

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

### **Journal Entries, Part 8 – Relapse and Final Years**

*I stopped writing in my journal on a regular basis, so this is a summary of events that took place from October 2004 to my husband's death in 2007.*

#### October to the end of 2004

More contamination was found on his dad's property, so expenses continued to go up.

J. went again to visit Luke in prison. We started thinking about what happens when his sentence ends next year.

In the fall, an absolutely dreadful misunderstanding came up with one of the staff associated with the rehab place he went to in January; this led to J. ending all ties there. It was an enormous loss of potential guidance and support. He was very angry for a long time about this.

J. continued making regular trips to his dad's house. It became obvious that one of his diversions while he was there was going to flea markets and antique malls – he would come back after every trip with all kinds of dishes, bowls, old magazines, another necklace for me that I didn't need, things for Robin...it was endless. After a while I tried to tell him we were running out of room but it was also obvious this was one of his new joys in life, so I gave up.

The property cleanup was completed at last, and the sale of that part of property to the neighbor took place in December. With that money we were able to deal with the biggest part of the debt, and our worst fears receded. However, it was clear we would have to be very careful with our finances. J. was sad that he was not going to be able to buy some of the things he wanted.

We made it through the year. I decided to stay with my housemates until mid-January 2005, just to be sure everything was OK. J. and I spent weekends together, went to the movies and met for church during the week, etc. but we didn't talk about recovery.

#### 2005

I moved back into the house in January. Also in January, for his first anniversary of being sober, he asked me to get him a one-year chip from AA and have it engraved. We were both very happy about this milestone. I was so proud of him, and told him, often.

We had an absolutely wonderful getaway weekend in February. Things felt like they were back on track for us. I was so happy to be married to J. He made me laugh with his creativity. We had such a good time just being together. I was in heaven most of the time. However, I could also see J. wasn't spending a lot of time on recovery – he didn't have a sponsor, and wasn't regularly going to meetings. I worried about it.

Around the same time, we decided to start a very ambitious home improvement project that we believed would benefit Robin. Unfortunately, we didn't spend enough time before we committed ourselves to it to

truly think it all through. We just forged ahead, assuming everything would work out. We didn't do a draft budget or timeline. What a huge mistake. J. threw himself into this project. He woke up with joy every day, eager to get to work. He completely stopped going to his early-bird AA meeting because he wanted to get going on the project first thing. I didn't insist on nailing down the important project details because J. seemed so happy and I didn't want to throw a damper on things. The project substituted for his recovery – it was his pride and joy, his outlet for his creativity and skills. The trouble with that approach is that when the project hit snags, he had no resources to fall back on.

Work on the home improvement project continued, and J. spent practically no time on recovery. When we started, we thought we would be finished in August, but it became apparent after a few months this was not going to happen. J. was having some disagreements with the man he hired to help do the work, and got very annoyed at times. But it was too late to stop – the only way we could survive financially was to finish the project.

In late spring, we got word that Luke would soon be released. However, there wasn't going to be any follow-up from the state – no parole officer, no half-way house, no anything. I couldn't believe it. J. felt he needed to do something to help Luke, and decided that he would allow him to live at his dad's house for a while. I had serious misgivings about how this was going to work. J. and I talked about it for a while, and I asked a lot of questions. I could tell J. didn't want to re-examine his plan, and I backed off. J. picked up Luke and they went to J.'s dad's house, did some shopping, and then J. returned home. For a couple of weeks, things seemed to be going OK. J. talked to Luke frequently, and went to visit on the weekends. J. put a lot of thought and effort into trying to help him move forward, stay out of trouble, and off of drugs. He spent a lot of money buying things Luke would need for a job, and tried to provide some structure. I was not optimistic this could last, but didn't say anything.

However, one day we got a very troubling phone call from a neighbor. He told us he had seen some tough-looking people coming in and out of J.'s dad's house, and then they had driven away in J.'s dad's car. The neighbor had tried to follow the car, and then he called the police. We threw some things in the car and got there as quickly as we could. It was night by the time we arrived. J. and I went into the house together – my heart was pounding. Many things in the house were missing. We found Luke asleep, or passed out. J. woke him up, yelled at him, and demanded to know what had happened in the house. Eventually it came out – Luke had gone back to drugs, and was selling things out of the house to pay for them, including J.'s dad's car. The police found the car – it was wrecked. J. told Luke he had to leave the house.

