamorizes drinking and bars, but tries to support and respect me. Sometimes when we are driving and pass a bar, he'll say that looks like 'a cool place to hang out,' or 'I'd like to try that place.' We have separate friends. But we continue to try. Should we let go?

*

Sometimes, it just becomes too hard. Last week, James came home drunk. It was 2:30 in the morning. I was staying at his place. I knew that he would be drunk. I thought I could do this, but I couldn't. I had created such a distance from him because he wants to drink socially. I ignored his drinking. I ignored all the problems. I ignored all the pain. I forgot what it was like to have a man crawl into bed, smelling like the bottom of an ashtray. He cradled me, and I cringed. Tears streamed down. It was time.

*

It is time to let go.

We both hold on to the love that we have.

We both learn so much from each other.

We are both scared.

But it is time.
After four long years,
I say good-bye to my love.
And we end.

*

Alex:

Not drinking is more stressful than one would think, but we have to do this for ourselves.

US

I can't be ashamed of this.
I need someone in my life who will love me for me.

It may sound cliché, but it's true.
We all have something from our past,
and I have learned to accept my 'thing.'

If you can't,
then sobriety will come to an end.

I have to remind myself that
I do have a lot of good qualities.
I have to be open to other possibilities
and keep trying.

Finding Sobriety

Alex:

“I can’t say it enough: A person needs support. This cannot be done alone. If a person does not have a great family or supportive friends, then find a group. Many people are surrounded by alcohol. They need to get out of those surroundings. We were lucky to have friends and family members who don’t drink. Drinking isn’t a focus at family gatherings with our families, but that is not the case for many. It’s hard enough. And there will be rough times when you need to talk and you need someone who can relate and truly understand.”

“You need to have a safe space, which may mean leaving the space you exist in. A drunk is asked to not only quit drinking, but also change everything they once were. It is a challenge. I don’t think someone can be sober without a true understanding of what they are dealing with. I’d suggest reading, talking, find out as much as you can about it.”

“You can’t glamorize drinking although this one is hard because it is all over society. It’s just like the glamorization of thinness; drinking is fun, sexy, everybody is doing it. When someone glamorizes a night of drinking, I ask, ‘What was your worst experience with alcohol?’ You have to keep that awareness and never forget where you were and what you went through to get here.”

“And you can still have fun. I was afraid I would never have fun. I think that is why many people don’t quit. They are afraid they won’t be able to share in that experience with others and get wild and crazy. But the truth is that now you create the fun, instead of getting drunk to have fun. You have to let go of your inhibitions without

drinking. Let things go at times and live in the moment. Get out there without worrying about what others think about you.”

“Now, fun can be reading a book, listening to good music, watching a good movie. You’ll find people respect you and will want to be around you. It will just be a different crowd. It doesn’t just happen over night.”

“I went to the pizza buffet with my friend and her mom. I was looking forward to this all week. We went to eat, then to watch the Vagina Monologues. It took me awhile to be able to go out and let go of my anxiety--to just be in the moment. It is hard to extract the idea of fun from drinking.”

“I always have an escape route in any social setting. I drive myself and leave when I want to. If the department chair says, ‘Can you bring the vodka for the punch?’ I say, ‘No, actually I can’t.’ Right now, sobriety is more important than any job. You have to really believe it. You have to talk yourself into going to social events. Many times I feel like it is too much work so I won’t go out. But then I remember I have to get out there. I can’t shelter myself forever. And I usually have fun.”

“One of my closest friends is in her early twenties. She stops by a lot at night and we talk and make dinner. Her mother is a drug addict, her father is in prison, and she has worked hard to get where she is today, staying away from drugs and alcohol. I had her in one of my classes a semester ago. She doesn’t drink or do drugs. And at that age, being in college there isn’t much for her in terms of socializing. Everyone is out partying. She doesn’t want to be around it. We have started to become good friends. It is nice having someone around who doesn’t glamorize drinking. We can rely on each other.”

*

Cara:

There are people out there having fun without alcohol. You just have to find them. Or hope they find you. When you rely so heavily on alcohol, the thought of fun and being included without it becomes impossible. The truth is if you stick around the same people you drank with it is much harder to be comfortable. I have heard over and over again, "How am I supposed to have fun without drinking?" It can happen. Don't let this be a reason to keep drinking. I agree that you have to work on letting yourself feel free and uninhibited without drinking. The people you surround yourself with can influence this experience. It just takes time. It doesn't happen over night.

*

Two of my closest friends, Sarah and Josh, are twenty-one. I met both of them at work, and we have much in common. We workout constantly, enjoy swimming and competing, are very close to our families, like to goof off, are in school, and have distinct career goals. Neither of them places a high value on alcohol, which was a new concept to me. At twenty-one, I was already identifying my alcohol abuse pattern, and I was involved with another alcoholic. I drank every day. I didn't know any different. People can have fun without drinking? I didn't think so.

I admire Sarah's carefree attitude towards drinking. She doesn't like being drunk because she doesn't like the person she becomes. I know that Sarah has been drunk. I know she drinks here and there when she is out with others who are drinking, but I also know that she could take it or leave it.

She doesn't use alcohol to cope with sadness or loneliness, to ease her anxiety, build confidence, socialize, or escape. She doesn't get caught up in the moment and over indulge. She has a lot to teach me.

Josh drinks on occasion, but he drinks one drink. Again, I have tried to drink one drink and couldn't, so I am amazed that he can just have one.

He often expresses his dislike of being drunk. He is extremely health conscience and physically fit, and he avoids alcohol to stay fit. When we hang out, he doesn't drink. I don't even think drinking is on his radar.

Neither of them glamorizes a night of heavy drinking or fantasize about happy hour. They don't talk about getting drunk or wanting a drink. They still have fun.

The first time we hung out outside of work, Sarah and I hosted a fondue party. I spent the afternoon cutting food for the night. I was nervous to be around everyone in a social setting. I thought about how much easier it would be if I were drinking. I would ease into the night. I began to yearn for a drink. But I knew how it would all turn out in the end if I drank.

I continued to prep and arrived early to Sarah's apartment to set up the fondue. This gathering was with our entire staff, and we were unsure how the night would end up. Many brought appetizer dishes, and we heated up cheese for bread and chips. I was in charge of the chocolate, so I got the fondue ready for the fruit and dessert cakes. Sarah was slaving away over the hot oil, prepping the chicken nuggets.

As the guests arrived, we all went from station to station, laughing, talking, eating. Alcohol wasn't the guest of honor. There were two people drinking out of the fifteen or so people there. Half of these people are heavily involved with their church and

drinking doesn't fit into their lifestyle. One of the newest staff members even commented, "This is very different than socializing with the other area of the recreation center. Any time we get together, there is drama and lots of drinking and pot smoking."

I think about how four years ago when the staff got together and played board games or went bowling. Our boss always had great drinking parties. We were all drunk all the time. I think about the shift in people that now work with me, and how great the timing is to have this staff and these friends who don't drink.

Six of us sat around the table. The others were in the living room. We all huddled over a watermelon, eating piece by piece. Someone mentioned that fruit gives people gas and diarrhea and the conversation went downhill from there. I was laughing so hard, tears streamed down my cheeks, and I was trying not to pee my pants. I couldn't stop laughing. I was getting light headed and euphoric.

This was the first time I had had a genuine laughing attack in a long time. I realized that I too could have fun without drinking. It was becoming easier. Alcohol was far from my thoughts that night, and I was grateful to be sober and remember such a fun event.

*

I appreciate life more.

I was truly given a second chance.

A chance to learn.

Laugh.

Cry.

Scream.

Yell.

Feel.

There will always be ups and downs.

And sometimes you think you want

to have a drink

or escape this sober life.

But I choose the downs of a sober life

over the blackout drunk cycle

of alcohol abuse and self-destruction

that I engaged in for so long.

As an alcoholic, you don't grow.

You get stuck in the cycle and never move forward.

*

I am sure when you are drinking there are moments when you are bored or not having fun, but we often cannot remember them or brush them off. When you first get sober everything is so highlighted and significant that you think, "Oh, I will never have fun again" or "I didn't have fun because I wasn't drinking." We automatically blame not drinking. It may be a part of the self-pitying, why me feeling, that goes along with accepting that you are different. It takes practice being social. You are just getting to know yourself and discovering who you are. Being social is just a part of this learning.

This isn't easy.

*

The first time I had seen my guy friends from high school in six years was at our ten-year high school reunion. I was three and a half years sober. The first few years that I hung out with them I didn't drink (this was in middle school and the beginning of high school), but as we got older I was drinking right along with them.

I wasn't nervous that I would want to drink when we hung out this time, and I knew that I could have fun without drinking. I was in the mood to socialize this weekend, but I knew at some point my not drinking would be the center of conversation. However, I didn't know it would come up more than once and to what extent. I had forgotten how closely my identity was tied to drinking and how surprising it was for those who knew me back then to find out that I don't drink now.

I watched my two good friends get drunk and saw one of them swaying. Everyone was leaving the bar, so I knew it was time to go. We wanted to be able to get up the next day and enjoy the beach. The first assault:

"Why are you leaving? Oh come on. It's early. Don't take them. They want to hang out. Whatever Cara, I see how it is, we haven't seen each other for years and this is how it is going to be."

I knew my friend was drunk so I blew him off, and we left.

Second assault:

I had waited for my friends to get ready. They were hung-over and unmotivated. I was ready to hangout with our friends, but we lay around instead. The phone began to ring off the hook.

“Come on let’s pre-party. Come over to our place first. Come on. You really aren’t coming over first. Tell Cara, we wish she was still a tomboy and drank and would hang out.”

I didn’t understand this attack. I wasn’t the one who didn’t want to hang out. But because I wasn’t drinking I got blamed. I guess it is hard for those who rely on alcohol to have fun to understand that I could still be a part of the event. I just didn’t need to drink. I didn’t want to drink. This group of old friends only remembered me in the context of a drink, and this change was hard for them to understand. Because I was different I became the scapegoat.

*

There is always somebody who questions you or makes you think twice about your decision to not drink. This just reminds you of how important it is to stand up for yourself. It’s hard for other people, even normal drinkers, to understand that you can have fun without drinking. Even though in the past, my nights out dancing, playing board games or just about anything social involved drinking, I was still there under all the alcohol. And I can find that person. I have. I like to dance. It wasn’t the drinking that made me like dancing. I like to do some of the same things that I did when I was drinking. The only difference is now I know when to go home. I am a better and more honest person. My work is better, and I have become a reliable, competent female.

Even normal drinkers use alcohol to get relaxed, go dancing, to play cards or to be social. Isn’t that what the term ‘social drinking’ means? So you get funny looks even from drinkers who aren’t alcoholics. It hard not to think that drinking is more acceptable; not drinking is odd. I get the responses, “You dance without drinking. You

mean you weren't drinking last night." I really try to let go and let loose. Just because I don't drink doesn't mean I am not fun. But I also have to feel safe and be with people I know and trust.

I am fairly shy when I first meet people. It takes me longer to feel comfortable around people I don't know. Before, when I would drink, it took a few drinks. Now it may take hanging out with the group a few times before I am comfortable.

*

Is This Me?

Alex:

I am not that social.

I don't hang around people

that drink all that much.

I am different.

If they are drinking,

we are not compatible.

I like much quieter things

I watch stupid reality shows.

I read books.

I like to work.

I feel pain.

Tomorrow is a new plan.

I hope that I will

I was a rebel.

Fuck the traditions
of society.

I wanted to be high.

continue
to understand
myself better in sobriety
and to really like myself.

I had to say goodbye
to a part of me.

The extraverted
(alcoholic)
and social self.

You have to be ready
to
let this world go.

I don't like crowds, you know.
Or small talk.
Or promiscuity.

My moment of truth,
A poem, saying good-bye.
It just clicks!
I had to say hello
to the part of me
I never accepted!

Quitting drinking isn't

that difficult.

It's changing your entire
lifestyle to accommodate sobriety

that was initially hard for me.

I tried more than once.

Each step of the way

I made new revelations

that helped me the next time.

This time it is different.

I believe in myself.

Don't make this a personality flaw.

Sobriety empowers me.

*

US

Maybe we could drink, but we've got a shitload to lose. If we take that risk, what good would it do? We wouldn't have a good time and would feel like we just threw away years of sobriety. It's easier to never drink again and spend the rest of our lives believing that we can never drink normally than trying it again. Our voices fade into one as we say good-bye.

My recorder clicks, and I sit for a minute listening to the dial tone, thinking about the idea of learning to love myself and learning to be okay with who I am. Alex has so much to say, so much to offer and concludes, “I have to learn to be alone and be happy with myself before I can offer myself as a partner.”

Shortly after the story I shared about James coming home drunk, I broke up with him. Now I often sit in my apartment alone. I look around. I am alone. I remember Alex, and I must learn to be happy with myself. In the past, I drank because I wasn't happy and I didn't want to be alone. I must grow without any boost from alcohol. You can't stay sober if you don't trust and believe in yourself. Sobriety tests my faith in myself and my will to make myself a better life.

Chapter 7

Janet: This is Our Problem and Our Choice

“Where am I?” I try to calm myself as I turn into a parking lot to reassess my directions. I look back onto the one-way street and sure enough I missed the turn. “Now how in the hell do I find my way back to that street, if I can only go one-way?” I’m aggravated, tired, panicked and lost. My A/C blows, keeping me from overheating as my body temperature rises out of frustration. This experience perfectly sets the tone for the upcoming interviews with Janet.

I am already running late, mistiming my commute to South Tampa. So I continue to drive, circling back to the right street. “I need to invest in a cell phone,” I whisper under my breath. I am anxious to see how this interview will go. I know Janet from school, but we haven’t really ever spoken in detail about her drinking past. We have rescheduled various times, and I wonder how much time is she really going to give me? How will I keep this conversation going?

Janet recently expressed her hesitation about participating in this study. As I search for the next turn, our recent phone conversation plays in my head:

“I just have so many other emotional things to deal with right now. I am not sure how much I can give you. This will take a lot out of me. I was much better last month when we first started planning this out. To be honest if you asked me right now, I probably would have to decline.”

“We can stop at anytime. I don’t want you to feel pressured. If you don’t want to do this you don’t have to,” I reacted, stunned by Janet’s admission.

“No, I said I would and I will. It will just take me longer to answer and think about your questions. I have been awfully tired recently,” Janet reassured.

Finally, I see her apartment complex, and I am brought back into the moment. I enter her contact number into the security gate calling system and wait for the gate to open. At this moment I enter not only the physical gate at Janet’s complex, but also I begin to open an emotional gate that Janet keeps secure and usually closed.

