

Terry: My Daughter's Life and Death Struggle With Alcoholism

by George McGovern. New York, N.Y., Villard Press, 1996, 208 pages, \$21.00 (cloth).

Sometime after 8:30 p.m. on December 12, 1994, Teresa Jane ("Terry") McGovern stumbled out of the Crystal Corner Bar in Madison, Wisconsin, and fell among the garbage cans bordering the parking lot of a small print shop. Many who heard the news the following day, when her frozen corpse was finally identified, must have wondered how the daughter of a former U.S. Senator and presidential candidate could meet such an end at so young an age—perhaps the most mystified was her father, George McGovern.

Terry is a searching account of a daughter's decline into alcoholism, one that is filled with aching regret and self-recrimination. "What could I have done differently? What if I had been a more concerned and actively involved parent when she was a little girl, or a fragile adolescent? Why wasn't I in closer touch with her in the final months? Knowing that alcoholism is a dangerous, often fatal disease, shouldn't I have intervened to have her committed indefinitely to a locked long-term treatment facility?"

In many aspects, Terry's story is a familiar one to practitioners working with alcoholics. She began drinking early in life, commenced regular drinking at age 20, used a variety of other drugs, and experienced serious trouble with alcohol in her late 20s. By her 40s, Terry's drinking was completely uncontrolled, necessitating treatment stays at seven different inpatient facilities, scores of detoxification admissions, and several hospitalizations for alcohol poisoning with blood alcohol concentrations exceeding 0.40. Although Terry had lost custody of her two children, was on welfare and food stamps, had multiple arrests for driving while intoxicated and one for stealing alcohol, and probably had ascites and esophageal varices, she remarked in her diary in 1990 that "I still haven't learned how to enjoy being chemically free. I still long for the life when booze was my friend."

McGovern's depiction of Terry's final years, his attempt "to tell a coherent story about an incoherent life," effectively conveys the fierce persistence of her efforts, despite innumerable setbacks, to remain sober. Perhaps it is not surprising, given the retrospective nature of McGovern's account and his strong belief in the genetic underpinnings of alcoholism (his grandfather, brother, and son were also alcoholic) that the reader comes to see Terry's death as nearly foreordained.

Terry's biography highlights a number of unresolved issues in the alcohol studies area. Her lengthy hospitalization for depression and attempted suicide at age 19 and her mother's history of postpartum depression suggest that an affective disorder may have antedated her alcoholism. Yet, McGovern concludes that "For the most part, alcoholism is the cause of the alcoholic's increasingly unhappy, problem-plagued life—not the result of such problems. When well-meaning doctors attempt to treat an alcoholic's depression, anxiety, and fear with-

out knowing the role of alcohol in that patient's life, they are taking the patient down a hopeless and disastrous road."

Some readers will contend that McGovern "enabled" his daughter's drinking by occasionally paying her rent and other bills. In one instance, he openly questions his decision not to buy her alcohol when his refusal resulted in her wrecking a car. "Possibly I should have done that on that particular icebound night at an hour when Terry was crying out from the depths of her soul."

Just prior to her death, McGovern and his wife decided, based on professional advice, to distance themselves from their daughter. He suggests that "this was not the right course. Terry had become so ill as the disease took its deadly toll that she needed all the attention, concern, love, and intelligent action we could have brought to bear. . . . Better to keep trying and failing than to back away and not know what is going on. If she had died despite my best efforts and my close involvement with her life up to the end, at least she would have died with my arms around her. . . ."

Although McGovern's book is directed to a nonspecialist readership, professionals would benefit from reading it for the following reasons. First, it is an effective reminder that the suffering caused by alcoholism is far more poignant than will ever be adequately captured by the boilerplate tracts addressing the "personal, social, and economic consequences of excessive alcohol consumption." Second, Terry's story captures, in all its frustrating mystery, the compulsion of many alcoholics to continue drinking even while they are acutely aware of the untoward consequences to their lives. Finally, *Terry* points to the need for more professional-quality phenomenological accounts of alcoholism. Currently, the alcoholism literature consists of empirical reports written for specialists and confessional first-person expositions describing personal struggles with alcoholism intended for laypersons. These latter accounts are generally exhortative or "motivational" in character. As a professional historian, McGovern draws upon Terry's diaries and medical records, and on the recollections of friends and family, to skillfully reconstruct the course and quality of her relationship with alcohol. While McGovern is anything but a disinterested observer, there is much in *Terry* to foster hypothesis generation (e.g., the possible association between postpartum depression and alcoholism in offspring of affected mothers). Psychiatrists treating alcoholics would benefit from other full-length phenomenological studies of problem drinkers and their struggles with alcohol.

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