

Hi, I'm Bill and I'm Old

Reinventing My Sobriety for the Long Haul

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Preface

I have written this book for everyone who is aging or who hopes to age. There is emphasis on how aging affects those of us who have moved beyond substance abuse and addiction, but you will also find that I believe that most everyone, whether they use alcohol or other drugs or not, is addicted. Addicted, that is, to the chimera of a separate, freestanding, autonomous *self*. Walt Whitman knew well the process of curing off that small self when he wrote, “I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured.” I have measured myself, of course, for years, and it was only in my seventh decade that the tape began to break.

This story is entirely personal. I see sobriety as a radical way of living on this earth: endlessly honest, open, and willing. To reinvent my sobriety, it was necessary for me to review my life and “re-vision” my story—my self.

While I’m writing this book with older people in mind (and more specifically older people who have had histories of drug and alcohol dependence), if you are drug free and twenty-five or thirty-five or forty-five, this book is still for you. Elders are simply the gatekeepers and the guides to the territory ahead. Those who have died, at an old age, can show us a road we have yet to walk. So don’t be put off by my use of the word *old* in the title.

This book is for anyone who ages. All of us, that is—or at least the fortunate ones.

You will not find information on health care options, retirement communities in Costa Rica (which all look like Santa Barbara South), or the pitfalls of failing prostate health. You will find that I have tried to reduce desire, live more simply, and practice noninterference; that I have a small rented home in a very primitive and “de-gringoed” part of Costa Rica; and that my bladder has finally given up, under the onslaught of years of drinking alcohol and mainlining caffeine, and it behaves however it wishes whenever it wishes.

This is not an “autopathography.” You will not find tales of family dysfunction, stories about bizarre drug and alcohol use, details of my sex life, or *kumbaya* moments of spiritual elevation. I am not one for exhibitionism-by-proxy, and so my family and others are not trotted out to show how I’ve suffered. Many names are false, and a few places disguised. There is one fictional character. You’ll probably recognize that one when she arrives, toward the end of the book.

In spite of my debilitating tendency toward name-dropping, you will find only one gee-whiz reference to the famed folk I have met. In order to save you the trouble of searching the book now, I will tell you that it is Phil Everly. (If you don’t know who Phil Everly is, you might question whether this book is for you at all.)

I have nothing to say about conscious aging, ethical wills, or the Kevorkian option. You will not find economic speculation about the impact of the aging boomer generation, of which I am obdurately not a part. (I'm too old for that particular demographic, thank the gods, by about three years at this writing.)

Nor will you find cookie-cutter generalizations about aging.

You will find what turned out to be, much to my amusement, a somewhat narcissistic detective story. I ended up investigating a series of crimes I committed, ones in which I was not the only victim, but was often the principal one.

You will find my experience of finding my true self, protean in nature, emerging from behind the failing masks. A jester on horseback, according to my son. I miss the exuberance and juicy vanity of youth, so I'm leaving that description in. It's wrong, of course, but there it is.

You will also find that the title of this book is entirely accurate—that I am old—and that “old” is a very good thing to be, and a rare thing, not confined to chronological age.

So come along. That “long, strange trip” we've heard about? I found out that it's the trip home. And it isn't over—not by a long shot.

*“Old age is the most unexpected of things
that can happen to a man.”*

—Leon Trotsky
Diary in Exile

Reverie: Oblivion

The dead dark hangs outside of my closed curtains. After midnight the night is a presence, heavy and persistent. No sound, no movement, no smells or tastes of night. There is only darkness and a heavy weight.

I am drunk. After twenty-three years without a drink, I sit in my brightly painted den—with the masks I collected in Central America and Bhutan, the tangkhas from the Himalayas, the rubbing of the gravestone of Delta blues pioneer Charley Patton, and the pictures of my son—and I drift into oblivion.

The only light is from two Japanese lanterns in the corners. The quart bottle of Jack Daniel's is half empty. I hold the heavy crystal tumbler in my right hand, with a Camel straight perched

between my index and middle fingers. The smoke drifts to the slow-moving ceiling fan. The drapes are closed against the night, and all is silence but the humming in my ears. I am alone and my dark twin has been fed at last. I have no responsibilities and I am free. No one knows where I am, and tomorrow I will be gone again. But right now there is no tomorrow. Only the dark and the stillness.

It is July 16, 2007, I am sixty-five years old, and I have not had a drink or wanted one since June 24, 1984. The wraiths have my mind, and ancient snakes have come alive in my belly. Oblivion, my first default. Drunk again.

Not so.

It was a reverie, but by no means “mere.” I shook it off. There was no bottle, no tumbler, no cigarette.

The date was indeed July 16, 2007, but the drapes were open, the night was fully present to me through the opened doors, and the tree frogs sang by the creek down the slope behind my house. I had been entranced, living in a vision of something that never happened. I don’t know how long it lasted. It was a lie told by the mind of addiction, my dark twin, always with me, just behind and off to the left, sinister and leering, in shadows and mist, waiting. I had not had a drink in this house since June of 1984. I had never wanted a drink since that day. Drinking had never occurred to me, during good times or bad. Not for over twenty-three years.

