

Reading Raymond Carver: A Recovery Narrative

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This essay chronicles the author's experience with alcoholism. Using an autoethnographic approach, the author describes what it was like as a drinking person and how her life changed after choosing to go sober and enter recovery. This reflection notes the difference between the performance of self during active addiction and the clarity discovered about identity in sobriety. Dealing with loss and relearning how to engage life in healthy ways are central to this author's performance of a sober identity.

Social performance considers how identity is constituted through the roles we engage in throughout our lives. Corey (1996) describes identity as a social construct “that is produced, refined and re-produced through performance” (pg. 148). The performances we produce and re-produce in everyday life are influenced by the cultural beliefs, values and attitudes of the cultural members who audience our actions. Butler (2004) describes how the performance of identity is inextricably tied to the relationships we develop and when we lose someone or something important to us, we question who we are. Whether we lose a person, a community, or a lifestyle, our identity is altered in some way. The social performance of identity is fluid and we can be hopeful knowing that we have agency to adapt to changes in our environment. This process of adaptation helps to create a new and dynamic identity.

This essay is an autoethnographic account of my experience with alcoholism. Specifically, I frame this experience as a social performance that constitutes my identity as I move from active drinking to sobriety. First, I introduce aspects of performing resistance as a way to talk about the impact stereotypes can have on one's ability to perform an alcoholic identity in sobriety. Next, I describe loss, body and mind, and habit as important elements that invited me to reflect on my alcohol abuse and finally achieve sobriety. I move on to describe my performance of identity in active addiction in an effort to show some of the negative conse-

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quences that drinking had on my life. Finally, I discuss the representation of alcoholic women in recovery in the series *Mom*. Through the incorporation of balance and leisure in my life, I can now view my identity as multi-dimensional and not strictly defined by my alcoholism.

Performing Resistance

Ultimately, this essay is about how our socially constructed identities are impacted by the stereotypes ascribed to us and the ways in which we perform our identity to resist those stereotypes. Stereotypes are especially negative about women with substance abuse issues. While men are portrayed as masculine and brooding, portrayals of women addicts depict them as self-indulgent, unfit mothers, sexually promiscuous and lacking will power. Garapich (2011) asserts that stereotypes only provide a surface level understanding of an individual without taking into account how culture influences the way that individual performs his/her identity. In order to acknowledge cultural influences, we need to investigate how structure and agency impact one's ability to perform and act upon the world (Garapich 2011). Understanding the interplay between structure and agency in the performance of an alcoholic's everyday life is important in order to demonstrate how women addicts are constrained by the perceptions of appropriate behavior in US culture while, at the same time, alcoholic women are compelled to resist these structures in some way. While I am constrained by the structures that perpetuate stereotypes about women and alcoholism, I also have some agency to resist these depictions. I write about performing my identity both in active addiction and in sobriety as a way to resist the perception that all alcoholic women share the same story. I believe that no two addicts are alike and that there are as many reasons that women drink as there are women alcoholics. Alcoholism is the common denominator, but every woman's story is unique. Individuals attempt to make sense of cultural meanings in their own way in order to take action in social contexts (Geertz, 1973). My ability to perform a sober identity is dependent on my understanding of my chaotic history and how it shapes the way I take action as an individual within a culture that might exclude me. According to Victor Turner (1988), "The self is presented through the performance of roles, through performance that breaks roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state and status, been saved or damned, elevated or released" (pg. 81). My performance of a sober-self felt unnatural to me in the beginning, but now I am more spontaneous through the repeated actions of what I need to do each day to maintain my sobriety. Performing my sober identity in a community with other women empowers me to declare that there is life after active addiction if one has an open mind to do things differently one day at a time.