We discovered a lot of damage had been done to the house in the course of “selling” / moving out the washer and drier – the carpet was absolutely soaked through with water and squished when we walked on it. J. was beside himself with anger and grief at what terrible things had happened to his dad's house, and what dreadful people had been inside. We did what we could to repair the damage, left for a few hours, and then Luke broke in again and stole more things. We couldn't believe it when we came back. We went to an attorney and then the police. I insisted that we press charges against Luke; J. reluctantly agreed. However, Luke left town and so was not arrested. J. was devastated at this latest betrayal. I did what I could to comfort him, but he was so very, very sad and angry for a long time. Why, God, why?

What is the point of such suffering? I don't understand. (*In retrospect, this is the event that may have triggered J.'s relapse, but I don't know.*)

We also had a very sad disagreement with one of J.'s relatives about some property. J. was very discouraged when this happened, and got even more depressed.

Robin was forced to stop working due to new issues that resulted from her cellulitis infection last year. This was a huge loss for all of us.

I hoped working on the home improvement project would provide some joy, as it had in the beginning, but as the year progressed it seemed like things were slowing down, and misunderstandings increased with the people he had hired to help him. J. seemed less and less excited about it.

In late fall, we went on our annual vacation with Robin. We took two cars part of the way, because J. and Robin were going to stay two weeks and I only had vacation time from work for one week. On the way to our destination, I was puzzled that J. seemed to be driving very slowly on the Interstate. (*In hindsight, this should have been a huge danger sign.*) The trip was so different without J.'s dad. J. seemed very sad a lot of the time – the enthusiasm about the home improvement project was almost completely gone by this point. It had become a project he had to finish but was not happy about. There was not much joy during the trip.

Late in the year, we talked to Robin about our plans for the home improvement project, but Robin didn't agree with our approach and said she wanted to keep living where she was. It was a huge blow, and J. didn't share with me the true depths of his disappointment and anguish. I did not fully appreciate at the time what this meant to him, and all the ramifications. In retrospect, we should have discussed all of this ahead of time with her, and then we would not have started the project. What an enormous mistake this project turned out to be.

Whenever J. went to visit his dad's house, he came home with more household items, books, magazines, and trinkets that he had picked up at various antique malls and second-hand stores. I finally asked him to stop because we didn't have any more room in the house. He reluctantly agreed.

I had a very powerful experience related to resentment being transformed by compassion. I was basically cornered into doing something I didn't want to do for someone for several days, and even though it wasn't so difficult, I was feeling very resentful. Then, on one of the days, I believe God intervened, and as if by magic, a switch went on in my brain and I was able to feel compassion for the person in the situation. The resentment disappeared instantly. I could perform the necessary task for this person, and I didn't mind at all. It was amazing, and an important lesson for me.

## 2006

J. did not ask me to get another chip engraved on what would be his second anniversary of being sober. I wondered about it, but didn't ask him why. (*This was a huge danger sign.*) We never talked about recovery.

The home improvement project dragged on, and then the resulting debt from taking out more and more home equity loans became my constant preoccupation. Then more, unrelated and expensive home renovation projects cropped up for us. It was terrible. We ran out of home equity loan money and had to resort to borrowing from my family. The only way we could avoid financial catastrophe would be to finish the renovations so we could refinance our mortgage.

There was no celebration when we finally finished the major home improvement project in the summer. Instead, it felt like the end to an exhausting and very disappointing marathon, only it wasn't the end because there was more work to do. A couple of weeks afterwards I had a routine screening exam, and was told something had shown up and that I needed to come back for a follow-up test. The follow-up involved a very painful procedure, but I got through it and wasn't worried about getting bad news from it. They said the test results would be ready the following week.

During that weekend, Robin made a very, very poor choice that started a long chain of incredibly stressful events. J. and I were in shock. Robin was now involved with the criminal justice system. It was absolutely awful. We talked a long time about what to do, and developed a plan. Two days later I received the results from the follow-up procedure – it was cancer. I told the nurse that I didn't have time for this, that I needed to give my time and attention to my family. She said she was sorry, but I needed to deal with my own health issues as a top priority now. She called my doctor for me and made an appointment. I got back to work and cried and cried. My co-workers were so kind and sympathetic. Then I called J. and cried some more. He had a wonderful dinner waiting for me when I got home, said he was here for me, and we would walk this road together. It was so comforting.

I met with my doctor, who is also a surgeon, and she assured me that because the cancer was caught so early, the surgery could be done as an out-patient, and that I had every hope of a complete cure. I would need radiation for several weeks after, but no chemo. We set the surgery date for three weeks. J. came with me for the next appointment. J. was now working full-time on the other renovation projects for our refinancing, but he was very concerned about how I was doing. It was not a bad time. My entire family was very supportive, as well as my colleagues at work and Al-Anon friends. At the same time, J. was also very preoccupied with Robin's affairs and consulted with an attorney and arranged for counseling visits.

