

Interview with Jeff Herten

Author of *An Uncommon Drunk: Revelations of a High-Functioning Alcoholic*

Reader Views welcomes Jeff Herten, M.D., author of “An Uncommon Drunk: Revelations of a High-Functioning Alcoholic.” Dr. Herten is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita Thanks for joining us today Dr. Herten. We are happy to have the chance to talk with you about your new and quite revolutionary book, “An Uncommon Drunk: Revelations of a High-Functioning Alcoholic.” Would you start by telling readers what your book is about?

Dr. Herten Thank you Juanita, it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to awaken your readers to the unknown and untold hazards of alcohol. My book is about how I woke up one day at fifty-four years of age to discover that I was a high functioning alcoholic, how I got sober, and the unbelievably frightening things that I learned about what alcohol does to your body and to your mind. Juanita, these are things that you and your readers have never heard about before. For instance, alcohol is directly linked to the causation of at least eight kinds of cancer, including breast cancer, colon cancer, and liver cancer, among others. Alcohol is the second leading cause of osteoporosis, a disease that is epidemic in middle-aged women in our country. The list goes on and on. When I discovered these facts in my research, I wanted to share them others. From that desire, the book took form.

Juanita What is a high-functioning alcoholic?

Dr. Herten I define a high-functioning alcoholic as a person who drinks almost everyday, is often under the influence, yet performs his job, raises a family, and very often excels in many areas of life.

Juanita Dr. Herten, how long were you an alcoholic, and how were you able to function in such a demanding profession with your alcoholism?

Dr. Herten I was a high-functioning alcoholic for at least twenty-five years with a gradual progression or worsening during the last five years of my drinking. Juanita, I was able to function because I never drank during the day, only in the evening, and because many people, myself included, are able to perform at a very high level intoxicated. In the book, I tell about a personal friend of my parents who was a huge success in real estate and he drank a fifth of whiskey a day for years.

Juanita How and why did you decide to finally quit drinking? Did you suffer any of the ill effects of a long history of alcohol consumption?

Dr. Herten I had a sudden awareness that my problem had gotten out of hand when I almost physically injured a young boy who was annoying me and a group of friends at a New Years Party. I had tried to quit before, but this was the proverbial straw. I knew I had to quit or risk ruining my whole life. I got down on my knees and I prayed to God to do what I could not. I thank Him everyday that he heard me.

I did not suffer any ill-effects from the long years of drinking. There are many reasons for that, too many to innumerate here, but I do explain in the book how resilient the body and nervous system are. It's truly remarkable how complete a recovery can be once a person abstains from alcohol.

Juanita How did your colleagues respond to your alcoholism and your choice to quit?

Dr. Herten Many of my colleagues are, as yet, unaware of my alcoholism but many will be finding out soon with the publication of my book. Those that know are astounded because they had no idea I had a problem. Most have been extremely supportive and proud of me for having the courage to share my story with others. Some, who have problems with alcohol, have been surprisingly tight-lipped. It's a form of denial: They can't acknowledge I had a problem unless they acknowledge that they have one, and they can't do that.

Juanita What inspired you to write your book?

Dr. Herten Juanita, I am a horseman. Six months after I got sober, my wife and I rode most of the 2000 mile Pony Express Trail from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Carson City, Nevada. About half-way across the country, my beloved horse, Famus, colicked and was close to death. I drove all night (something I could have never done in my drinking days) to get him to the vet school at Colorado State University. They saved him. I was saying a prayer of thanksgiving and I got a very clear message: If I really wanted to thank God, I should write about my recovery in hopes that I might help others.

Juanita In your opinion, why is drinking alcohol so prevalent in our society and culture?

Dr. Herten First, it feels good. In small doses it makes us happy, feel confident and sexy, and relieves our fears and social anxieties. If it weren't for the fact that it had terrible health consequences and was highly addictive, it would be a terrific drug. Second, the marketers of alcohol have made it very cool. It's so deeply ingrained in our culture that it seems un-American to speak out against it. But that's what I am doing.

