

HAUNTED VICTORY

# DISCUSSION GUIDE



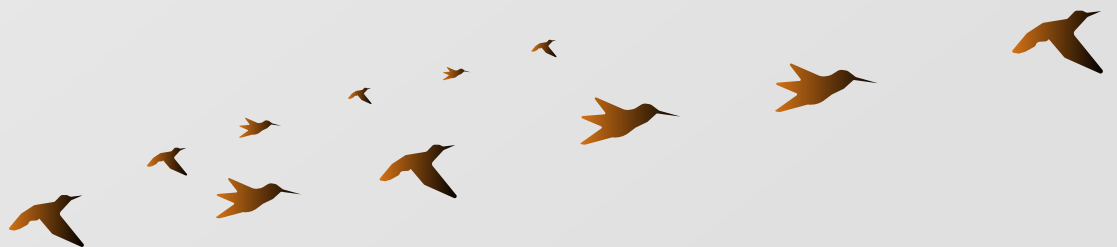
Gil wrote his memoir at age 63. Writing it was a part of his healing journey after 40 years of daily drinking. He had his first drink at 22 when he left college and escaped 7 years of sexual abuse by his athletic coach. He had been living as a functional alcoholic until he was 60, at which point his stressful living situation turned him into a day drinker.

The opening line from his memoir is:

**“I had no idea I was dying—  
that’s how bad it had gotten.”**

And in his prologue, he poses the question to himself:

**“How did I get here,  
and where am I headed?”**



# CHAPTER 106

## THE SIMPLE THINGS,

page 366 (September 2021, age 64)

“After my hepatologist told me it was alcohol that was killing me, I was in a state of disbelief. I could accept my medical condition—I understood what was happening to my body and why—so I was not in denial. But I could not comprehend how I had let the events in my life transpire to the point that I was killing myself. I was a well-educated, conscientious, and disciplined man who had spent decades teaching others the principles for living life masterfully, using my life as my training ground. I simply could not believe I had been blind to my alcohol addiction and ignorant of the damage it was wreaking on my mind and body. I needed to understand how it had gotten to that.”

- ***How do the effects of drugs and alcohol keep our rational minds from comprehending what is happening to us?***
- ***How can we miss the signs—both in our physical demise, and in our mental health—that should have us realize we have a problem and need help?***
- ***Even if we suspect something is wrong, why do we remain in denial and fail to take the necessary actions to get help.***

# CHAPTER 96

## A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH,

page 330 (October 2020, age 63)

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Gil had lived 40 years as a highly functional alcoholic and had accumulated a long list of achievements and accolades during those years. He knew when he was 38 that his drinking was a problem, and he spent 2 years in therapy. But he was not able to quit drinking or using drugs. It was not until age 59, when the overwhelming stresses from his living situation turned him into a day drinker, that he became dysfunctional.

“I was admitted to the UCSD hospital on the La Jolla campus on October 22nd and did not come out until the 26th. After a series of ultrasounds, MRIs, CT scans, and endless blood work, I was released with a laundry list of prescriptions to fill and a full calendar of appointments with my new specialists: a neurologist, hepatologist, orthopedist, and psychiatrist.

My hepatologist saw me three days after I was discharged. My blood alcohol levels were five times those indicative of excessive, long-term alcohol use. He explained how my symptoms had manifested and the process by which my body was shutting down. The alcohol had created fatty deposits in my liver cells, which began to scar and die. As my liver lost healthy cells, it could no longer filter the heavy metals it was supposed to flush out. They had accumulated in my blood, which explained the metallic taste in my mouth. My liver could no longer remove the ammonia from my blood, so it had been accumulating in my frontal cortex, causing all my neurological

problems. And being unable to remove the bilirubin, I had become jaundiced. Because I had stopped eating—or regurgitated anything I had managed to get down—I was malnourished, and my immune system could no longer stop the destruction from the poisonous alcohol I had been ingesting for so long. Although I did not like hearing what it was, I was glad to have a diagnosis: hepatic steatosis and alcoholic cirrhosis. After forty-five years, treating my alcoholism had become a matter of life or death. I had to stop drinking or die.”

