

Context: This is a letter I wrote to my mother and father about my current approach to the Word of Wisdom. I recently resigned from the Church, and I have other siblings who have left and who I suspect will leave, so I wanted to establish some common ground and explain my current thinking as a way to build bridges of understanding. I've added a few headers, simplified some of the wording, changed some formatting to make it more readable, and added a few thoughts that weren't in the original.

Dear Mom and Dad,

First off, I'm excited that you two are about done with your mission. We're all proud of you and glad you were willing and able to give of yourselves and serve others so diligently. I'm confident that you have blessed many people's lives. And maybe most of all, I'm glad that serving has enriched your life and your marriage. I am also grateful for everything I learned, the good I was able to do, and how I grew as a person on my mission.

Introduction

I was glad we were able to talk about alcohol and the Word of Wisdom some about a month back. Sometimes those conversations are tough to have. For me, it's hard when I hear that you disapprove of me, my actions, or my way of thinking. For you, I know that it's hard to hear when your children think or act in ways that run against the grain of your strongly held beliefs and you feel may result in your kid's (or your Grandkid's) short or long term harm (which is completely understandable). In the end, even though they can be hard conversations to have, I prefer to have them because I think talking through and understanding why a person feels and thinks the way they do is the only way for relationships to grow. If our relationships are to just stagnate, what good is that for anyone? I think vibrant, growing relationships are worth the effort. And, I think it is healthy to view differences as a potential strength to our family, and not necessarily a weakness.

So, in that spirit of communication and understanding, I wanted to advance our discussion about alcohol, tea, and coffee a bit. I have observed that differences in ideas about the Word of Wisdom are often a sticking point between active and post-Mormon family members. I've thought about this a lot, and I think there is enough common ground that we should all be able to understand and respect one another's positions.

Your Position

Maybe I'll start by reiterating what I think is your position (feel free to correct me if I have not fully captured it):

For our day and age, any alcohol consumption is unacceptable. Outside of the fact that alcohol is prohibited by the modern Church, this is based mostly on a cost/benefit analysis where you recognize no benefit to alcohol consumption and at the same time recognize all the ills that are facilitated directly or indirectly by alcohol—primarily **impairment of decision making ability** (e.g., embarrassing others), **damage to health (cancers, etc)**, **facilitating or contributing to substance abuse addictions**, and **DUI related deaths and injuries**. You also mentioned the story of your father drinking and making promises that he didn't follow up on and how painful that was to you. So, insofar as it contributes to broken promises, you are also against it.

For the sake of discussion, I'm also assuming that you disapprove of people drinking tea or coffee. This is based at least partly on the fact that these drinks are forbidden in the Word of Wisdom, and also on the idea that these substances may create a physical dependency in people and may contain other harmful substances (e.g., tannins).

Again, if I've mischaracterized your thoughts, please feel free to clarify.

Insofar as I understand this position. I respect this position. I also respect the idea that if the church is true, then this is counsel from God and hence should be given strong consideration.

Common Ground

Outside of that, I also believe that all of us (family members in the Church and out of the Church) share a common core of belief on these matters. I think we believe the following with similar, if not identical, conviction:

1. Our agency is precious, hence it is wise to avoid becoming addicted to any substance. A state of addiction is self-defeating and, in proportion to the level of addiction, leads to misery and loss of agency.
2. Given that we live in our bodies and we desire that they serve us well we ought to treat our bodies with great care and respect. Our bodies are not mere objects to be used solely for our own pleasure but vehicles for our soul/consciousness to experience life and to help and bless others.
3. One death by DUI is too many. People should never drive (or operate heavy machinery) under the influence of alcohol.
4. One addiction (or death due to addiction) is one too many.
5. Children and young adults should wait at least until the legal drinking age until consuming alcohol.
6. Unless there is a reason that justifies it, people should keep their promises. Unless there is some good reason for it, people should not do things that would embarrass them or anyone else.
7. Enjoying the good things of the earth is healthy and part of living a fulfilling life.

The philosophy behind the last point is also captured in D&C 59:18-20:

...all things which come of the earth, in the season thereof, are made for the benefit and the use of man, both to please the eye and to gladden the heart; Yea, for food... for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul. And it pleaseth God that he hath given all these things unto man; for unto this end were they made to be used, with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion.

In my mind, I see that we share an enormous amount of common ground with one another, and I think that common ground extends generally to most people inside and outside of the Church (how much this extends to people outside of the Church is maybe a discussion for another day).