As I park, a tall, thin lady walks out to greet me. It has been a while since I have seen Janet. We hug and I gather all my recording equipment. I notice Janet has a new haircut and new glasses. “I’m trying to date again,” she informs me. Deep wrinkles outline her mouth as she speaks, “I was getting worried about you. You really need a cell phone.”

“I know. I hear that all the time,” I reply, following her to her place. I am greeted by a thick smell of cigarette smoke as we enter Janet’s apartment. I make a note to take allergy medicine before our next meeting and hope I am okay during this one.

Janet offers me a drink, and we sit. I sit on her brown, over-stuffed, leather couch. It’s quite cozy. Janet sits on an ottoman near the door. “I am going to have to smoke during this. I hope you understand,” she admits, cracking the door and reaching for an ashtray.

Although Janet is celebrating twenty-five years of not drinking, her drinking past is connected to many ghosts of her former life. For Janet thinking back to her drinking days and her first years of sobriety takes going much further back in time than most. By

twenty-three, Janet was attending AA and was on her path towards sobriety. Many times she was the only woman in the group, let alone being twenty-something. Though it has been many years, when Janet reaches back into her memories, there is much to tell. I listen eagerly.

The First Time

I over dosed on pills

a

couple times.

I ended up in

a

halfway house.

I was put in

a

psych ward.

But when I overdosed in
the psych ward they moved me
to lock-side ward.

I stayed there for five months.

I tried to kill myself more than once.

This first time I took 95 Phenobarbitals.

I wasn't supposed to make it.

After the first hospitalization,

I wanted to be a counselor, so

I worked at the hospital, but

this

is where I started to get pills.

I wasn't drinking after

I was hospitalized, but I ended up

back in the hospital for

overdosing again.

Once

the alcohol

was

gone,

I

couldn't deal with

what

was

inside.

In the hospital,

we didn't deal with my

drinking right away.

However,
after my second lock-up,
I started going to AA meetings.

I quit drinking and drugging
for the most part,
but the memories still haunted
so I moved.

I really hadn't
dealt with anything.

I was just trying to survive.

*

Janet shakes her lighter, taking a moment.

“In a way alcohol saved my life. It numbed me from all that was happening to me. It kept me from going crazy,” Janet says, lighting another cigarette, and continues, “I was too young for the hippy scene, but the drugs still lingered. By my freshman year of high school, I was mixing drugs and alcohol. I blacked out in school sometimes. Just after high school, I was living in my parents' basement. I had lots of parties there; my basement was nicknamed the opium den.”

“Drinking was different for me than most people because my father served me alcohol at a young age. My father was a drunk.”

Father

Alcohol was more of
an escape

than a pleasure.

It wasn't uncommon
for my father to take me
to the local tap.

Everyone thought it was cute.

I was eight
ten
twelve.

I'd have wine and seven-up.

No big deal.

My father gave me alcohol often.

At family events, I would drink.

Drinking was everywhere.

Where I grew up was like *Cheers*.

There's a bar on every corner.

As I got older,
my father would make elaborate drinks,
and we would both indulge.

In my teens,

my dad and I would
drink
Friday night
Saturday night
and open the bar the next day.

It was a part of my relationship with my dad.

But at this time,
I needed to escape.
My father was sexually abusing me.
Drinking kept me from remembering
and sheltered me from my father.

I needed to be numb.

*

“My drinking was complicated because of my relationship with my father, but
nonetheless I was abusing alcohol. I had to quit.”

*

My Last Hooray

“It had been about four years. I had a good job with IBM and started a whole new
life,” Janet says, time-lining out her drinking life.

“When you met your sponsor, is when you got sober for good?” I ask, as Janet strains to think about her past.

“Yes, and I remember the last time,” Janet replays this event in a trance-like state careful not to forget any detail.

It was a horrible dry.

Living in this liminal space.

I wasn't using that often

But I felt worse sober than I did drunk,

so I smoked weed.

I just needed to numb it all.

My father

The abuse

I tried to forget. Alcohol let me forget.

Without it I had to remember, so I used.

After four years, I knew something else had to give.

I started AA here.

Finally someone simply listened to me.

She became my sponsor and saved my life.

I went to meetings for eight years.

I am sober today by the grace of God and AA.

I was only twenty-something.

*

“I remember lying in bed at this guy’s apartment and we had just smoked a whole lot of weed when we heard that John Lennon died. He was killed. I went to an AA meeting the next day and told my sponsor about the night and that I had this weed at home. That night she and Dave, this really cool guy from group, sat up with me all night until I was ready to go home.”

“At home, I got on my knees and started praying. I was saying, ‘Help me. I can’t do this.’ I couldn’t flush this shit down the toilet. I just couldn’t do it. And, I heard this voice. I swear I heard this voice. It said, ‘Be still, in the name of God.’ It was truly a spiritual experience. It was like somehow I knew I wasn’t alone, and I flushed the weed down the toilet. That was an incredible moment. It was heartfelt.”

“My early years of sobriety were laced with spirituality. Brooksville is a Mecca for spiritual energy from the stones. It draws many psychic people. I had many friends who ventured down there. They helped me reinterpret God in a way that is like an energy spirit. And as I was leaning over the toilet this energy helped me make that decision to flush the drugs. That was twenty-five years ago.”

“Every year, I am reminded on the radio that it’s my sobriety anniversary when they mention the anniversary of John Lennon’s death. My sobriety was hard. It was horrible. I kicked and screamed for years.”

*

The garbage truck breaks her concentration. Janet rises to shut the window.

“Sorry about that. I finally gave it all up in Florida. I had spurts of not drugging or drinking, mainly not drinking, but it wasn’t until I had moved to Florida that I got sober. However, *our* language is off. I don’t use the word sober any more,” she corrects.

“I don’t understand,” I inquire.

“I don’t say sober or I got sober. You see it has been a long time since I quit drinking and since I was in recovery, and I just don’t use those terms anymore. I simply say ‘since I quit drinking or since I had a drink’ when I am talking about drinking,” she expresses with discern.

I feel threatened by her tone and unsure whether I offended her by using the word sober.

“You see I am not sure I understand what you are getting at or why you are asking some of these questions: Explain your journey towards sobriety. What does being sober mean to you? Tell me a story about what it is like to be sober. I don’t feel like they are open-ended. You are asking a lot, and I can’t remember or keep it all straight,” she confesses.

“I am sorry. Please, we can take our time. I am not looking for a right or wrong answer. You can share with me any parts that you want to talk about. I am interested in hearing your story,” I say, trying to diffuse the situation.

“I need to take a break. Is that okay? You can turn that off,” she continues, pointing to my tape recorder.

“Okay,” I say, agreeing it is time for a bathroom break.

*

I feel as if Janet assumes an attitude of superiority, down playing my few years of abstaining as if I have so much to learn. My language isn't correct, my questions aren't right. Is she still coping with her past, and does her discomfort highlight the pain or is there something wrong with my study? No other participant has reacted this way to my questioning. I am confused. I listen to Janet rewrite my ideas of focusing on sobriety, suggesting I focus on my own personal romantic relationship as a starting point. I take it all in, and I notice my language shifting to ease our conversation and to better communicate with her as we continue to talk.

*

“In the beginning, I wanted to talk about the abuse, which had just cycled back into my memory. My sponsor wouldn't let me. She made me focus on the drinking. And she was right. I went to probably five meetings a week. AA was my life, and it was an okay life because I met supportive people in group. They all believed in me, and I was often the only woman there. I was twenty-three, twenty-four.”

“I have wonderful memories of barbeques, Sunday morning breakfasts, burgers and soda; all with my group. I immersed myself in this because I had nothing else. Soon I finished college, and then started working for IBM again. I was on the fast track. However, I was thrown back into socializing, dinner parties, happy hours, but I wasn't drinking and kept going to AA. I worked and went to AA. That was my life. I was a success. But then...”

Ten Years

Break down

I was a middle

manager for IBM

in New York

when

I crashed

and

burned.

Not sure if

anyone has told you this,

“Your life is

going to have...

You think things are

tumultuous now...

Around seven

or eight years, usually your eighth,

of not drinking

your whole life turns

upside down.”

At ten years,

I started

having panic attacks.

I started to remember my past.

My father.

The abuse.

I couldn't work.

Here I am ten years sober.

I was weak.

The past ten years overturned.

I had to start

dealing

with it all over again.

My work kept me busy;

I flew all over the country.

I would always come back

and head to a meeting.

But I got too tired of traveling.

Always being gone.

And the panic attacks.

I quit work,

went back to school,

and

started individual counseling.

It is just amazing.

It is so powerful.

You wake up years later,

looking back, feeling alone.

And thinking about drinking.

Although, not drinking does get easier,

it will always take work

no matter how long you got.

I still get really

annoyed that

I can't just let lose

and have a drink.

Even normal drinkers use

alcohol to relax.

We can't even do that.

I don't have a way to

stop

the

feelings
the
thoughts.

Ten years was hard.
I felt like I was sober
for the first time.”

*

I couldn't stop crying today. My mother was in town this weekend, and we talked about my alcohol abuse. I had interviewed Janet the day before my mother got here, and her story was fresh in my mind. I thought about what she said--ten years.

“Mom, I am scared. I think about ten years. My last interviewee said that the tenth year was one of the toughest years. It all comes back: the sadness, the fear, the loneliness, the memories,” I sobbed to my mother.

“It will be different for you. You have been dealing with it all for many years. Your memories came back sooner. Your past experiences were different,” mother reinforced, trying to convince us both it would be okay.

“I had panic attacks when I was getting ready to graduate from college. I remembered memories of past feelings of hate, family experiences, and dating adventures gone wrong that I had repressed for so long,” I say.

“Things will be fine. You have a lot of love and support from your family. You have been dealing with it all along,” she reiterated.

*But why couldn't I stop crying? Was I crying for Janet? Alex? Nicole? Myself?
Out of Fear? Anger? Hurt? I couldn't stop thinking of Janet. Ten years!*

*

Janet's voice comes back to me and I cry. Her voice echoes:

"I didn't have any girlfriends growing up."

"When I was in eighth grade, I had my first pajama party."

"My dad hosed everyone down with the fucking hose, and all my girlfriends and I were soaked in our pajamas. This was my last attempt to have some connection to outside of the home. I missed out on having a best friend. The only people I hung out with were people from work. We would get high after work at whatever friend's house we ended up that night. I didn't have close friends, and I didn't try to after the whole eighth grade pajama party. As I got older, I just had the friends I drank with."

*

All of my friends fell away

the first time

I tried

to get sober up north.

They

were just gone.

Everything and everyone

you

were

once
familiar
with
changes.

Every thought and every feeling

you
were
once
familiar
with
changes.

You just change.

You lose chapters of your life.

Sobriety is Hard

The alternative is worse.

“When something starts to really fuck up your life, you can’t have any other life,”

Janet states, pushing her glasses up her nose.

“It seems some people think alcohol is too important. Social drinking is widely accepted, more so than not drinking, even if it is fucking up your life,” I respond, clicking my pen and reading my notes.

“I know some people have a problem with my sobriety. It reminds some people of their own drinking problems. I don’t get invited to many get-togethers. So I had to create

my own outings. I'll make girls-night out a priority. Usually, a few girlfriends and I will go see a band or play pool. Sometimes we go to this gay bar near downtown. Everyone is so nice and usually enthralled when straight people go there, and they are very accepting. I actually pole danced there one night. It was a lot of fun. When I say I don't drink, people's first response is, 'she is no fun.' But that's not it. I can have just as much fun as the next person. I can pole dance, shoot pool, etc., but I just don't drink," Janet continues.

"That's it. You just don't drink. It's not like you are against fun and can't enjoy being social," I respond, taking in all that Janet offers.

"Some of the girls will have a drink or two, which doesn't bother me. What bothers me is when people treat you differently. Or ask, 'Is this okay? Can I drink in front of you?' Nowadays, I just don't care what people say about me drinking a Coke when I am celebrating a night out on the town," she states, reaching for her lighter.

"It sounds like you have found new friends to socialize with and you really have to make an effort to be out there. It doesn't just happen. You have worked hard to get to this place of comfort and ease," I respond, checking my tape recorder.

"Listen, the truth is that you have to firmly believe that it cannot be a part of your life," she asserts.

"Alcohol?"

"Yes, alcohol. Once you believe this, then you start to try to figure it out from there. I can't have this. Now how am I supposed to live," Janet shares.

"I think that's the hardest transition: living."

“I probably could get drunk tonight and maybe not drink tomorrow, but I have already lost too much. It’s not worth the risk,” Janet states, her eyes dark and filled with pain.

“The more time you have invested into being sober the more you risk. But relapse is a real ghost that haunts us all,” I speak, feeling far away. I think about Alex and how many times she has tried to quit, hoping this time she can do it.

Janet’s voice brings me back, “Living sober means you are going to leave out a lot of people and that is hard for some. But that’s just the way it is. Ones that are truly your friends will be there. I don’t have a group of friends that spans across my lifetime. I have chapters of my life that I have had to reject and during this time I let these friendships go in order to get sober. I spent all my time with AA. This became my only outlet.”

AA. Those years weren’t easy,
but AA made it easier.
It teaches you a lot
and anyone can benefit from it.

I went for eight years.

I needed it.

I needed to immerse myself

in a world

that didn’t drink: AA.

We had formal dinners.

No wine.

We went out to socialize.

No drinks.

We had barbeques.

No beer.

I surrounded my self with AA.

I was babied.

But it was what I had to do
to stay clean.

I needed it.

You need

to have someone

in your life who understands.

AA.

A counselor.

A friend in recovery.

A network.

Something.

I needed AA and it worked for me.

Moving forward. “It’s okay to be an alcoholic.”

“You have to accept certain things about yourself to move on. I used to lie a lot. I was a liar. This is something that I had to work on. My sponsor called it taking inventory. You have to look at the seven deadly sins, then pick one relating to your drinking personas and work on it. I lied. Now, I hate people who lie. I have become the truth police. I can’t continue a friendship with someone who lies. I may be a little extreme, but today I value truth more than anything. In order to be happy in sobriety, you have to get to a place where you are solid. You have to let go of your past and move forward. Alcohol is just bad stuff. It is too fucking available, so you have to get over it. I had to start living my life without wishing I could have a drink.”

“Of course even twenty-five years later I think about how it would be. I know it helps people socialize, and it would make dating easier, but I can’t fixate on it. I don’t have the option to go home and pour myself a glass of wine, which is how many deal with stress. I have to live through the stress without any anesthesia. My doctor gave me a prescription for Xanax to help when the stress becomes too much. I have been taking care of my ill mother and brother. It takes a toll on you, so I am glad to get through the day. I need to start worrying about me again and head back to yoga. Something as simple as yoga can help a person heal spiritually, mentally, and physically. A person should start small in order to succeed and consider the whole body.”

