**Crossing Over**

There is a line between heavy drinking and self-destructive addiction that gets blurrier the closer you get to it. I was always a heavy drinker since college. For most of my adult life, I was able to keep it under some semblance of control. While I drank too much under any reasonable standard, I was functional in that I was able to work and sleep and my job and relationships were intact. With a little luck, I was able to avoid serious consequences such as a DUI, divorce or job loss. I did not crave that first drink of the day until I got home from work and at that point I always told myself it was just to relax.

Then something changed in my late forties. It was such a slow progression that I cannot pinpoint when I crossed over. I had a couple of very stressful cases. I began waking up at night with anxiety and sleeplessness that a shot or glass of wine would instantly cure so that I could return to sleep. I had to sneak around to do this but did not think I had a problem and I just thought my family would not understand so I hid it from them. I eventually started going home at lunch for a drink and a “nap”. This then turned into also needing an afternoon drink to get through the rest of the day. I always had a breath mint in my mouth to mask the odor of alcohol. This constant drinking led to painful physical ailments in my stomach and esophagus that would only feel better (albeit temporarily) if I had a drink. I was sleeping at least twelve hours a day and was always tired anyway. I fell into a miserable vicious cycle of anxiety, physical pain, and sleeplessness that could only be lessened by the one thing that was causing all those things to begin with, alcohol. I was trapped and could not quit.

Then a terrible and wonderful thing happened. I got caught by my employer one day when, with my wife and family out of town, I drank so much that I blacked out and missed a telephone scheduling conference with a judge. A concerned law partner showed up at my house in the middle of that work day and found me alone and obviously impaired. It was the most awful and embarrassing experience of my life and I’m so glad that it happened. I had gotten to point that I could not see for myself how lost I had become and did not realize how completely powerless I was to quit. One of the side effects of alcohol addiction is a diminished recognition of significant problems with one’s behaviors. Before that day, I had convinced myself that I did not have a problem and that I was not drinking more than a normal person, which in hindsight was ridiculous. I had refused to acknowledge or even consider how much it was affecting my work.

This confrontation with my employer led me to “voluntarily” seek professional help at a 45 day inpatient facility to preserve my job. I now know that I never would have been able to stop drinking without going away and removing the option to drink for an extended period. While in treatment, my head began to clear and I was able to fully appreciate my predicament. I paid attention and learned an enormous amount from the daily lectures. I physically and mentally healed. I developed intimate and supportive friendships in the facility that still exist today. I am convinced beyond doubt that going to treatment saved my life.

In the almost two years of sobriety since seeking treatment, I have experienced a total rebirth of my life and my legal career. My anxiety is completely manageable now and I find myself effortlessly doing things in the courtroom that used to cause me great angst. I am now much more likely to defuse rather than escalate conflicts with opposing counsel. My obsession with drinking is gone. I am truly present for my family for the first time in a long while and have repaired the damage to those relationships that I had caused. I have developed deep and meaningful friendships with other lawyers who are in WVJLAP and who I probably would have never met otherwise. I truly enjoy the humor and comradery of the JLAP group and AA in general. Meetings are a pleasure to attend rather than the chore I thought that they would be.

I can honestly say at this point in my life that I am a grateful recovering alcoholic. While it was a painful and humbling experience, and while I am certainly glad the bad part of the journey is behind me, I would not trade my past. This whole experience has taught me to appreciate and experience life one day at a time and that is one of the priceless gifts of recovery. .