Loss

I quit drinking after my mother died. I just stopped. There were no bright lights and no specific event triggered my decision to quit. The death of my mother was the expected outcome of her illness and my anticipatory grief began long before she died. When I first got sober, I had to deal with two great losses. The loss of my mother, the love of my life, and the loss of the substance that I thought would help me cope with losing my mother. Alcohol proved to be a disappointing substitute for facing the grief I felt after my mother died. I found myself in withdrawal from both the person and the substance I loved most. The ground notes of my existence were gone, leaving me full of an emptiness I still sometimes hold unto. For the first few years I felt like glass, like I might shatter at the slightest provocation. Butler (2004) describes grief “as moments when one goes through something that is completely out of their control and is outside oneself” (pg. 28). This was true for me both in terms of my addiction and the grief I was experiencing due to my mother’s death. I knew that I had no control over the cruelty of terminal cancer or the bad luck of being alcoholic, but I still felt that both were somehow my fault. If I hadn’t drank during my mother’s illness, maybe she would have lived longer. If I was a stronger person, I could just moderate my drinking. Never did I consider that cancer and alcoholism run in my family. My family tree is riddled with addiction. The chances of becoming an alcoholic were very high in genetic terms. My grief over the loss of my mother and the absence of alcohol to deal with it made me question my own identity. Who was I without my mother and alcohol? Butler describes how the loss of the other results in the loss of ourselves. “If I lose you, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who ‘am’ I without you? Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other” (pg. 22-23). My mother and I were alike in body and spirit and my identity was constituted through our relationship with one another. After she died, an aspect of my identity was missing. I believed for while that my grief was something I would get over and then could return to performing my identity like before. In time, I realized that my performance of identity is socially constructed and that when one aspect of that performance disappears, I am no longer the me I had come to know. My my own body was impacted by this loss. I could no longer see my own hands. My mirror was gone making many parts of me unrecognizable.

Body and Mind

Goffman (1963) describes the “unnatural passions...from a known record of, for example, addiction and alcoholism” (pg. 4). I knew that in my drinking days I was full of an intense obsession with alcohol. Life was either drinking or waiting to drink. It wasn’t until I got sober that I recognized that my efforts at managing the impressions others had of me was becoming more difficult the longer I drank.

Goffman (1959) describes *face* as the public performance of the self through communication. As I continued to drink, my private face was beginning to show. My public and private selves were contradicting each other, causing me to lose face, resulting in embarrassing situations. I simply could not hide the consequences of my drinking any more or disguise the impact drinking was having on my physical, emotional and mental wellbeing. The early days of performing sobriety were marked with feelings of being completely unacceptable to myself or anyone else. Goffman defines stigma as “the situation when the individual is disqualified from full social acceptance” (preface). I began to understand myself as socially and personally abject. Goffman describes how people manage stigma through passing, concealment and refusal. The stigma about alcoholics, especially women who are alcoholic, made me keep my addiction a secret, concealing it from even my closest friends. Alcoholics Anonymous is founded on the principal of anonymity. Breaking someone’s anonymity is considered unacceptable. Being labeled an alcoholic could impact a person’s employment, their parental rights or their ability to stay sober. The only person who is to reveal their status about their addiction is the alcoholic him/herself. This concealment of an alcoholic identity made it easy for me to keep quiet about my alcohol issues publicly. I did not reveal my status as an alcoholic and tried to blend in and pass as a “normie” (the term people in Alcoholics Anonymous use to describe social drinkers who can drink without consequence) when in social circles outside of my recovery group. I only felt semi-comfortable discussing my addiction with other alcoholics who knew and understood the torture that alcohol can inflict on a person’s life. Refusal in many recovery circles, including Alcoholics Anonymous, means total abstinence from any mind-altering chemical. For me, giving up alcohol completely was the only way I was able to get sober. My many attempts at moderation never worked. Feelings of being stigmatized also played out with some of my family members who I told about my alcoholism. My sister and aunt made a point of telling me that every event will still have alcohol and that just because I had a problem with it, I shouldn’t force others not to drink. In these moments, I felt the stigma hard. My personal and social feelings of abjection still rise up in me when a co-worker asks me out “for a drink” or when someone says, “Can’t you just have one drink?” I worry and stress wondering how am I going to get out of this without revealing myself. The social performance of an alcoholic woman is complex due to the stereotypes that exist about alcoholics and women in general. The image of the homeless drunk is still prevalent in our culture, yet for a sober woman, it can be even harder to find an identity when women by nature are not expected to over consume alcohol because it violates cultural expectations of femininity.

