

# Drinking, and Flirting with the Mormon Church

*Marian Nelson*

I STARTED DRINKING IN HIGH SCHOOL. I love to push the limits, and hearing that something was prohibited enticed me to go after it. Being both devious and smart, I indulged in forbidden behavior without my parents knowing. Drugs didn't tempt me then because they weren't available. Guys would take me to little beer joints just outside of town, and we would dance, drink beer, and smoke cigarettes. In Salt Lake City in 1950 that was wicked enough.

When I was eighteen, I married a jack-Mormon, like me; perhaps we were a good match because neither of us followed the Word of Wisdom. We found many others like us, and that reinforced our flaunting of the Church. One time we lived in a neighborhood in Orem, Utah, where the Church was trying to raise money to build a new meetinghouse. The bishop gave each family a few dollars and told us to follow the parable of the talents and let the money generate more funds for the building.

Some families bought flour, sugar, and eggs and baked cookies or bread to sell to their neighbors. Others bought cloth and made aprons. In my neighborhood we pooled the money from the bishop, bought a Texas fifth of whiskey, and sold raffle tickets with the whiskey as the prize. We turned in more money than any of the others in the ward. We thought we were very clever until the ward clerk called several of

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us wives in to see the bishop. I had the first appointment and felt sick at heart as my judgement hour arrived. I went into his office and sat stiffly in the hard chair. He asked if I would be the accompanist for Primary. I was so relieved, I accepted the calling.

All my adult life I flirted with the Church. Sometimes I was drawn to the love expressed through caring members. Sometimes I felt the peace of the gospel. Then friends would say, "Let's party!" and I was easily lured away again. My excursions into Mormondom neither helped nor hindered my faltering marriage. Ironically, one of the reasons I divorced my husband was that he began drinking excessively. Hindsight tells me that my wantonness before marriage turned to coldness afterward and drove him to alcohol.

At thirty-five I was suddenly single; single with five children aged nine to seventeen. When I started dating again, I became dependent on alcohol for a good time. Although I rarely attended church meetings, I kept up a pretense of sobriety for the sake of my children. I sent them to church, therefore many of their friends were Mormon. My children would have been embarrassed if their friends had been aware of my drinking.

When we lived in Scottsdale, Arizona, my friend Patricia and I began attending night Relief Society. After a few months we started going to a nearby bar to dance instead. We had a lot more fun drinking and slow dancing with good-looking guys than sitting in Relief Society being taught about Chinese opera. When my children became adults, they told me they knew back then what I was doing; they told me they knew and that they worried. I worried about them also, especially when they were teenagers. But I didn't worry enough to change. I loved to party with my drinking buddies. I would often stay out until all hours of the night and invent excuses to tell my children.

The bishop visited my home once. My children explained to him that their mother was gone for the weekend to Las Vegas with a friend. When I returned, he called me into his office for a talk. Although I considered what I did none of his business, I did go talk with him. He shamed me by telling me the effect I was having on my children. That hurt. For a while my bishop and I tried to deal with my transgressions. I cannot recall my motivations, or whether I was sincere, yet I recall the look on his face and his comment after our last session. He said he usually had a good feeling when someone confessed their sins, but he didn't have that feeling with me. He looked troubled, with good reason, for I was soon back to lies and drinking—and sins worse than drinking.

When my children married or left for college, I solved the "empty nest" problem by packing up and moving to Marina del Rey, California.

I was on my own for the first time in my life. I chose to live in a singles complex, where drugs of every sort were the norm. I got caught up in that scene with a passion, and only my abhorrence for needles stopped me from experimenting with the hard stuff that was readily available.

I came home from a business trip to Seattle one warm day in January to find a party going on in my apartment. About twenty-five people were crowded into the small one-bedroom place. They were drinking champagne, eating caviar on stone-ground wheat crackers with a squeeze of lemon, and snorting cocaine. The cocaine was carefully measured out in lines on a mirror placed on the kitchen table. I took a glass of champagne and sat at the table waiting my turn. Later I went toward the bathroom, and my roommate said, "Don't go in there." The door was slightly ajar, so I ignored him.