Health Consequences

One point where we probably do not see eye-to-eye yet is on the health consequences of alcohol, tea, and coffee. The Church typically focuses on all the negative aspects of tea, coffee, and alcohol. After my faith transition I decided that I should research the health effects (since I knew next to nothing about all of these). I was strongly biased against all of them. But, after spending many hours researching the health effects of these substances, I came to the realization that I was misinformed and my fear of them was largely unfounded.

I encourage you to spend some time becoming acquainted with the scientific consensus on the health effects of these drinks. Below I've made links that will pull up the latest review articles with each of these in the title and "health" in any other field. That way you can read the science (or at least the abstracts—that's what I do for the articles behind a paywall) for yourself.

- [tea](#)

- coffee
- beer
- wine

Below are some basic summaries of what you will find above, from the general media:

- [Why tea is so healthy for you?](#)
- [Why is Coffee Good for you?](#)
- [Mayo Clinic Summary \(Alcohol\), Drinking boosts life-expectancy](#)

I used to think that the benefits of alcohol, tea, and coffee consumption were just pushed (and inflated) by people who wanted to justify a habit. However, certain aspects of the science is fairly well established at this point (i.e., the overall health effects). These substances are likely somewhat good for you (particularly in moderation), but at worst probably just neutral for health. However, viewed in comparison to soft drinks (or high sugar snacks), they are considerably more healthy. I believe that virtually every medical doctor who has taken the time to familiarize themselves with the data would agree with me.

Of course, I'm aware that some of the health benefits (and fewer undesirable side-effects) may be derived by consuming other substances (e.g., [grape juice](#)), but that does not negate the positive effects of tea, coffee, and alcohol consumption (especially when compared with high-sugar beverages, which is what many Latter-day Saints regularly consume as an alternative to tea, coffee, and alcohol).

Addiction and Dependency

It is certainly true that consuming too much alcohol regularly can lead to addiction and regularly consuming too much caffeine can lead to a mild physical dependency. Interestingly, I've recently learned that there is a difference between an "addiction", as it is formally defined by psychologists, and a physical dependency. While alcohol can be addictive, caffeine is not: "Caffeine addiction, or a pathological and compulsive form of use, has not been documented in humans" [source](#). Hence, while caffeine dependencies may be inconvenient and undesirable (and should be avoided), they are not dangerous in the same way that an alcohol addiction may be—alcohol addiction/dependency is a serious issue.

The Church has settled upon an approach of completely avoiding these substances as a way to deal with these risks. Such an approach has some clear advantages. For instance, [those in religions that prohibit alcohol have much lower rates of alcohol dependence](#) than the general public. But creating a taboo against alcohol can also generate higher levels of guilt/shame, and [higher guilt/shame is inversely associated with addiction recovery rates](#). In addition, people with highly compulsive or anxious personalities may just end up merely choosing a different addiction or preoccupation (e.g., [eating](#), a [hypersexual disorder](#), or a [religious addiction](#)) without ever dealing with the root mental/emotional causes behind their behavior.

The alternative model for dealing with addiction risks is moderation, education, awareness, and openness. In this model, family members are taught the risks, moderation is encouraged, and family members are open about their use (i.e., there is no taboo). Problems may be dealt with by working towards [moderation rather than alcohol abstinence](#). This kind of approach cannot guarantee a family member will never become addicted at some point, but it does foster an environment where addiction is not likely to occur because it removes primary drivers of addiction (taboo and secrecy) and if it does occur it is likely to be dealt with before the behavior has spiraled out of control. As an example, Europeans drink more alcohol than Americans, and alcohol use is integral to their culture (e.g., teenagers can legally drink at home at the age of 16), but Europeans engage in binge drinking far less frequently than Americans (the world's leaders in binge drinking) ([source](#)). Similarly, nations

that have decriminalized drug use generally report lower drug use ([source](#)).

I see merits to both approaches, and I am fine to use aspects of both approaches (for instance, I expect and demand alcohol abstinence of children in my care, and I strongly advocate the abstinence approach with highly addictive substances like heroin or meth). The Church also uses both approaches to deal with various issues. An abstinence only approach may work great when it works, but when it fails the results may be catastrophic. A moderation/openness approach may have a higher rate of failure (i.e., someone becomes addicted to some level), but failures may be less catastrophic. Both approaches have significant merit.

My Position

Once they familiarize themselves with the data, most of your family who has left (or may leave) will likely adopt something similar to this policy regarding alcohol, tea, and coffee:

There is no problem drinking alcohol, tea, or coffee in moderation. It is much better for a person than drinking/eating high-sugar snacks.