One of my relatives offered to come be with me a few days after the surgery, and she said she would help with the last of our home renovation projects, too, if needed. The time for the surgery arrived. J. drove me to the hospital for the surgery. When I woke up, my doctor said everything had gone well. J. drove me back home, and I was awake enough to notice how very slowly he was driving. I thought it was odd but I didn't comment on it. *(In hindsight, this should have been a huge warning sign.)*

The first couple of days of recuperation were painful, but not awful. J. did everything for me. The third day I felt better, like I'd come through the worst. I was so happy and relieved. A friend came to visit, and I ventured out of the house for an hour. It was glorious to be in the sunshine. J. was continuing to work on the other home renovations that had to be finished so we could refinance our mortgage. The appraiser would be coming in a few days and there were still many things that had to be done.

After dinner that night, J. seemed to be taking a very long time upstairs. I decided to see what was happening, and went up. Just as I got to the top of the stairs, I called his name. I heard a file drawer slam shut and I could feel the bottom falling out of my life. I already knew that during his drinking years he had kept a bottle of vodka in a filing cabinet drawer up there because I had found it one day. I looked at him and said I knew he was drinking. He said he wasn't, and I said "Oh yes you are," pulled open the file drawer and brought out the bottle. He seemed to shrink before my eyes. We went downstairs to talk. I asked him what had happened, and he said it was a way to cope after Robin's most recent challenges, which made it sound like the relapse was very recent. He said to me, and I'll never forget his words, "Why don't you let me die." I said no, I didn't want him to die, I wasn't going to leave him, I already knew the worst, I wanted us to keep going, and what he needed to do was go back into rehab. He said he didn't want to go back to where he went in 2004. I said OK, let's not talk about it anymore right now. He got ready for bed, and I went outside to call my former housemate – I had to talk to someone. She was wonderful, so kind and caring. She helped me digest what had happened. I went to bed, in agony all over again. I prayed to God to help us.

I called my relative to warn her about what had happened. She arrived the following day. J. continued to work on the house. When my relative came, she didn't refer to what had happened, but offered to help do things. At first things seemed OK, but then something set J. off, and he became very angry. The next day he stormed off, saying my relative was "hurting his recovery." I wanted to say "What recovery?" but didn't. He said he was going to his dad's, packed up his things, and drove off. It was a horrible moment.

My relative and I did our best to make the progress we could. J. didn't answer my repeated phone calls. Then he returned three days later, the day before the appraisal, and amazingly, threw himself into finishing the renovations. It was incredible what he accomplished in such a short time. But he remained very angry with my relative – it was a very sad and tense time.

I took my relative to the airport right before the appraiser arrived. We were cleaning and organizing up until the very last second. Fortunately, the appraiser seemed to be impressed with how the house looked so I was hopeful. J. was still angry at my relative. The next day he and I were scheduled to leave on a short get-away weekend to a musical gathering we had attended before. As we were packing, he told me that I had done a terrible thing, letting my relative treat him so poorly and not sticking up for him. I asked him when had I done that. He said I did it the entire time she was with us. It was awful. I was in agony. We finished packing, and J. drove. I tried to hold his hand and he yanked it away. It was just terrible. Once again, I felt numb and overwhelmed. I wished I could disappear.

When we arrived at the get-away place I asked J. if he wanted to go for a walk with me – he said no, he would spend time by himself. I felt worse and worse. I took a short hike on the property, and came to the edge of a ravine. I stood there and started thinking seriously about jumping off and ending my life. I wondered if I would be certain of dying, or if I would just be injured. If I jumped, I wanted to be sure that I died. I stood there a long time. Ending my life seemed like a way to end my pain. It was so tempting. Then the moment passed and I decided I would keep on living, at least for now. I turned around and went back. Then I saw a friend I knew from this gathering from previous years. She asked me how I was doing, and I cried and told her this was one of the worst days of my life. I didn't go into details, but said I

was very depressed. She was very kind and sympathetic, and patiently sat with me for a long time while I sobbed and sobbed. I started feeling like I might make it through the next hour. God was with me.

