

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

Journal Summary Part 2 – Marriage, Realization of Alcoholism, and Before First Separation

A week before we were to get married in 1995, we had the worst misunderstanding of our time together. It was related to J.'s jealousy. I seriously thought of postponing the marriage, but after meeting with my counselor and praying at our church, I decided to move ahead. I believed with all my heart that God was telling me I was doing the right thing. It was a lovely service and we had a wonderful time on our honeymoon, but all the problems continued once we got back home and resumed our lives: the Jekyll and Hyde personality issues, communication misfires and misunderstandings, worries over the drinking and odd behavior that troubled me, and no agreement on finances. I continued to meet with my counselor to cope with these issues, but struggled to talk about them with J. The signs were there that the drinking was accelerating, but I didn't recognize them: unreasonable anger over trivial things; causing a scene in a restaurant; repeatedly not eating much at dinner; strange accidents; escaping to our unfinished and unpleasant basement after a disagreement (a place he could drink undetected); getting angry when I asked him to please speak a little louder; very puzzling discussions, always at night; a very scary memory blackout; and hearing him argue with himself in the kitchen using two different voices, also at night. I continued to suggest that he see a counselor on a regular basis to deal with the agonies of his childhood. His pattern was to go a few times and then stop.

One year after we were married, in 1996, I discovered two large, empty bottles of alcohol hidden in the trash. The light came on for me – I knew for certain that J. was an alcoholic. I told him what I had discovered, he agreed he would take action, and I immediately started going to Al-Anon meetings. J. tried to stop cold turkey, but after three days he started drinking again. He did try going to meetings. In those first weeks, I frantically talked to a lot of people about what was happening, to get ideas about what to do, as well as to confide in those I thought I could trust. One of these people told others, and disaster struck when word got back to J. He was livid, and rightly so, and I was devastated. It caused a huge rift between us that lasted for ages.

I called a friend who had told me about her father's recovery from alcoholism, and called him. He said that "half-measures won't work" and that's what J. was doing. He said I was in for a rough ride. It was so depressing. I hoped J. would take strong actions such as getting an assessment, out-patient therapy, daily meetings, and finding a sponsor, but he seemed to be dragging his heels. About a month later, he took me for a drive and when it was over, I realized he had been drinking and driving. I agonized over what to do. I wrote him a letter and read it to him, telling him calmly how his drinking affected me, and that if he were to drink and drive again, I would separate.

Shortly after that, he found an outpatient program he really liked, but right after he started the funding was cut. He couldn't find another one. Our misunderstandings continued, and with my own counselor I went around and around with what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. We rehearsed the words, but then when the time came, I wasn't able to speak up. It was still so difficult for me to stand up for myself, due to my childhood experiences. I urged him again to see his counselor on a regular basis. We did have one joint meeting with his counselor, who brought up J. going to 90 meetings in 90 days. I

made the mistake of not pushing for J. to do this, thinking it was unrealistic; instead I settled for five meetings during the week. It turned out this wasn't enough. The Al-Anon meetings, which I continued to attend faithfully, were a lifeline. I heard a phrase that was extremely helpful – “the nudge from God.”

We spent the next two and one-half years in a very difficult and sad dance. J. seemed to stop drinking for a while, then I would suspect he was drinking and say something, then he would promise he would do better and seemingly stop again. But there were still so many happy moments when the man I married would come through, and I wanted so desperately for us to keep going. I reactivated an old injury on our vacation and was in more pain; J. was very supportive. I had a very powerful dream that I believe was related to J.'s addiction. I told him about it, and he got angry. We found out his troubled nephew, Luke, was going to get married, and he called to ask J. for money. J. sent some, then Luke spent it all on drugs. He and his fiancée got married anyway. They came for a surprise visit at Thanksgiving, then later that weekend J.'s dad's house was broken into and we all suspected Luke had done it. This bothered J. tremendously, since he still felt that he was responsible for Luke's behavior. His depression got worse. Then he fell on a solo camping trip and hurt his back and shoulder. His anguish was obvious, but I was powerless to help him. I had another vivid and troubling dream about J. that I believed was related to his addiction, shared it with him, and once again he got very angry.

Then J.'s unreasonable anger and bitterness at me escalated, so I tried a different strategy – I decided to leave the house for a few hours if I came home and found he had been drinking. First, I went to a restaurant a couple of times, and then tried going to a friend's house. But after doing this twice I realized it was difficult for my friend and I stopped. Shortly afterwards, J. was drinking and driving with his daughter in the car, and I confronted him. But instead of keeping to my boundary of separating, I left for the weekend to let him think about what he had done. Looking back through my journal, it's as if I “forgot” I had told J. I would separate. When I returned home, we reached an agreement that he would make recovery a high priority. We met again with his counselor, and J. said he was willing to attend AA meetings regularly, find a sponsor, go to an outpatient program, and continue with counseling. I acknowledged that all these things couldn't happen right away. I also made it clear I would separate if he were to drink and drive again.

But J. found it difficult to follow through with the agreement, and I struggled with what to say and do. The sad and painful dance continued of misunderstandings and arguments, and then wonderful and delightful times. One day I would be in heaven and the next, in despair. I kept going to Al-Anon meetings, and found a temporary sponsor who was extremely helpful. J.'s troubled nephew, Luke, was arrested again, and J. coped by drinking. J. experienced a back injury, and this pushed recovery to the back burner. He started going camping on the weekends without me, saying it was the best way to connect with God and work on recovery. Sometimes I was lonely, but I had urged him before we were married to do what he needed to do for himself. My sponsor had a lot of wisdom to share, and said so many things that were tremendously helpful. One was that we are responsible for the effort, not the outcome; another was that when I'm trying to decide whether to say something that I know will make J. defensive, I could ask myself, is it necessary/is it true/is it kind? This includes being kind to myself, not only to him.

I rehearsed words to say to him over and over again with my counselor and my sponsor, but when the time came to say them, most of the time I was too afraid of J.'s reaction and didn't speak up. When he got angry, mostly I just continued to wilt. With the help of my sponsor and counselor, I could see that I had my own journey of healing. There were occasions when I felt that I was getting better at standing up for myself, but it was always a challenge.

As time went on, my husband's unreasonable anger escalated and painful misunderstandings increased. I agonized more and more about what to do – separate, or wait and pray that J. would embrace recovery. I talked to different people in the program to get their thoughts. I wrote in my journal that I'd rather have cancer than deal with the agony of waiting to know the right thing to do. We started meeting with a new couples counselor. In late 1997, an Al-Anon friend assured me that the time would come when I would know deep in myself with certainty what I needed to do. Then in early 1998 I discovered J. had been drinking and driving again, and I knew immediately that I had to separate.