A young woman was seated on the closed toilet lid with a bright red scarf wound tightly about her upper arm. She held her arm palm up, and in the crook of her elbow the vein bulged dark blue. A guy inserted a needle into the vein and slowly pushed the liquid into her arm. I watched, fascinated: the pulsing vein, the liquid draining ever-so-slowly into her arm, the euphoric look on her face as she drifted into some heavenly, sweet place. Although I was stoned, I said "no" when offered a hit of heroin. I was intrigued by the place where the young woman seemed to go, but I didn't want anything to do with a needle. The next morning I cleaned away the dried blood splattered around the bathroom.

After several years in Marina del Rey, I moved to Dallas, perhaps for a better job, or to get away from the traffic and pollution of California, or maybe I was tired of life in the fast lane. Unfortunately, moving to Texas didn't slow me down. I remember reading a quiz about alcoholism in the local newspaper. According to the writers, if your score summed 100 or more, you were probably an alcoholic. My score was 205. I didn't drink daily, and I was able to function in my profession despite my use of alcohol, but I fit into most of the categories. When I did drink, I always overindulged.

The quiz disturbed me. I had never put a label on my drinking. I lived by myself and didn't have to answer to anyone. The article said that many people drink to bolster their self-esteem, to feel socially acceptable. I saw that in myself. Although I was a successful manager of computer projects, and confident in the business world, I didn't have social confidence. Before going out dancing or to a party, I would drink a few beers or smoke some pot at home to get "loosened up."

There was another reason for my drinking. I purposely drank enough to put my conscience to sleep. For example, at a company

party I met the wife of a man who worked with me. I wondered if she had figured out why he wasn't in his room at five in the morning when she called, when he and I were on a business trip together in New York. As I talked with her at the party, I wondered, with a pang of guilt, what my involvement with her husband might be doing to their marriage. However, the next time he called, I watered down the guilt with a few glasses of wine and kept ignoring his marital status.

I often heard a voice within me say I was doing things I shouldn't, but I anesthetized myself to drown out the warnings. That's not to say I considered the seriousness of my moral transgressions; I had completely turned my back on the Church. My records still caught up with me sooner or later each time I moved, and I became adept at handling telephone calls from the Relief Society president or home teachers. I told them I appreciated the concern and would certainly call if ever I needed them. I never did call.

Once I wanted to go to church. On a sunny December day in Dallas, I received a Christmas card that showed snow falling in a little village. In the picture warm light glowed from the windows of an old steepled church. From somewhere deep inside me there arose a nostalgic longing to sing "Silent Night." One Sunday before Christmas, I went to a nearby Mormon chapel. I enjoyed singing carols during the sacrament meeting, but then I made the mistake of going into Relief Society. The very pregnant teacher was talking about journals. She had stacks of elaborate albums, journals, and books of remembrance and said how important it was to write daily. She even suggested that the ladies start a journal for a child while it was still in the womb, describing such things as the feeling when it kicked! In my mind I can still see the scrapbook, covered with a blue quilt-like fabric with lace around the edges. I wondered if next she would show us how to put in the results of the rabbit test with her hot-glue gun. I thought, good grief what will they think up next? I wondered why the Mormon church asked so much of its people. I got out of there as soon as I could and vowed never to go back.

Although I didn't give much thought to the moral reasons to stop drinking, I often thought about the practical ones. Every time I got intoxicated (at least once a week), I suffered excruciatingly painful headaches. I also felt deathly ill in other ways, sometimes throwing up violently. The headaches scared me; several times I even reached for the telephone to call the paramedics, convinced I was going to die.

I thought I was killing myself. And if the headaches didn't kill me, I figured the driving would. I'd be out drinking, and people would offer to drive me home. They would plead with me to let them drive; but no, I insisted I was perfectly capable of driving. Sometimes I had

no idea how I got home, no recollection at all. Many nights I got confused on the way home and ended up in Frisco, Texas, miles north of Dallas.

One time I drove home, very drunk, and came to the place in the road, about three miles from my destination, where the sign says RIGHT LANE, RIGHT TURN ONLY. I was in the right lane, ignored the sign, and went straight ahead across the intersection. My car sailed into a culvert, bounced down onto a cement block, and then lurched onto the parking lot of the 7-Eleven store. I got out of the car, unhurt. I laughed. Even the blown-out tire seemed funny to me. I got back into my broken Honda and drove home. The car tried to die on me, but I kept urging it on because I needed to go to the bathroom. To keep the car going, I drove the last mile or two in low gear.

