

## THE LOSS OF SUBSTANCE: CAFFEINE

November 25, 2010

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Now caffeine was much more of a problem for me. I really liked coffee. Notice the past tense? I liked its smell. I liked its taste, and I liked the get-up-and-go that it offered. I have had a long and happy love affair with the bean. For sure I was addicted to it, and many times. Way back in the day, when I lived in just one room on no money, it was a hot plate and the jar of instant coffee, and all the time. Instant coffee back then was really terrible tasting. I have no idea how it is today.

Then I learned to boil water, drop some coffee grounds in, turn off the flame, and cover it. My teacher Andrew McIver taught me how to do that. And anywhere and all-the-time 'percolation', of course. Remember the old percolators that mom and dad used? In my life they have been gradually replaced with glass containers, plastic funnels, and filter papers. And let's not forget the coffee grinders. Pre-ground coffee went out of my life about the time I got married. Since then, I grind my own, so to speak. And did we drink coffee?

Sitting in the Michigan Union and drinking cup after cup of coffee is about all we did back in the early 1960s. Maybe we had a couple of donuts or a grilled pecan roll (with butter) on the side too. That was very close to heaven. Much later, in my mid-thirties and on into my forties, it was all about the beans and espresso machines. I have two of these machines kicking around somewhere. I imagine they still work. And when I had a restaurant (what a blog that story would make!) I bought a \$6000 espresso machine that could do about anything but talk.

For me it was never straight espresso that captivated, but cappuccino, and finally café Wien, Viennese-style coffee, dark and black or with just a little cream. No sugar. So where did I go wrong with coffee? How is it that today I never, ever drink it? There is a reason and reasons.

The most obvious reason (but not the most important) is my particular constitution. I am naturally speedy. I usually need to slow down, not speed up. Coffee gets me moving and I don't just mean around the town. It sends me to the bathroom, sometimes in an urgent condition, especially if I am already upset about something. But I was able to (mostly) live with that, for the sake of the coffee, of course.

And then there is the fact that as I got older I could not sleep if I drank coffee. Oh yes, I would lie down and try to sleep, but it seemed that I was ever in a kind of coffee trance, suspended somewhere between sleep and awake. Early on, who cared? But in later years, the line between wake and sleep, which was already getting somewhat tenuous, drifted toward awake and not sleep. Bummer. And it was not just regular coffee, but even decaf coffee has too much caffeine for me, not to mention chocolate. But those were minor obstacles only.

A subtle yet more important factor (and finally the deciding factor) that ended the reign of coffee in my life was this: I tend to make my living not by doing physical things and work, but rather by using my mind, and often making a living depends upon what I write, design, or program. I am an author, musician, designer, programmer, etc. I exist on my wits and creativity, for the most part. Remember I don't even have a high-school diploma as a safety net if I fall. What I found out was that coffee (at least in my system) was like white noise on a radio, a buzz or burst of energy that was so loud that it drowned out whatever natural creativity I happened to have going

for me at the time. Yes, coffee kept me at it and gave me what seemed at the time like added energy, but for what result?

Creative energy can be very subtle, kind of percolating (pun intended) up from somewhere deep in there until it gets to my attention, to where I can realize it and use it to make whatever I am doing better or smoother, as in: more creative. And this was not an isolated observation. Since I dearly, dearly loved my coffee, I tested it out (as I do all my vices) many, many times with always the same result. If I really, really needed whatever I was writing to be at my best, coffee made it much more difficult to impossible. It veiled everything in a hazy drone or buzz. In fact, many days when I gave in and had coffee, I would just give up writing or programming for that day and have to clean my office or whatever. Anything else would require a re-do the following day because it was uninspired.

Eventually I had to make a choice as to which I loved more, that comforting and delicious daily coffee or my innate creativity. In the end, the creativity barely won out, because without creativity life is 'really' not much fun for me. And you can bet that I tried every possible kind of ersatz coffee, things like Pero, chicory, dandelion, Cafix, herbal teas, and whatever else was hot and wet! I like the dandelion coffees, but they gave me headaches.

And trying to give up coffee will prove to almost anyone that we can be addicted to caffeine. Every time I would go off coffee, I would get massive headaches and my whole life would stall out until I went back on the stuff or stayed off cold-turkey. Caffeine is a drug and is addictive. Period.

I sometimes marvel at the amount of caffeinated tea that Buddhists drink, in particular the Tibetans, cup after cup, and all day long. And I joke about all the caffeine they must ingest. Is it any wonder that the extant Buddhist literature is greater by a factor of five than any other religion? Could it be the caffeine that writes all those books and texts? In the style of Bill Maher: "I kid the Buddhists."

Along the way I found out that I don't really like hot beverages. My system already runs hot; my hands are always warm. I need cooling, not heating. If I can't have coffee, I don't want any other hot liquids in my system. OK, once and a while I might have a cup of the Cafix swill with a little milk in it, but that's it.

Ultimately, I gave up coffee because I discovered that my mind was so clear and perfect (just as it is) that I did not want to buzz it up with all that coffee noise. In the end I just wanted my mind to keep being as it naturally is. It has been many years since I have had coffee and even chocolate is enough to put a buzz on that I find annoying. It is just not worth it. That is the bottom line.

Once every two years or so I will drink a couple of tablespoons of some visitor's coffee, just to see if things have changed, but no. I can feel the noise rise and start to drown out the kinder, gentler parts of me, and my family knows we all need that part of me. Still, I miss my coffee and my epitaph might read "The man who loved coffee" or some such thing. But this man loves the thin layer of creativity even more.

Tomorrow I will either wrap this up or go into less-charted territory like: sugar.

