

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

### **Journal Summary Part 3 – First Separation and Reunification**

I confronted J. about the drinking and driving, and told him I wanted to separate; it was now 1998. He got very angry, and over the next few weeks, did everything he could to change my mind. We consulted the minister from our church who had married us, who supported me in my decision. However, J. was furious because he believed the minister had chosen sides and picked me, and said he didn't want to go to our church anymore. It was awful. He apologized after a couple of days. Sometimes he got very angry, even throwing out a cake I had baked for him, and other times he was so thoughtful and loving. This time, I did not back down although there were times when I wavered. Both my sponsor and my counselor were incredibly helpful. They had great insights and helped me find good words to say to J. He and I kept going. It was difficult for some family members to hear the daily ups and downs, so I quit sharing every detail. This was difficult for me, but necessary. J. and I met with our couples counselor. Time passed. J. did not want to move out, and it hit me that I could move out instead. It felt like the right thing to do. It took a little while for me to find a short-time rental, and I was only able to use the apartment for three months. (This was a mistake – I should have kept looking until I found a place without a set time to leave.) I told J. that during the separation I needed to see evidence that recovery was his top priority in order for me to move back into our house. But still, there were happy times during this interim period and I could feel that the love was still there between us.

As the time approached to me to move out, I was afraid of being alone, that we would drift apart, that we wouldn't get back together again. It was very stressful and I was so afraid. But once I named the fear it seemed less overpowering. I ran into a man from the Al-Anon meeting who affirmed my decision to separate – it was very helpful. He said he wished there had been a strong woman in his life who had set a boundary, because maybe he would have started earlier on his road to recovery. J. continued to be very angry. There were times when I wished I could die. My counselor and I talked about this – I realized it was a feeling that came from my childhood experiences. Finally, the apartment was ready for me to move in. J. was able to get over his anger enough to help me when the time came. We agreed on how we would communicate during the separation: we would talk every day, get together when we wanted to, and there would be no dating of other people.

We spent time together, and I hoped he would be motivated to embrace recovery and then share the journey with me. I continued working the Steps in the program with my sponsor, and wrote a long letter to J. outlining my resentments. It felt good to lay it all out, but I wasn't ready to give it to him. I was able to articulate to myself my bottom line to move back into the house with him: that he is totally committed to recovery, and he is committed to dealing with his anger so I'm not the target. Finally, after a couple of weeks apart, we had a serious conversation and I was able to tell him more about how I felt. He listened and didn't get angry. More time passed. I told my Al-Anon group that my tombstone would read, "She worried a lot, and then she died."

I got more insights into my patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior resulting from my childhood. I learned more helpful things from attending the Al-Anon meetings and reading the literature,

especially that it is an illusion to believe that we can control people, places, or things. The communication difficulties between J. and me continued, as well as the nice times together. The weeks went by without much changing. Then, J. started talking more about recovery, and I became more hopeful. Eventually I decided I would move back into the house rather than look for another place to live because it did feel like we were moving forward. We had a great session with our couples counselor, and he suggested a new tool for us to use to improve how we communicate. The counselor called it a “WAMFA” letter – standing for, “What are my feelings about...” He explained the process, and then we tried doing it during the session, practicing on “What are my feelings about my moving back into the house?” We both liked the process a lot.

I moved back into the house, and things were great for a little while. But the communication difficulties quickly resurfaced, and we quickly stopped using the new WAMFA tool. I suggested it, and J. said he was too tired. I heard something that made me very sad and worried at an Al-Anon meeting – a member, who was also in AA, approached me afterwards. He said that stopping drinking is easy, compared to changing your thinking. He says in order to stop drinking and truly embrace recovery, an alcoholic must change his/her thoughts. I was stunned – if J. was having such a difficult time stopping drinking, then how will he ever be able to change his thoughts?

Then J. got a phone call from his troubled nephew, Luke, that made him very depressed. A few days after that, when J. wasn’t home, he got another phone call from a financial firm, which had happened several times before. I found it very annoying. This time, I asked why they were calling. I was very surprised when I heard that he owed several hundred dollars in overdue credit card charges. I told J. about it, and we had some painful conversations about the debt. I told him I felt betrayed again, like when I discovered the bottles of alcohol hidden in the trash, and he got very angry. Over time, it turned out this was just the tip of the iceberg – there was more than one credit card involved. We met with our couples counselor; I talked to my sponsor and counselor. It was so stressful. It took him a while to add everything up, and then to trust me with the information. I was stunned when I found out how much it was. Eventually we used a home equity loan to pay it all off, but J. didn’t want to talk about what he would pay monthly to take care of it. I continued to go to Al-Anon meetings, and shared an insight about the four “p’s” of new behavior: persistence, patience, practice, and prayer.

We went on a great trip together, and I sensed that J. felt lighter, now that the debt was going to be resolved and this huge secret between us was out in the open. I hoped we could keep talking about coming to an agreement on a budget, but J. found that very difficult. At first, he said we would talk about it later, and then he became very defensive and angry. Then he reinjured his back. I could feel my depression returning, and went back on medication. J. was supportive. Then I was rear-ended again, reinjured my neck, and I knew there would be a lot of pain and months of physical therapy. I was so very discouraged. J.’s back continued to bother him. We argued over his not taking care of himself. The sad misunderstandings between us continued. I often asked myself when things were going to get easier. But there were also happy times, times when the man I married was present.

We came to an agreement about a budget to pay off the home equity loan. He went camping by himself a lot, saying that’s where he did his best work on recovery. We kept going, stumbling through the weeks and months. We didn’t talk about recovery. In the spring of 1999, J. was involved in a car

accident that was not his fault, was injured, and his car was totaled. More delay for recovery. I continued going to Al-Anon meetings regularly and met with my sponsor, and continued to gain helpful insights from counseling. I learned an acronym for fear at a meeting: Future Events Already Ruined. It made me laugh. I heard other extremely helpful things at meetings – if a person could do better, he or she would do better. That really clicked inside me. Also, when the pain of the familiar is greater than the fear of the unfamiliar, then a shift can happen.

J. spent a lot of time preparing for a very special community event related to his job. After it was over, he sat for a long time in his car in our driveway. At the time I didn't think much about it and just let him have his private time. Much later, I realized he was probably drinking in the car. A few days after the event, I caught him drinking at our house. I confronted him, and he said the special event brought up a lot of feelings for him and he would try to work harder on recovery. When I raised the possibility of seeing his counselor – our couples counselor – together, he said very hurtful things to me. I wrote him a letter with my worries and fears, but I wasn't able to bring myself to give it to him. We went on our planned trip to visit my family and had a great time. But when we got back home, the sad misunderstandings, unreasonable anger, and bitterness continued.

In the fall of 1999, as J. was driving us to a special concert, I realized he had been drinking.