

In Sobriety, I've Stopped Asking "What If?"

By AUTHOR

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Shortly after I'd left a treatment center, back when my drinking career had finally given way like a sagging ceiling with water damage, I wondered how it'd all gotten to that point. I sat at home on the same couch I used to pass out on and looked around at everything (including my family) as if for the first time. And I wasn't bitter that I couldn't drink anymore—I was bitter that I had the life I had. I'd arrived in a sci-fi parallel universe. I was 37, unemployed with two kids, and not quite sure how I'd gone from someone people believed in to someone who couldn't make their mortgage payment. The lyrics of that Talking Heads song "[Once in a Lifetime](#)" started to mock me. I asked myself: "Well, how did I get here?" It wasn't part of the master plan for me to become an alcoholic, hiding bottles under the sink in the downstairs bathroom. I just assumed great things were always just around the corner for me, which meant I could afford to not take things seriously. Newly sober, I realized that I'd been drinking because I felt that none of those good things were arriving. I was mourning the loss of a life that I hadn't yet lived, drowning my sorrows in cheap vodka and even cheaper wine.

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In early sobriety, I had so many "what-ifs" that I could've filled up my own goddamn Choose Your Own Adventure book. I'd willingly lost years of my life, scattering them like confetti, and I'd never get that time back. If you look at my career before I got sober, it reads like [an instruction manual](#) for how to do the bare minimum and make it to happy hour on time. I pieced together a few hours here and there of adjunct teaching work, then made it to a job where I tried proofreading through blinding hangovers. I didn't want to do too much hard work or commit to anything that resembled a routine. The last thing I wanted was a reality check. Without drinking, I had to face my reality of parenting and overdue bills and packing kids' lunches and falling asleep instead of passing out.

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Until sobriety, my life was a just an endless boulevard of green lights. I had zero to complain about. [Even though I didn't have that life I thought I was entitled to,](#) everything worked out and there was always a safety net, or someone to bail me out. But that's because I treated my life like I was a tourist in it. None of it was real, none of it was permanent, and none of it mattered, [because surely the great life I was destined for would just materialize, just show up like the clean towels did in a hotel room.](#) [As someone recently told me: "The most expensive thing I ever bought was my own bullshit." I believed every single thing I told myself about being owed amazing things, having bad behavior excused, and being rewarded for doing nothing. I often think of this when I take my kids to those mall play areas. Sitting there, surrounded by bee swarms of children, I notice how fleeting and forgettable playground friendships are. All those temporary constellations, falling in and out of themselves as quickly as they came together. As an alcoholic, that was how I lived my life. I just assumed that my drunken](#)

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texts, sloppy appearances and wasted money were excused. It was *me*, after all. I was different. It simply didn't compute that my reality was what it was.

I frequently ask the "what-if" questions now, wondering how different my life would have been if I hadn't become an alcoholic. How far up the corporate ladder could I have gotten by now? How many overdue tax bills could I have avoided? How many friendships would I still have? Early sobriety found me tortured by alternate timelines, like when Marty and Doc Brown found themselves in a different 1985. I spent embarrassing amounts of time—long, actual hours rewinding my past and trying to make sense of where things went wrong. From my first stolen bottle of Zima (drunk alone in a closet, by the way) to having my son's daycare say they were constantly smelled alcohol on my breath, I mentally scrolled through the surveillance footage of everything. I tried to pinpoint where, exactly, my life had jumped the tracks.

But eventually I came to feel more at home reading books to my children than I did texting friends from a barstool. And now that I enjoy showing up to kids' birthday parties without a buzz, I realize my time in sobriety is best spent working on steps forward than re-imagining the past. No amount of mental time-traveling is going to unwind any of my drinking or my decisions. (I'm still not entirely ruling out that some sci-fi villain went back in time to sabotage my future, though.) What I've discovered in sobriety is that the great things I expected from life actually *did* happen. They just didn't arrive in the forms I'd imagined they would. When I envisioned my future and all the things I'd hoped for, I actually wasn't dreaming big enough. I'd never considered just how fulfilling and rewarding it is to be a part of the recovery community and talk to other alcoholics. Truth be told, I didn't choose to be an alcoholic—but if I had the choice, I'd do it again, I'm not saying that I'd willingly choose to do all the alcoholic things I did (like driving home after a night out with one eye closed), but I wouldn't trade being able to appreciate the life I have, I threw away years by drinking, but now, I wouldn't trade the knowledge I've gained by throwing that time away. I've come to cherish the life I have, including all the damage that's gotten me to this point. No matter what, I choose this reality over any other.

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