Habit

Moya (2015) defines the process of habit formation as “a set of situations and responses that, despite not being identical, constitute a community of meanings.”

Merleau-Ponty (2012) describes habit as “the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through the incorporating of new instruments” (pg. 145). The essence of my experience is enhanced as I incorporate sober experiences into my life. My body has become a new instrument to me as I integrate ways of moving that I never thought possible before. I have found that I can actually transition my body into a yoga pose and ride a mountain bike with ease. In my shaking body, these were actions I just couldn’t perform. Leder (1990) explains how taking on a new habit involves intention and motivation to absorb new bodily actions. He states, “A skill is finally learned when something that was once extrinsic, grasped only through explicit rules or examples, now comes to invade my own corporeality” (pg. 31). I am constantly learning how to negotiate my sober body to conquer new skills. These bodily achievements make me feel pride for my body instead of the physical shame I lived in before. Learning to be in the world in a sober body allows me to accept the invitations that come up as I meet the horizon of each new day. My spontaneity increases as the habits of the body become internalized and I learn to fully trust its new capacities. I am amazed that, in sobriety, I have choices. I try new things and allow my body to fully participate free of alcohol.

Sometimes, I feel the weight of my body come back to me and I think to myself, “I exist. I have a presence!” In the past, I spent so much of my time ghosting myself that this new sense of my body can be startling. I remember seeing myself in the window of a restaurant as I walked by thinking, “Is that me?” and then turning around to see if anyone else was there. In active addiction, I simply didn’t recognize my own body. After I quit drinking, my body appeared to me as if I had never seen it before.

Before

Raymond Carver wrote about life in sobriety after a 10 year-period of abstinence from alcohol. In his poem, *Gravy*, he describes sobriety as a supplement to experience. Sobriety, for Carver, added dimension to his life, making it full and exciting. For me, sobriety feels like gravy tastes. It enhances the flavor of every aspect of my experience. Every sense has been awakened and things seem even clearer now than they were before I started to drink.

Leslie Jamison (2018) described Carver in her book, *The Recovering: Intoxication and Its Aftermath*:

His shadow was the drunkest of all. His stories were painful and precise, like carefully bitten fingernails, full of silence and whiskey. He was a rogue running on booze and fumes: leaving meals unfinished because he was getting all his sugar from liquor, walking out of restaurants before paying, moving his class from the English Department to the backroom of the Mill, one of his favorite bars. No one even tried to stop Carver for they knew never to poke the lion. (pg. 19)

A friend turned me on to Carver's work and I began to read his stories and poems in the evenings during the winter I turned 36. "Gazebo," a short story in Carver's 1989 collection *What People Talk about when they Talk about Love*, was particularly compelling because of the way drinking was infused into every aspect of the character's lives. During this time, I was in the throes of alcoholism and alcohol was becoming my most dependable prop. I used it daily thinking that it was helping me deal with the chaos around me. In the story, the narrator states:

Drinking's funny. When I look back on it, all of our important decisions have been figured out when we were drinking. Even when we talked about having to cut back on our drinking, we'd be sitting at the kitchen table or out at a picnic table with a six-pack or whiskey. When we made up our minds to move...we sat up a couple nights drinking while we weighed the pros and cons. (pg. 25)

I also made many important life decisions when drinking. I decided not to stay in graduate school and left ABD (all but dissertation) moving halfway across the country to try to finish my degree remotely. I didn't finish while away, so a few years later I ended up back on campus to write my dissertation and complete my degree. Making decisions confused me and I believed that having a drink or two gave me the clarity to decide what to do. Drinking was relaxing and I needed it to survive my habit of worrying and fretting over every little detail of life. It was great until it just wasn't so good anymore. In my denial, I skimmed over the things about drinking that bothered me. The terrible hangovers, paranoia and general greyness that hung over my days were not enough to make me quit.

