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# IN SIGHT

*for Oregon Lawyers*

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## A WHOLE NEW WAY OF LIFE

When I quit drinking, I thought it would be the end of life as I knew it. And it was, thank God!

I worked as a journalist after college, but deep down I had always wanted to be a lawyer. My mother still has a picture I drew in sixth grade of myself as the first female U.S. attorney general. In my depiction, I stand in a courtroom, tough but feminine, pointing an accusatory finger at a character I dubbed “The Jackal.”

That confident young attorney, however, was not the person who first walked through the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous. On that evening, I was a blotchy, bloated mess, barely able to look at myself in the mirror, let alone look someone else in the eye. I appeared, as one friend later confided, “rough.” I smoked a pack of cigarettes a day. At night when I got home, I drank.

Beer was my drug of choice. That and coffee brandy were my two closest friends at the end. I can identify with people who say they holed up in some secret place to drink alone in peace. That’s how I liked to drink, too. Since I lived alone, it was fairly easy. Late at night, when I had a good buzz going, I used to stand out on my balcony, smoking and listening to music on my headphones. (I didn’t want to wake up the neighbors!) In my stupor, I would gaze at the sky and tell myself everything was okay.

Except that it wasn’t. Dragging myself out of bed and off to work in the morning became harder and harder. I can’t tell you the number of times, head pounding with a hangover, I vowed to myself I would not drink that day. And I meant it – until I was driving home after work, and my car would mysteriously turn into the parking lot of the liquor store. “I’ll just have a couple,” I’d tell myself. Of course I never had just a couple. And the cycle repeated itself, over and over.

I used to see ads on television for a luxurious treatment center and think, “Oh, I wish I could go there and get away from it all.” Never once did I consider this a sign that I needed help. (How many healthy people fantasize about being institutionalized?) I didn’t go. I worked as the lone staff reporter on a small weekly newspaper, and I thought I was too important to miss work.

Finally, after a few years of living this way, I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. I hated my job, my life, and myself. On the advice of a counselor I had been seeing for a few years on and off (i.e., on when I liked what he had to say, off when he suggested I had a drinking problem), I finally went to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. I didn’t know much about AA or whether it would work, but after numerous experiments, I had failed to stop drinking on my own, so I was willing to give it a try. Absent this gift of desperation, I would not have walked through the door.

I identified with what a woman shared at the beginner’s meeting that night. Afterward, sensing I was new, she followed me out the door and introduced herself. She invited me to go back inside for the regular meeting, which I did. That was over 10 years ago, and thanks to the grace of God and the fellowship of AA, I haven’t found it necessary to pick up a drink since. That woman who reached out her hand to me became my first sponsor, and under her wise, patient, loving guidance, I began to work the 12 steps of recovery. To this day, she is a dear friend.

She was also an important role model. When we met, she was taking classes at my alma mater to get her bachelor’s degree. Going back to school was *not* my idea of a good time, but I did have other goals I wanted to achieve. I quit smoking, and a few years and 40 pounds later, I took up running. I even ran some road races. A part

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of me had yearned for years to run, and now that I didn't smoke or drink, I was able to do it. One day while I was out running, a thought occurred to me: I want to go to law school.

I had applied to law school as a senior in college, mostly to appease my mother. Although I got a decent score on the LSAT, I compiled my applications half-heartedly and submitted them at the last minute. With my lackluster undergraduate grade point average – the result of too much partying and not enough studying – it came as no shock that I didn't get in.

This time, however, I went about the process entirely differently. I planned ahead and got all my paperwork in order, on time. I also wrote a candid personal statement that began with a quote from Helen Keller: "One can never consent to creep when one feels the impulse to soar." I related this sentiment to both my urge to take up running and my desire to become a lawyer. And even though I scored one point lower on the LSAT this time, I got in.

Four years into my recovery, I was dismayed to discover how law school social life centered on drinking. On Fridays, a classmate would note on the blackboard the time and place of a local happy hour, inviting all to come. At times I felt slightly resentful that I couldn't join in; it wasn't fair that they got to go out drinking after class and I couldn't! But then I would look around the classroom at the new friends I was making and remind myself that they wouldn't *be* my friends if I were still drinking. If they saw the way I acted when I drank – which could range, unpredictably, from sloppy and maudlin to obnoxious and angry – they'd want nothing to do with me. And I was definitely glad that the person whose drunken antics everyone whispered and laughed about on Mondays wasn't me. One time, an unsuspecting classmate tried to cajole me into going to a bar by saying, "Come on, I'll introduce you to all the alcoholics." "No thanks," I said, "I already know plenty!" I went to an AA meeting instead.

Staying sober enabled me to participate in law school in ways that I hadn't been able to in college. I made law review, ultimately publishing both a note and a comment. In my third year, I balanced my duties as articles editor with representing indigent criminal defendants as a student attorney. Through all this, I attained a GPA high

enough to graduate in the top 5 percent of my law school class. But my recovery had to come first, because without that I could do nothing. I went to meetings, asked for help, worked with my sponsor and sponsees, and prayed. A lot!

A passage in *Alcoholics Anonymous* ("the Big Book") says, "See to it that your relationship with Him is right, and great events will come to pass for you and countless others." I kept thinking of this line on graduation day, as I waited to go up on stage and accept my law school diploma.

Getting involved with my local lawyers assistance program enhanced my recovery tremendously, because it fused my two identities of recovering alcoholic and budding lawyer. While still in law school, I joined a lawyers support group, where I befriended other sober attorneys and law students. After a few years, I was honored to be asked to join the board of directors. At the time, I was clerking for a state supreme court judge, so I needed to clear it with him. He voiced his support for the organization, adding that a lawyer friend of his was a recovering alcoholic. Without thinking, I blurted out, "So am I!" Luckily our conversation was over the phone, so I didn't see the look on his face. But months later, when I was interviewing for post-clerkship jobs, he told me that one prospective employer had called and asked about his confidence in me. He said he told the caller, "I have no doubts about her trustworthiness." Those words from a supreme court justice meant the world to this recovering drunk.

Recently I moved to take a dream job as a media attorney – another gift of recovery. I contacted the local lawyers' assistance program because I want to stay connected to other lawyers in recovery. The director of the program suggested I become a volunteer, which I gladly agreed to do. Being of service to others not only helps me, it also provides an opportunity to give back in some small way all that was freely given to me. Recovery really is a whole new way of life.

#### Grateful for a Second Chance

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