- ***Why do people living with addiction so often need to reach the brink of disaster before recognizing the severity of their problem and the need to seek help?***

# CHAPTER 33

## THE BIG APPLE,

page 109 (May 1983, age 25)

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Gil received a job promotion and was transferred to his company's headquarters in New York City. He thought the move would be a fresh start to a new life, but it turned out to be more of the same, and he suspected he was in trouble.

“That first sip of vodka released the right amount of dopamine to tell my brain I was feeling better. *Maybe the pain will begin to ease—so take another sip.* It worked. Since two sips worked, I thought the entire drink would be a well-earned reward for a good day's effort, and offer relief from my sadness. But as the alcohol numbed my brain, it acted as a depressant, and the sadness increased. I was certain another drink would fix it. *The first one worked wonders, so the second one should be even better.* But it wasn't—it made things worse. *Maybe another then? Where is that feeling of euphoria this drinking session started with?* I wanted to know when my brain would go “click,” and when I would finally feel at peace—getting some sort of escape from the disturbing memories running through my head. Almost every night wrapped up with two or three hits of pot and an intense stretch-out session. I would be in bed by 10 p.m.—living the NYC dream.

One of my favorite pieces of literature is the play by Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. It was made into a movie in 1958 and stars Paul Newman, who ironically was a neighborhood friend of my father's. This exchange between an aging football player, Brick, and his wealthy father,

Big Daddy—the patriarch of the family’s large estate in Mississippi—encapsulates the yearning I felt for something to turn off whatever was going on inside my head that made me feel so depressed and unsettled.

Brick: Somethin’ hasn’t happened yet.

Big Daddy: What’s that?

Brick: A click in my head.

Big Daddy: Did you say “click”?

Brick: Yes, sir, the click in my head that makes me feel peaceful.

Big Daddy: Boy, sometimes you worry me.

Brick: It’s like a switch, clickin’ off in my head. Turns the hot light off and the cool one on, and all of a sudden there’s peace.

Big Daddy: Boy, you’re, you’re a real alcoholic!

Brick: That is the truth. Yes, sir, I am an alcoholic.

At the age of twenty-seven, my journey toward knowing I was addicted to alcohol was in its early stages; Brick was ahead of me on that count. But like Brick, I had already begun searching in earnest for that daily “click.” I didn’t realize the only thing keeping me from finding that peace was the alcohol itself, the Great Deceiver. I experienced no peace. Only night after night of *sip, sip, sip*.

- ***Gil talks about turning to alcohol and marijuana as a way to escape his emotional pain and find peace with himself. He realizes that the substances are not working as he hoped and calls alcohol the “Great Deceiver.” What is your reaction to this realization, and how does it relate to your recovery journey?***

# CHAPTER 88

## THE SWITCH,

page 307 (April 2017, age 59)

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Gil became the full-time companion of his 80-year-old friend after the death of her husband of 60 years. His friend was extremely wealthy—and eccentric—and Gil traveled with her extensively throughout the U.S. and Canada. They took four yearly two-week trips to stay at a luxury resort in Scottsdale, Arizona, and each trip became progressively more stressful for Gil to manage.

“And then the stress ratcheted up another notch. I knocked on Jane’s door at 11 a.m., as I always did, knowing we would head out for lunch promptly at 11:45. Although she had calmed down a bit by the time I arrived, I could tell she was still agitated. I was dreading going to lunch; there would be no end of people she could yell at there.

So, when Jane went to her bedroom to put on her earrings and lipstick, I went into the cabinet under the kitchen sink, took out the bottle of Kettle One, and slugged down a big gulp. It burned my throat and I almost heaved, but my brain told me it was the medicine I needed to get through lunch, and I believed it. Before she got back in the room, I took another gulp, and as soon as I heard the toilet flush, I took a third. The Great Deceiver had come to the rescue and the dopamine had been released. I cherished the momentary feeling of euphoria and felt fortified to face whatever dramas would play out at lunch.

When we got back, I helped Jane with her email correspondence and then wished her luck following up with her CPA, Merrill Lynch, and the bank.

I hoped by the time we got together for dinner she would have the answers about her net worth. In the meantime, I had an errand to run.