I began to revisit events that I had framed as simply bad luck. I started to see a connection between drinking and the physical injuries I sustained from bizarre and often dangerous "accidents." Falling off the platform on to the L tracks after a night of drinking in downtown Chicago with work colleagues, running into parked cars while riding my bicycle home after a drunken picnic, and waking up behind a fast-food joint late at night not knowing why or how I got there were just a few of the incidents that marked the impact drinking was having on my physical health and safety. Yet, even these events didn't seem that bad to me. I somehow chalked them up to a clumsy disposition. It was only when the malaise and the inability to "have fun" drinking became unbearable that I began to seriously question what might be wrong with me. I grew up in an alcoholic and chaotic home so I knew about alcoholism first-hand, but this knowledge only steeled up my resolve to "not be like them." This mindset kept me drinking until the "what ifs" led me to open up my mind to the possibility that I might, indeed, be an alcoholic. It was easy to say to myself, "who cares?" or, "I'm not hurting anyone," yet my relationships with others close to me were becoming harder to manage. Arguments with my partner about my drinking made our relationship tense and tedious.

Around this time, my mother was diagnosed with stage four bladder cancer and I became her primary caretaker. One afternoon I walked into her bedroom

to check on her and I noticed that her head was tilted upward and her mouth was slightly open as if she was talking with someone. My mother's sweet face was glowing. In that moment, I realized with certainty that my mother would not survive. I cried, regretting all of the drinking I did in her name. The thought occurred to me that my mother and I were both living on the edge of human experience. The cancer that was rearranging her body with each new day would eventually kill her despite her desire to live. I, on the other hand, had options. I could choose to live, but I knew that living involved giving up alcohol and that choice seemed impossible to me.

Jamison (2018) describes addiction "as a story that has already been told, because it inevitably repeats itself. Desire. Use. Repeat" (pg. 9). My desire to drink was at the core of my need to drink. My longing for booze was constant and unrelenting. Even when I was drinking, I longed for more and was always fearful there would never be enough to satisfy me. I remember thinking that my appetite for alcohol seemed abnormal, but I rationalized it by telling myself that I was okay since I had never gotten a DUI or experienced any legal trouble due to my drinking. The concept of uniqueness became very apparent to me only after I quit drinking. In recovery, people talk about the concept of terminal uniqueness or the idea that we as alcoholics are special people who think that we are immune from any of the ill effects of heavy alcohol use. I really believed that I was different than everyone else due to my unpredictable childhood and that I somehow got a pass from becoming an alcoholic. I didn't recognize that I was simply recreating the insanity of my younger years. The consequences of my drinking were becoming more and more problematic but the intense craving for alcohol and my denial of the problem kept me drinking for a long time.

Alcohol is a thief that promises something for nothing. The appeal for alcohol wasn't just about intoxication. It was also the only way that I could imagine functioning socially. Drinking promised me a way to communicate socially without experiencing the dread of saying something wrong. I spent most of my young life feeling as if I didn't get the joke that everyone else was laughing at. Drinking allowed me to feel like I was a cool participant in the conversation. Rudolfsdottir and Morgan (2009) illustrate the gendered codes that are imposed on women and how women internalize what it means to drink while still maintaining femininity. The authors describe how women see "problem drinking" as a masculine quality that disqualifies them from being considered out of control drinkers. Women drink to feel social and less self-conscious about their ability to openly communicate about anything that might result in their voices being rejected or questioned. The systematic gendering of drinking makes it almost impossible for women to be feminine and alcoholic. To admit that one is a "problem drinker" is difficult for women who feel the need to perform an image that fits within the cultural guidelines of appropriate feminine behaviors. This makes sense to me. Admitting my excessive consumption was an embarrassment to my social performance as a