My hangover the next day got even worse when I discovered that the oil pan had been knocked off in the accident: I had driven home with no oil. The motor was completely burned out. That little episode cost me three thousand dollars. When sober enough to think about it, I realized I got off cheap. I could have been killed, or killed someone else. I thought of the many times I had driven while intoxicated or stoned and felt fortunate I hadn't killed someone or been picked up by the police for driving under the influence. But still I didn't stop. I worried I would die from the headaches or kill myself in an accident, but I couldn't give up drinking. Sometimes I gave it a half-hearted try but was too weak to leave booze and drugs alone. It was going to take a miracle to save me from myself.

In December of 1985 I went to Flagstaff, Arizona, to spend Christmas with my twenty-six-year-old daughter, Nancy. The day after Christmas she wanted to show me the beautiful sunset in the national forest behind the towering San Francisco peaks. Four of us piled into her little Honda Civic: Nancy, her friend Kathy, my two-year-old granddaughter, Leah, and me. We planned on arriving behind the peaks as the sun was going down, and our timing was perfect. We drove about six miles on the unplowed forest service road. There were tracks to follow because people had been there before Christmas to cut trees. That day there were no other vehicles out there in the biting cold. People were snug at home enjoying their Christmas trees and a roaring blaze in the fireplace.

The Honda was going along like a hydroplane because it was so close to the ground and the truck tracks we were following went deep into the snow. Nancy had a hard time keeping the car in the tracks. Finally, she lost control, and the car plowed into a snowbank. Nancy pushed on the gas pedal, but the wheels only spun. We put branches under the tires and pushed and pulled but could not get the car to

budge. Nancy said we would have to hike to the highway. She figured it was about three miles ahead. I already felt chilled in the bitter cold, even though I was dressed warmly and had boots. Leah had on a snow-suit, but Nancy and Kathy had only canvas shoes and light denim jackets.

Nancy hoisted Leah onto her shoulders. We started walking. The snow was about eighteen inches deep and crusted on top. I would step and sink, step and sink, step and sink. We hadn't gone far when the truck tracks we were following ended, but Nancy insisted she knew the way. After going about a hundred feet further, my heart began to thump, and my breathing was very labored. I told Nancy I couldn't go on. I didn't even walk in Dallas, where the elevation was not seven thousand feet, and the temperature was not thirty degrees with eighteen inches of snow on the ground.

Nancy reminded me it was too cold to wait all night, and no one knew we were out there. She said nobody would be along that way for days—to hike out was our only hope. I asked Nancy to let Leah stay with me in the car while she and Kathy went to the highway. Nancy wouldn't hear of it. She said that she got Leah into this and she had to get her out. So I went back to the car by myself to wait for them to bring help. Soon I could no longer see them.

The fear gnawing in my stomach violated my peaceful surroundings. The silent woods were like a cathedral to me. Pine trees were thick off to the right, and to the left I could see the purple silhouette of the San Francisco peaks rising in the distance beyond a snow-covered meadow. The full moon gave a soft glow to the meadow and to the snow hugging the boughs of the pine trees. There was not a sound. I became a frightened, silent part of that still, white universe.

Then off in the distance, from the direction where Nancy had gone, I heard a coyote howling. I pictured Nancy fighting off a snarling coyote to save Leah. Cold tears filled my eyes; I felt helpless. After a few hushed minutes, I stepped out of the car, looked up at the moonlit sky, and said, "Hi God, remember me?"

I didn't know how to pray. I didn't even know if someone was up there. But it was worth a chance; I had to do something to help Nancy. I asked this God, whom I didn't even know, if he could help them. I thought I would have to pay something for his help, kind of make a bargain with him. I said if he would help them I would . . . I would . . . I would go to church! It occurred to me I ought not make any promises I had no intention of keeping, so I told the God up in the sky that if he would help Nancy, I would go to church for one month—four times.

I didn't feel any instant comfort, no warm peace inside I have heard other people describe. I didn't hear any bells ringing in my forest

cathedral, and I didn't repeat my plea, although I sat there for hours waiting and worrying. Much later I saw car lights off in the distance, and soon Nancy's friends had the Honda out of its snow trap. I didn't offer up any thanks as we drove back to Flagstaff; I laughed and told Nancy what the rescue was going to cost me—four times at church.

The first Sunday in January, back in Dallas, I thought about my bargain. I had convinced myself that Nancy, Kathy, and Leah made the trek through the forest safely because they were in good physical condition, and the full moon lighted the way. But a part of me said that I had made a promise and should keep it. I debated with myself aloud and finally, just to shut myself up, I called to find the meeting time, put on my burgundy wool suit, drove to the chapel on Meandering Way, and marched myself into the building.