I drove our rental car to AJ's Market and purchased a bottle of Kettle One. After a few sips of vodka and a long nap, I began dressing for dinner and thought: *By the time the car service gets us to Capital Grille and they bring our drinks, it will be 6:30. I'll just have a small one here and then I'll be good for whatever awaits me next door.*

Jane was wrestling with a clasp on her necklace, and she had received an email from the bank she couldn't understand, so she was agitated. Once again, when she went to her bathroom to put on her lipstick and earrings, I revisited the cabinet under the sink, swigged a big gulp of Kettle One, and settled in for the ride to dinner.

After thirty-eight years of drinking alcohol every night of my life, I changed my status from "nightly drinker and functional alcoholic" to "day drinker." I was about to spiral out of control. An addict doesn't think rationally about their substance abuse, and I now saw nothing wrong with the odd sip of vodka during the day; being with Jane warranted getting some kind of relief. I rationalized my behavior as a form of self-preservation—something I could stop as soon as I was back in Michigan and away from Jane.

The bottle I had purchased was empty by Thursday afternoon and I went back to replace it with two more—more than I needed to get through the next few days, but better to have too much than too little. I could always bring a half-filled bottle home with me and keep it in my room ... in case.

That was the week my life changed forever. Alcohol can be an insidious killer and my new predator had just walked into the room and claimed me as its next victim—I was headed for three years of nonstop *sip, sip, sip*.

There is a Japanese proverb that says, "First man takes a drink, then drink takes a drink, then drink takes the man." I was under siege and would barely survive to tell the tale."

- ***When the stress became overwhelming and Gil turned to day drinking, he convinced himself that having the “odd sip of vodka” during the day was justified by the circumstances and that it was not a problem. How does our addicted brain convince us that making bad decisions is OK?***
- ***How do we miss the signs that we are headed for trouble and continue our destructive behavior?***

# CHAPTER 100

## TIME TO THRIVE,

page 346 (January 2001, age 63)

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After achieving sobriety for the first three months of his adult life, Gil began reflecting on his past while working with his therapist.

“I was beginning to understand the complexities of trauma. The rapes I had suffered at the hands of the Pataki brothers and Dennis were singular events—each one traumatic in its own right. My vulnerabilities had been obvious, and my abusers took advantage of them. Years of persistent sexual abuse by Joe were a different kind of trauma. I learned it is called Complex PTSD and involves betrayal by the predator over a sustained period.

I could see that allowing my vulnerabilities to be exploited through acts of violence and betrayal were partly due to my childhood fears of not fitting in and not being good enough. I wanted to please and be liked and therefore established no boundaries to protect myself from predators. I was no stranger to betrayals—in my career and in personal relationships—but I had never understood how and why they had transpired. If only I had, I may have been able to protect myself from the one that was about to be revealed.”

- ***Is the distinction between PTSD and Complex PTSD clear to you?***
- ***Are Gil’s childhood feelings of “not being good enough” a sufficient explanation for how he came to be a victim of prolonged sexual abuse and rape, or did other circumstances play a role?***

# CHAPTER 107

## LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON?

page 370 (November 2001, age 64)

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Gil's friend and companion passed away in January 2001. After her estate was settled and her California home was sold, Gil moved to Florida in September to live on the ocean and continue his healing journey. He had been sober for 11 months.

"I would stand on the deck leading across the dunes and gaze in both directions, excited to begin my walk on the seemingly endless stretches of sand, in disbelief they would be available to me every day, anytime I felt like enjoying the solitude of a walk in the surf. But disempowering thoughts were always there: persistent feelings of inadequacy, lurking in my subconscious like a ghost in the attic—haunting me. *Maybe I'm not worthy of having this. Maybe I'm flawed and undeserving.* Those were the thoughts of someone who as a child felt he didn't measure up to the other children, thoughts of being less than he should be, thoughts of being unlovable. That would explain my lifelong quest to be perfect in everything I did, to always strive to do more, to be the best, and to disprove what others might think about my shortcomings; my need to be liked and accepted—to belong.

