

# A Personal Story

BY ANONYMOUS

**P**ersonal stories can be either the easiest to tell, or the hardest. Easiest, because we know our own stories so well; hardest, because they often reveal things about ourselves or those close to us that we might prefer not to disclose. This story is both.

I was 30 and divorced when I fell in love with a wonderful man. He was smart, handsome, witty, exciting, and, best of all, he was in love with me as well. Like me, he was also divorced and a fellow lawyer. Our relationship filled us both with a zest for life that was intoxicating. We were aware of how fortunate we were to be drinking so deeply from the cup of life, and we cherished the opportunity we had been given to start life anew with each other as soulmates.

Somewhere along the line, however, something began to change. It happened gradually, so that I cannot now identify when or where the shift occurred. At the time, I didn't know the signs—what to look for or what they meant. All I knew was that the man I had married so happily years prior was no longer the man to whom I was married. What I didn't realize for some time yet was that I was married to an alcoholic.

And why should I? There were no alcoholics in my own family, and my vision of an alcoholic bore little resemblance to my husband. He wasn't sleeping under bridges or in jail—he was a successful lawyer and respected member of the community. Sure, he drank more than he had in the early years of our marriage, but I didn't yet know the full extent of his drinking—he was keeping that hidden. With two young children at home, we had worked out an arrangement where I would stay at the house later in the morning, and in return he would come home earlier at the end of the day. Unbeknownst to me, that arrangement gave him the opportunity to start drinking at the house before I arrived home for supper. He may have had a drink in his hand when I walked in the door, but he

wasn't throwing up or passing out from drinking; in fact, I don't think I had ever seen him drunk. The signs were more subtle than that.

What I did notice was that the man who used to be so interested in our relationship had become distant and inaccessible to me. He was still the life of the party in a group, but my efforts to engage with him one-on-one were met with hollow stares. His needs became paramount as he pushed aside the needs of others, annoyed by anything or anyone that asked of him some commitment or sacrifice. Like many spouses in the face of similar conduct, I assumed the problem was me—that I had done something wrong or had become boring to him. It was a time of pain, confusion, self-doubt, and despair. I could not grasp what had gone wrong with our storybook relationship. Although I tried desperately to understand, my entreaties yielded no answers.

Often, when I am overwhelmed by feelings that I cannot contain or understand, I try instead to capture those feelings in a poem. My poem from those days follows:

## *An Island*

You sit just an arm's length away, yet you remain beyond my reach.

Once again, you have retreated into your private sanctuary,

that unnamed place from which you stare at me with vacant eyes—

your physical presence with me a mere charade.

My words bounce off and return to me unanswered.

What emotion lies behind your empty gaze?

Is it anger, disgust, or simply boredom?

Is it directed at me, at life, or at someone or something I don't yet know?

I crawl frantically about the surface of your glass shell,

groping for an opening, for some crack or weakness I might penetrate

and find again the man I once knew and loved.



But you are prepared—the gates are already closed,

the soft spots protected against intruders.

Your eyes tell me you are only passing time until I have exhausted

my efforts and retreated in defeat,

leaving you to satisfy your needs free of my expectations or demands.

You are an island without a bridge, a fortress no one can reach—

disconnected from anyone who might ask you to give something of yourself,

to relinquish any control to someone else's needs;

disconnected from me,

disconnected from life,

disconnected from love. (© 2008)

Looking back now, I believe those times of uncertainty were the hardest for me. My marriage was falling apart and I had no clue why or how to fix it. With alcoholism, however, things seldom stay the same for long. And so it was with us. As my husband began, inevitably, to drink more, I finally started to realize that alcohol was in some way connected to our problem. At my urging he talked to a doctor and then a counselor about his drinking; they merely suggested that he try to moderate his intake. Naively, I offered to help him moderate by keeping track of the level of alcohol in the bottles on the pantry

shelf. I thought he was doing better until I noticed the condensation on the inside of the gin bottle and discovered he had drunk the gin and refilled the bottle with water. That discovery brought with it another one—that he was deliberately deceiving me. The honesty in our relationship had been sacrificed to his need to drink.

Of course, once I knew the game he was playing, I became more alert to other signs—the bottles of alcohol hidden behind the sofa and in his gym bag, the increasingly frequent moments of forgetfulness, his flirtatiousness with other women, and a growing immaturity. I became fearful of where this path would lead him—to malpractice, an affair, a terrible car accident, emotional scarring of our children, his own personal and professional downfall? It was a horrible vision of the future, but one I was certain would play itself out in reality if he failed to change course. At the same time, I was struck with the equally painful recognition that I would become the sole source of support for our children, both financially and emotionally.