Of course, different family members will vary in how much they integrate these into their lives (if at all), but on principle, I don't think any of them will reject them outright. Responsibly drinking an occasional glass of alcohol, tea, or coffee easily fits within the fundamental principles I've outlined above and is consonant with living a healthy, productive, responsible, and happy life.

I am asking that you respect me and all of your family members who hold this position (or who may hold this position in the future). And I am asking that you respect this position. I believe that you should respect us as much as you respect any of our siblings who choose to abstain in some or all of these drinks for religious or health reasons. I am asking you to respect us as much as we respect you in your choice of abstaining.

Reflections

I also want to offer up some data and thoughts for reflection. I'm following each of these data points with some thought questions. I hope you don't find them too annoying. Some of them are leading questions (sorry). I obviously have thoughts about these things, and they have shaped my questions. I'm just hoping that in thinking about some of these questions you can gain some additional insight into why/how I think the way I do about this topic.

Okay, here goes:

1. At a wedding celebration, Joseph Smith taught that drinking wine on such occasions was an "institution of heaven" and a "pattern set us by the Saviour himself."

We then took some refreshment and our hearts were made glad with the fruit of the vine. This is according to the pattern set us by the our Saviour him self when he graced the marriage in Cana of Gallilee and turned the water into wine that they might make themselves joyful, and we feel disposed to patronize all the institutions of heaven. [josephsmithpapers](#)

Was Joseph Smith wrong when he talked about the propriety of drinking wine on such occasions? If the amount consumed and the attitude of consumption are the same, is it any less after the pattern the Savior set if non-members drink at such special occasions? Were those drinking alcohol at this wedding celebration licentious? Were they weak of character?

2. Joseph Smith recorded that he "drank a glass of beer" at a bar two weeks before his martyrdom (see [The Millennial Star](#) [3rd paragraph from the bottom of the page on the right column]). *Was Joseph Smith weak in character for doing this? Was he being irresponsible?*

3. We also have record of Joseph Smith drinking wine in everyday life when offered it. For example:

Called at the office and drank a glass of wine with Sister Jenetta Richards, made by her mother in England, and reviewed a portion of the conference minutes. ([History of the Church](#))

Should he have declined drinking wine with this woman? Did drinking together enhance or diminish from the experience? Was he able to adequately perform his spiritual duties following his drink? Did this action mean Joseph was weak in character?

4. The Word of Wisdom explicitly prescribes drinking beer (read D&C 89:17 very carefully). This is confirmed from the behavior of the early Saints (I've read through all the early documents on this). Brigham Young said this about beer in 1875:

[beer] is a mild drink, and is very pleasant and agreeable to a great many ... ([source](#))

Can the drinking of beer be viewed as keeping the original intent of the Word of Wisdom?

5. Drinking wine for "sacraments" (D&C 89:5) was clearly interpreted by Joseph Smith to mean drinking wine was fine for special occasions. *Can drinking wine on special occasions be considered keeping the original intent of the Word of Wisdom?*
6. In the early church, drinking alcohol because a person was feeling down was considered completely within the bounds of the Word of Wisdom. For instance, John Taylor said this about his experience in Carthage Jail:

Sometime after dinner we sent for some wine. It has been reported by some that this was taken as a sacrament. It was no such thing; our spirits were generally dull and heavy, and it was sent for to revive us. I think it was Captain Jones who went after it, but they would not suffer him to return. I believe we all drank of the wine, and gave some to one or two of the prison guards. ([History of the Church](#))

Were Willard Richards, Hyrum Smith, John Taylor and Joseph Smith weak in character because they drank alcohol when their "spirits were generally dull and heavy"? Did they lose the spirit as a result of this action?

7. The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve drank wine every week at their Temple sacrament meeting until 1906.

On 5 July 1906, the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve began using water instead of wine for their sacrament meetings. [FairMormon](#)

Did a glass of wine each week inhibit their spiritual sensitivity over the course of the +50 years while this was being practised? Did this action make them of weak character? Did any of them become addicted?

8. Muslims [forbid eating pork](#) and [Hindus do not kill cows](#), both for religious reasons. However, most Latter-day Saints feel that eating beef and pork in moderation is just fine (for instance, all Church owned restaurants of which I am aware serve meat as the main course at almost every meal). *How would you feel if a Muslim or Hindu friend looked down on you because you eat meat sparingly? Would they be justified in looking down on you? Are you weak of char-*

acter because you eat meat sparingly? Are the brethren weak of character because they eat meat sparingly?

