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Ode to the Dive Bar

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I used to love going to what we now often call “dive bars.” With my father when I was a boy, we’d go to a bar called the Dugout, where men (and the occasional woman) were often drinking at noon on a Saturday, nursing a beer or throwing back boilermakers. These were working people mostly – factory hands, farmers, truck drivers. But also salesmen like my father, the occasional teacher or small business owner, and on some Friday evenings even our parish priest, who’d come just to have a beer with his flock – the egalitarianism of the thirsty. My father would put \$20 on the bar, banter with the men around him, and when his cash was down to a couple singles and change, we’d leave, my father weaving slightly.

As an adult, I came to realize that regulars in the cool dark of a bar are entirely themselves, and by that I don’t necessarily mean their best selves. This is what attracts us to these joints – the feeling that we’re on the edge of something illicit or disreputable.

The word’s origin helps explain that – the establishments they initially referred to were literally beneath us. The first printed use of the term, according to Oxford English Dictionary, occurred in the New York Herald in 1871: “One of the gayly decorated dives where young ladies ... dispense refreshments to thirsty souls.” The term, the OED speculates, was due to the establishments being below street level, either in a cellar or basement (not unusual in New York), so the patrons could “dive” in without being observed. Reputable people didn’t go to such places (a “dive” could be a brothel, an opium den, or a tavern), only they did, so people skated over that unpleasantness by using a word that made clear the distance between where they went and who they thought they were.

And this is an essential problem when we talk about “dive bars” today: We’re usually talking about these places at tourists. We visit them once or twice, but they aren’t “our bar” in the way our favorite watering hole is – you know, our corner bar, our neighborhood bar. We love the dives for their authenticity and their slightly down-at-the-heels grimy atmosphere, we like the price of the booze and the colorful clientele, but we’re traveling on a visa of privilege.

We call these places “dives,” which carries with it a whiff of the pejorative. It’s our little walk on the wild side.

But the places we describe are neighborhood bars. They are corner bars. They’re just not our neighborhood, not our corner. As with too many things now, we divide ourselves by class, and employ a language that divides us. So the “dive” caters to a clientele that might be a little further down the economic food chain. So what? They offer the same thing we want in our “regular” bar – warmth, camaraderie, good drink.

So maybe it’s time to retire the term “dive bar,” and just call them what they are: a good bar, period. And thank our stars Milwaukee has so many great ones.