“Don’t worry about being judged because you are working on becoming the best person that you can be. I have even tagged my drink before because I knew some people were drinking rum and cokes, and I didn’t want to pick up the wrong drink. I have done that before and got a sip of alcohol, which was a huge surprise, which is good, I guess.

My body reacted and reminded me that I don't want to drink. I was just so shocked. It wasn't an issue. I was nervous at first. But I was fine. I had to move on. I have learned to let go and move on. When you drink you get stuck in one place and never move on."

"Today, I am more responsible. I am quieter and more reserved, and I am okay with it."

Relationships

Drinkers

won't

have

a

clue

what

you

are

talking

about

or

feeling.

You will need to build a new life

*

"A new life isn't always that easy. I feel as if the tape should sound blank for this response. A long moment of silence can capture my dating history. After all these years, I

am still trying to figure out dating. When I first got out of treatment, I went to visit one of my high school friends and fell in love with this guy who ended up being her boss. We stayed up talking all night. Eventually, I drank. We just reached this point where if I wasn't drinking, it was awkward. So I drank. I ended up on the first train home the next day. I had to get out of that scene.”

“I also dated someone in recovery. And it was nice to be with someone who didn't drink. We would wake up early and go for bike rides and be active. It's really nice sharing this lifestyle together. Sometimes, I would wake up and he'd already be gone for a run. He'd be standing over me all sweaty. We grew apart for some reason or another, but my point is that there are people out there who aren't waking up every Saturday morning hung-over.”

“At my age, it is even harder to relate and date. On top of me not drinking, I smoke, and I am getting up there in age. A lot of guys my age are dating girls your age. It's tough.”

“A couple years ago, I met this really cool guy on New Year's Eve, but by the end of the night I was the only one left not drinking. You just can't compete. It's all just alike. If you're not drinking with people, you're not. Eventually, you won't be able to stay on the same track. You just don't have much in common any more.”

“I still don't know how to negotiate all that dating stuff. I am figuring it with each new experience. Right now, there haven't been any new experiences, but I want to work on the dating thing because I do want to share my life with a partner. I have to put myself in situations to meet people. Of course, not drinking makes this a little harder.”

You Don't Know Why

You keep doing it, but you do.

“Once I got my own car, it became more dangerous. One time when I was twenty-one or two, I was driving people home from a party late one night when I sideswiped a Cadillac. I stripped off the total side of the car and left the scene. I was in a blackout and didn't remember doing it. The next day someone's pounding on my door. It was pretty messy. I ended up paying for the repairs out of my pocket, and it was a lot of money for me to cough up. I wouldn't know how I got to the places I ended up at on the weekends. But I got there.”

“You have got to understand that before I quit there were times when I would get up and go to the corner restaurant and have steak and potatoes and go home and start drinking at 10 a.m. I'd just get drunk. Driving drunk just added to the chaos.”

“I went the wrong way on the expressway ramp, then tried to turn around and got stuck on the median. The wheels were spinning on both ends, and I couldn't fucking go anywhere. I don't remember anything after getting stuck. Another blackout.”

“I was a mess. It is very clear to me today how bad it got, but it is hard to connect with these memories because it was so long ago. It is clear that I cannot have even one drink. I can't. I can't stop from going zero to sixty. And that's what happens when I get involved with alcohol.”

*

I have driven on the on-ramp. I have found myself blacked out driving on the wrong side of the highway. What were we thinking?

*

“It is too easy. In the beginning, you don’t know how to negotiate this because alcohol use/abuse is so pervasive. It’s just everywhere and this makes it hard to quit. AA fills in those hard places. It wasn’t always so easy. I had to stay out of the scene all together. I didn’t go to bars. The first time I went into the *Race Track* gas station I turned around and walked out. I felt my juices flowing.”

“Now, I am pretty oblivious to it. I still stay away from solely drinking events, especially at bars. It is just not fun. And when people ask to buy me a drink or why I don’t drink, I respond with, ‘I drank enough in my time to drink everyone under the table.’”

“I have noticed that we have to not make this sobriety thing more than it is. We can’t feel sorry for ourselves. We have to learn how to flatly say, ‘I don’t drink anymore. I don’t drink anymore.’ It really is about you ‘inside’ because you can’t change the culture. You can’t even make anyone more empathetic. Will you touch a few lives? Yeah. And they will touch a few more. But for me it is about being okay with who you are and being okay that you don’t drink.”

“I do get bothered and angry at the whole alcohol culture. You do get left out at times, and you wonder what others think of you. If I tell someone I’m not drinking, they think I am some kind of goody two-shoes. Sometimes when I say, ‘I don’t drink,’ I feel like the first response of the person I am talking is, ‘Boring. I really care.’ It is hard to connect to those who are involved in that culture, or for those in that culture to connect to us.”

“I am fairly social now. It doesn’t bother me to go to bars or out with those who are drinking, but you feel disconnected at times. I once went out with a girlfriend of mine

to play pool and she was drinking. We were having a good time, and I met this really nice guy. He didn't drink. The next thing I knew that guy and I were in a great conversation and my friend was kind of left out. Not drinking and drinking puts people on very different pages because often we have different interests and hobbies."

"There is a whole other world out there of people who aren't drinkers. You just have to be open to this new social network."

Drinking Matters

"Sometimes you don't know how to be/act in a new situation without drinking. Sometimes drinking can help ease your social anxiety. Not drinking can also set you apart, and something goes missing."

"Back in my early days of sobriety when I first got rehired for IBM as a manager, I had an all day interview. During the interview the interviewer kept asking me what I did on my free time. Fair question, right? Not for me. I was terrified. He would phrase his question like, 'So what's a typical Sunday like for you?' I didn't know how to tell him that I go to AA almost every day. My best friend is my sponsor, and she is eighteen years older than me. I wash my car on weekends. Work and AA. That's my life. I finally flat out told him that I was a recovering alcoholic, and it turned out to be a smart move. It turned out that he was dealing with someone in his family who was facing this same battle. But he still called back to my old office and talked to at least a half dozen managers about my psychiatric start. It was a huge deal, especially twenty odd years ago. It has less of a stigma these days, but it still sets you apart from others and you are an outcast."

“I don’t have a problem expressing that I am a recovering alcoholic, but I have had some interesting negative experiences being so open about things. The most hurtful thing that has happened to me since I have been sober was when I tried to help somebody else. A friend of the family called me a few years back and said she had a good friend who had a drinking problem, was becoming a drug addict, and had a history of sexual abuse. I showed up the next day to meet with this person, and I started to invest a lot of time into her. I would stay out until midnight helping her cope and work through things. I went with this person to the hospital to get her stomach pumped after a night of boozing and drugging. These were late nights, and I did my best to be there for her.”

“It is hard helping someone who in the end doesn’t really want help. You can only do so much and try so many things. But if their language never changes, and they say I can have a drink down the road, then you know they are not ready. This situation really takes a toll on you. You only hope that you can see the time when they are serious about it and quit.”

“Eventually this individual started drinking and drugging again, and the ‘friend’ who originally asked me for help started to ignore me. I risked a lot to help her friend. I shared personal stories that really took a toll on me, going back into dark crevices of my past. I felt used. They both blew me off. I remember showing up at a dinner party and running into my ‘friend.’ She looked right at me and turned the other way. Any time we had to interact it felt forced. One time I even heard her say, ‘Do I have to do this,’ to another person before she walked over to ask me about work related stuff.”

“All the time I spent with these two blew up in my face. I felt betrayed and hurt.”

*

Janet rises to get us drinks and our meeting runs longer than expected. I can tell that Janet is getting tired, and I am feeling a whirlwind of emotions. Janet's voice brings us back onto topic as she walks out of the kitchen.

"It's hard to let go of that world, but you meet people who get it. Some people just aren't ready to quit drinking and some live in limbo, trying to find a balance between the drinking world and recovery. The truth is you can't. You have to leave that drinking world behind," Janet reinforces, handing me my glass of water.

"I have met very few people my age that aren't still drinking on Friday nights," I respond.

"That's because you are caught between being and living sober," Janet's back straightens out as she begins to speak, "You're floating on a carpet, and you really want to move into the world of living sober. You are almost there. You are navigating some rough waters--dating and not drinking or dating and drinking."

I again feel threatened by this observation. I feel like Janet puts herself above me. I am just a baby in sober years. But this is about her not me and maybe she needs to in order to make sense out her long history of not drinking.

"In order for you to move onto the next plane, you will have to radically change your relationship with your partner or leave. If I may be so blunt, you need to pull yourself out of this in-between stage of not drinking; not drinking and living. You are getting there, but you're not quite there yet," Janet concludes, nodding her head, in a matter-of-fact manner.

I don't respond. I just listen. I listen to Janet's voice and take in the harsh realities.

Reality

It's
our problem.
It is.
Although,
I don't
think I
have to compromise
a hundred percent.

I am
the
one who can't
drink.
It is my problem.
There are a lot of people
who can
come home after a long
day of work.
Sit down.
Have
a glass of wine.
That's them.

But that is not me.

I can't.

It sometimes

makes me sad.

But I can't get too self-involved

and self-righteous.

You have

to move from

a place of feeling

to doing

and living.

We all

have something,

but I've got to accept

this is

no one else's problem.

It's

my

problem, my choice.

*

I can see Janet is spent. Her thoughts get more fragmented, her cigarettes more frequent. She continues to think out loud, making sense of her drinking life, "To be alive

and living, I had to take alcohol away. So, now the question is, can all of my relationships continue as they are, if I've taken this thing away? What happened when alcohol was taken out of my life?"

My mind spins. I contemplate my life. How is my life changing? What am I doing now that I am without alcohol? What about my relationships?

I continue to probe Janet, "Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share or any advice that you would give to others facing their drinking life. What happens when alcohol is taken out of your life?"

"You can't do it alone. Whatever route you choose, you can't. I mean, you can't," Janet reminds.

I gather my used tapes and pause, looking at Janet's deep smile lines.

She stops me and reaches out towards me, "Cara, you just discover there's this whole other world that exists where you're not sleeping in until noon on Saturday and Sunday because you partied so hard Friday or Saturday night. You can wake-up and go for a bike ride at 7 a.m., and it's relieving and freeing."

The click of my tape recorder running out of tape startles us, but urges us to find a finishing point. The thing with recovery is that it will always be an ongoing learning process, so there never is an end, just a place to pick the conversation up the next time.

I get up to exit, hugging Janet for longer than usual, my body soaked in tobacco. As I open the door to her apartment, the sunlight hits my blue eyes. I squint, walking to my car. I turn to wave good-bye to Janet, smiling and pondering the last few hours. As a slight breeze from the bay hits my body, I once again smell Janet's cigarette smoke on my shirt. I leave. I think about my life, and my dating or lack of dating experience.

Janet's words repeat: "There is a whole other world out there of people who don't drink." And I wonder where socializing occurs without alcohol. What does it mean to be floating in-between living sober and being sober? Am I living in-between worlds, holding on to my drinking past, not drinking but still engaging in a drinking circle? What does this mean for my sobriety? I turn my radio up as I pull out of her parking lot, contemplating our path and our sobriety.

Chapter 8

Discussion

In this dissertation research, I focused on the stories of women with a history of alcohol abuse, examining how they used language and communication to construct a sober life, a life without alcohol. I discovered how recovering women alcoholics made sense out of their past drinking lives, experienced an identity transformation from a drinking self to a sober self, and how they described living sober. Beginning with my own experience, I examined memoirs of three drinking women and held extensive interviews with three other women with drinking pasts. Their stories showed how some women are introduced to and abuse alcohol and how they can eventually find a path toward sobriety. Their stories also help us detach the stigma associated to alcoholism by highlighting common experiences among drinking women and reinforcing that they are not the only one, they are not alone.

In this research, I engaged a small number of women to gather a more detailed and concrete experience of alcohol abuse, which is important because it adds depth to our understanding of women alcoholics. Together my participants (Nicole, Alex, and Janet) and I delved into our sobriety, tracing our history of alcohol use and abuse. In this chapter, I begin by revisiting each participant's story, then looking at the common themes from each story. I discuss and question what these stories reveal about sobriety, identity, and relationships, and how these stories help maintain, reinforce, or endanger the sober

lifestyle they've chosen. I attempt to find connecting points across each woman's narrative and draw conclusions that can be helpful to other women trying to get and stay sober.

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The stories of these women showed that sobriety requires a constant negotiation; it's a lifelong learning process. Once alcohol is removed, a woman is bare for the world to see, ridicule, or praise. Her identity is thrown into doubt. She questions, reshapes, and then doubts who she is again and again. Eventually, she connects her drunken body to her self-hatred and works to form a 'new' sober body and self. All she once knew was known to her through a drunken lens. However, now she must reenter society and face situations such as dating, sex, work, bills, friends, and family without the crutch of alcohol. She often finds herself wondering, "Is this me? Do I like myself in this sober body? Do I feel this way because I am sober?" She first questions what sobriety has brought to her life. "Do I even like this? Am I really like this? Is this who I am?" Then she realizes that just because she was drinking doesn't mean that wasn't her. She's not that different without alcohol. However, she has to figure all of this out on her own. Alex admitted, "One moment I am carefree, everything is cool, then the next I am nit-picky. I wonder if this is just the first time I have been sober enough to dislike things about someone, then feel I should express it."

Sobriety becomes a new frame from which to understand and orient a woman's life and body. She needs to learn about herself because now she is sober. She needs to be single because she is sober. She needs to work on herself because she is sober. She got involved with this man because she needed to try it sober. For years the idea of being

sober is in the forefront of her mind, and she becomes very self-involved. Nicole stated, “Sometimes, I feel like I am holding back because I don’t drink... I don’t get out as much as I should.” These recovering alcoholics tended to relate nearly all sources of conflict in their lives back to the idea of not drinking. I ask, ‘Once a woman is sober, can she ever life without wondering and thinking about a drinking life?’ Referring to a dating situation, Nicole added, “Sometimes it isn’t about the alcohol. Sometimes we get ourselves into things regardless.” Or is it the alcohol?

As I listened to the words these women used and the stories they revealed, I found it impossible to discuss the idea of sobriety without first tracing the history of each woman’s drinking past. In the next section, I will discuss what lured these women to drinking and why and how they decided to quit drinking, which then framed their course of recovery. These stories of what comes before and after a drinking life help to show how identity is shaped and reshaped. They also give us insight into the vast changes that occur once alcohol is removed, furthering the conversation on recovery and the powerful influence of language in helping to construct a life of sobriety.

