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NOTES ON CHANGING YOUR LIFE

Life Changed When I Stopped Drinking

On the outside, I look pretty much the same, but inside, I'm evolving in ways I never expected.

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It's 4 a.m., and I'm wide awake—not with dread or shame, or even an alcohol-induced dry mouth or headache. I stay in bed a bit. It's winter here and warm beneath the heavy blankets, but eventually, I decide to get up and write this piece.

Last year, I finally stopped drinking alcohol. Even as Christmas approached, I was mostly indifferent toward the booze around me. Holidays used to be *carte blanche* for my heaviest drinking. This past year, they were an opportunity to see loved ones, enjoy good food, and get extra sleep. As the new year begins, I'd like to share a few notes on what's changed for me since I stopped drinking.

But first, I want to tell you what hasn't changed.

I haven't lost weight or gotten more toned, and as much as I would have liked to, I haven't turned into a yogi. I haven't transitioned to a plant-based diet, and my libido is not significantly higher—though sex is better—than when I drank every night. I haven't finished my book, and I haven't used my gym membership in several months. I don't participate in 12-step or non-12-step groups, and I haven't made any new non-drinking friends. I still don't regularly meditate, and I've had no spiritual conversions. I haven't quit my day job or started a sobriety blog. I still eat too much takeout, watch too much Netflix, and get cranky with my husband and colleagues.

In other words, much of what's presented, and sometimes promised, by the online recovery world didn't happen for me.

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And that's okay, because I no longer drink, and I no longer want to. From this essential change have come other more subtle and internal changes, ones that are

harder to talk about. In truth, it was much easier to share how I finally quit drinking than to articulate what's different now.

But I will try.

In my marriage, I no longer feel an overwhelming need to run for cover when my husband looks me lovingly in the eyes. I can stay in the discomfort and vulnerability and let myself be there with him, in the enormity of what we've gotten ourselves into. I can stay with something hard. It's not necessarily that I'm great at opening up to it, not yet anyway. But I can stay, and that's the important thing.

In the middle of the night, I'm no longer plagued by a privately shameful sense that I am hastening the end of my life. Sure, I could stand to exercise a little more and eat a little less, but I'm not haunted by these choices. I recognize that I'll never be the marathon-type or go completely vegan; I just don't operate that way. What's new is, I've stopped trying to convince myself I'm that kind of person.

At work, I say good morning to my colleagues. I used to shirk in slightly hungover, silently vowing to stop drinking. I'd sit in my office and drink my coffee while berating myself for the two or three drinks I'd had the night before. Trapped in this cycle, I didn't want to exchange friendly chitchat. Now, although I'm still an introvert, I at least have the decency to say a friendly hello. What's neat is that this small change has led to other small changes—people dropping in more often, a few hard but important conversations, and some slowly deepening collegial connections.

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Online, I completely deleted my Instagram and Facebook accounts. I realized that the very platforms predicated on connecting and sharing alienated me from my own direct experience of being alive. I no longer wanted to squeeze myself into an iPhone camera and a few catchy phrases, and I started to hate the people who were good at doing this. I also unsubscribed from all sober podcasts, blogs, and newsletters. I didn't need the

merchandise, the reminders, or a new identity as a non-drinker. I knew I was done for good, and that it was time to move on. This has all been quietly liberating.

What else? I apologize more often. My husband says I'm more fun to be around. I can identify and express my feelings more easily. I read books from start to finish. I really enjoy my alone time. Hot showers are amazing—sometimes I take two a day. When I get home from work, I actually know how to relax. On most nights, I sleep like a baby.

Also, I'm starting to think more strategically about what I want to accomplish. This wasn't possible when I was drinking because I was constantly reacting to the effects of alcohol. I could only see what was right in front of me. Each day was a discreet slog to the evening, and each week a tiring trek to the weekend. Addiction made me measure time as the distance between doses.

Of course, while I was drinking I did other stuff too: I got my PhD, worked as a therapist (of all things), taught graduate counseling courses, and even got married. But the background noise, my invisible dominant narrative, was all about booze. Would I or wouldn't I drink? Would I or wouldn't I stop?

It's hard to make long-range plans, let alone stick to them, when life includes addiction.

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Let me be clear. Since I stopped drinking, I haven't accomplished much in the external realm. In fact, what I can show for myself is as much about what I've stopped doing as what I have done. Besides no longer drinking and killing my social media, I've closed my evening private counseling practice. (I still work full-time, just not more than full-time.) Where possible, I've divested myself of the most taxing, nonessential work commitments. And I've spent significantly less time socializing. On the outside, it really doesn't look like much.

What's opened up is an interior space, one I need not have feared. It's easier in here, far easier than being trapped by alcohol. From here, I can discern what needs to go and what wants to grow. Through gentle attention, rather than brute force, I am able to subtly adjust my life.

When I was trying unsuccessfully to stop drinking, I had lots of fantasies about how much sobriety would change me. I imagined that once I became a non-drinker, I'd be a candidate for a glossy cover of a yuppie magazine or a prAna ad.

But rather than becoming a different person, it turns out that quitting booze has mainly allowed me to better see and accept who and where I am.

Paradoxically, this is—at least for me—the biggest and sweetest change of all.

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