

## **The Intoxication of Sobriety**

**Alcohol is the lubricant of careers: Political philosopher laStaempfli (Regula Stämpfli) describes in an unusual personal essay what it meant for her to get sober during the pandemic.**

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When I wrote my essay for a Swiss magazine, Munich was the capitol of booze: The “Octoberfest” flooded the city with madness and only one goal: To get as drunk as possible.

I don't like beer, I never did and since the pandemic 2020 I live alcohol-free, with a few exceptions, countable on one hand. I say this so in case somebody sees me with a wineglass will not shout across the room “but I thought you were sober”. It will be apple juice mixed with water as to look like white wine because being sober in Switzerland, France, Italy, Belgium, London and Germany where I work and travel, counts as a crime. I never tried telling anyone apart from my family that I don't drink, since the conversations, especially with friends, are painful. Either the friends start telling me how often they stop drinking, then they urge me to celebrate the occasion and life is so short that my very happy life as an alcohol-free person starts to wobble.

My father was an alcoholic during my early childhood years and we suffered tremendously as a family. When my mum divorced in 1973 – just a few months after the women in Switzerland finally got the right to vote – my dad went to the AA and became sober and the best father I could have ever wished for. My siblings were not so lucky – they hated my parents until my dad died in 1987 and until my mum died in 2016. They never had the experience of a happy childhood as I did (they were much older) with a dad who was sober, a mom who knew how to enjoy life and to love her youngest in a way that made me a very happy and strong human being.

The history of my dad's drinking prevented me from ever drinking during my university years. Until I was 25 years old, I never touched the stuff and was a very energetic, sporty and fun student, finishing my two bachelors in record time, my master with a first, got the

university prize for best thesis, went to Italy to learn my sixth language. Then I got to N.Y. for the summer, at the time I had a boyfriend in the States, and on my way to him I met one of the great love stories of my life: A Greek with the name of one of the Gods and of course I fell for him hopelessly, having studied Homer in the original. He drank, smoked, was the most intelligent man I had met so far – and ever since, I have to admit with great sentimentality – and he introduced me to alcohol, sex and cigarettes in a way I kept from then onwards. Alcohol was fun for me, the love story, the feeling adult and free and being tipsy made cigarettes taste wonderfully. The love affair ended after three years and I met the father of my children and I changed my life from being the “East-Village-Girl of the 90’s” to a great career and happy family life, getting spirituality from my best friends in Brussels who encouraged me to continue with yoga and meditation – something I had done as a student anyway.

The happy story got cracks due to politics. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the disappearance of the printing press due to the digital revolutions not only changed my media career but also my private life. Politics entered all my relationships with ambivalent consequences. Without me realizing it, I started to drink alcohol on a regular basis – something I had never done before. Social media are addictive on so many levels, I can’t even start to describe the stress here. The more public and media life stole quality time from my writing and my friendships, as an independent entrepreneur I had to constantly “feed the machines” as I call Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, the alcohol laden parties became more frequent; as if to compensate the fact that we were all becoming platform slaves, feeding information to machines that would eventually abolish our jobs, our identities, our friendships. TV series began to celebrate the “Berlin of 1920s” – “Babylon” by Tom Tykwer enhancing the idea of young, beautiful people full of porn, drugs and roaring twenties sentimentalities. And it captured the mood of the media elite of our times, a hundred years later. Alcohol is THE accessory of supposed adults: Instead of playing board games, having deep discussions about love, religion, drugs, sex and the world, adults mostly come together to eat and to drink and/or to take more drugs like marijuana, LSD, Cocaine. A nice glass of prosecco unites women who actually don't have much in common without that fake champagne whimsy. To this day, the men in the media industry

think boxing, bullfighting, drugs, war, adventure, women and boozing will improve their shallow writing: Mistake. If only they were sober for 100 days, they wouldn't make life so difficult for their female colleagues. And yes: If my younger female colleagues in media weren't so obsessed with adapting male porn, drink, language and bad ass behavior, the women's movement would not be at where it is now, namely in the process of abolishing not just the term "woman" but the female sex altogether – but that is yet another story. Fact is: I became an alcoholic like everyone else, still thinking I was different due to my childhood history.