woman who performed adequately within the limits of my assigned gender role. Drinking also addressed the ambivalence I felt about my own views and opinions on issues. My fear of rejection kept me silent when sober. Having a few drinks lessened the impact of my insecurities, and in the company of others, I was able to find a voice. It empowered me and I needed empowering. This was especially true at a time when I was required to find my voice in writing. Drinking wine while writing became a ritual for me. This ritual seemed to provide me the confidence I needed to take risks and be more creative (Jamison 2018). While in graduate school, I enrolled in a writing-as-performance course. On the first day of class the professor began his comments with a warning:

Most writers don't drink to excess. One drop of alcohol won't help you write anything. It will make you write crap that you assume is a masterpiece, but reading it in the light of day you will find it to be trivial and unenthusiastic.

I ignored this comment because I truly believed that alcohol provided me the courage to write. I just simply could not imagine my life as a student without alcohol. Years later and still drinking, I reread some of the poetry I wrote for that course, my body temperature rising from the shame I felt at the words reflected on the page. Most of what I wrote was self-absorbed and nonsensical. After that rereading, my desire to create anything became secondary. It was the drinking that I was after.

My drinking was a daily choice I made regardless of what I had to do or how I was feeling. I drank whether I was happy, sad, angry, or indifferent. It was how I dealt with the demands of life and my emotional reactions to them. My drinking wasn't with a group of friends watching live music at a favorite bar or having a glass of wine with dinner. I drank alone. Drinking started out as a way to be more social, but in the end social drinking became a source of stress for me as it required controlling the amount of alcohol I consumed publicly. I had a need to appear in control so I performed my social identity very carefully by hiding my heavy drinking from others. Performing the role of a "normal" drinker involved having one or two drinks while in the company of others and then hitting it hard once I was isolated at home. The first time I drank alone, I was mortified. I knew that I had somehow crossed the imaginary line into addiction, but I was able to justify my drinking by telling myself, "I have always followed the rules, been obedient! I deserve to drink!" There was a rage building inside me at people and situations that I couldn't control, fueling my tendency to drink. I wanted to scream and fight, but my training wouldn't allow for that. Instead, my rage dissembled making my desire for alcohol even stronger.

Leisure and Representation

As a sober woman, I see a need for more balance in my life. Part of this balance includes integrating leisure activities into my daily life. In my drinking days, I was

never good with down time. I found it boring and unenjoyable unless I was drinking. Now, I am open to trying new things in an effort to discover what I enjoy doing. Through the daily performance of sobriety, my identity has expanded to include social interactions with other sober women who remind me that sobriety is a process. Recently, some of my leisure time has been spent with a group of sober women watching the series, *Mom*.

The television show *Mom* depicts a group of alcoholic women who meet and develop relationships through the Alcoholics Anonymous Recovery Program. The women in *Mom* are flawed and imperfect. Their unique imperfections are what makes the series *Mom* so compelling to me. The women don't always get along but they are bound by a force larger than themselves as individuals. This force helps them traverse the ups and downs of life as women in recovery from alcoholism. The women tackle the real issues that woman in America face – sexual assault, poverty, cancer, teen pregnancy, parenting, gambling addiction, loss of a loved one, suicide, and functional friendship. I began watching this series after a friend suggested it to me as good example of a show that deftly takes on the topic of addiction. I watched the first episode and wasn't that excited about it. I just wasn't used to episodic television having not watched a sitcom in years. I kept with it and slowly the show grew on me. I think that my gradual appreciation is partly due to how different the characters are from one another in terms of personality, class, age, marital status and experience in recovery. It clearly reinforces to me that addiction is the ultimate equalizer. Aspects of one's demographics aren't always relevant when everyone shares the common goal in recovery – to stay sober. Learning to laugh in recovery has been tricky for me and this show, with its ability to take on serious issues while threading humor throughout the episodes, has become the highlight of my evenings. I watch it because it reflects and reinforces my experience and while it deals with difficult topics, it is funny. The humor for me comes from my identification with the women individually and collectively. I see myself in one of the characters and the group of the women remind me of the sober women I hang out with. I realize that some of the humor may seem like an inside joke and the discourse about alcoholism, recovery and Alcoholics Anonymous may be lost on some audiences but most everyone can identify with the desire to evolve in the midst of a confusing world and that is exactly what the characters in *Mom* are trying to do. The series values friendships in all of their forms.