Nicole: Shame and Self Contempt

Nicole began her interview by stating, “I always knew I was an alcoholic.” Later in the interview she, also, stated, “I guess I always knew that I had a drinking problem, even from the beginning.” Nicole’s father was an alcoholic, but she did not witness his drinking until she lived with him for two years when she was in her late teens. She revealed, “I witnessed my father drink himself to death.” She also noted that she began drinking heavier at this time in her life. The term alcoholic became a part of her family

story long before she discovered her own alcohol abuse. Nicole's mother even pointed out to her that she thought Nicole was an alcoholic.

I wonder if growing up immersed in an alcoholic family narrative makes a person anticipate having alcohol issues, forcing her to identify and define herself as 'alcoholic'? Or does it add to her denial because she can't see her drinking in this narrative--her drinking seems different than the alcoholic in the family, therefore, she can't be an alcoholic? In this study, I heard all the participants discuss family alcohol abuse. I heard each talk about a father or grandfather being an alcoholic so it was possible she would end up being an alcoholic. However, these women inferred that since their drinking habits were not like their father or grandfather's drinking habits, in the beginning, they didn't think they were alcoholics. Do these family stories and histories establish a person's expectations? Do they help her accept or make sense out of her use or deny her use? I found that these family histories thus function as an early warning or symptom of possible alcohol abuse that is passed on to the younger generations. It becomes part of their "narrative inheritance" (Goodall, 2005).

While witnessing her father's alcohol abuse, Nicole started to question whether she had a drinking problem at seventeen. Nonetheless, she did not quit drinking until she was in her mid-thirties. Once her father quit drinking, Nicole was hoping that she and her father could have a relationship. This never happened and their relationship remained distant. According to Ranagarajan & Kelly (2006), family communication is strained among families with an alcoholic parent, and usually children learn not to talk so they don't upset the alcoholic parent. Nicole thought once alcohol was removed, this communication could occur, but it never did. And she began to drink even more.

For years, she participated in a repetitious paradoxical cycle of hating herself because she drank too much, but drinking too much because she hated herself. She “often felt so guilty about drinking,” a feeling that, according to Kirkpatrick (1990), becomes exacerbated as the alcoholic life evolves. Kirkpatrick (1990) stated, “Later in her drinking, she will become self-pitying, resentful, and even childishly cruel as a consequence of the drug, alcohol” (p. 21). In my research, I heard and read over and over again about the dreaded “day after blues” and self-pitying episodes that followed a binge.

For an alcoholic woman, the day after a binge ushers in feelings of shame and disgust, especially during times when she is trying to figure out her drinking pattern and how to stop it. Nicole remembered two different times when she said, “I don’t have to drink when I go to this party.” But on each occasion, she drank until she blacked out. After the last party, when she thought “oh, just one” and ended up on a drinking binge, she realized, “Obviously. Obviously, I can’t win. I can’t control it.” In the beginning Nicole, like the other women, thought she could restrict her drinking to one or two drinks. Indeed, she tried repeatedly to do so. But eventually she learned that even when she really intended to drink just one or two, she couldn’t. Instead, she would drink all night, blackout, and end up with an overwhelming feeling of self-hatred, guilt, and failure.

Nicole had to reach a point where she could confirm she had a “drinking problem” by failing at repeated attempts to ‘drink normally.’ As Alex, one of my other participants said, “You just cannot control how the night will end and this is too unpredictable.” Denzin (1987b) also made this point, reminding us that the pain a person feels the day after is enough to saturate anyone with hate for her drinking life. This self-

hatred eventually forced Nicole to not only look at her drinking self, but to decide to change--to quit drinking.

Throughout the interview, Nicole's thoughts shifted from shame and sadness to pride and encouragement. Yet, she sounded sadder than the other women. Nicole quit drinking five years ago and said she would never drink again, but she isn't completely happy with her sober life. She stated, "there has to be more to life than this." She wants this up coming year to be a year of discovery and moving forward. However, alcohol provided her with a social life and a circle of friends that she has not been able to find in sobriety.

She continually mentioned the idea of fun, making me think about how we frame and understand "fun" in our drinking and sober lives. Nicole stated, "I know that I sure haven't been able to learn how to have fun." She still connected fun to drinking, making it harder for her to live sober. However, the more we talked through the meaning and experience of sobriety, Nicole started to reframe and reidentify what fun can mean. She added, "You know I can have fun. I had a really good time at Josh's birthday party." Through our discourse, her ideas of fun changed, and I began to see Nicole take pride in her sobriety. Telling her story seemed to allow Nicole to reshape her drinking past as she voiced her experience of sobriety aloud for the first time. She began to write a new storyline to live by, one including fun without alcohol.

Alex: I was Ashamed, but Now I am Proud

Alex started her interview by stating, "I knew that I drank differently than most. I always wanted to keep drinking. I couldn't get enough." Unlike my other participants, Alex had decided to try to relearn how to drink socially. During this time, she was trying

to figure out if she really had a drinking problem or not. She went to counseling for personal issues, stepped away from her drinking circle, and did everything she could to remove reasons for drinking too much from her life. But what she discovered was, “Alcohol will find you.” No matter how ‘together’ she was feeling, her drinking remained out of control.

Earlier in our friendship, I was nervous to interview Alex, because I knew she was having such a hard time and was indecisive about quitting. But during our conversation this time around, I heard Alex use different words to express her goals. Instead of saying, I need to quit for now, or maybe down the road I could drink, she believed not drinking would be a life-long achievement. She wanted to quit drinking.

Unlike Nicole and Janet, Alex spoke in a very matter of fact tone. She appeared to be unemotional. She said she rarely fantasized about drinking. She never wished she could drink. Alex had a very analytical approach to her story and used striking metaphors to express her experiences.

She explained that drinking had a euphoric affect on her. It wasn’t so much about being drunk, but about liking to feel “buzzed.” Knapp (1996) discussed how alcoholics repeatedly search for something greater than the mundane day to day and must confront yearnings and desires: “I sometimes think of alcoholics as people who’ve elevated that search to an art form or religion, filling the emptiness with drink, chasing drink after drink...” (p. 61). Alex was chasing a buzz, a high, and a middle ground between drunk and sober. She stated, “You try to find that buzz state every time. You want these nights to never end. You strive to get that same high back, but sometimes you end up losing control.” She also pointed out that it wasn’t always bad, and she didn’t always blackout.

If it were, why would she do it? In fact, the bad was infrequent, but never the less, shameful and painful enough to make her want to stop drinking. Like all the women I talked with, and those whose memoirs I read, Alex discovered that drinking is too unpredictable. Alex couldn't control the amount she drank, so she often passed the stage of feeling buzzed and became too drunk.

Like Nicole, Alex experienced the shame, embarrassment, and self-hatred that accompanied a night of bingeing and ended in a cycle of self-hatred that led to still more drinking. She stated, "I was miserable, obsessed about drinking too much, cried, and would drink all over again the next day." The guilt she felt from drinking too after a night out was a main factor for quitting. She stressed that even if you told her she could drink for six months with having only one bad night, she wouldn't risk it. That one night is too painful; she never again wants to wake-up wondering what she did, feeling embarrassed, having to piece the night together, or feeling worried about what she said. "I choose not to drink," she said, and felt empowered by her choice.

Alex vividly captured the risks alcohol brought into her life when stating, "And therein lays the problem, when an alcoholic drinks they are playing Russian roulette," which is a game that can end in death. An alcoholic never knows what will happen after she has one drink. Sometimes, she can have one or two drinks and walk away. During these times, she convinces herself that she doesn't have a problem. Sometime, she can be drunk, have fun, remember the whole night, wake up unaffected by her overindulgence. But like Nicole and Alex consistently remind, there is the time: she blacks out, wakes up afraid and unsure. These nights weighed heavily on these women and slowly chipped away at their self-esteem. They ended up blaming themselves for not controlling their

drinking, they drank again to mute the pain of self-contempt. Eventually these experiences piled up and shook Alex out of denial. But like Alex said, not drinking wasn't the hardest part of this whole thing: it was changing her entire life so drastically that she couldn't recognize who she was then, as she tried to figure out who she is now that was tough.

In this study, Alex is the only female actively dating. She shared with me her first dating experience sober. It was raw, and she gushed about everything. This was an important step in getting to know how she would relate as a sober person. Now she had to deal with someone else's drinking habits as well. This can be a lot for a person to handle. She shared, "I had to talk about it. I probably over did it. I may have exhausted the subject." She felt that she had to talk through everything with him, but her ideas/feelings changed so frequently that it was hard for this other person to understand. "It was all very emotional," she continued. The difficulty Alex faced while trying to be in a couple after getting sober was a theme emphasized by many researchers (Denzin, 1987b; Gorski, 1992; Skutle, 1999; Smith, 1992). As woman returns to her life, at first, it will be hard figuring out how to communicate with partner. Although she and this man remain friends, Alex isn't sure if a partner who hasn't experienced addiction can ever fully understand the travels of an alcoholic.

I still worry about Alex because I know she is so freshly sober, but she appeared to be the most proactive participant. She stated, "Without drinking, I have been able to pick up the pieces and put myself back together. I don't ever want to lose my self-respect again." This sentence captures the overall feeling of all three interviews--no one ever

wants to feel the low they felt while drinking. Alex continued, “I physically feel better about myself; spiritually I feel a connection for the first time.”

Alex’s interview uniquely balanced the interviews with Nicole and Janet. Alex echoed the shame that dominates Nicole’s story, and Alex is trying to heal and think positively, like Janet discussed, removing the stigma of being an alcoholic. These women feel that the more suffering they have acknowledged, the more committed they become to not drinking. None of these women could imagine giving up what they have worked so hard for, but each does admit every once in awhile, she hears a tiny voice that emerges every once in while to challenge the choice not to drink. Romanticizing a drink may occur when seeing couples sharing a bottle of wine or being with friends, coworkers, and/or family at a social event where drinking is a main attraction. She can’t avoid every place that alcohol is, and no matter how many years she has, the temptation will always remain, just not as severe. The thought, “I want a glass of wine.” Or, “I miss the taste of a good beer,” enters her mind. When this happens, she must play out the possible scenarios and remember how the night could go very wrong. Given her lived experiences with alcohol, she couldn’t really want another drink, not even one.

Janet: You Just Have to Live

In her early twenties, Janet recognized that she needed to quit drinking right away. Janet’s drinking was tied to an abusive father, who was also an alcoholic. She stated, “In a way alcohol saved my life.” For Janet alcohol numbed her mind and allowed her to forget the abuse. Even now, twenty-five years later, she is sure drinking got her through this time. For years, she drank to forget or mask the pain when her memories surfaced. Janet recognizes the alcoholic reasons it is necessary to mask the pain and

experience, but fails to understand that drinking keeps the memory more alive because while drinking she never works through or heals from the experience. As a result, she has to experience it twice. The first experience is when it really happened and the second when she finally remembers and tries to move beyond it in sobriety.

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At the end of the chapter on Nicole's story, I shared a vignette of sexual violence. For years, I drank to forget this event and numbed it. But when I first tried to get sober, this event surfaced and I had to cope and relive this experience--I continued to drink. And when I finally quit drinking, I had to relive it again in order make sense out of it seven years later. Yes, I hid and numbed it, but when it came back I had panic attacks and was terrified by the memory of it.

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When Janet became sober she too began having panic attacks, as her past became more vivid and memorable. She began abusing prescription drugs and tried to commit suicide more than once. During her second hospital stay after a suicide attempt, Janet began to attend AA, and soon after AA became her life. Like Nicole, Janet grew up in a family drinking culture. Her father would pour her spirit and wine at a young age, and she hung out at pubs with her father. Drinking was the only life she ever knew. As she said, "Drinking was everywhere." AA provided Janet with a safe space devoid of alcohol, a new and supportive family.

She added, "I was babied." AA is so safe you do not have to encounter the drinking world. But one day you do have to face it again. Janet pointed out: "It is too fucking available, so you have to get over it." She attended AA for eight years, then

ventured out on her own. Unlike the other two women in this study, Janet attended AA, and she has been sober for twenty-five years. The other women have been sober for two (Alex) and six (Nicole) years. Given the longevity of her sobriety, Janet has a unique vantage point. She warned, “Ten years was hard. I felt like I was sober for the first time.” I wonder how much of this ten-year break down had to do with breaking away from AA. Was AA so safe that when Janet entered back into her life without this support structure she was starting over again?

Nicole and Alex did not go to AA, and thus they faced getting and staying sober virtually alone. They had to figure out what sobriety meant to and demanded of them without the guidance of AA. I am not discrediting AA, which helped Janet achieve sobriety. The other women didn’t follow any steps, but rather tripped, skipped, and fumbled their way to sobriety. Alex tried AA a few times, but found that “everyone spends so much time retelling their ‘bad stories’ that I thought it was miserable.” Kirkpatrick (1990) also agreed that AA focuses on retelling the bad to keep a person from reliving the bad. However, she too did not want to continue to retell the bad all the time. She wanted to focus on the good, which is why she founded Women For Sobriety. In this study, I found us retelling the bad and focusing on the good. All women agreed that you need someone who understands and to whom you can relate. Janet didn’t have anyone to support her, and AA provided the safety and nurturance she needed.

Unlike Alex and Nicole, Janet didn’t speak as much about self-hatred, but rather emphasized giving the self-criticism up and moving on. She expressed herself bluntly (almost preachy at times), stressing that this is her problem, no one else’s. She stated, “You have to firmly believe that (*alcohol*) cannot be a part of your life.” She was very

assertive, stressing, “It’s okay to be an alcoholic. This is not the only thing that you are; let’s not forget who we are.”

Janet doesn’t deny that sobriety is hard. Indeed, all three women talked about the rough spots and the difficulty of sobriety. Initially, they thought drinking was just a subset to other issues in their lives, not the main problem. But eventually they realized the alcohol abuse was a problem in itself. However, Janet just wants to focus, as she said over and over again, on “moving forward.” She acknowledged, “A new life isn’t always easy...I still don’t know how to negotiate all that dating stuff.” She preached, “We can’t feel sorry for ourselves.”

Janet had difficulty retelling about her past alcohol abuse and abuse, but as she began to talk about her life now, in the present, her voice lightened and she sounded free and relaxed. She mentioned that going to bars and drinking events are just not fun anymore. She has fun going out with her friends and being social, but drinking is the background not the main event. Janet also talked about taking another step in her sobriety and trying to date. She wants to get out there and meet someone. She is now ready to be a partner and take a risk.

As I mentioned before, I wonder if sobriety drives us to be so busy working on ourselves that other people and relationships fall out of the equation. Janet stated, “You wake up years later, looking back, feeling alone. And thinking about drinking.” One day we wake up and ask ourselves are we ready to be a partner. It has taken Janet twenty-five years to begin to answer this question. And I know I am still working on answering this question for myself. Is our sobriety an excuse to not take a risk? Are we afraid to

experience disappointment and happiness? To be driven back to drinking? Can we learn how to understand and deal with these emotions of dating without drinking?