Juanita How would someone know that they, or someone they love, is a high-functioning alcoholic, or in danger of becoming an alcoholic?

Dr. Herten I have a whole chapter devoted to questions that suggest whether or not a person has a problem. If you drink almost every day and miss it when you don't, you have a problem. If you

drink for the effect it has, like one would take a drug, you have a problem. If you use it as an anti-depressant, if it makes you angry, if you are uncomfortable at social occasions where alcohol is not served, you have a problem. If you have had a DUI or a sexual failure while drinking, you have a problem. There's a much longer list in the book, but that's good for starters.

Juanita What are some of the negative side effects of alcohol? Most people tend to think that the negative side effects only happen in the down-and-out drunk, or the stumbling alcoholic. Is this true?

Dr. Herten No, Juanita, it is not true. Many of the chronic diseases we see in our senior population may be caused by or contributed to by alcohol, even in moderate amounts. The list is exhaustive, Juanita. Alcohol causes eight kinds of cancer, osteoporosis, neuropathy, obesity & diabetes, immune suppression, gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD), dementia, sexual dysfunction, insomnia, allergies and hepatitis.

Juanita Your book includes chapters detailing “chronic alcohol poisoning” and “acute alcohol poisoning.” Would you explain these two terms and how they differ?

Dr. Herten Let's take acute alcohol poisoning first, Juanita. If you sat down right now with a half-gallon of vodka and started drinking it, your blood alcohol would rise through laughing and giggling (0.1%) to boisterous staggering (0.2%) to falling down/passing out (0.3%) to death (0.4%). Alcohol poisons nerves in the brain. When the poisoning is severe enough, the vital centers in the brain stem that control breathing, heart, and consciousness shut down. In acute alcohol poisoning, the drunk stops breathing. The heart deprived of oxygen fails soon after and death follows.

In chronic alcohol poisoning, the repeated insult of alcohol to internal organs, especially the liver, finally results in irreversible changes. The liver finally scars enough (cirrhosis) that it can't function well enough to detoxify the ammonia in the blood stream. The ammonia causes a severe neurologic impairment. The increased back pressure through the liver causes veins throughout the esophagus, stomach, and bowel to bulge and eventually rupture, causing life-threatening bleeding. The failing liver often causes the kidneys to fail as well. It is not a pretty end.

Juanita You mentioned earlier the great resiliency of the human body once the consumption of alcohol is ceased. Would you comment on the differing symptoms in individuals regarding how alcohol affects their bodies? Can all problems related to alcohol be turned around, or are there points-of-no-return?

Dr. Herten Juanita, the list of symptoms caused by alcohol is extensive. In addition to its most well known effect of intoxication, alcohol can cause hepatitis, myocardopathy (heart muscle inflammation), pancreatitis, gastritis, encephalitis and dementia, insomnia, immune suppression, allergies, osteoporosis, and eight different kinds of cancer. Most, except for cancer, are reversible if the damage hasn't progressed too far. There are points of no return, however, especially when the liver is extensively scarred (cirrhosis) and the brain is permanently damaged (encephalopathy and dementia).

Juanita As a doctor, why do you think the medical profession largely disregards the long list of negative effects of alcohol consumption, while emphasizing the few positives? Do doctors really know the truth, or are they being deceived also?

Dr. Herten I think many doctors are uninformed about the true risks of alcohol. I think others are in denial or disingenuous because they have their own issues with alcohol.

Juanita Dr. Herten, you mentioned the power of denial earlier, and this term is synonymous with those suffering from addictions. Would you explain further the insidious nature of denial, and the potential of your book to help breakthrough denial's strong grip?

