

HOLIDAY IN A BOTTLE

By Rev. Edwin Lynn

The effect of alcohol on our society is equal in its absurdity to the “potlatch” parties of the Kwakiutl Indians of our northwest coast. The Kwakiutl held periodic feasts which included their guest sitting around a large fire. As the evening progressed, additional oil was poured on the fire, which then grew larger and larger to the intense discomfort of the host and his guests. No one moved, however, for fear of admitting defeat. The fire eventually rose so high it burned the rafters, or the entire house, which the host feigned indifference to impress the guests with his courage.

Such behavior seems insane to us as we look at it from a different cultural perspective, yet in our own time we conduct similar alcoholic rituals with equally disastrous results. Instead of great fires burning the guests and destroying our houses, we have drinking parties which lead to destructive behaviors that often end in auto accidents and loss of life. Future generation may look back at our pastimes with the same incredulity with which we look back at the Kwakiutl “potlatch”.

The United States is second in the world in per capita drinking and the general profile of the “high alcohol” consumption” group is remarkably similar to the social description of those in our denomination. Consumption is highest among affluent, professional, college graduates who live in major metropolitan centers.

The production of alcohol yields revenue of over 30 billion dollars per year. We spend twice as much on beer, wine and liquor as we do on education. Over 900 million dollars is spent on advertising alone. The target of alcohol advertising is the 27% of the drinking age population who consume 93% of the alcohol. They already believe in the fantasy portrayed on the ads. A telling advertising in this regard ran with the caption: “Who Can Blame You, A Party of One.”

The greatest predominance of advertising is evident in the magazines such as “Time” and “Newsweek”, two of the top magazines read by Unitarian Universalists. Of 110 pages, the Christmas issues of these magazines has 20% devoted to color ads for alcohol sales. Advertisers do not really expect people to read all these ads. They want to unobtrusively have the reader associate good living with drinking.

Several years ago, an ad that was very popular ran in a national magazine depicting a party of smiling, handsome young men and women, smartly dressed and gathered around a Christmas tree drinking a popular beer. The caption read: “Christmas in a Bottle”, which is close enough to “Christmas IS a Bottle” to be particularly offensive. Christmas is so much more – a time of family gatherings, childlike imagination, sharing gifts, meeting with friends and hopes of peace and goodwill. And it is a time for celebration where a drink can be part of the holiday festivities, but not, as the ad implies, where Christmas is contained in a bottle.

Holidays in a bottle create pretty pictures. The ads are very clever. They appeal to the basic truths which are then exaggerated and dramatized in fantasy:

Do you want power? Identify with the ad “The Spirit of the Czar” and become a young man in a uniform accompanied by your dog inside a castle of elegant surroundings with a beautiful woman. Important and powerful people drink, and you can be like them.

Do you want happy days? “Escape to the Islands – Your Own Special Island”, an exotic, isolated setting where a without alcohol becomes a gray by comparison.

Do you want love? Know “The Best Way to Open a Conversation: Use a Corkscrew”. You can throw a party, or seek “Love In a Round Bottle.” Which is the way to a seductive relationship.

Do you want to celebrate? “Pour a Party” and join all the other people in the inevitable gracious setting.

These ads are elegant slick, colorful and full of fun; however, they never show the other side of alcohol. They create a fantasy, much like the mythology of Kwatiult “potlatch.” Everyone is smiling, trim, young, attractive, well-groomed, beautifully dressed, wealthy, and in elegant surroundings. No one is even in a sleazy bar; the drink is never in a pathetic stupor. In the ads, everything is perfect. Even the bottles are always full. Everyone is drinking, but not a drop has been poured.

The fantasy goes on.

Television also portrays a totally indulgent attitude with its endless run of comedians depicting the joys of drinking and enticing others to join them. The Christian Science monitor has state that television between the hours of 8 and 11 pm presents some form of alcoholic drinking every 8 minutes. Although some TV programming tries to e a counterforce with presentation about the problems and dangers of drinking, these rational approaches cannot compete with the glitter and drama of the “holiday in a bottle” fantasy.

Alcohol consumption underlies almost every major social problem. Alcohol is a part of most accidents, is related to 80% of all fire-related deaths, 65% of al drownings, 22% or home accidents, 77% of falls, and 36% of pedestrian deaths. Alcohol is a part of most crimes, is relative to 65% of all murders, 40% of assaults, 35% of rapes, 30% of suicides, 55% of flights in the home, and 60% of child abuse. Alcohol is a part of many health problems. It was directly related to 30,000 cases of cirrhosis of the liver, as well as many other illnesses.

One of the worst areas of abuse, however, is driving after drinking. Of the approximately 50,000 highway deaths a year, 25,000 are the direct result of drunken driving. In the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1971 there were 49,000 deaths. In that same period, there were 279,000 auto deaths related to alcohol, as well as innumerable accidents causing property damage and severe bodily injuries. Each week 400 people die on highways, the equivalent of a 747-jetliner crashing every week.

The difficulty of alcohol abuse for our society defies a simple solution. Great peer pressure to drink to excess exists at every age level. Moderation is often meaningless because people can easily underestimate their capacity, especially in the midst of a good time. The alcohol fantasy presents us with a dilemma.

What can we do in our lives to solve it? Where can we begin?

- We can begin by coming to terms with our own drinking. This may be the most difficult of all. Most people assume they ae more moderate drinkers than they are. The self-identified light drinker is often a moderate drinker, and more dangerously, the moderate drinker is often approaching being a heavy drinker. The heavy drink is most often an alcoholic.
- We can be sensitive to the media ad not let advertiser’s image of the good life become our own.

- We can point out the influence of the media and the cultural stereotypes to our children; establishing direct and honest communication with them.
- We can be willing to give our teenagers a ride anytime, anywhere – without questions -0 if that is their only alternative to getting in a car with a drunk driver.
- We can support legislative proposals to organization working at any level of government to reduce alcohol consumption and educate alcohol abusers, where as drivers or in antisocial behaviors.
- We can be good hosts. During the holidays, or at any time, we should not promote drinking to excess at parties. We can encourage the spacing of drinks over a period of time, provide food to supplement drinking, provide attractive alternative to alcoholic beverages, and never let a friend drive home who is intoxicated. Most inebriated drivers think they “can handle it.” They cannot.

Long ago a strange and primitive coastal Indian nation, the Kwakiul, developed a bizarre culture with self-destructive rites called the “potlatch”, in which they burned themselves and their buildings. Now, a strange and civilized people have developed a bizarre culture with self-destructive rites in which they burn themselves out on alcohol. Just as the Kwakiutl could not seem their own destructiveness, so we, in this sophisticated society of ours, can not see the danger. The alcohol industry spends millions of dollars in advertising to create new drinkers and increase consumption through images of “Carefree Fun.” “Happy Holidays”, “Pour a Party”, and “Two Ounce Vacations”. They do not show the drunkenness, despair, destruction, and death caused by this most potent drug. They don’t show the 25,000 killed on the highways each year in alcohol-related automobile accidents, or the other victims of alcohol-related accidents and crimes.

The “alcoholic potlatch” is powerful. The celebrants are burning at the hot fire. The flames are reaching the roof. There are national and state programs pouring water at the edges, but the basic problem and incredible destruction do not stop. Surrounded by and being a part of an alcohol culture, we can at best use moderation ourselves, communicate openly with our children, be responsible hosts, and enjoy the holidays or any event in a manner that does not need a bottle to make it real.