The Seduction of a Drinking Life

What is it about alcohol that is so appealing? Why do some of us become so attached to drinking that it becomes the most central thing in our lives? In my interviews I found that all three women were drawn to alcohol for different reasons, but all focused on using alcohol to help them socialize and relate to people.

Nicole mentioned that alcohol made her feel “more comfortable.” She stated, “I always felt so insecure and isolated, but drinking was a way to get involved and be included.” Alcohol was used to ease her anxiety; initially, it functioned as a social lubricant. Alcohol gave her something to do, and she found a social circle to hang out with. She continued, “I was usually nervous and uncomfortable and alcohol made me feel more comfortable. It made me feel better...” For Nicole, drinking made her feel included, and she began to associate having fun with drinking.

Alex first turned to alcohol because of the physical high she felt from drinking. She stated, “Drinking had a euphoric impact on me.” She liked having a buzz and always wanted to maintain this high. While buzzed she felt a little happier and more social. She added, “There were plenty of nights that alcohol allowed me to connect with another persons on a more intimate level, and I am not talking necessarily about sexually. I just mean on a more personal level.” Alex testified affirmatively to needing to feel included and how alcohol helped her to socialize.

Janet also stated, “I know it helps people socialize, and it would make dating easier.” Janet’s social circle revolved around drinking as well. However, Janet was drawn

to alcohol more to escape her father than to feel social. She stated, “Alcohol was more of an escape. Drinking kept me from remembering.” From the beginning, she used alcohol as a tool to cope.

For Nicole and Alex, alcohol seemed to be a very innocent party favor. Their relationship to alcohol started slowly and was at first a social lubricant. However, as our interviews continued, I began to realize how the language they used to describe their drinking self was changing. They began to reframe their social drinking as a necessity. The fantasy that alcohol made a person funnier and more comfortable, or offered an escape drew each woman to alcohol. But this was all just an illusion. It was all a fantasy. In sobriety, these women see a different reality to their drinking lives. Alcohol was no longer “fun,” it was hurtful, destructive and demoralizing.

Contradictions and Fantasies

The plot of the alcoholic storied life revolves around misconceptions, contradictions and fantasies. The women in this study began by thinking ‘alcohol helped me cope, be fun, or be involved,’ but as they moved to later chapters in their story words like, ‘hate, guilt, disgust’ replaced the idea of fun. Initially alcohol appeared to be helpful, but in the end it clouded their judgment and became nearly impossible to control. The way they languaged their experience often changed within minutes of conversing with me.

The meaning of fun. Earlier, I mentioned how Alex stated that drinking allowed her to connect with others. She stated, “There were plenty of nights that alcohol allowed me to connect with another person on a more intimate level, and I am not talking necessarily about sexually. I just mean on a more personal level.” However, she later

discussed meeting others while drinking and stated, “And it was all so superficial. Most of the time you don’t really remember full conversations. You hang out with people more to get drunk than to actually get to know them.”

Nicole said drinking helped her feel included, but she also stated, “It is kind of funny to say included because we felt included, but in the end we drank so much that we started to exclude everything but alcohol.” In the end alcohol did not make her feel more comfortable, in fact, she recalled, “I was so ashamed. I tried to ignore the feeling, but it is in your gut...I never wanted to be that cold like my father, but when I drank I was cold and would get so angry...” And Alex observed how, “I would wake up hung-over, depressed, and hating myself...I woke up embarrassed feeling horrible.”

These women were seduced by the illusion that alcohol made them more fun and more socially adept, but the reality was that they would feel guilty about drinking too much. Unfortunately, this guilt would disappear before the next drinking binge, so they again would fantasize how much more fun they would have by drinking. As Denzin (1987b) pointed out, the alcoholic forgets the pain of a drinking night the minute she has her next drink.

Even now, after several years of sobriety, Nicole asked, “What if I can never have fun?” Even after reporting to me the shame of drinking and admitting that drinking wasn’t fun after all, she still asked, “What if I will never have fun?”

Referring to her anticipation of and anxiety about dating, Nicole said, “I mean now I just wish I was drunk sometimes.” When she first considers it, dating appears easier if she’s drinking, but when she plays out her anticipation of how the night might go, she realizes it could end up being worse. “I would really love to feel tipsy...I do miss

it. The thing is that I would always get drunk (not tipsy), and I could never have just one.” Reliving the entire drinking night reminds Nicole how it would end up and keeps her from having that first drink. By verbally working through it, she realizes she is making a good decision by not drinking. When she is forced to imagine the whole experience and tell it to herself, she is able to keep herself sober.

Alex stated, “It is hard to extract the idea of fun from drinking.” But she reminded, “You wake up thinking, ‘that was fun,’ but I look back and wonder, ‘Come on. Was that really that much fun?’ It seems so forged.”

Janet echoed this same issue:

Of course even twenty-five years later I think about how it would be. I know it helps people socialize, and it would make dating easier. Sometimes drinking can help ease some social anxiety. Not drinking can also set you apart, and something goes missing.

What Janet didn’t highlight is that for an alcoholic drinking sets a person apart because alcohol is used to numb or forget; it’s no longer really about socializing. Each woman wanted to drink socially, but they used alcohol as a drug not a beverage.

Nicole brought herself back to reality:

You see people having so much fun drinking. And I think, ‘Awww!’ And I shake my head. I know tomorrow they will be throwing up; they won’t remember what happened. I redraw the sketching. I don’t have to worry about that any more.

In order for her to believe that she can live sober and still have fun, she must remove this contradiction of what fun means and reframe fun. For years fun is equated

with drinking, now these women are redefining fun to better fit in their lives. As Alex said, “I have to get out there. I can’t shelter myself forever. And I usually have fun.”

Escape. Not only did each woman fantasize about how much more fun a drinking life was, but each also felt initially that drinking and blacking out was better than dealing straight forwardly with pain, fear, or other “negative” emotions. They preferred the chaos of drinking to the conflict of confronting the stress of living. As Nicole observed, “I would just blackout and all the pain would be gone,” and Janet added, “I feel worse sober than I did drunk.” But as Nicole and Alex relayed, they felt worse sober because they then had to face their drinking self honestly.

When Nicole found out that her boyfriend cheated on her, she was consoled by a bottle of Jack Daniels. She believed it was, “better to blackout than to feel this pain.” However, the next morning when she awakened and walked into the living room, she was faced with her previous blackout. She had broken everything in sight. She stated, “When I walked out into the living room, I got that feeling in my stomach. I felt nauseous.” She was under the illusion that drinking would help her get through this experience, but drinking only added to the chaos--she then had to deal with her boyfriend cheating and her actions of wrecking her place during a blackout.

It seems as if the only pain an alcoholic can get in touch with is the self-hatred and guilt she experiences the day after a binge. We were more comfortable with that pain than dealing with the pain of a cheating boyfriend. But the next day, she had to deal with the guilt of drinking binge and the pain of a cheating boyfriend. Drinking only prolongs the heartache. It doesn’t make it disappear. Indeed, it never disappears. In a blackout we don’t mourn our losses. So the question becomes, what does it mean to “move on?”

Confronting and getting through the pain is a path toward growing; not feeling the pain, muting it with alcohol, only stunts this growth and hinders a person from moving on.

Janet is a case in point. She stated, “In a way alcohol saved my life. It numbed me from all that was happening to me. It kept me from going crazy.” But what was it that alcohol saved her from by numbing? She later said, “In the beginning, I wanted to talk about the abuse, which had just cycled back into my memory. My sponsor wouldn’t let me. She made me focus on the drinking.” Her memories were still there, and eventually she had to remember them to work through them and move forward. Janet informed, “Ten years later I started having panic attacks. I started to remember my past, my father, the abuse.” Drinking really doesn’t make you forget, it just makes you feel as if you’ve forgotten temporarily. She added when discussing now, “I don’t have a way to stop the feelings...the thoughts.”

We really want to believe that alcohol is helping us cope. Janet continued, “I tried to forget, alcohol let me forget. Without it I had to remember, so I used.” We believe alcohol is helping us to forget, but really it is creating other chaos and simply distracting us from learning how to heal and cope. In the end we feel guilty, hating ourselves just as much as we did before we drank. We end up adding more pain and creating difficult situations to get through, like wrecking a car or waking up with a stranger in our bed.

‘Normal drinking’. Janet suggested that even ‘normal drinkers’ use alcohol to ease anxiety, cope with stress, and relax. I noticed that as each woman began to see their drinking ‘as different’ from normal drinking. They then tried to drink ‘normally,’ only to find that drinking still was a problem. There was a misconception that once their lives were better, their problem drinking would disappear, but it never did.

Nicole remarked, “I am not going to party as much since he’s not here. But of course that didn’t last very long. It wasn’t long before that I was back to drinking just the same.” Alex added, “I thought it would be different this time because I was different...I figured once school was done that I would slow down. Or once I was out of this crowd I would slow down.”

Drinking continued to be just as chaotic and central to the lives of these women after they realized they had a drinking problem and tried to control their drinking. Each of them may have been drawn to alcohol for a slightly different reason, but in the end the trial and errors of drinking had a similar effect. Alcohol is so powerful and so culturally sanctioned that five, ten, or twenty-five years later, a person in recovery still may fantasize about drinking? But it is also important for these women to keep their drinking stories alive in order to remind them to not drink. The therapeutic effect of remembering should not be lost on us. Their fantasies need to be countered by their memories, their stories of blackouts and self-hatred. Each woman needs to remind herself that this could happen to her again and it wouldn’t be fun, it would be disastrous. She is not a ‘normal drinker.’

Turning Points

Each of the women in this study admitted that they were suspicious of their own drinking long before they actually quit. They had moments where they thought they needed to quit or slow down. It took them a few tries at slowing down to realize they couldn’t, that they had to quit completely. For each female this last drinking episode was different, but for Nicole and Alex the feelings after the event was what led them to quit. Janet’s recovery took a different path when she joined AA.

Nicole stated, “Even though, I always kind of suspected I had a problem, it wasn’t until my father’s funeral that I decided it was time to quit.” Nicole blacked out the entire funeral; she didn’t remember any of it. Although she realized that she needed to quit, she tried to drink socially for a while. But she realized she couldn’t have just one drink. For each woman, there was the initial realization that she needed to quit, then a culmination of events forced her to quit entirely.

Nicole remembered New Years as a turning point: “As the ball was dropping, and we were counting down to the New Year, I was timidly holding up a glass of wine. I don’t remember anything else after that.” She really didn’t want to drink and wasn’t planning on drinking, but she blacked out. She woke up knowing she would never be able to control her drinking. She stated:

It was as if God came down and said, ‘you know, I will fix your whole life if you quit drinking right now or if you can control your drinking.’ I knew I couldn’t control it, so I quit. I was too involved with alcohol. I had one moment of clarity. It was a very small moment where I knew I had to quit. To be honest, if I hadn’t of quit then, I don’t think I would have ever had that moment again and I would have never quit.

For Nicole, trying to drink normally and not being able to forced her to make the choice that she could either keep drinking and being out of control or could quit drinking all together. Knapp (1996) added:

There are moments as an active alcoholic where you *do* know, where in a flash of clarity you grasp that alcohol is the central problem, a kind of liquid glue that gums up all the internal gears and keeps you stuck. (p. 3-4)

It is what happens after that moment of clarity that will determine her path. Does she keep drinking or quit?

Nicole and Alex associated quitting to the unbearable guilt and self-hatred they felt after a night of bingeing. They could no longer tolerate these feelings. The only way to remove the guilt was to quit drinking. Alex recalled, “There is just something about waking up wondering about what you said the night before and searching for your car. It scares the shit out of you. It is a wake up call.” Even after all these events, it was still easy to fall back into the drinking cycle. For Alex, her last night was about embarrassment and fear. The last night Alex drank, she was on a date with a new boyfriend. She had never been drunk around him before because she ‘controlled’ her drinking when he was present. But on this particular date, they went to a wedding and she thought alcohol would enhance the romance, but instead she kept drinking until she was drunk and blacked out. “I ended up just acting stupid,” she said. The next day she was throwing up all over the hotel floor and couldn’t remember anything. She saw drinking was too unpredictable and that morning her date left her alone in the hotel room. She never heard from him again. “I had to quit drinking,” she concluded.

Drinking was too unpredictable, and these events that once were perceived as fun became a source of fear and unpredictability. She was fed up with not knowing how she would react to alcohol each time. Alex finished this story: “You have to accept that you cannot drink because you are different. And who wants to be different. It’s a tough realization.”

Janet had a few turning points that were important to her story. The first was her hospitalization. Janet found herself abusing prescription pills and woke up in the hospital

after trying to commit suicide. She revealed, “I wasn’t supposed to make it.” After her second hospital stay, she began attending AA. She found that without alcohol her past haunted her. AA gave her a place to connect to people and help her live without alcohol.

Janet was trying to negotiate her drug and alcohol abuse during the period after her suicide attempts. She stopped drinking, she started abusing prescription and illegal drugs. AA helped her get through both addictions.

The last time Janet drank was while visiting a friend of hers for the weekend. During this visit, she met a guy she was interested in and they talked all night. As the night went on, she found herself with a drink in her hand. They ended up drinking, and Janet remembered it was too easy to start drinking again. This drinking episode reminded her, she couldn’t drink. She stated, “I had to quit.” She left her friends the next day and headed straight for an AA meeting.

These women tried and tried over and over again to slow down and reduce their drinking without quitting entirely. They needed to know for sure that they really couldn’t drink. When an alcoholic takes a step back and looks at this last try, it becomes too real. She couldn’t have just one, because one always leads to another. She begins to reframe her perspectives on drinking from “I can’t drink” to “I can’t even have just one drink.”

However, after Janet quit drinking she still had to choose to quit doing drugs. She explained:

I went to an AA meeting the day after I heard that John Lennon died and told my sponsor I had this weed at home. That night she and Dave, a guy from group, sat up with me all night until I was ready to go home. At home, I got on my knees and started praying. I was saying ‘help me. I can’t do this.’ It was truly a spiritual

experience. It was like I knew I wasn't alone, and I flushed the weed down the toilet.

Janet shared that choosing to quit and reliving these turning points reminds her that she was given a second chance. Through retelling these moments all the women were reminded of what led them to where they are today and why sobriety is important. They got to reinvent themselves narratively and start over again. These turning points included not only the event but also the growing importance of having support from others and support from a higher spiritual power. These women suggested that the healing must be holistic. A person has to nurture her body as well. A body she abused and escaped from for too long. She now reclaims her body, learns how to live in this body, and loves her sober body. Alex stated, "Meditation, massage, exercise, positive thinking, physical, mental and spiritual healing is important." She sometimes wonders how she survived some of these situations, leading her to believe in something greater. Each woman was grateful to remember these moments, even though they were hard to retell.