I also appreciate *Mom* because it opens up the discourse about a topic that is especially difficult for women to talk about. The women in *Mom* challenge stereotypical expectations about appropriate “feminine” behavior through their performances and use of language (Bednarek, 2015). They discuss topics like masturbation and sex as it relates to their experience dealing with intimacy in sobriety. Their non-conforming use of language resists the stereotypes about how a moral woman should act and subverts the rigid cultural rules that guide more traditional

expectations about a woman's behavior. The women swear, are assertive and engage sobriety aggressively. They are also multi-dimensional. Being a sober alcoholic is only one part of a character's identity. Watching the show helps me recognize my own multi-dimensional identity. The social performance of my identity isn't limited to the single fact that I am an alcoholic. Reducing myself to one aspect of my identity constrains my ability to see myself as a woman with multiple identities that develop as I grow in recovery.

For me, performing identity in recovery is enhanced by engaging habits of mind that help me stay sober. Some of these habits include constant reflection, rigorous honesty, an emphasis on mental and physical health and the unconditional acceptance of all things. When in active addiction, alcohol served as a buffer when bad things happened to me. In recovery, I try to apply these habits of mind when dealing with life's problems. I don't always succeed, but I am much better at being honest than I was a year ago. Giving up alcohol was hard because I constantly glorified how much it helped me survive traumatic events. I had to reflect on my past and be rigorously honest about the negative impact alcohol had on my overall health and relationships. Habits of mind also has allowed me to recognize the need for a healthy mind and body. Practices like yoga reinforce the health of both my body and my mind. Focusing on my mental health has helped me relearn what it means to have fun. When I first sobered up, I equated fun with drinking and I was terrified that I would never enjoy anything sober. In meetings, I listen to women talk about how boring an alcoholic life can be. Daily life becomes defined by waiting to drink, drinking to excess, dealing with the consequences that drinking brings, and then drinking again. The pattern was so consistent for me that I began to dread my monotonous existence. Life now is very dynamic and I am amazed at how even little activities like buying groceries bring me such joy. The social performance of my sober identity is much more fluid as my time is no longer constrained by drinking.

After

I still enjoy reading, but instead of reading Carver, I read about Carver. I am more interested in the intersectionality between his life story and the fictional world he created. In Sklenicka's (2009) biography, *Raymond Carver: A writer's life*, Carver described his delight in going sober when he stated, "I am prouder of that, that I have quit drinking, than I am of anything in my life" (pg. x). I can acknowledge this statement and understand it because I am living it.

My partner says that now that I am sober, I am a more playful person. I recognize this in myself and, the longer I am sober, the more the down times seem less frequent and intense. Performing as a sober person is not always easy, especially when that performance is audienceed in negative ways. Stereotypes about alcoholism and the Alcoholics Anonymous program still exist and sometimes I get

tired of explaining them. People sometimes comment on my performance as a sober woman saying things like, “You are so quiet. You don’t seem like an alcoholic” as if all alcoholics are outgoing and loud. My identity as a sober alcoholic is a daily role that I perform regardless if I feel like it or not. However, through recovery and with other sober women, I have grown in ways that I didn’t expect. I am a better friend, partner, employee and citizen now and am much less driven by expectations. There is a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous that acceptance is the only answer to all of life’s issues. I agree with that. Acceptance of things as they are helps simplify things for me and, as an overthinker, I am grateful for that.

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