Dr. Herten Most ordinary people, when they put their hand on a hot stove and burn it will admit that they were burned and not touch the stove again. It is a testimony to the power of the addiction and the insanity that it produces that alcoholics will deny the burn and put their hand right back on the stove. The potential of my book to overcome that denial lies in its ability to take the alcoholic beyond the first negative outcome (the burn or in the case of the alcoholic, the scene they created that night and the hang over they had the next day) to the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth outcome, namely the abused spouse, the broken marriage, the DUI, the job loss, the severely retarded infant, the traffic fatality, and inevitably, the death from alcoholism whether by cirrhosis or suicide.

Juanita Would you compare the alcohol industry to the tobacco industry? How so?

Dr. Herten There are alarming parallels between the alcohol industry today and the tobacco industry twenty years ago. All the data (with references) that I provide are indisputable facts in the scientific literature. Yet, the only thing you see on the front page of the newspaper is the latest study of how alcohol is good for your heart. There is a conspiracy of misinformation going on here. The papers are only publishing what the alcohol industry wants the public to know. They don't tell you that, in the same French study that showed less deaths from heart disease in wine drinkers, there were more deaths from suicide and cancer than in the group who drank less.

Juanita Your book provides alarming statistics that suggest 25 % of alcoholics are teenagers. What would you tell parents regarding what is looking more and more like a national epidemic?

Dr. Herten I think every parent of a teenager should read my book. I think every teen should read my book or, at least the chapter "For Teens and Young Adults." Sexual promiscuity, frightening increases in sexually transmitted diseases, teen suicide, and vehicular deaths can all be linked to teenage drinking. What's even more frightening are studies that show that the younger a person begins drinking the higher the likelihood that they will become alcoholic and the more likely they will add other addictive substances to their lifestyle.

Juanita Dr. Herten, how has your life changed since you quit drinking?

Dr. Herten It is wonderful beyond my ability to describe, Juanita. I am free from the burden of alcohol for the first time since I went to college. I have learned that the fear and insecurity that was

salved by intoxication is a normal part of the human condition. You can't ever learn who you really are without alcohol, until you confront that fear and insecurity and cope without that crutch. I like myself and who I have become, better than I ever have. This is real happiness.

Juanita There seems to be much debate for and against twelve step programs in the recovery community. What are your thoughts on AA, the help it can provide, as well as the high recidivism rate of its members?

Dr. Herten I must state that I am not a spokesman for AA. I think it works for many people if they can be honest and follow the twelve steps. I think it is difficult or impossible to quantify the success rate of any recovery program. If you have ten alcoholics and they enter a program that produces two lifetime "cures" from alcoholism, those two drop out of the statistics. The other eight may bounce in and out of recovery a number of times (a good friend, now 20 years sober, failed rehab five times) and each time they get counted again, so it skews the numbers in the favor of failure. There wouldn't be millions of AA members if it didn't work. Remember, before AA, alcoholism was considered incurable. Patients were put in mental hospitals or resigned to the streets. The disease was invariably fatal. That's not true any more.

Juanita Dr. Herten, what are you hoping readers understand/learn by reading your book?

Dr. Herten I hope they learn the truth about the health risks of alcohol. I hope they grasp the potentially serious signs of high-functioning alcoholism and the progression of the disease. And I hope they understand that there is help out there for those who still suffer.

Juanita How can readers find out more about you and "An Uncommon Drunk"?

Dr. Herten Juanita, the book is available at Barnes & Noble, Amazon.com, and iUniverse books on-line. Anyone who wants to know more can access my website at AnUncommonDrunk.com.

Juanita Thanks you for taking the time to talk with us today Dr. Herten. You have compiled a groundbreaking book on the ill-effects of alcohol, and we encourage readers to look for "An Uncommon Drunk" at local and online bookstores. Do you have any last thoughts for your readers today?

Dr. Herten I'd like to thank you for helping me explain the urgency of my plea. I hope that every person reading this who has a problem or has a friend with a problem will read the book. I know it will change their lives.