Who am I? What do I Want?

These turning point moments left each questioning who they were and what they wanted for themselves. Each woman started to dislike herself while abusing alcohol. Sobriety for these women meant they were choosing to make a change that would in the end lead to a more positive self-image and allow these woman to become someone they liked. Self-hatred needed to be transformed into self-love.

Some of the negative comments these women used to describe themselves while drinking included:

Nicole: "I just hated myself."

Alex: “I hate myself. I started to watch twenty-six...twenty-seven...twenty-eight pass me by, and I was still passionately drinking. I had to face it...You are an alcoholic. You can’t drink. I thought I would grow out of it.”

Janet: “I was a mess...When something starts to really fuck up your life, you can’t have any other life.”

Remembering these feelings helps these women to not drink because they do not want to ever feel that low and self-defeated again. Remembering is an important part of their story, especially in light of their blackouts. Knapp (1996) added, “Still, I look in the mirror sometimes and think, What happened?” (p. 7). Alex reminded, “You have to keep that awareness and never forget where you were and what you went through to get here.”

All three women remembered their drinking lives as saturated with self-hatred:

Nicole: “I can’t control things. I had no self-respect. The disrespect that I showed myself is enough to keep me from drinking...Now, every situation is real... I trust myself and respect myself enough to not drink.”

Alex: “Waking up with throw-up on you, smelling like the bar, head pounding, chills, sweats, memory loss. I had to get sober or I would die. I may not die a physical death, but emotionally I was on life support...I don’t ever want to lose my self-respect again.”

Janet: “To be alive and living, I had to take alcohol away.”

These women now believe that drinking was hindering them from living and being the person they liked. Knapp (1996) said, “it’s very hard to accept that the insides, the pieces of you that have to do with integrity and self-esteem, are slowly rotting away” (p. 22). In sobriety, it takes time to heal and move beyond these memories to become the

person she wants to be. Janet shared that when she drank, she lied a lot. In sobriety, she values honesty and demands honesty from other people. She insisted that she couldn't be a friend to someone who lies. She has transformed herself into an honest person who she can respect.

It takes work to transform herself into this 'new' self. Nicole observed how hard it is and after six years of sobriety stated, "I just feel awful in my body. I am not complete. I am not quite living sober." Nicole and I have made a pact that this year will be better, and she will take more steps to becoming a person she likes. All of these women talked about moving into an even better self. Janet wants to head back to yoga and start dating. Nicole wants to find a safe social crowd, and Alex wants to keep discovering new things about herself.

Relationships

The idea of family, friends and intimate partners arose at various times during our interviews. As mentioned earlier all three women traced and connected their alcoholism to a parent or grandparent. All three highlighted the role friends play in drinking and not drinking, and all three discussed the quandaries they experience surrounding dating and sobriety.

Friends and family. Nicole and Janet were both exposed to alcohol abuse at a young age while witnessing their father's alcoholism.

Nicole stated, "My father was drinking every day. I felt bad for him, and then I was angry and resented him." Janet added, "My father gave me alcohol often. At family events, I would drink. Drinking was everywhere. It was part of my relationship with my dad." Drinking was a way for Janet to bond with her father. Janet's drinking was a way to

gain attention and acceptance from her father, similar to the way alcohol is used among peers. However, drinking also was tied to sexual abuse, and Janet said it became a way to “shelter me from my father.”

Both women had troubled relationships with their alcoholic fathers and found themselves drinking through the experiences. Alex, on the other hand, did not witness this behavior and had a harder time recognizing her drinking patterns since there was no one against whom she could compare her alcohol abuse.

Many times these women used others to describe their drinking and abuse. As they searched to make sense out of their drinking they compared themselves to ‘normal drinkers.’ Nicole stated, “I don’t think a normal drinker sits down and plans out her night in reference to drinking.” The term ‘normal drinkers’ was often used in these interviews to compare self to other. In order to have the concept of an alcoholic--an abnormal drinker--we must have a ‘normal drinker’ against which to compare ‘alcoholic drinking.’ Nicole and Janet referred to their fathers as alcoholic drinkers and concluded that their drinking fit the category of alcoholic drinking rather than ‘normal drinking’ (see Denzin, 1987b). Nicole stated, “A normal drinker wouldn’t repeatedly wake up in bed the next day beside somebody they never met before. It’s just so embarrassing.”

These women eventually defined themselves as alcoholics, then highlighted the necessity of leaving their drinking friends behind and having the support of friends and/or family to complete their transformation from a drinking self to a non-drinking, sober self. If relationships can fuel addiction to alcohol, they can also facilitate recovery.

Nicole talked about her step-dad as a person she admired and honored. He became a source of strength for her and a person to be accountable to during her recovery. She

stated, “I just thought about how disappointed he would be if I had started drinking again.” This support and accountability could be compared to that of an AA sponsor. She is not only letting herself down if she drinks, but also letting down her sponsor and her support group. They look to each other for encouragement to stay sober. When another person slips, it can remind her how easy it is to drink again and disappoint her because she wanted that person to stay sober.

Janet found her support through AA stating, “I immersed myself in this (AA) because I had nothing else.” She could not do this alone echoed through each interviewee, and it was stressed that not only does she need support from others, but also she will need support from someone who understands and can relate to her experiences. These women viewed ‘normal drinkers’ as individuals who would never truly understand what it is like or understand these complicated issues that accompany alcoholism and recovery. It’s as if we alcoholics speak a different language than normal drinkers. It was important to these women that I could relate and understand what they were experiencing in order for them to share and disclose to me.

Nicole said, “But I know you get it. I know you aren’t judging me.” And Alex added, “I am just getting to know myself in relation to others. It is hard to talk to someone who has never experienced addiction.” Janet concluded, “Drinkers won’t have a clue what you are talking about or feeling... You do get left out at times, and you wonder what others think of you.”

Not only do these women feel it is hard to talk about this or relate to others who are drinking, they sometimes feel judged and like an outsider in drinking situations. They

mentioned how sometimes not drinking makes others who are drinking feel uncomfortable. Janet highlighted this:

I know some people have a problem with my sobriety. It reminds some people of their own drinking problems. I don't get invited to many get-togethers. So I had to create my own outings. Girl's night out. We'll go see a band or play pool.

And Alex commented, "I see people express disappointment when I tell them I don't drink. Janet continued, "It still sets you apart from others and you are an outcast."

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As I listened to these words, I am reminded of an academic convention where I ran into friends I used to drink with:

National Communication Association Convention. I see old friends. Friends who barely recognize me. I am now thinner, more conservative, and sober.

"I remember when this girl used to party," one man slurs.

There are only a few people left at our school who knew me when I drank alcohol. But as I run into old friends from my MA program at an academic conference, the drinking stories always surface.

"There was this one time..." the stories would begin.

"Are you sure you don't want a drink for old time's sake?" the conversation always ended. I think about how it could be, having a drink, feeling a little less apprehensive and a little more outgoing.

"No, I'll pass this time," I repeat, as we get ready to head to another bar.

As we enter O'Malley's Bar and Grill in the Hilton Hotel, a man approaches. "Can I buy you a drink?"

“No thanks, but you can get me a water,” I suggest. He gets me water with no questions.

“You don’t have to worry about driving,” his friend starts with the 3rd degree.

“I am not a big drinker,” I reply.

As I lift my water glass to take a drink, I feel extremely flush. I get nauseous. Panic grips me. I raise the glass to my lips and for a brief second I think, ‘What if he really brought me an alcoholic drink?’ Smelling the glass, I take a very small sip.

I can’t believe I felt so paranoid. I actually thought it could have been alcoholic. And what would that mean?

“Just one,” I am brought back to the conversation by his friend’s voice.

What is it about the idea that I don’t drink at all that some people won’t accept?

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Socializing still can be a challenge for these women and for me too because often in our culture social events incorporate drinking. These women sometimes feel judged and shared various experiences where not drinking seemed to be somewhat of a problem. And for all these women the idea of dating became problematic.

Intimate partners. Since dating was connected historically to drinking for these women, becoming sober meant not dating. During the courtship, it is often common to go to dinner and order wine. This is also a time when many couples disclose personal information as they get to know each other. When these women faced dating for the first time sober they had trouble knowing what to share, how to frame the history of their struggles with alcohol, and anticipating the reactions of their date. All three women had moments of sadness and empowerment when discussing dating.

First, sobriety meant that these women faced getting to know themselves, then they had to face getting to know themselves as ‘others’ to potential partners, that is, as relational selves. These women are still discovering who they are in relation to others and how to be in a relationship. These women know that they do not want the dating and sexual experiences they had while drinking, but are still trying to figure out how they see themselves as sexual and feminine in sobriety.

Nicole reported, “The idea of dating can be really sad because when you get into a serious relationship you are going to have to talk about this stuff with them.”

Alex expressed, “Dating was my main fear. I never dated without alcohol. Candlelight flickers in the background; an empty glass stares at me. That first date was hard. And my first relationship was even harder.” Alex was the only female who was dating at the time of the interviews. She explained that her first relationship was hard because it was all so new to her. She wasn’t sure how to fill him in or what she was feeling. Often during this self-discovery period, her feelings changed and she found herself confusing her partner along the way. She stated:

In one sense, I would tell him I don’t want this to be a big deal, so you don’t have to change your habits, but then I would snap at him when he would say something about alcohol. I was giving him mixed messages.

This was an important relationship for Alex as she navigated the rough waters of dating. Although this relationship did not work out she now feels more confident about being in a relationship. But she concluded, “What if no one can accept my alcoholism?”

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As I listened to Alex, I was left shaking my head and wondering about my own sobriety. I am a single female experiencing all that these women are talking about, and I too wonder about how my sobriety plays into my single status. I think about Janet:

I met this really cool guy New Year's Eve, but by the end of the night I was the only one left not drinking...Not drinking and drinking puts people on very different pages because often we have different interests and hobbies. I don't know how to negotiate all that dating stuff. I am figuring it out with each new experience.

It has been twenty-five years and Janet still expressed hesitation and complication. These women have a tough time moving into the dating world and opening up herself to dating. These women's pasts have been tainted with rejection, self-hatred, and doubt. When faced with dating, the risk of rejection from a partner may resemble her past pain and may be too intense for her after years of re-building her self-esteem. After working so hard to revise her self, dating just seems like too much work.

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Halloween. I remember:

"What would you like to drink?" a man approaches.

"Water," I reply, flipping my blond hair over my shoulder.

"How about a beer?" one suggests.

"No thanks."

"She doesn't drink," my friend chimes in. "She's driving." I watch her struggle with the excuses.

This is a struggle I so often lose. I have started to add justifications to my ‘no thanks.’ ‘I found myself drinking too much so I quit to clear my head.’ People often respect that excuse, but still have to ask me if I want a drink, as though competing to see who will get me to drink.

“She can have just one drink,” I hear the man reply to my friend.

“No thanks, I don’t want one,” I repeat. I am amazed at the persistence.

“I don’t drink.”

“I am driving.”

“I have to get up early tomorrow.”

“I have too much to do tomorrow.” What else can I say? The simple fact that I don’t want to drink is not acceptable.

“You can have one, can’t you?” I hear again.

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Having to justify not drinking becomes a part of negotiating dating and alcohol. These women also worry about their judgment when picking a date. Their past dating experiences were largely negative and alcohol can’t be blamed for all of the bad. They wonder about how they choose dates and hope to break the pattern of dating the ‘wrong men.’ Unlike ‘normal drinkers,’ these women have to factor in a date’s drinking pattern (even if it is barely existing) in order to decide if he would be a safe date. This can complicate things and Alex reminded, “I think it will be hard to find someone who isn’t immersed in the drinking culture, especially at our age.” Janet complimented this by stating, “living sober means you are going to leave out a lot of people and that is hard for some.”

Nicole questioned her dating self while talking about trying to date again. She stated, “Sober or not...I would still pick a bad boy.” Six years have passed since she quit drinking and Nicole finished, “I know that my judgment was so screwed up. It has taken until now to get to a place where I’m ready to put myself out there.”

However, as these women felt more empowered by sobriety the language they used to discuss relationships changed as well. Alex began, “In the future when I date, I will be very upfront and non-apologetic.” Nicole concluded:

Not focus on alcohol in relation to drinking...I am going out on a date and I’m sober. There is nothing more to it...I know what I like and what I want. I finally know what I want. I want someone who likes the arts and loves to dance. I need a stable person who views me as an equal.

Alex added:

Although they may not understand what you are going through, they still need to know what is going to upset you and what is safest for you. If this doesn’t work, then you need to let him go. Sobriety has to be more important than any man.

I heard hope in all three stories as they discussed getting out there and trying to date.

And Janet shared:

I went out with a girlfriend of mine to play pool and she was drinking. We were having a good time, and I met this really nice guy. He didn’t drink. The next thing I know that guy and I were in a great conversation and my friend was kind of left out.

She reminded me that there are men out there who do not drink and have other hobbies and ideas of fun.

Alex observed that when dating she has to think about what role drinking will play in her relationship. She deserves a safe relationship that will help her situation. She stated, “But you can’t settle for anything less or you are selling yourself short. Alcohol or lack there of shouldn’t be an issue.”

These women started out discussing dating from a sad viewpoint, but end feeling stronger and better situated to date. The process of storytelling and committing to sobriety allowed these women get to know themselves better and accept their new identity. They feel more empowered and ready to socially interact with others.

Identity and Sobriety

For many years, these women lived a drinking life. Their lives revolved around drinking and encompassed a drinking self. Becoming sober involves radical changes in her identity. Janet shared: “Everything and everyone you were once familiar with changes. Every thought and every feeling you were once familiar with changes. You just change.” When a woman accepts and acknowledges her drinking problem and begins the process of recovery, she experiences a transformation of self and identity. As these women reflected back, they remembered their drinking lives through their sober self. In storytelling, she looks at the past through the lens of the present (Carr, 1986).

Once a female begins to take on the identity of alcoholic she can move toward recovery. It is important to note that alcohol will always be a part of her identity. Janet revealed, “At ten years...I had to start dealing with it all over again. It is a constant part of your identity and self.”

Identifying as an alcoholic was a first step taken by these women to move forward; it gave them a language and frame (see Goffman, 1986) to transition to a new

self-image. They identified what was wrong and could begin to fix it. Alex admitted, “Saying that I am an alcoholic implies that I cannot drink ever. It makes it easier than trying to find some type of middle ground. There was no middle ground...I cannot drink.” And Janet added, “Some people just aren’t ready to quit drinking and some live in limbo, trying to find a balance between the drinking world and recovery. The truth is you can’t. You have to leave that drinking world behind.” Remembering keeps this drinking identity alive as these women grow further away from their drinking self, leaving their drinking world behind and committing to a sober self.