Each week I counted: one down, three to go; two down, two to go; until I reached the fourth Sunday. The first week I sat on the very back row, my arms folded across my chest, ready to bolt for the door the minute the last amen was uttered. I felt something that first Sunday, but I didn't want to feel it. I worked hard to deny it. The people were friendly, seemed genuinely happy to see me there, but I was not going to get involved. Four Sundays, and that would be the end of it. But my home teacher saw me—I have no idea how he recognized me. He suggested I would enjoy the Sunday School class because they were studying the Old Testament. I thought that very amusing, yet went the next Sunday, maybe out of curiosity. The class was in the Relief Society room, and I had to move pretty fast to get out of there before all those horribly nice ladies were all over me trying to get me to stay.

I experienced a touch of sadness as I sat in sacrament meeting for the fourth and last time. However, I was glad my little bargain with God was finished. Four down and none to go. And yet on the fifth Sunday, I went to church.

During the first few months of church-going, my lifestyle didn't change; I wasn't exactly acting like an angel. Then gradually I became uneasy with what I was doing and entertained the idea of changing. One Sunday in June my home teacher cornered me at church and invited me to attend a temple preparation seminar. He said a group would meet each Sunday evening, and one of the High Priests would give the lesson in his own home. I told him he was pushing too far this time, that he had the wrong girl, that I had no desire whatsoever to go to the temple, never had, never would, no, no, no! I thought I spoke clearly, but he didn't seem to understand. He told me to think about it and he would come and get me later that night for the first lesson at his home.

At seven o'clock his wife rang my doorbell and then drove me to their home. It was decorated in warm pastel colors of yellow, pink, and blue, yet I felt cold and uncomfortable. The lesson my home teacher presented was about our acceptance of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. I was interested, but when he asked if I really believed that Heavenly Father answered my prayers, I had to say I didn't know; I had read that he did, maybe wanted to believe it, but I just didn't know. He asked what I knew about Christ's atonement. I answered: "Jesus died that we might live." That's all I knew.

After a couple of sessions, my home teacher suggested I read some passages in the Book of Mormon. The writer warned, "I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance . . . for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world," and he said that the devil would "seal you his" (Alma 34:33-35). I had considered myself close to death many times in the past few years. What would it be like to live as I had been living, for an eternity? The enormity of my sins started to frighten me. I began to pray earnestly.

The fifth Sunday we met at the home of an airline pilot. When I walked in the door, I thought this must be what heaven is like, all spacious and light, all white, light blue, and pale peach. It surprised me that this time I didn't feel out of place. When our host appeared, I was shocked to see that his face was beet red and covered with burn salve. He explained that driving home from the airport that day, he had had car trouble. When he looked under the hood, the battery exploded, severely burning his arm and face. He asked my home teacher to give him a blessing.

The pilot sat in a straight-backed chair; another man anointed his head with consecrated oil, and then he and my home teacher placed their hands upon the pilot's head. We bowed our heads and closed our eyes. While my home teacher was speaking the blessing, I felt a shiver run through my body. I began to weep. I opened my eyes for a few moments, expecting to see a glow around the three men, or a bright light fill the room. I saw nothing out of the ordinary—but I sensed a change. I felt the power of Christ and the power of the priesthood come into the room. Tears ran down my cheeks as I experienced, perhaps for the first time, Christ's love for us, his ability to heal us.

But the stubborn part of me was still fighting. Later that night when asked, "Have you determined to serve Jesus Christ to the end of your life?" I answered, "That's a long time; I want to be very sure before committing." But the experience caused me to feel something



that was most difficult to deny. Perhaps I could change, could believe in the healing as the pilot believed. I felt hope.

The next Sunday night, however, I was jolted out of my complacency. The subject of the lesson was obedience to the Lord's commandments, and when the law of chastity was discussed, I got a sick feeling in my gut. The man giving the lesson said immorality was a sin next in seriousness to murder. I suppose I had heard that before, but never with the impact it had that night. I couldn't look anyone in the eyes the rest of the evening. I realized the horrible condition of my soul. It didn't take me long to figure out that I wasn't heading for the temple, but rather toward some serious repenting. For the first time, I knew how much I needed Christ's atonement.

