

Abstinence

Today (9 January 2012) I heard that the government is recommending that people cut down on drinking by having at least two alcohol-free days every week. Sounds good – sounds eminently sensible – but I don't think it will catch on.

I ought to declare an interest. Normally I am a moderately heavy drinker. Most evenings at about ten o'clock, I feel that the only way I can push on with work into the early hours is to open a bottle. If it's whisky, it makes me think of Christmas with every sip. Pouring another glass feels like it's a holiday. Pouring another glass of port makes me think of living in a different age, just for a moment. Such rewards keep me going. I drink socially too, and like most people that's when I drink most. However, recently I suffered from a nasty deadline. I needed to complete 120 hours of indexing in the eight days before going away for Christmas. I saw the prospect of constant, reliable sobriety in all its beautiful, multicolour glory. It was like a guiding star hovering over my desk. Duty called, and the whisky remained untouched.

It was quite a surprise. I found myself thinking about not drinking in a very positive way. Rather than alcohol facilitating something, by relaxing me and smoothing the path to enthusiastic conversation, *not* drinking was doing the same thing. It was not a case of giving up alcohol, more a case of taking up clear-headedness.

Suddenly I saw not drinking as similar to all the other things I've given up over the years – flying, smoking and eating meat. In each case, there were positive reasons. The catalyst that led to the essay 'Why I do not fly' was not so much my fear of heights as a sudden awareness of how much larger and more varied the world is if one simply eradicates airplanes and airports from one's idea of travel. Smoking I used to love – 'the most perfect form of the most perfect pleasure' as Oscar Wilde put it – but the benefit of being able to demonstrate my willpower and simply stop became apparent, and, having done so, the benefit of stopping my curtains and clothes smelling of smoke too became obvious. Meat: one day in the British Museum I realised that almost every major civilisation has expected its thinking and spiritual leaders to be vegetarian, or at least fish eaters, so there had to be something to it. I knew a fair bit about medieval monasticism already but when I read about vegetarian Egyptian, Chinese and Indian priests, I decided that it was worth a try. In early January 1993 I bought myself a quarter pound of my favourite chorizo and sat and ate it in a farewell salute to my carnivorous past.

On the strength of this evidence, you might conclude that the secret to giving things up is to prioritise long-term satisfaction over short-term self-indulgence, and to see the positive side of not doing something. But if it were that simple, more New Year's resolutions to lose weight would prove permanent. As not drinking shows, there's more to it than that. It's not just about the thing given up, it's about everything else. It's about personality (can you do it? will you give in?), about lifestyle choice (the connotations of slurring, being drunk, making a fool of yourself), as well as seeing the positive side of abstemiousness (the beauty of clear thinking). Just as not eating animals and not smelling of smoke are aesthetic resolutions, so not drinking is also an

aesthetic. In fact it is both an aesthetic *and* a short-term indulgence. I'm drinking a cocktail of sobriety which is having a great effect, and I'm loving it.

One of the rewarding things about not drinking which I had not foreseen is the awareness of flouting conventions. I love the irony that I started drinking to excess at school as a form of rebellion and now, twenty-seven years later, I find not drinking is considered rebellious, or at least unconventional. There is a huge social pressure to drink – friends, family, workplace acquaintances, promised prizes of crates of champagne from supermarkets, nervous occasions when you need a stiff drink – so much so that drinking can hardly be counted a lifestyle choice. You can say the same about TV, cars, internet access and mobile phones – they are such widespread features of modern society that having them is *de rigueur*. The only significant lifestyle choice connected with them is *not* having one. A lifestyle that is full of all the latest gadgets and gizmos is fine – but that is not so much a *life-style* as a life encumbered, covered in the accretions of modern society. It is like an accumulation of attributes, not a collection. Style requires some conscious thought, some design. It is as much about the things you do *not* do – what you resist – as what you do do.

Just as a sculptor creates a fine form by taking away the extraneous stone, so we should sculpt our lifestyles by cutting away some of the extraneous habits, crazes, fads and foibles that are foisted on us. Note: cut away *some*, not all – not unless you intend to live like a recluse. In my case, I use the internet daily and drive a car but do not carry a mobile phone. There's a sort of tyranny about continual connectedness that I find reminiscent of George Orwell's *1984*. I can recall watching an audience coming out of a London theatre and all turning on their mobile phones immediately to see if they had missed any calls or messages. The desperation was like so many addicts lighting up at once; but the implications were more disturbing. If they *had* to check their calls, for work or some similar reason, then that suggests a degree of control on the part of whoever expects them to be receptive to a phone call at all hours. If they themselves wanted to check their calls there and then, for their own benefit, that indicates a level of dependence as great as smoking and much sadder, for whatever news they were hoping for it couldn't all be good. Perhaps they all had children and were all worried lest the babysitter had a problem, and wanted reassurance. Again, that level of dependence is a little unhealthy. I suspect the attraction is fundamentally like that of gambling *will I have good news or bad?* – and dependence on such unreliable things suggests a hopefulness, and an imploring or pleading. A mortgaging of one's wellbeing. Whether you have to have a mobile phone or not, *not* having one is liberating. Like not having to wear a uniform.

To be a genuine sculpted part of your life, your lifestyle choices have to have some originality. Choosing a ringtone or a certain style of handset is all very well but if that's your idea of lifestyle choice, you're on the bottom rung of the stylistic ladder. Find something better – or at least more interesting, something that no one is trying to sell you. Choices need to have depth, to be rooted in your experience and not simply borrowed from someone else, or adopted for the sake of religion. A Lenten fast is not really a lifestyle choice if you are expected to fast for religious reasons. Like a great poem must be inspired by life and not by another poem if it is to have meaning, lifestyle should not be derivative. It follows that what one gives up should flow from one's life experiences or imagination and not be copied. Not flying, not eating meat, not

having a mobile phone – for me, these were all inspired and meaningful resolutions. So too in a manner of speaking was not drinking.

This is why the government's two-days-off guidance is unlikely to make any difference. It is not rooted in any sense of style. The only meanings attached to it are (a) obedience to the government; and (b) trying to preserve health, which again comes back to the government's interests, as a means of saving money. As the centuries go by, our lives are increasingly standardised and accordingly defined more and more by our relationship with government. Damn it! The reasons why people take up drinking are not satisfied by having greater regard to the sake of their health. People should not allow obedience to authority to define their lives. But that doesn't mean you and I need drink ourselves into a stupor every night. Doing what the government tells you to do is hardly independent thinking. A drive for clarity on the other hand, that's much finer, much more admirable. The reasons not to drink should therefore not be about obedience or preserving your liver – after all you're only going to live longer without a drink – but about achieving something, or self-knowledge, enhancing creativity or looking for the true edge of your intellectual horizon.

Do I think my abstinence will last? It is interesting how often I hear that question. One person asked me when I would start drinking again so they could time a dinner party afterwards. I had to ask, 'Don't you want the sober version of me?' Some people apparently prefer my company when I let go. 'You giggle more when you drink,' says one. 'I feel I've lost my drinking buddy,' says another. Others say that when I'm sober and they're drunk, they feel I'm judging them. I suspect that I will have another drink soon. One of my brothers has a fortieth birthday approaching – that would be a good reason to raise a glass. I also want to write my next book in a totally sober state. But we've come full circle, and are talking about purposes again. I'll drink again – when I've got a good reason to do so.

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