Since my spoken words didn't reach him, I wrote him a letter. In it I expressed my fear that he was going to make some mistake, or otherwise do or fail to do something that would be very hard for him to live with. I knew that, above all, he valued his reputation and his intelligence—if he destroyed them, he would have struck a blow at the deepest core of his self esteem.

At my request, we went to see an alcohol counselor. For the first time, she applied the label of “alcoholic” to my husband. He rejected it and her suggestion that he go to an AA meeting. She advised me, in turn, not to be an enabler of his conduct. Her words struck home for me. He might destroy his own life, but I was unwilling to allow him to destroy my life or the lives of our young children as well. I accepted that, if there was to be any hope of improvement, I had to stop protecting him from the consequences of his conduct. I told him that he could no longer drink at home, and if he thought he would get around me by simply drinking away from home, then I would not allow him to enter our house after drinking. It was a sobering pronouncement, at least to me.

As Easter was approaching, my husband declared he would prove he was not an alcoholic by giving up alcohol for Lent. And he almost made it, although he was miserable the entire time. He declared victory a few hours

early—on Easter eve—and celebrated with several drinks. His Lenten sacrifice, however, did not disprove his alcoholism, as his path took an even sharper decline upon his resumption of drinking.

As the saying goes, when one door closes, another one opens. As my husband was closing the door on our relationship, another door to help was being opened to me. Several months earlier I had attended the Festival of Legal Learning CLE program in Chapel Hill. The program was structured in a “buffer” style—for every block of time there were several offerings. For one block, I had selected a topic that offered ethics credit. One of the speakers was Ed Ward with the State Bar's Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP), who talked about alcoholism and the role of the LAP. Ed's words struck several chords with me. What I remembered most, however, was his offer of help should it ever be needed by either a lawyer alcoholic or a family member of an alcoholic.

One night in early June, my husband had his first blackout. He had scared me when I found him perched precariously on the top of a stepladder, trying to change a light bulb in the ceiling of our garage. It was a wonder he didn't fall and crack his skull on the cement floor. The next day, however, he remembered nothing of this escapade. That incident was my last straw—I knew instinctively that there was nothing more I could do to help my husband. At the same time, I recognized that I needed to do something to help myself. That day I called Ed Ward at the State Bar.

Looking back now, I am amazed that I had the courage to take this step. Had I taken the time to think about it, I might not have done so. Unaware of the confidentiality of the LAP program, I might have been scared off by the prospect of revealing my husband's name to the State Bar, or by the uncertainty of what they would do with that knowledge. It was a blessing, however, that I didn't stop to think. The truth though is that I didn't call for help for my husband—I called for help for myself. But in doing so, I did the best thing I could have done for either of us.

I told Ed that I thought my husband was an alcoholic, that there was nothing more I knew to do to help him, and that I needed help myself. Ed has a voice that immediately conveys compassion and inspires trust. I answered his questions about my husband's behavior, and when he asked me my husband's name, I gave it to him. Ed then asked

me if I thought my husband would call him, and I agreed to ask him.

That night, standing in our bathroom, I told my husband what I had done and asked him to call Ed. I watched the color drain from his face. He agreed, however, to make the call. I immediately felt a load lift from my shoulders—someone else was going to take charge of this huge problem that I no longer knew how to handle on my own. I slept well for the first time in months.

The story both ends and begins with the phone call my husband made to Ed the next day. It ended the downward spiral—my husband didn't have another drink, he accepted his alcoholism, and he agreed to go to 90 AA meetings in the next 90 days. And it began his recovery process—a process that was slow, but was also steady and continuous. As the alcohol left his system, we began communicating again and our marriage started to feel like a partnership once more. By the end of the first year he had regained his maturity, and I was starting to trust his commitment to sobriety. Over the next few years I was able to recognize and articulate the ways his conduct had hurt me, and he was able to apologize. He became concerned again for my needs and was willing to balance those needs with his own. We talked, we shared, we rebuilt the bridges between us, and we re-forged our relationship.

Ten years later, my husband's sobriety is intact. He takes his recovery seriously, and still attends AA meetings twice a week. Ed has continued to play a vital role in his sobriety, and they are good friends. My husband and I are good friends again as well. Once more, we see life as bountiful. Help was there when we needed it. Help is there for anyone in our shoes who asks for it. ■

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