J. and I met for dinner a little while later in the group dining room. We didn't talk, but the next morning I felt like something had shifted in him and somehow, we made it through the rest of our time there. He seemed to regain a bit of his sense of self, and we didn't argue. We came back home, and a few days later we heard from the bank – the appraiser's figure was a bit higher than what we had to have, so a few days after that we refinanced our house and were out of the danger of immediate financial catastrophe. He was even able to write a thank-you note to my relative for her help with the house. I felt a lot better after that.

The deal to sell the rest of his dad's property fell through. I was very disappointed because I had hoped we could pay back my family and be completely free of debt. But J. said he was just as glad he wasn't selling – he liked going to his dad's house and communing with nature. He continued to make regular weekend trips there. However, he seemed to be not at all concerned about the money we still owed my family, or the money it was costing to keep his dad's house habitable. We did not talk about a budget, so I had no idea of exactly what was going on with his finances – only my own. There was no talk of next steps in recovery, and he continued drinking every day but he was not drinking and driving. I was in suspended despair, going through the motions of life, hoping that something would shift somehow to change things.

I started my radiation treatments after a few more weeks, and amazingly enough, this was a positive time. I liked the staff, and got to know the other people getting treatment I saw at every appointment. I didn't have to make any decisions – they were all made for me. I got up, went to work, went to radiation, maybe worked some more, maybe not, came home, went to bed. Everyone at work understood that my energy was failing as the weeks went by. I was working on a project that didn't have a set deadline, so all I had to do was focus on the project and do what I could.

The most surprising part was that J. was so very caring. It was like a switch had come on in his brain. He would ask me every night how radiation had gone, I'd say fine, and he'd say he wanted me to tell him more – was there a wait, who did I see, did it hurt, and how was my skin doing. Even when it was obvious he'd been drinking a lot that day, he was still "present" with me. Who knew years later I would look back on this time with longing because it was a time when J. and I were truly connected. I wish I could have been less irritated that he'd been drinking, and more grateful for his presence, genuine caring, and compassion.

After eight weeks of daily treatment, I "graduated" and got a signed certificate from the staff. It was very touching. That very day we made our trip to our vacation spot with Robin. The next morning, I sat outside in the sunshine for hours and just stared at the beautiful scenery – I was done with radiation, I didn't know what lay ahead for J. and me, but right now my only responsibility was to breathe. It was a very healing week.

After we got back from the trip, J. met with his family doctor, who recommended that as a first step, he go through detox at our local hospital. He said OK, but first he needed to have cataract surgery on both eyes, which would take a couple of months.

2007

J. had the cataract surgery in early January, he had a date reserved for detox, and then he got a bad kidney stone and had to have surgery for that. That set the time back for detox, which triggered an avalanche of despair in me. On a very bad day, feeling hopeless and overwhelmed at the prospect of more waiting and watching J. deteriorate, I once again thought about ending my life. I prayed, reached out to my program friends, and the moment passed. Shortly afterwards, I wrote these words.

*January 22, 2007*

### Despair

Despair sucks the life out of me at times.  
Despair takes away hope that life can be better.  
Despair is like a fog that envelops me  
And makes me believe that life can never be better.

So how do I survive despair?  
How do I hang on until the fog lifts and I can remember that the sun is always there,  
Even when I can't see it?  
Just like the stars are always there, but half the time we cannot see them.  
I remember they are there, and I wait, and the night comes and I see them again.  
If I wait long enough, the sun comes back, too.

God, please help me survive despair.  
I don't want to throw your gift of life away because I couldn't see or feel the sun.  
Help me to hang on long enough until the sun comes back.  
I scared myself, wanting to throw my life away.  
Despair almost won.  
I don't want despair to win.  
I have a lot to give still.

I want to feel joy, and remember that I am good enough as I am,  
That I do bring joy to people, even if my beloved can't feel it;  
That my life has a purpose even if I can't save my beloved.  
It's not my fault, nor is it his.  
He has his own path...and maybe we won't be walking our paths together.  
If he's drowning and refuses to reach out his hand for help,  
It's not my fault if he drowns. I cannot save him.

God, help us to survive despair and the fog.  
Help us feel the sun every day.  
Help my beloved to find his way towards the sun.

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Finally, in March he went into detox for five days. I visited him on family night. One of the men in the program collared me when J. was out of the room and said, very forcefully, that J. truly loved me, he was so grateful that I had stayed with him during all his relapses, he thought the world of me, he talked about me all the time in group sessions, and I needed to know this. I said thank you, but I felt numb. J. said during my visit that it was a very good program and he was getting a lot out of it. Then he got shortchanged at the end when he got some terrible stomach bug and had to stay in bed, so he missed the last few group sessions. I asked God why, why did this have to happen? Why couldn't he have gotten the full benefit of being there? It just seemed so incredibly unfair, again, that some outside event would interfere with his recovery.