Why now? My life was good. I had a nice home that I had just emptied of decades' worth of collected books, furniture, records, and CDs. I had unplugged my television set and put the books that remained after the great sell-off in my upstairs office. They were mainly books of poetry, largely Chinese, and some original texts of religions both from the West and East. There was some Florida history and, my favorites, the novels of Randy Wayne White and Ace Atkins. I was single. I lived with my cat, Fred, who's not a drinker. I had friends in this small town and more friends scattered across the planet. I was writing my first novel, set in China in the Tang Dynasty.

My seventeen-year-old son was in Maine, working at a camp he had attended during the fall semester of 2006. My health was good. My enemies list was empty, for the first time in several years.

What had happened?

I sipped iced tea (decaffeinated) and chewed on a piece of cold (vegetarian) pizza. I let my eyes roam the opposite wall, where they fell on a tangkha I had bought in Thimphu, Bhutan, in the fall of 1999, toward the end of a month-long trek in that unearthly Buddhist kingdom. A tangkha, loosely, is a scroll painting on a background of silk brocade, which always fulfills a spiritual function, often in temple ritual or meditation on the images. This one on my wall was a depiction of the Wheel of Life, the Tibetan image

of the six realms of existence in the world of Samsara, or delusion. The image rests on a magnificent tapestry of green silk with starbursts of white and progressive borders of gold and red. The image is held in the jaws of the Monster of Impermanence, with his crown of skulls and rage-distorted red face.

My eye fell on two realms. The first, the Realm of the Titans, is the realm of those who fight the gods in pursuit of their own greedy aims and ambitions. It is the realm of endless war. I reflected briefly on my country, with sadness. Then I looked at the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts, with bloated bellies and necks too thin to admit the sustenance their greed demanded. They are never satisfied and can never be. I thought about myself.

Here I was, content, I reckoned, with a good life, and yet I was thinking, with longing, of drinking again. My life, and yours perhaps, is a life of perpetual longing and endless dissatisfaction.

Do I want more? Am I insatiable? No, I thought, I want less. I want the poems and the hot days, but all the old thrills are gone, thank the gods. Yet—wanting less is still wanting. Endless and pervasive dissatisfaction. In the parlance of Alcoholics Anonymous, I was restless, irritable, and discontented.

The night grew deeper and my mind came to a fitful rest, finally, in the deeply spiritual place of “don’t know.” I

finished off the pizza, gulped down the final mouthfuls of the iced tea, cleaned the kitchen, gave Fred a good brushing, and closed the house down for the night. I climbed into bed, without reading from the ever-present novel by my bedside, in this case Randy Wayne White's *Sanibel Flats*. I lay there in the dappled dark. The frogs were in full throat. Time to sleep, the acceptable oblivion.

Nope.

Restless still, I got out of bed after only a few minutes, pulled on my black meditation robe, and went downstairs into my former living room, now an austere meditation hall, and arranged myself into sitting posture on the black meditation cushions beneath the bookcases.

Something was nagging at me. What is it?

In some deep-down place, I saw a Möbius strip of light, rotating in the winds of my mind, but it wouldn't hold still long enough for me to read its circular message. I finally nodded out on the cushion, jumped awake, startled, got up, stripped off the robe on my way upstairs, and hit the bed.

For the next three days, that "what is it?" was the subtext of my life, a current like some Florida rivers, sometimes on the surface, more often flowing below ground, below consciousness.

That weekend I called my friend Hugh, in Eugene, Oregon, known in some circles as "The People's Republic of Eugene," where Hugh and Evelyn are happily retired.

Hugh has been sober longer than Jesus, and has been a Zen student and practitioner for over thirty years as well. I told Hugh about the oblivion reverie, emphasizing that I didn't really want to drink, that I was just thinking about it. He understood that and put a sharper point on it. "You were speculating," he opined. That was it exactly. He asked what I thought might have been behind it, other than the obvious reality that I'm an alcoholic, and I went through the worn list that I had been carrying around for days—Will's away from home for the first summer ever, I'm worried about money, I broke a weekend date with a longtime lover and felt guilty, I was studying kung fu again and my hip felt like it was about to go out the way it did a year ago, I "should" be able to retire, and on and on. The list was probably as boring to Hugh as it was to me. It was a litany with content but no feeling.

When I stopped to take a breath, Hugh said, "You've told me exactly the reason and you haven't heard it, not once." OK, so tell me. He said that I prefaced nearly everything with "I'm sixty-five years old and . . ."

"You're getting old," he said, "and you don't want to."

Bingo. I recalled that at one point during the reverie I had thought, "OK, twenty-three years sober, I've made my point."

So here I was, powerless again, and in ways that I could not have imagined.