I began to pray, really pray, knowing I sorely needed help from my God and from Jesus. Now I knew what had happened that cold moonlit night by the San Francisco peaks when I said, "Hi God, remember me?" He was there, and Christ was there—reaching out to me.

I asked my home teacher to tell me more about Christ's atonement. He explained that Christ experienced all of our sins, as he knelt and prayed to his Father in Gethsemane. I felt so ashamed. He suggested I read Christ's own words. I read Christ's account of trembling because of pain, bleeding at every pore and suffering both body and spirit. I realized, with exquisite pain of my own, that it was my years and years of ugly sins that were heaped upon Christ in Gethsemane. I caused his pain. I caused the bleeding and the agony. I ached to go back and change what I had done. I wanted to spare him from all the horror. And I couldn't. All I could do was say, I'm so sorry—I'm so sorry. I knew then I would rather die than place one more sin upon Christ's shoulders. I quit the drinking, and the drugs, and the sleeping around.

When the eight-week temple preparation seminar ended, I went to the seashore at Padre Island off Corpus Christi, where I could be alone for a week. I needed to know that Christ had forgiven me. I found a quiet spot along the shore and walked inland, up the side of a barren sand dune. I saw a secluded crater completely surrounded by hills of white sand. I walked down into the crater and knelt on the hot sand and prayed. I wanted some manifestation that my repentance was accepted. Nothing happened. I felt foolish kneeling there in the glaring sun. I walked away from the sand dune into the surf.

Day after day—in the morning, in the heat of the day, late at night—I walked barefoot along the surf, letting my past course through my memory to exorcise the evil. I knew I would have to confess all those years of sins to my stake president. I recoiled at the thought of telling him those incidents. I wept with shame. I waded further out

into the surf, praying vocally and singing loudly, "Come unto Jesus, he'll ever heed you though in the darkness you've gone astray," and "I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me." The surf drowned out my off-key voice. I listened to hear him say I was forgiven. I prayed and pleaded and read the scriptures and sang the songs over and over that week and waited for something miraculous to happen. No bolt of lightening came, no instant peace flooded my soul; I didn't feel any warm glow within my breast. I was devastated.

Toward the end of the week I noticed how beautiful the sky was, particularly when the sun set. The rosy hue of the clouds met the blue of the sky, and I would sit on the sand and watch until the last reflection in the water faded away. I pictured God up there, watching me. I wondered why he didn't talk to me. I also wondered why the sky wasn't so beautiful in Dallas as in Corpus Christi. When I went home to Dallas, to face the ordeal of the confession, I was amazed to see the sunsets were just as fine there. Why hadn't I noticed before?

I met with the stake president many times, in his office and at his home. He counseled me and prepared me for my confession. His wife opened the door on the appointed night, and I told him that I felt I was defiling his home to even mention my past. He assured me everything would be all right, and after we knelt in prayer, I found the courage to tell him all. I recited my transgressions as best I could, not in explicit detail, but not whitewashing anything either. We both wept. We prayed again.

Because of the gravity of the sins and the many years they had continued, my stake president convened a High Council court. On a gloomy, rainy Sunday morning, I was ushered into the room where the twelve councilmen and the stake presidency sat around a conference table. I felt ashamed. After the stake president told the gentlemen the nature of my transgressions, they asked if I wanted to say anything. I told them, with tears streaming down my face, that when he recited my sins they didn't sound nearly as horrid as they should. I expected to see distaste on their faces; instead I saw love. I felt love and concern radiating out from them to me.

I waited in a small room for their verdict; the stake president and his counselors were in another room praying about the decision, which they would then take to the High Council for confirmation. I also prayed. I prayed most fervently. Did I kneel? I don't remember. But I remember how earnestly I wanted to be excommunicated so I could be baptized again. I needed to be baptized. I had read so many scriptures that said, "Repent and be baptized." I was afraid that because they could see I had repented—had changed—they would just gently

slap my hand and tell me to sin no more. I wept and prayed and pleaded that they would excommunicate me.

When we were back in the High Council room, the stake president told me their decision was excommunication. I thanked them from the depths of my heart. I doubt if I will ever again feel such an outpouring of hope and love as I experienced in that room that Sunday morning. When I walked out of the building, the sun was breaking through the clouds, and I thought it had come out to celebrate my joy.

I was baptized again. All my sins were washed away; I became clean and pure. Gradually, seeping into my bones, came the knowledge I had been heard—even at the seashore—and I was forgiven. Now all I have to do is forgive myself.