Nicole stated, “Every once in a while I have to remind myself of my past. I have to remember the past to keep moving forward. I got to cope.” Through narrative she remembered her past and was reminded that her drinking past will always be a part of her identity. Sobriety is about remembering her drinking stories to remind her who she was, is and wants to be. It’s about telling. AA focuses on this telling (Rotskoff, 2002). Even the two women who didn’t participate in AA talked about the importance of remembering and telling and having a support system.

Nicole had never talked about many of the events of her drinking life and during our conversation she showed a lot of insight into her ‘old’ self and her new identity. Talking seems to be imperative to recovery. She even acknowledged, “My next step is to head back to counseling. I need to go back and work through these drinking experiences to move forward.” And Alex also informed, “If I ever truly start thinking about drinking, I mean really thinking it is okay, I will be heading to a meeting.”

In sobriety, she can never let herself entirely forget her alcoholic self no matter how many years go by, but she can eventually file it away so it is not at the forefront of

her identity. Alex added, "It wasn't always so bad. In sobriety, we focus on the negative to remind us that we can't drink. After a while, you look back and can't recognize the person you were when you drank. That person seems unreal."

As she moved beyond her drinking self, she began to discover or create a 'new' self and Alex admitted, "It is hard when all you've known for the last fifteen years is your drinking self. I have only known my sober self for a year and a half." These women get to better know who they are in sobriety. Nicole found, "I can't be ashamed of this." And Alex discovered, "I am not that social...I don't like crowds, you know. Or small talk. Or promiscuity." Janet added, "I am quieter and more reserved."

Since we live in a drinking culture, often these women feel that others react at times to their not drinking with the attitude that if she is not drinking she thinks she is better than us. Alex found, "Some people may view me as 'Miss Princess' or no fun since I don't drink. You have to wonder how not drinking plays into others' perception of me." And Janet affirmed, "When I say I don't drink, peoples first response is, 'she is no fun'. But that's not it. I can have just as much fun as the next. I can pole dance, shoot pool, etc., but I just don't drink."

As each woman began to let go of a self that they were not proud of and could no longer live with, they began to create a new self. The old drinking stories remain, but she was no longer living them. However, she can't entirely separate herself of today from her past self. Janet said, "You lose chapters of your life." I am not sure if a person loses these chapters or they simply become part of her past. They become a prologue to her new life story and a point of comparison.

Metaphors and Language

These women often used illuminating metaphors to make sense out of their experience and to dramatize or story their lives. As mentioned before these women felt it was hard to talk about their drinking lives and especially hard to talk to others who may not be able to understand their experiences. Kirkpatrick (1990) pointed out:

Perhaps the single most tragic part of alcoholism is that the woman with a drinking problem is the last to know. It is not that she is dull-witted. Rather it is because it is part of the disease, this inability to communicate that reality of what is happening to herself and her life. (p. 24)

In this study, metaphors are used to communicate feelings, allow others to understand her, and help an alcoholic better understand her own drinking. The most common metaphors used were the 'roller coaster' of a drinking life, drinking as a 'love' affair, control or losing control, and anesthesia or the 'numbing' effect of alcohol.

We can see the 'roller coaster' metaphor in the following. Here these women discuss the highs and lows and the drastic changes between drinking episodes.

Nicole shared:

I would feel too much regret and shame that I drank so much. It was a terrible roller coaster...I would hate myself for losing control and drinking too much, and then I would go out and drink to cope with the feelings. Then wake up hating myself again.

On this 'roller coaster' these women also battled for control over their drinking self.

Alex emphasized, "Bad nights...Fun nights...Highs." And Janet added the drinking was also, "Zero to sixty."

This 'roller coaster' metaphor extended into the idea of being in a 'bad love relationship' with severe ups and downs. These women talked about alcohol as if they were in a romantic relationship with the bottle. Like Knapp (1996) said, "The relationship developed gradually, over many years...Anyone who's ever shifted from general affection and enthusiasm for a lover to outright obsession knows what I mean..." (p. 6). Knapp used the 'love' metaphor throughout her memoir, as do these participants throughout their interviews.

Nicole claimed to have been, "... too involved with alcohol...Love to feel tipsy. I loved my red wine." While discussing her relationship with alcohol she also stated she felt a "longing feeling" for her favorite drink. Alex added, "Emotionally, it drained me" And Janet too suggests she was, "...involved with alcohol."

As their involvement with alcohol grew, these women discovered they used alcohol to numb and escape. Drinking then began to take on a different meaning. Alex said, "Everyone's abuse takes on a life of its own." These women no longer had agency over drinking and drinking took over. They felt like they had lost control. Nicole said, "I would black out and the pain would go away." And Janet often used the word 'escape' and 'anesthetized' to describe her use of alcohol and explained, "I needed to be numb."

Drinking became a love-hate relationship. These women loved drinking, and they hated drinking. They began falling in love with the feeling drinking gave them, but then hated the self and began to use alcohol to escape. This led them to feeling out of control. For so long, they tried to control all aspects of their drinking life. Once they felt out of control, they began to hate drinking.

These women also referred to social drinking and drinking as ‘drinking culture’ or ‘drinking world’ and stated alcohol is a normal part of celebration. However, when discussing their own drinking they no longer saw drinking as celebration. Indeed, they eventually defined drinking as ‘a problem.’ Their voices ran together as I read the interviews and saw descriptions such as ‘living hell,’ ‘bad stuff,’ and ‘chaos.’ Alex used a unique and compelling metaphor of ‘Russian roulette.’ She said you just never know when the bullet will hit you. You can drink many times and be just fine, but then there is the one time and you get sloppy drunk. This metaphor highlights the danger that alcohol represents to an alcoholic. It can kill you metaphorically and literally.

Janet used metaphors to describe the in between state of being between drinking and getting sober. She stated, “You’re floating on a carpet, and you really want to move into the world of living sober...navigating some rough waters.”

As they moved into sobriety, these women used different metaphors to express their experiences. Sometimes they feel as if others think they are ‘party poopers’ or ‘goody two-shoes.’ But I heard these women also say that in sobriety they have more respect for themselves and drinking “is no big deal.”

The metaphors these women used are important because they show the growing awareness and progression each woman experienced as she recovered and committed to sobriety. They began by referring to hate and guilt and ended talking about respect and self-empowerment. It is important to note that these women each used similar language and metaphors throughout (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Phases of Sobriety and Changes in Language

As our conversations continued, I began to notice a shift in how each woman talked about living sober. Each went through different stages of acceptance. At first, a person may feel sorry for herself, asking “Why me? Why can’t I have a drink? What is wrong with me?” As these women tried to physically remove themselves from drinking settings and tried to not drink they also had to understand and make sense out of what it now means to not drink. They had to figure how not to drink and what that would mean.

Nicole stated, “In the beginning, I just curled up in bed. When I wanted to drink, I curled up in bed. It was scary. I didn’t want to be around drinking.” And Alex confirmed:

I was scared to change. When I first quit drinking, I was obsessed with not drinking. Not with drinking, but with not drinking. I was afraid I would slip back into drinking again, like so many times before. I was afraid of the word alcoholic.”

Janet added, “My sobriety was hard. It was horrible. I kicked and screamed for years.”

There was fear, sadness, and anger echoing in their voices. When a person removes something so central to her life, she has to learn how to live like a child learning how to walk. Facing this situation is like facing the unknown. Alex reminded, “A person is asked to not only quit drinking, but also change everything they once felt comfortable with (even if it was chaos). It was a challenge.” Questions such as, “What do I do? What if I can’t make it? What if I drink? Who do I talk to? What can I do?” run through a person’s mind. The first few months of sobriety can be a rude awakening as a person starts to realize this decision is forever. It’s a commitment that will take a lot of work.

Along with fear, sadness, and anger, these women, especially Nicole and Alex, expressed a lot of shame. But these feelings began to take a new form as these women began to see not drinking as an empowering choice. They talked about being given a second chance and even though not drinking may not always feel right or be fun, it does get better. They began to accept not drinking and focus on living well without alcohol. As Janet reminded, “You can’t feel sorry for yourself. You have to move on.”

After mentioning ‘curling up in bed’ at the beginning to avoid alcohol, Nicole continued, “Luckily, that longing didn’t last too long after I quit drinking. It’s not the drinking, but the living.” And Alex referred to the investment of energy in not drinking: “It’s easier to never drink again. We would feel like we just threw away years of sobriety.”

Janet pointed out that eventually the language that we use to talk about sobriety would change too. She stated:

I don’t say sober or I got sober. You see it has been a long time since I quit drinking and since I was in recovery, and I just don’t use those terms anymore. I simply say ‘since I quit drinking or since I had a drink’ when I am talking about drinking.

According to Janet, with time sobriety takes on new meanings and even new language. Although Janet admitted, “Although not drinking does get easier, it will always take work no matter how long you got.” She noted that a person doesn’t always feel like she is in recovery. She begins to feel like she just doesn’t drink. She begins to take on a new identity, one that is outside of the word and worldview of the alcoholic. She begins to see herself as a nondrinker because she chooses to not drink. Alcoholics cannot drink.

This will always be a part of our identity, but not drinking eventually becomes more about not wanting to than not being able to. It's a choice and a commitment.

As these women told me their drinking stories and brought me into their sober life, the sadness they experienced became less apparent, and they began expressing the idea of not drinking in terms that were very matter of fact and unemotional.

Nicole concluded with thoughts such as, "I am not sad that I am an alcoholic. I don't mourn it any more. I don't feel sorry for myself. I am okay with it. The fact is I cannot have a drink. I just can't." She advised, "In order to be happy in sobriety, you have to get to a place where you are solid. You have to let go of your past and move forward." Alex put her view straight forwardly: "I hope that I will continue to understand myself better in sobriety and to really like myself." And Janet showed a new understanding of what is fun and not fun: "In the beginning, you don't know how to negotiate this because alcohol use/abuse is so pervasive. It's just everywhere and this makes it hard to quit. Now, I am pretty oblivious to it." She continued, "...I still stay away from solely drinking events, especially at bars. It is just not fun."

Janet also reminded how important language is to construct what it means to quit drinking and how she will go about not drinking. When a person approaches for help just based on her language, Janet can tell if a person is ready to commit. She stated, "You can only do so much and try so many things. But if their language never changes, and they say I can have a drink down the road, then you know they are not ready."

I witnessed Alex experience this when she initially decided she needed to quit drinking. At first, she would say to me, "I need to slow down or I will try to not drink." She wasn't ready and went back to drinking. But this last time, her language changed and

she stated, “For me to be sober, I had to really believe that this was the only way. If I didn’t believe it, then I would try to drink again.”

As I listened to these women I felt proud to be sober and encouraged by their stories. I saw women who battled self-hatred, addiction, and fear. They each reinforced that not drinking is a top priority and want only to get better. They’ve undergone a complete paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962). Now they see the world differently and have discovered new meanings. Of course, there is no fairy tale ending here. There are still times when it will be tough, like dating and other social occasions. But their lives should never be as chaotic as they were when they were drinking.

Empowerment and Choice

The change I witnessed in how these women used language and narrated their stories documents how women use sobriety to be empowered. Not drinking--sobriety--is seen as a choice instead of a problem. In the beginning, each spoke about her problem, but as she continued there where many times were each referred to not drinking as an accomplishment. I heard Nicole say, “I’m surprised I actually did it. I am very proud of it. But just like that, I quit,” and later she said, “I don’t want to drink.”

Alex observed how, “I think not drinking can be threatening and makes people who drink heavily feel uncomfortable. It challenges the status quo.” She, also added, “I choose to not drink...I have to do this for myself.” Janet added, “It’s relieving and freeing...It’s okay to be an alcoholic.”

I am left nodding my head in affirmation.

Nicole finished, “It’s like we need to go through this process with our self-esteem and if we can get to the other side without drinking, then we have a lot to be proud of. It’s like you can conquer anything.”

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It took me a long time to understand this statement because for so long not drinking felt like a punishment, but now it is a celebration. A person starts to realize how hard it really is for an alcoholic to not drink and becomes proud that she can do it. Each female has an anniversary that is viewed in a positive light. She starts to gain her self-esteem back and feels as if she’s starting to live again, that she’s survived the greatest risk and threats to her well-being. She begins to feel more comfortable in her body.

Nicole explained, “I used to reach for the bottle, but now I know I will be okay. I feel sad, angry, indifferent, but at least I remember it all...I really want a life and I am going to get it.” Alex concluded, “I would never give up the last year and half of sobriety to go back to drinking...You have to believe in yourself...We would rather spend the rest of our lives believing that we can never drink normally than trying it again.”

Janet agreed, “I can’t fixate on it...It is about being okay with who you are and being okay that you don’t drink.”

These conversations shifted from talk of sadness and problems to relief and choice. We were brought through various stages and language shifts, and witnessed the transformation each female encountered, ending with thoughts on how to keep getting better and living a good live.

Summary and Conclusions

Through the act of storytelling the women in this research made sense of a drinking past and how they brought themselves to the recovering self they are today. Telling their story to me gave voice to their experience and acted as a tool for empowerment. This act of telling reinforced and underscored their commitment to sobriety, while reminding them who they were and who they are today.

During this study, I became convinced that the act of storytelling, not unlike the AA experience, helps reinforce sobriety. I began to ask, ‘is it AA’s twelve steps or the act of telling that encourages sobriety?’ AA gives a ready-made audience, allowing members to tell and retell their story to help them remember why they have chosen sobriety. However, five out of the seven women discussed in this study found that AA was intimidating, not helpful for them, and focused too much on negative experiences and emotions. This view is also discussed on the website *www.SoberRecovery.com* created by The Mulligan Group, an organization that provides services (marketing, financial and compliance servers) to addiction treatment centers. This site compared AA to WFS and reiterated, “Power comes from looking forward not back. It is very important for women to have a positive, proactive force supporting them when it comes to quitting drinking” (The Mulligan Group, 2007, para. 16). Several women in my study shared the opinion that AA does not serve women because AA is too much about the ‘old’ self and does not feed the need for self-nourishment and self-creation that these women expressed as a part of sobriety.

My participants did tell stories of their past, but they also expressed their search for a ‘new’ self that would fill their desire for self-love. My participants and I were

empowered by these exchanges; we acted as an understanding and affirming audience for each other. It was important for these women to feel safe as disclosure increased, and storytelling centered on their vulnerabilities and insecurities.

