Reflections in a Pint Glass

Reflecting on 30 days giving up alcohol:

Yesterday marked the 1st week eliminating alcohol from my diet. I carefully decided to set this as my first goal to accomplish beginning May 14th despite the objection and criticism of a few friends. Don’t get me wrong, most responses I got were positive but tinged with the rebuttal of “… so you’re not going to drink on your birthday? Why don’t you just start that goal the next day?” That type of “why not start it the next day/week/year” thinking is exactly what I’m avoiding by starting this project.

I think that this reaction is unique to saying I’m giving up alcohol. If I had said “I’m eating vegetarian” I may get some odd looks but no one will say “you have to have a burger on your birthday” the same way they say “you have to celebrate with a beer on your birthday”. Why do we have such an association with drinking and celebration? This past week spent telling friends that I’m abstaining for this month made me realize that abstaining is commonly associated with either abuse or religion. In this free-market economy where a person of a certain age can purchase and imbibe as much as they want, the only reasons conceivable to most of not exercising that right would be that they don’t have the will power to do so responsibly or that they have a moral imperative to ovoid it completely. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not legal to drink and drive nor to be in public endangering others with alcohol impaired judgement or emotions, but no law enforcement stops a citizen to drink a full handle of vodka in their livingroom.

So why did I choose to give up a refreshing beer after a long day or a shared cocktail with friends if I’m fully capable of drinking responsibly and not motivated by a set of religious guidelines? I took a hard and honest evaluation of my status quo through the lens of what I could cut out of my life with little detriment and the most gain on my personal mission and drinking a couple beers in the evening or on the weekend was one of the first things that hit the chopping block.

Before I get on my soapbox as to ‘why’ I find it beneficial to cut out alcohol from my life for a few weeks, I should first give a disclaimer. This is a choice I make personally, I don’t presume to impose it on others nor do I take any political stance on this blog post of government involvement on substance restriction. I believe in self education and self experimentation to learn and experience more in our short lives. At the end of this month I doubt I’ll maintain complete restriction but do expect to have a new perspective on my relationship with alcohol.

Reasons I decided to go for 30 days without alcohol.

- Financially, alcohol value vs. cost ratio for me.

- My relationships and experiences find a stronger foundation with less alcohol.

- Alcohol serves as a force multiplier in the negative direction of my overall health.

I’ll elaborate. After reading Your Money or Your Life (YMoYL), I took a value vs. cost evaluation of all things I was spending money on in my life. After looking through my Mint.com spending history, I noticed a couple hundred bucks I had been spending each month in the “Alcohol/Bars” Category not accounting for the beverages that might be hidden in the “Grocery” or “Restaurant” sections. As YMoYL instructs, I took a month’s bills, finely categorized them, then evaluated each on a basis of “Does this bring me happiness and is it something I want to spend more or less money on?” The answer emphatically was “NO!” I found that adding more money to this monthly expense subtracted progress to my goals.

In college, in the midwest, in a fraternity, I found some of my early friendships had a strong basis on the parties we went to. Being out of that scene for 6 years, I had evolved the basis of my friendships to shared values and interests. However, the easy social enablement of “let’s go for a drink” not only detracted from the variety and intensity of experience I had with friends but also hit my wallet harder than taking a walk/jog or going for a sail. If you’re convinced that alcohol plays a key and irreplaceable role in your nightlife and party scene, I urge you to try out Day Breakers, a morning dance party where the only substance available is coffee and great music! I’ve never had as good of a time at a club than dancing my face off amidst tons of great people at 8AM before work.

Alcohol not only costs me money, it costs me time. The human body takes 1 hr optimally to process 1 drink. For me, that tends to mean after I crack a beer, I’m not doing any exercise for at least an hour afterward. That means that not only am I taking in extra calories, I’m blocking myself from burning them off too. It’s a force multiplier against one of my key values: Living a healthy and self responsible lifestyle. There are times, of course, when after a dinner with some wine I have still safely ridden my bike home or I’ve welcomed the summit on a long hike with a quick nip of whiskey before beginning the descent. To say alcohol is equal to sloth is an overstatement. Though I would like to spend my time on things that make me more efficient and productive than less.

So, how has it been going? I have not ostracized myself by adopting this goal, at least not to my knowledge. In the past week, I’ve found ways to substitute the drink on the couch for an evening run or deed dive into a book. My social life has been replaced with sharing yoga and cooking instead of a drink.  I attended a wine tasting party equipped with a wine glass filled with my alcohol alternative. Met with friends at bars and beer gardens opting for water instead of hops. When I tell people what I’m doing and why it shares with them not only my commitment to my values but also communicates a drive I have to build relationships deeper than a pint glass.