I could go on, but my story, unusual as we as individuals are but usual as all of the alcohol-stories are, namely boring, the patterns remain the same. Paths that lead from the pleasure drinker into an addict are paved with this strange mixture of relief, joy and depression due to alcohol. In the English-speaking world, the awareness of how much the alcohol industry profits from the misery of its consumers is much greater than in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Alcoholics in these countries are considered to be the exception and if discovered they resemble all total losers. They all look like homeless people, piss in their pants, sleep on a bench or under a bridge, with an empty vodka bottle in their hand and bloodshot eyes in their furrowed faces. Alcoholics are just those miserable creatures, the physical and psychological misfits, not those cool guys with the "shaken not stirred" in their hand. We all know the reality looks different with beautiful women drinking half a bottle of Vodka every night or two bottles of white wine, but the fiction of "alcohol as a culture" remains. My favorite philosopher Robert Pfaller an Austrian, pleads vehemently for intoxication – actually all of my friends in the academia do. Nobody points out that humans in the 21st century are miles away from the archaic, Dionysian spiritual, nature-loving movement sapiens of the Greek classical period. We neoliberal capitalists all resemble consumer prisoners who can only survive from crib to coffin with drugs and addiction.

Friday the thirteenth of March 2020 hit me with huge drama. Life was over. In the first lockdown I got 30 performances, lectures and book events cancelled. I did not know that by the end of 2020 I would have had no public events. But I knew on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 when the first radical lockdown was ordered in Munich – and

believe me, the Germans still have it in them when it comes to authoritarian measures – that I am in deep trouble. From then onward I had an unbridled desire to start the day with a glass of champagne on an empty stomach, followed by a gin tonic before lunch, enjoying the drink until it was dinner time. I was in abysmal despair of not being able to do my work, to travel, to go to the museum daily, to be locked up and shouted at if I left the house. My grown kids had all come back, it was fun but I needed a drink to keep calm – almost all the time. My partner would shout out all the bad statistics and new horror scenarios every day (that was his German way of coping with the horrible situation). Added to this new lifestyle came my shame, my utterly and bitterly felt shame considering the luxury that I was in compared to the misery all the kids of alcoholics had to go through in the lock-downs. I wrote articles urging the authorities to keep the schools open for kids like me 40 years ago because I knew: If the pandemic had been 1970, I would have died by now of an overdose, never having had the chance to climb the social ladder. My angst and sorrow, my shame of feeling so utterly sorry for myself, my drinking, my unbelievable misery in the lockdown was not noticed by my family, which made me even more depressed. After eleven days of being constantly drunk, I quit. Radically. And started looking for help. The AA in Germany was no help – generally AA in Europe is difficult since even doctors have old fashioned views on alcohol and encourage you to drink. So, I turned to all the podcasts, books and online support I could get from the US. And my life started to change radically. I started my own podcast company – until then I was mainly a writer of non-fiction – I lost over 10 kilos, found new friends, moved part time to wonderful Vienna and enjoyed being alcohol-free tremendously. I found programs just for women, like “sober curious” by Ruby Warrington or “Soberful” by Veronica Valli. There are now hundreds of terrific TED Talks on the subject: helping addicts of all kinds to live their lives free and substitute “spirits” with “spirit”. Johann Hari's TED Talk and book “Connection - The True Causes of Depression - and Unexpected Solutions,” for example, was a great help. Hari's insight that the opposite of “addiction” is “connection”, relationship, resonance and togetherness among people, also holds political renewal. Ever since I am sober, I try to include addiction issues to socio-economic change – it is a very stony road though, which brings me to today: The euphoria of not drinking anymore has left me again through politics

when the Russians occupied the Ukraine, when yet another culture war broke out to harm mostly women and feminists like me. The social media hate that all of us women in politics, culture, public life remains a heavy burden.

Ever since I quit alcohol, some dysfunctions in my friendships and in my partner stay: they are all still drinking quiet heavily and try to coax me into drinking: “But you are so disciplined, you can always stop and just drink once in a while. We only live once after all” – not realizing that my life without alcohol makes me so much more funny, energetic, prettier, happier and stronger. Maybe that is why they all want me to drink: Misery is generally better supported than true happiness.

Which brings me back to the Oktoberfest in 2022. When you read these lines, it is long over. Looking at the location, the tents, the fair ground, I thought how nice it would be if once a year we could celebrate intoxication, orgy and joy together, happily, with style, safe, diverse, tolerant and laughing, and not as it is at the moment: a mass booze for over five millions of people with all the horrible side effect of alcohol: Rape, Violence, Fights, Injuries, Harassment. I did visit the Oktoberfest this year and did not drink, I ordered the alcohol-free apple cider that costs exactly the same as the beer, but got really bothered by the waiter who kept shouting at me: “Das ist das Bierfest, nicht das Apfelfest”. But I celebrated with my drunk friends and family nonetheless, helping them to get sorted out and find their way home and providing them with good breakfasts the next day reminding them how humans can be when they party hard without having to turn to booze. I keep telling everybody how intoxicating it will be once you stopped drinking alcohol for 100 days: To wake up celebrating every day as new makes your spirit new as well. Now the holiday season is approaching and I am determined to be free of anxiety, of anger and angst, of nervousness, of hyperactivity while all the glasses offered stay untouched and are replaced by what I call the best drink of all: Springwater mixed with Self-Loving.

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