

A Rambling Journey Through the Abundant Intricacies of Beer

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Beer. Beer! BEER! Like a rumbling tsunami, that call floods through campuses across the nation. College life is somehow intrinsically bound to beer and its cousins, liquor, wine, and cider. Not every college student drinks, but the majority like to get drunk now and then. There is something alluring about the quest for beer. It is a noble endeavor of some mysterious, divine simplicity.

I remember, not long ago, finding myself in a Ford F-150 Lariat from the early 80s, jerking and lurching forward as my roommate Brian shifted gears. We had been walking down the stairs outside Sexton Commons at St. John's University, when we noticed Colin. "Wanna ride?" Bryan asked before greeting him. Colin hopped in the truck and I got in beside him. Soon, I felt a strange stinging sensation and reached behind me to find a wasp had stung my right shoulder. The gargantuan, mutant wasp was perched on my knuckles. I quickly whipped it out the window. My thoughts soon drifted from the pain of the wasp sting. We were going to get beer. That was all that mattered. We dropped Colin off in St. Joe and went inside Bo Diddleys to get a sandwich. After a brief layover at Ben's house, we were on the road again. The truck roared and shook violently as we lunged forward, jerking spastically.

Soon we were on the road with the radio turned up and the windows rolled down. It was a beautiful fall day. The fields were golden brown and the leaves were lustrous shades of red, orange and yellow. Time slowed down and my way of thinking changed. I was fully immersed in the now. I couldn't remember the past, except to know that I had no obligations or responsibilities, aside from the acquisition of massive

quantities of an alcoholic beverage, which is to say, "Get Beer." College teaches us ways of thinking and speaking and writing that are often convoluted. College favors the big words with ambiguous meanings. Life in the real world, however, requires a certain amount of bluntness. "Getting beer" is a way of escaping the cobwebs of academia.

There is something about quests that focus the mind, which causes time to change, immersing us fully in the moment. However, the key difference between goals is whether they were set by ourselves or someone else. School consists mostly of goals set by somebody else, which is a concept we choose to either accept or reject. Intoxication is a mission that we set for ourselves. I know of few people who would take a bullet to save their homework, but I know of several guys who would probably take a bullet for a keg. Most people care more about objectives that they set for themselves than about the various motives society and government would like us to have. Goals we set for ourselves are more conducive to the focusing of the mind upon the task at hand.

On this radiant day, my thoughts took on the qualities of the wasp who'd stung me. My jumbled thoughts flew around my head like a wasp, spending a few seconds on each topic, fluttering from idea to idea, following the flow, not worrying about structure and organization. There is a certain organization inherent in the rambling of a mind, or the haphazard safari of a wasp. One thought is connected in only the most abstract way, like a daisy is connected to a duck.

There is some subtle attraction that makes us spend so much money on beer. I honestly don't know why. Its taste is usually bitter and vacuous. Beer is not for tasting; it is for drinking. The mission to get hammered is one that has been constant through the years. I'm willing to bet that our world's population would be nowhere near its current peak of six billion if alcohol didn't exist. Liquor, wine and beer are strategic elements in a greater purpose: sex. Ironically, the Catholic Church uses wine in the sacrament of communion, when alcohol is the single biggest threat to the Church's long list of restrictions against sex. People have been using liquor to get inebriated for

thousands of years. The lowered inhibition has contributed heavily to lots of sexual and comical activity.

As we drove down the long and virtually deserted road into St. Cloud, I ruminated on the timeless conundrum of beer. What a powerful liquid. I wonder what brilliant ancient Egyptian discovered that fermenting certain substances changed them into a potent alcohol. Being drunk is certainly an odd form of awareness, or lack thereof. There is probably something valuable in the change of perception that alcohol allows us. I think that it's good to have a drink now and then. Scientists have discovered that a small amount of liquor can actually be good for the heart. I also think that it helps to cut loose and party every now and then in order to relieve stress and to give us some perspective on life.

I have a strange notion that alcohol holds some deep meaning that eludes description. Humans give objects their meaning, and college students give beer an incredible amount of meaning. They search for it with unending fervor, and they drink it with an insatiable lust. This passion for beer unites us. It allows us to encounter people and experiences that we might never have encountered in the grip of sobriety. However, through the glorious stupidity inherent in drinking, alcohol teaches us the virtue of moderation.

The hangover is a demonic, throbbing punishment from our bodies for consuming too much alcohol and not enough water at the end of the long night of drinking. A free tip for drinkers everywhere: drink large amounts of water before you crash and your hangover will be slight or nonexistent. This is what college teaches us. The hangover's unearthly pounding sensation is enough to convince most people that drinking too much will wash away one's soul. Others stubbornly cling to their addiction. Alcohol is indeed a dangerous substance. People can become controlled by it, rather than *vice versa*. Still, its danger is part of what makes it so tempting to college students, although it has a more universal attraction.