I knew they were the unsettling and omnipresent thoughts that were harbored in the mind of the traumatized. These thoughts kept me from the one thing I had been searching for my entire life: peace with myself, and peace with the world around me.

Like the character Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, I had been drinking since my twenties in search of that elusive *click*: hoping the switch in my

brain would have flicked on when it was numb from alcohol, bringing me peace—but it never did. I was successfully managing my addiction to drugs and alcohol, and my sobriety was a victory to celebrate, but my depression and PTSD had not been treated with psychotherapy since I left California, and their ongoing presence haunted me. I knew that until they were treated, I would always be at risk of having that one bad day—just one distressing event—that could cause me to take my first sip and send me right back down the path to drinking. Or just as frightening, as happened with Miguel in Lisbon, I could become elated with a new experience and turn to alcohol to celebrate, wrongly thinking I could handle “just a few drinks.” I knew alcoholism was a disease that cannot be cured; it can only be managed. I found myself haunted by the fears of a relapse and the knowledge that my recent victories could vanish in a heartbeat.”

- ***Gil uses the term “haunted” twice in this passage. Why do you think he uses it when discussing the disease of alcoholism and the effects of untreated trauma?***

# CHAPTER 107

## LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON?

page 370 (November 2001, age 64)

“Even in those low moments, I never stopped telling myself there was nothing “wrong” with me. Looking back, I could see that what happened, had simply “happened”—because I was there when the circumstances appeared. Sometimes I created them, and other times they were thrown in my path. But things didn’t happen to me because I was flawed, or lacking, or unworthy. In every situation, I made the choices that moved me forward to the next situation, and the next set of choices. Like everyone does in the face of their circumstances, I did the best I could with what I had at the time.”

- ***Gil is sharing his thoughts about taking responsibility for his past without passing judgment on his self-worth. Do you agree with his views?***

# FROM “READER REVIEWS” ON AMAZON.COM



What sets this book apart is its honest and raw depiction of the complexities of confronting one’s past while trying to forge a path forward. The narrative gracefully addresses the psychological impacts of abuse and the often-circuitous path toward recovery. For anyone grappling with their past -or those simply searching for a story that champions the human spirit’s capacity to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles—”Haunted Victory” offers solace and inspiration. Gil Merrick’s courage in sharing his story encourages others to face their own challenges with renewed hope and determination. It is a truly enlightening read that will leave you reflecting on the resilience of the human spirit.”

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“As difficult as it is to read about sexual abuse, the author bravely puts his experiences down on the pages, giving us all a peek into the childhood trauma that helped shape his subsequent years. The author delves into the complexity of learning that all his life experiences created a ripple effect: Point A led him to point B, which led him to where he is today. He took us on that journey, laying the story out logically so we could easily follow along and connect the dots. He doesn’t shy away from the details that may have caused his long-harbored feelings of shame to resurface, allowing the reader to see him at his lowest points. We also see how the circumstances of his life fed his alcoholism, ramping up and up until his body could no longer survive unless he made a change.



# A MESSAGE FROM THE THERAPIST WHO HELPED GIL RECOVER AND HEAL



Is the mind, passed down to pen, then to paper, cathartic? Yes. Not only writing to heal yourself, but to help other survivors, maybe the ones who are still struggling to make sense of their own trauma. Putting words to paper may help to release the shame and guilt, thereby reducing the power trauma once had on us. When placed out in the open, the truth can be transformational, with grace, self-respect, and a strong desire to heal one's soul.

Incorporating the disease of addiction into the history of trauma makes this memoir even more identifiable for many. We turn to unhealthy coping skills, innocently, only to end up with more consequences. We don't need to give anything that sort of power. Take the power back. Maybe you are living with something too difficult to write about in real time? Perhaps you experienced your own trauma and have been afraid to talk to anyone? Maybe you are struggling with a substance use disorder? Perhaps you have felt alone in your experience? Maybe you have felt profound loss, hopelessness, and fear? You, too, can heal from trauma, but you cannot do it alone. If you experienced, or are experiencing any type of abuse, reach out to find a therapist, someone objective, who can validate you, support you, and encourage you to find the peace and hope of life you too deserve."