

Alice King finds sober shopping takes on a different flavour.

SOBER SHOPPING

A dash of therapy is good for the soul, is it not? Since acknowledging my alcoholism I'm all for it - anything to speed up the recovery process. One friend though I was taking life a bit too seriously, so invited me to indulge in some alternative retail therapy at his Vintage Fashion Fair. I called another friend - this sort of therapy is best done in doubles. She bought three brooches; I bought two dresses, one fifties, hand-made, linen polka dot, the other, a black wool crepe evening dress, exact vintage unknown. Total cost to me £35. At about 3.30pm we left and went out to lunch. In the drinking days, it would have been the other way round. A liquid lunch with a bottle or five - my last minute shopping dash would have been fuelled by fizz, and the money spent directly proportional to the amount drunk.

Oh yes, largesse after lunch was a speciality - it used to drip feed my grandiosity. Not content with filling the void inside me with alcohol, once I had topped up my spirit level I would look again outside myself for an additional fix. A booze filled high combined with a further adrenaline hit during shopping was the perfect haut couture cocktail. Clothes with their potential to cloak reality were the ultimate grandiosity fodder. The more I drank - the more porous I would become - shop assistants could sell me anything - and they did.

Witness the Poncho story. As a wine critic, I'd been at a dessert wine tasting - well lunch really - where we had been served six sample puddings with six glasses of sumptuous, sticky sweet wine. I slurped my mine down and requested seconds before pronouncing on the ideal pairing. My next coupling was not so tasteful. My favourite clothes shop was nearby. I left with a black polo neck Jean Paul Gaultier Poncho, complete with pompoms- and £200 lighter. The next morning, hung-over I realised it was hideous - it looked like a black shroud - and my was face was pale enough to make it frighteningly authentic. I have never worn it but No 2 son loyally dons it every Halloween - he's the best-dressed ghoul in town.

Avoiding reality and creating a fantasy world was the norm for me when I was drinking. My ex always used to dress in a smart suit if he had a hang-over. He was highly critical of my drinking, so one morning after a heavy session, fearing I would be in trouble, I dressed in one of his business suits. When he came into my office, he took one look at me and didn't know what to say - a welcome alternative to my standard dressing down. I would go to any lengths-to avoid examining my behaviour and why I was so unhappy.

In recovery, I have learnt I have to look inside myself - I have to be kind to myself, and pay attention to my emotional and spiritual well-being. In order to stay sober, I need to tailor what is going on in my head. Don't get me wrong. Of course I still love shopping - especially at vintage clothing bargain prices and I am feeling pretty pleased with myself sitting here in my £15 linen dress. But I know, today, if I am feeling low, an honest chat with a close friend will leave me feeling more sated and fulfilled than a whole wardrobe

full of new quick fix dresses. By stripping off the outer me I am gradually discovering the real me underneath.

Speaking of taking my clothes off, right now I am going to treat myself to a massage. I've recently reconnected with a masseur I used to go to when I was in the full throws of drinking. She used to tell me intricate stories about her neighbour, an 'alcoholic'. I often wondered why she laboured so much over the word. Did she know I was an alcoholic?

'Alice' she replied 'the neat spirit oozing from your pores and the bruises covering your body were a bit of a giveaway'.

Her neighbour is now dead, age 49, from this killer disease.

And lying here being thwacked and pummelled and feeling grateful to be alive, fit, and healthy, another happy thought occurs to me: A massage costs about the same as a decent bottle of wine in a restaurant. If I had a massage for every bottle of wine I used to drink I'd be continually horizontal.