These stories included details of:

The seductions of drinking- These women liked the physical feeling of being slightly intoxicated or buzzed. This drunken sensation led to the release of inhibitions, and these women discussed feeling more relaxed and less anxious when drinking. Drinking was exciting, allowed them to be sexual, numbed emotional pain, and engage in a more daring lifestyle. Drinking was romanticized and seen as sexy; they felt sexier while being drunk. Drinking was seen as a cure for their problems; it made them feel included and involved.

Contractions and fantasies- Even as these women discovered that they didn't like their drinking self, they continued to drink under the assumptions that drinking was more fun, could numb their pain, and they could 'drink normally.' Each woman discovered that drinking created a false sense of self and connection. Alcohol didn't create fun. These women believed alcohol made them more likable and more outgoing. They were under a cultural premise that society favors more social individuals and pushes a person to "break out of the shell." For years, these women thought alcohol was the only way to be social. But they begin to realize that shyness is contextual not a personality trait (see Zimbardo, 1990). They started to accept their introversion and also realized once they became familiar with a situation, they could be outgoing without alcohol.

Turning points- These women claimed that there was no specific turning point, but each recalled with great detail the last time they drank. They identified various points

where they thought about their alcohol abuse and considered quitting, but kept drinking. These women went through phases where they tried to slow down and cut out drinking, only to drink again, and eventually they realized that they had to quit drinking. Their decision to quit drinking was an internal experience. For these women 'hitting bottom' was more about a feeling than an episode or event. Each woman recognized she had so much hatred for herself and guilt about drinking that the only way to get out of this vicious cycle was to stop drinking.

Relationships- The idea of close relationships becomes very scary. It becomes necessary to disclose intimate details about her drinking past to a new partner. These women feel they need someone to understand them. Unless a partner has experienced the struggle to get to the point of sobriety, however, how can they understand? These women live in a drinking culture and as Janet often pointed out, "We can't hide from it." These women confront a relational dilemma of finding someone they can love, who may never fully understand and appreciate their past. This may not be much different than someone disclosing other personal experiences or past traumas, but it seems larger because these women feel excluded from participating in the act of drinking, which is a culturally sanctioned social act. Because drinking is public, unlike sexual abuse, drug abuse, and eating disorders, not drinking will become a part of the conversation. A person can't easily hide that she doesn't drink. Each woman talked about wanting to date, but also expressed hesitation and fear.

Metaphors and language- There were many metaphors that I have shared to help me better understand how these women have made this shift from 'old' self to 'new' self. These women discussed drinking as a 'roller coaster ride' with many ups and downs and

twists and turns. There was a cycle of feelings these women rode while actively drinking. We discovered that it was shame, guilt, and remorse that led us to make this paradigm shift to sobriety, and we acknowledged that to drink again would only allow these unwanted feelings of shame, guilt and remorse to resurface and dominate our lives again. The shift in paradigm also explained what inspired the shift in the first place, the anomalies (Kuhn, 1962) of living--drinking couldn't explain, account or satisfy the need each woman felt to respect and accept herself as she was and not necessarily as other people expected or wanted her to be. Sobriety satisfies this desire but ironically opens up new and different difficulties.

Identity and sobriety (phases, empowerment, choices)- These women challenged themselves to change everything they once knew, transforming from a drinking to a nondrinking self. They moved through an identity and paradigm shift, after which they could truly never go back to being the person they once were. As the alcoholic woman slowly adjusted to this new paradigm (Kuhn, 1962), she began to learn about her 'new' self. She faced many struggles while attempting to make this shift, but a question of identity was the main question and struggle that followed these women into sobriety. These women did not know who they were without alcohol, but they knew who they never wanted to be again. While discovering themselves in sobriety, these women mourned and grieved who they were as a drinking self. At first, they wished they could be participating in drinking situations, but they also remembered how horrible drinking was. As they left this drinking life, they learned to move beyond this grief and began to discover who they could be without alcohol.

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There is a difference between figuring out how to stop drinking and how to LIVE sober. Of course you can't begin to live sober without knowing how to stop drinking, but stopping drinking doesn't tell you how to live. This becomes a negative orientation--what I won't do. These women discovered that in order to not drink they had to focus on how to live without alcohol, not how to quit drinking. They replaced the negative with a positive--what I really want to do with my life. Despite the public's understanding, sobriety is not simply equal to not drinking. Sobriety is about changing everything about her life.

Sobriety is both a rejection of the alcoholic self and alcoholic life and an act of self-love. The difficulty involved in sobriety is that these women have been drinking for so long that they have little or no point of reference as to how they are supposed to live. They don't know another life; they only know they don't want the one they've been living. Thus sobriety jettisons them into a process of re-making themselves, what Nietzsche calls 'acts of self-creation' (as noted in Nehamas, 1985). Through narrative these women recreate a self they can love and discover a way of being in the world.

Reflections

When I began dating James, I was only two months sober. Two years into this relationship, I began this study. This study forced me to face my own ideas of living sober and being in a committed relationship. A written narrative is situated in a time--a time of the past. Over the years of this study, I wrote frequently of the relationship between James and me. He was my partner. But as my research continued so did my life and my story. I look back now over the stories I've written about us and think I must now acknowledge that James is no longer my partner. He is my ex.

We separated shortly after I wrote the pieces on Alex, where I shared the story about James coming home drunk and crawling into bed, smelling like stale beer, trying to hold me, and slurring his words. I tell my stories in present tense to give the reader a feeling of being in the story. However, these stories represent the past. It is strange to see him in these stories, but important to remember how we struggled through my commitment to sobriety. I was struggling to figure out who I was, and I realized I didn't like the person I was when I was with him. At times I would become insecure, codependent, and controlling. I tried to control his drinking and saw that he didn't know what he wanted out of his drinking life. When we first met we drank, we stayed up late watching music shows and drinking, and we drank more. When we started dating, he was still situated in this drinking past; I was not. As time went on, it became apparent we couldn't negotiate the rough waters in which we were treading.

After a four-year relationship, James and I have now been separated for almost a year. We still spend time together, and James has discovered, on his own, the path he wants to take. He does not drink often and he is focused on school, work, and athletics. Our future is unwritten and unknown.

This dissertation represents the flux of time and story, as well as the struggle of an author to understand her own sober self while studying and writing about other women's struggles. What does sobriety mean to me? Risk. Fear. Love. Self-Esteem. I learned who I don't want to be (past drinking self) and learned to respect and love myself. I am empowered and can begin to love sobriety. The question of drinking becomes more distant, as the commitment to sobriety begins to reflect my love for myself, a choice that liberates and frees me from the imprisonment of a drinking life.

It's been two years, since I started writing this project. I think about how much I have changed and about the language that I used to use when discussing my drinking. I remember thinking, "This is such a problem and a hassle. Why me?" I remember feeling left out and harassed, "Oh come one, just one." But now I find myself less inhibited, less afraid, and very social. I rarely hear, "You can have just one," but, instead, the reaction of others is, "I don't usually drink that much either, just tonight since we are out, I'm drinking." Maybe it's the way I share and nonchalantly state "I don't drink" or maybe it's the uninterested look I have about drinking. People see that I am having fun, am outgoing, feel very confident in my own skin--my own body. The thing with not drinking is that my confidence isn't a false confidence like a drinking confidence. It isn't temporary, but it is part of who I have become. I am confident in what I like, what I don't like, and in my choice to not drink.

I am rarely questioned any longer about why I don't drink, or feel the need to explain my history. I just say I don't drink. Sometimes people ask why I don't drink, and I tell them, "I drank too much. I had a drinking problem." But now people ask this on fewer and fewer occasions. They see that I can and do have fun. I feel empowered. Not to say that there still aren't times when I think about how it would be to drink, but that thought I never entertain. I am often reminded of who I was and how I have gotten to this place.

*

The night is cool and a breeze blows through downtown. It's early and dinner is the only thing on the agenda, as my girlfriend and I strut through a local bar hang out to a Tapas restaurant. We dress up in skirts and fancy halter-tops. Our make-up perfectly

applied and our hair done, feeling attractive and thinking maybe we will head to a dance club later in the night.

We get seated outside and the breeze threatens our table. Napkins almost fly off the table, but we grab them before they escape.

“Where is this wind coming from? Is it going to storm?” Shannon asks.

I don’t respond because I am caught in a stare.

“I think that is one of the guys from the gym that I have a crush on working at that restaurant,” I answer, pointing to another bar and not acknowledging her question. I feel kind of nervous, wondering if he remembers me. We’ve only said hi at the gym a couple of times. “I’m going to have to go say hi before we leave,” I tell Shannon, as she studies him.

“He’s really cute and looks young,” she replies, “damn girl you are so funny.”

He’s ‘movie star’ good-looking. I am preoccupied most of dinner watching him. I remember the first time I saw him at the gym. I couldn’t keep my eyes off of him. I am a sucker for nice arms and a cute smile. Unfortunately, by the time dinner is done he is off work and nowhere to be seen.

My mind is quickly distracted as Shannon and I head to the club for a few hours of dancing and more gossiping. Just as quickly as I am distracted from thoughts of my crush, he reappears. This time he’s not working, but with a crowd of friends. I quickly point him out to my friend again. My stomach gets knotted. I am kind of nervous, but ‘I will approach him,’ I think to myself.

As the night slips into early morning, Shannon and I dance for hours. And I see him again, this time I approach him and tap his back. He turns, surprised to see me, but at

least remembering me. We chat. Really, he talks and I listen. At one point in the night, he asks if he can buy me a drink. And I simply turn down his offer. His reaction is unique and one that I have never heard before.

“Are you straight edge?” he asks.

“Well, sure,” I reply, thinking back to the last time I heard that term.

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From my understanding of straight edge, it is a group of younger punk rock kids who have decided to be deviant by not participating in the drinking and drugging that is usually associated with the punk scene. Straight edge is a term of empowerment and uses not drinking as an identifying and bonding factor. In order to be a part of this group, you must be able to resist the temptation to drink. I remember knowing people who were straight edge in high school, and I didn't know that this movement was still around. Straight edge--it's been years since I heard that term.

*

“Sure, I am straight edge,” I reply.

Hugging good-bye, I head back to the dance floor. An hour later, I catch his eye and motion him to come dance with me. A few minutes later he reappears. We dance. We flirt. He leaves to hang out with his friends, and I continue dancing.

Shannon starts to feel worn down after our long beach day and early night out.

“I'm ready to go,” she says. I look around the room for my crush. I don't see him.

Disappointment consumes me.

“Okay, let's go. I was hoping to say good-bye to him.”

“Let's walk this way,” Shannon suggests.

We do and there he is. I approach him to say good-bye. He lifts me off the ground in a strong embrace. And we kiss. Both of us a little shocked at our actions, but quick to exchange numbers. I try to not think too much about it because it was a drunken kiss. Well, drunken on his part.

The next day he text messages me, apologizing for being so drunk. I do not know him well enough to notice that he was that drunk. We make tentative plans to hang out, and I wonder if my not drinking will come up again. Do I have to tell him I am a recovering alcoholic? If so, when do I have to tell him?

Usually when dating, my not drinking comes up pretty quickly. But he didn't question my not drinking. However, we have not talked about my dissertation topic, yet either. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to put it together. I am writing about women alcoholics and I don't drink. On first meetings, people usually ask about my research and then they question me.

I am not ashamed, but never know how one will react when I disclose this.

*

After a week of not hearing from him, I call him to make sure everything is okay. He does not answer, but quickly responds with a text message--he's having troubles with his phone. Over the next week we chat and he visits me at work. We think about and set tentative plans. But his last minute trip out of town sets our plans back a week. The next time we talk over the phone, our date planning takes an interesting turn:

"We could go to a martini bar?" he says, trying to piece together an impressive date, "What do guys your age do for dates?"

“I don’t know. I don’t date. We could meet up one night. Or we could go to dinner?” I respond, thinking a martini bar would be fine, but not sure what I would do besides order water. This could be an awkward date: him drinking, me not drinking. I slip and fanaticize about drinking with him.

“Dinner sounds good. Dinner it is,” he replies.

However, during his next visit to see me at work a few days after this phone conversation, I figure out our date will never happen.

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I’m thinking it would be just dinner. I am not thinking past a first date. I don’t care if he parties. I don’t care his age or that he’s just trying to find a job. I am thinking it would be just dinner. He’s a nice guy and very attractive. Dinner that’s it and maybe he’ll have a nightcap.

But I never got dinner. I never got a first date.

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As we talk about our week, our conversation gets strained and I get confused.

“I have to work late and my schedule is so busy. I don’t think dinner will fit. We could go out for drinks, instead,” he suggests.

I know I told him that I don’t drink so I find it odd that he keeps suggesting we meet for drinks, but he was drunk when I told him that first night and we were at a bar, so it may not have settled in. It obviously hasn’t settled in.

“We could go out for drinks,” he says again.

“I don’t drink, but we could meet out and hang out,” I reply. Standing in the middle of the exit for the gym, we debate for fifteen minutes on whether or not our schedules will work out. And it hits me. He’s not taking me out.

I never heard from him again.

Was it that I couldn’t meet for drinks that ended this courtship? Was this just a coincidence? Did this say something more about me? Did he need to drink to feel more comfortable? Or was it something else?

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This experience happened while I was creating a conclusion to this dissertation, and it reminded me that not everyone would understand or accept that I don’t drink. But my life is better since I surrounded myself with people who do not indulge in a drinking life, and my decision to not drink is a choice. At times, I may be questioned or question my choice, but I know drinking is not the answer. I ended with this story to show the consistent negotiation and struggles an alcoholic will continue to face long after she quits drinking. Alcohol doesn’t go away just because she quits. My participants and I will continue to learn about ourselves and our body the further we travel through a sober life.

In future studies, it would be interesting to interview and gather stories of couples in same-sex relationships dealing with an alcohol filled past. I found that most, if not all, the research of recovery focused on heterosexual relationships. When dealing with sobriety, is there a different set of expectations for women who are in (or pursue) same-sex relationships? This research would add to our literature on gender and communication and give a more detailed and complete view of sobriety.

I would also like to be able to add the other's (a partner's) voice as suggested in the literature review chapter. I am very interested in hearing the story of how a partner, male and/or female, makes sense out of dating a female recovering alcoholic? How does not drinking shape the other's life? What affect does this have on intimate relationships from the other's point of view? Incorporating this other's voice will help us further understand how we can communicate with a partner and how to better negotiate a nondrinking life.

Everyone reacts differently to my not drinking. I am not as shaken as I used to be by these scenarios, but they are moments of reflection, creeping doubt, and the need for courage. In the end, after I sort through my thoughts and feelings, I always conclude not drinking is right for me. I've given myself a chance to live a fulfilling, secure, and pleasant life. Sobriety is an act of self-love. I move forward with my past not as a marker, but as a point of courage. And as Nicole suggested, if we made it through this, we can make it through anything.

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