9. In 2004 and 2005 Utah led the nation in prescription drug abuse. In 2002, it was found that anti-depressants are prescribed in Utah more than any other state, and at twice the national average.

Utahns rely on mind-altering substances with high frequency (both legitimately and illegitimately). Which are more likely to be addictive: prescription drugs or alcohol? What is the difference between a person who “self-medicates” by drinking a glass or two of alcohol when their spirit is “dull and heavy” and the brethren in Carthage doing it? Which is a better society, where people take prescription medications to help deal with depression, or where they drink alcohol (in moderation) to help deal with depression? Is there any real difference between the two?

10. It has been shown that both moderate and heavy drinkers of alcohol live longer than those who do not drink alcohol (even after controlling for all other possible variables) (source).

If a person drinks alcohol because they want to lower their risk of heart disease, is that irresponsible? Does that mean they are weak of character?

11. You talked about not wanting to hear about if I ever drank alcohol. How am I supposed to feel about myself if I choose to responsibly drink alcohol when you treat it like this (i.e., shunning it)? Does this behavior need to be shunned? What good does this kind of shunning accomplish? What do you gain emotionally by setting up the situation in this manner (i.e., enacting a wall of silence, separation, and shame)? Does it help you? Does it help me? Does such a wall of silence help to contribute to addictive behavior in general (i.e., could it contribute to people keeping problems hidden)?

12. If responsible drinking becomes an enriching part of my life (like it was for Joseph Smith), why would you not want to share in that joy and journey? The early brethren felt like it was important enough to note on many occasions. Should they have kept their enjoyment of alcohol hidden? Does the family share pictures with you when they go out shooting? At this time I don't choose to own a gun or to shoot guns as a hobby. Should I try to shame or shun those who shoot guns? Should I assume they fully understand the risks, or should I worry about them and their gun habit? Is shooting guns together really more productive than drinking alcohol (responsibly) together?

13. Perhaps the most pressing health crisis in the U.S. is directly related to excessive consumption of refined sugar. Sugar is addictive, may damage relationships (e.g., diminishes sex drive), and is responsible for a number of health problems:

“Why is it that one-third of adults [worldwide] have high blood pressure, when in 1900 only 5 percent had high blood pressure?” he asked. “Why did 153 million people have diabetes in 1980, and now we're up to 347 million? Why are more and more Americans obese? Sugar, we believe, is one of the culprits, if not the major culprit.” source

It can easily be argued that sugar dwarfs alcohol use in terms of total damages, loss of life, and impact on quality of life. Yet the Church offers high-sugar treats at virtually every function (e.g., ice-cream sandwiches, cookies, etc.). As a family, many of our fondest traditions and gatherings revolve around consuming treats high in sugar.

Tea, coffee, and alcohol all have been shown to contribute to longer life-spans and generally to greater health while excessive sugar consumption is linked to shorter life-spans and generally poorer health.

Why is it okay to look with favor upon those who embrace sugar as a substance integral to celebrations and family/social gatherings but then to shun those who see tea, coffee, and alcohol

as substances integral to celebrations and sociality?

14. I rarely if ever consume a normal soft drink (and if I do I usually only drink about half of one) because I am aware of the harmful effects of fructose on metabolism and health. If I were to drink a glass of beer, tea, or coffee on occasion, I think that may be more healthy than many of my LDS colleagues who regularly drink several soft drinks every day (some fairly caffeinated). If I am exercising similar care and moderation in my consumption choices, and my choices are likely to be as healthy for me as are their choices, *why would you respect my choices less than theirs?*

Conclusion

On a final note, Elder Renlund recently **said this**:

We may on occasion find ourselves in uncomfortable situations where we differ in doctrine with ... family members. But the doctrine can never be used to justify treating others with anything less than respect and dignity.

I hope that I have not offended you in talking openly and freely on this topic. If I have, please feel free to explain how and why and I will try to understand. Also, if you feel like you have new or different information to add to the discussion, I welcome it. I also want to make clear that in relaying these thoughts and ideas I am not trying to convince you that you should change your opinion on how you choose to live or what you consume. Like I said, I have deep respect for the Word of Wisdom and generally think it is a sound code to live by. I am merely asking that you respect your children who choose to follow a slightly different health code—especially since that code is generally consonant with the same fundamental principles that we all believe.

Love,

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