J. came back home, and said he would go to meetings on his own, try to get a sponsor, and dedicate himself to recovery. I heard the words without much hope – how many times had he said these words? In my opinion, it should have been easy to focus on recovery, since he wasn't spending all of his time and energy with the home improvement projects, his business, or worrying about his dad. But after a little while I didn't sense the urgency or eagerness to be well that showed he had truly embraced recovery as the most important thing in his life. I kept going on autopilot at work, went to my Al-Anon meetings, talked to my friends and family, and prayed for guidance.

We got through the next few weeks. This included J. experiencing another kidney stone attack early one Sunday morning, going to the ER, and then being questioned by the doctor on call to make sure J. wasn't shamming to get pain pills – of course they had access to the records from his recent stay in detox. It took a while, but he got some relief from the pain and we went home. It was exhausting.

Six weeks after J. left detox, disaster struck again. I had left the house to exercise before I was to go to a seminar for work, when I realized I had left my lunch in the fridge. I went back to the house, and J. was in the bathroom. I called out to him to say I was home, went towards the kitchen, and saw what was on his laptop. It was so very distressing. He got out of the bathroom, came into the kitchen, and closed the laptop. I pretended I hadn't seen anything, he pretended everything was fine, I said hello and goodbye, and then left the house in a daze. I went to my seminar but didn't hear one word. I called a couple of friends after it was over to steel myself for this next conversation with J., and went home. The minute I saw J., I knew he'd been drinking. I told him what I saw. He said that recovery hadn't really taken hold after detox, that the depression was always with him, and he was using a negative coping mechanism to deal with it. I said I heard him, but what was he going to do next. He said he would see his counselor in the next few days and talk to him about rehab options. I said OK. I didn't know what else to say or do. I called my friends and cried and cried. It was right up there with the worst days in my life.

Then, one day after church, we walked across the lawn to go get something to eat at a restaurant nearby. I was feeling angry and resentful and had given up hope that things were going to get better. Suddenly, I stepped into a small hole and my ankle rolled. It hurt a lot. I cried out, and J. immediately held my hand, comforted me, and was completely present. We sat together on the grass for several minutes while I collected myself. It was so good to be holding his hand. It felt like there was an electric current flowing between us, and I could sense the love that was still and always there. I realized he was in anguish, and



that I needed to have more compassion for what was happening to him. This relatively small event was transformed into my mind as a message from God. It gave me hope again for our marriage. Once again, I realized that in spite of everything, on a fundamental level we still got along, enjoyed each other's company, had our common interests, and were attracted to one another...in other words, the things that initially brought us together and led us to marriage, were still there. I knew I still loved him, and that he loved me.

After he saw his counselor, J. said what they concluded was that his depression had never been adequately dealt with, and what J. needed was a new approach. The counselor said there was a treatment place several hours away that specialized in treating depression and addiction at the same time. I said OK. It was going to be expensive; we would have to borrow a lot more money. I said OK. I kept on with my life, one foot in front of the other, focusing on the next right step, afraid of what was going to happen next, praying constantly for help in keeping going. J. was drinking on a regular basis again. I called the treatment place a few days before J. was scheduled to go there, and asked what would happen to J. if he arrived and went into shock from stopping drinking suddenly. They said their directions to everyone coming clearly said he should be medically stable, that they made it very clear they did not have medical facilities, which kept their fees lower. If J. wasn't medically stable when he got there, and had some kind of seizure or whatever, he would be taken to the ER, kept overnight and stabilized, and then released to go home. All the money paid would be lost. I was in anguish with worry and fear.

Then, J. delayed his departure two nights before he was supposed to leave, saying he realized he wasn't ready. I was so relieved, and also wondered what would happen next. He lost his deposit but that was all. He saw his counselor and went back on a medication he'd been on before. He told me he had stopped drinking, in preparation for another try at the new treatment place. A bitterly disappointing medical appointment a few weeks later triggered a relapse. He was so angry. He didn't tell me about this before he died – all I knew was that he was livid for some unknown reason. I could tell he had started drinking again, however. Every day I placed myself in God's hands, and wondered what was going to happen next. He reinjured his back, and was in terrible pain. I wondered when this agony would be over. A few weeks later he had a massive stroke. Fortunately, I was with him when it happened and got immediate medical help, but he never regained consciousness and died at the hospital. My only comfort was that at least we had had a happy last day together, and on that last day I had felt hope for the future. The love was truly still there for us.