Beer represents freedom. Once, alcohol was prohibited in the U.S. by

overzealous religious and women's groups. We have not yet ceased legislating morality, and there are several controlled substances whose prohibition causes problems eclipsing that of alcohol's prohibition; but that is another story. Beer is the symbol of the fight for freedom against puritanical tyranny. One day we will recognize that the element of organized crime that exists hand-in-hand with the prohibition of any substance is a far greater danger to society than the substance alone could ever be.

What many people fail to grasp is what I call the "Forbidden Fruit Effect." When anybody tells a human that he or she can't eat the apple or drink the wine, they are consumed with an insatiable curiosity. Forbidden things have extra mystery added to them. Besides the usual questions we ask about things we are unfamiliar with, forbidden items contain extra mysteries like, "Why is it forbidden? Who forbade it, and for what purpose?" and so on. This leads most people to experiment with the forbidden object, unless they have been so filled with fear that they are certain it will damage them irreparably.

That's why I think we shouldn't have such a high drinking age. We fill our young people with fear and curiosity and implicitly encourage them to experiment with their friends. Young men and women can die to protect our nation at age eighteen, but they can't have a beer to celebrate a successful battle. This makes no sense to me. It gives the impression that beer is more dangerous than war, which is absurd. Some military bases, such as those in South Dakota, allow limited consumption on the base, but that is the exception to the rule. In Germany kids can purchase beer and wine around age fourteen, but they usually have to be eighteen to get hard liquor. German kids grow up with alcohol, and from a young age they are allowed to experiment with it, although usually with parental supervision. They do not have many of the problems we associate with drinking in the U.S. Drinking and driving is even more taboo in Germany. If you drive drunk, you will be lucky to ever have a license again. In Germany, kids can't drive until they are eighteen, so they get plenty of time to find their limits of sobriety before they start driving.

I'm twenty-one now, but I first got drunk when I was seventeen. My parents gave me a shot of vodka when I was around thirteen years old, and that burning sensation staved off my curiosity for four years. Then I discovered the wonders of mixed drinks. However, on this golden, sunny day, we weren't driving out to get liquor. We were going to get a keg of beer. Driving in that rickety pickup, with the wind in my hair and the sun showering down, I wondered if life could be more blissful. It's more the journey than the beer. Personally, I'm an apple cider drinker. Good cider tastes like stiff apple juice, with only a hint of alcohol. Apple cider is a secret due to the stigma attached to it because it is fermented fruit. Ostensibly, this makes it a "fruity" drink, but I think it takes a real man to admit that most beer is bitter tasting.

We slammed it down at parties as if it were the nectar of the gods, but I think most people know deep down that beer tastes like shit. We drank it until it came spewing out every orifice, and then we drank some more. We searched and searched for the Buddha in the bottom of the bottle, but we never found him. The only thing we discovered is that after you've become thoroughly drunk, beer seems to lose its taste completely.

As Brian and I rounded the corner in his decrepit truck at a considerable speed, bouncing and leaping into the Westside Liquor parking lot, I wondered what beer truly represents. I get the distinct feeling of searching when I think of beer. We usually search for it, roaming the streets of St. Joseph, wandering from party to party and from bar to bar. Looking for friends, looking for beer, looking for love, looking for fun. Alcohol represents the eternal search for self-gratification. It's what keeps us young. We haven't found whatever we're looking for and settled down. As people get older, they tend to slow down their searching and their questioning. They've been conquered by the world's cold spirit. Some older people retain that elusive spark of youth by continuing to search for answers and by questioning authority.

Of course, beer is not the answer. Alcoholics find very little truth after so many years of drinking themselves stupid. Beer only encourages us to keep looking. It tells us

that it can give us a fun time, and maybe a doorway to a new path; but it is not the answer. Homer Simpson, the high priest of beer, once called it “the cause of, and solution to, all of life’s problems.”

We bought the keg with a strange calmness. We carefully lifted it into the back of Brian’s truck. The drive home was so quick I hardly remember it. The sun was still shining, the music was still blaring, and all was right with the world. The beer sung to us from the back and we listened, waiting, to hook it up to the Kegarator, the fridge specially designed to house a keg, with a tap in the front. Brian’s Uncle Bob had constructed it somehow. It was vintage 1940s, and it looked like it had served many generations of college students well. We quickly installed it, and beer was poured in celebration.

I don’t claim to have the answers that beer may lead us to, or away from. I don’t know why anybody else drinks beer. I only know that for me, a nice frothy beer after a long day of classes and homework can’t be a bad thing. In fact, why the hell am I writing this essay, when I could be having a beer? Well, now that it’s finished, I will go indulge myself, and leave you with this thought: Beer is an enigma and it is rife with contradictions. The way it lowers inhibitions causes both life and death. Its allure borders on the spiritual, and yet those who crusade against it are often doing so in the name of religion. Alcohol is simple, and yet its ramifications are complex and global. Its dual nature teaches us about the intricate nature of life and the swirling miasma of grayness that swims in between distant polar opposites. In this way beer is a metaphor for existence and the mysteries life holds, and maybe that is why we pursue intoxication with an unending enthusiasm and a voracious, mystical desire.