

One Al-Anon Journey: A Spouse's Experience with Addiction

Journal Summary Part 1 – The Years Before Marriage

I met the man who became my husband, J., through our respective jobs, in 1988. We were attracted to each other right away because we had so much in common, including many interests and a common faith tradition, plus I loved his creativity and sense of humor. However, there were red flags at the very beginning. I wrote in my journal very soon after we started dating that I was worried about how much he was drinking. I was also worried about his lack of self-esteem and his many unresolved issues from what I came to realize was an extremely traumatic childhood. His mother was mentally ill and he suffered terribly as a result. He told me he was the father of a special adult daughter, Robin, and had also helped raise a nephew, Luke, also now an adult, but who was very troubled and had spent time in prison.

We had many happy times, but there were many serious misunderstandings that didn't make sense to me. It was very frustrating. I would bring up an issue that worried me, such as how to communicate better and resolve differences, and it would seem like we had an agreement regarding what we would do next time. But then if the issue came up and we had another painful misunderstanding, he didn't follow through with what we had agreed to do. It was incredibly frustrating, yet I didn't have the courage to raise the issue. This happened over and over again. I had many meetings with my counselor, trying to figure out what to say and what to do. She had many great suggestions, but most of the time I didn't follow through because I was very afraid of his anger – a leftover from my own childhood experiences. Standing up for myself was agony; my default was to let the other person have their way so harmony would be restored. I was not able to set a boundary and stick to it.

Something else I noticed was J.'s "Jekyll and Hyde" personality, which I came to realize much later was related to the drinking. For years I explained this to myself by thinking he was tired at the end of a difficult day at work, so that was why misunderstandings were more frequent. He would be grouchy or angry over what seemed like trivial things to me. I would be very hurt and get upset, and we couldn't have a rational discussion to hash things out. In the morning, he would return to his usual self. I couldn't understand it. It was a delight to be with him much of the time. But if the misunderstanding couldn't be resolved easily, then I felt like I was walking repeatedly on eggshells.

In early 1990, we mutually agreed that it made sense for me to buy a fixer-upper house in the town where he lived (he had no savings, which was a missed warning sign); we worked very hard together for a few months to make it livable, and then J. moved in. I continued to come visit on the weekends to spend time together, and we kept working on the house for the next several years. However, the deepening relationship brought up more of my own unhelpful coping mechanisms and unresolved issues from childhood. There were many stressful times. It's as if I were on an emotional see-saw: we have a misunderstanding and I am plunged into despair and anguish, then we have a wonderful time together when his terrific qualities come forward, and I am so happy we are together.

I urged J. to get counseling for his sadness over the intense and daily trauma he experienced in childhood, and he did eventually find someone he liked. But after a few times he stopped going. This was a big disappointment. Finances were an issue between us. We couldn't agree on what to save. One troubling issue that came up several times was J.'s unreasonable jealousy. I tried repeatedly to assure him that I felt very lucky to know him and found him to be intelligent, funny, creative, desirable, kind, and caring. But he did not believe this of himself, and it caused problems. However, when I made the difficult decision to confront a family member in 1991 about my abuse from childhood, he was completely supportive. The confrontation was difficult, and afterwards it triggered a return of my depression. I went back on medication. I changed jobs in early 1992 and relocated to an apartment in a town that was closer to J. Shortly afterwards, I had an amazing, extremely detailed, and vivid dream. It felt like a message from God. When I woke up, I was the happiest I've ever been in my life. The message was three things: do your best, and as long as you do your best, you don't need to worry. Even though things may look terrible in the world, things are truly fine because the world is in God's hands. I was filled with joy for days afterwards.

A couple of months later, after I had spent several sessions with my counselor to figure out the words and build up my courage, I told J. that I was troubled by how much he was drinking. He agreed that he would cut back, and I was greatly relieved. However, he switched to putting vodka in a mug with some water to disguise it, so I didn't realize what he was doing. Instead of cutting back, the amount was increasing. Since I hadn't grown up with alcoholics, I was unfamiliar with the signs that someone had been drinking.

J. went on medication for high blood pressure, and then also for depression. Our pattern of misunderstandings and reconciliation continued. In spite of off-and-on misgivings, I was ready to get married long before J. was, and he eventually proposed. I was in heaven. We did not set a date to get married right away because we wanted the work on the house to be mostly finished.

A very odd and troubling thing occurred when J.'s dad came for a visit in 1994. Out of the blue, when J. had stepped away for a minute, his dad said that J.'s former wife had told him that J. had a drinking problem, and sometimes was drinking and driving. I was absolutely stunned and didn't know what to do. I did not contact his dad to get more details, and then talk to J. about it. (Looking back, this was a huge mistake.)

We set a date for the wedding in a year, 1995, hoping the house would be finished. We continued to work on the house every weekend. I continued to be troubled by J.'s unreasonable anger, our difficulties in communicating, his lack of self-confidence, and why we couldn't talk about finances. I hoped we could have a discussion, but again and again I lost courage because I was afraid of what his reaction would be. And then, there would be absolutely blissful times. We went on a fabulous trip over New Year's, and had one of our peak outdoor experiences. On that trip I also witnessed a very sad and distressing family interaction at the next table when we went out to eat, and received new insights into domestic violence. I also had a profound dream afterwards that helped me shift from anger to compassion.

I missed more warning signs about the drinking – I came to our house one night after a meeting to surprise him, and he was furious, saying it was a violation of his privacy and interrupted his routine. I left. My family wondered if we should postpone the wedding. I said no. Then there would be times of hope, such as J. acknowledging that he needed to work on things from his past. He tried seeing another counselor for a little while. We moved forward with the wedding.