

*Editor's note: When asked to write a personal narrative detailing a defining moment in her life, Elisha produced "Mudslide," a narrative that deftly balances storytelling with commentary, analysis, and description.*

## Mudslide

When those steel jail doors slam shut on you for the first time it feels like you are in the middle of a nightmare. I could not believe I was there, hearing that hollow sound echo on and on for what seemed like forever. Once you hear that harsh, metallic, empty sound, you never forget the feelings of helplessness, fear, despair, and rage that it evokes. Helplessness over just being there; I always told myself that I was way too smart for them to catch me. Fear of what lay ahead; after all, people who went to jail were not nice people, so how could I be here and what would people think of me? Would anyone ever love me again? Despair over the effect this would have on the rest of my life now that I was a convict. RAGE! RAGE! RAGE! How dare you catch me!

The smell is another thing I will never forget, and every jail smells a little different. I would be willing to bet almost anything that if I were blindfolded and led into any one of the jails I have spent time in, I could tell which one it was by the smell. One smelled like sickness, another smelled like a hospital. The worst one was a fetid, putrid smell of something rotten. The most disgusting experience was my confinement to a ten-by-ten cell with a heroin addict coming down. They have a smell about them that is indescribable. The health concerns are yet another issue: lice, TB, and bladder infections run rampant in jails. The experienced lodger quickly learns to grease up her hair since lice can't cling to grease; keep as far away from everyone as possible, so as not to breathe in the disease; and don't use the soap. The last remedy is questionable, but I never did figure out what caused the bladder problems. I can tell you that I never experienced that problem before or since being in jail.

If someone had told me on that first day that it wouldn't end there, that I would actually be arrested ten more times before reality started to penetrate my brain, I would have said, NO WAY! As I look back on it now, it seems to me that the path of an addictive personality is like a slippery slope: once you get your feet on it, there is no way back. You just have to ride the slope down and when you are completely spiritually bankrupt, if you're lucky, someone says something that strikes a true sound deep inside and, out of the confusing haze of self-absorption, you start to see a path going back up the hill of self-respect.

People have asked me how I came to be a drug addict but as much as I would like to point to one single specific thing and announce with self-assurance, "That's it," there really is no simple answer. This is not something that you consciously decide to become and it does not happen quickly. The disease of addiction is a slow ponderous beast that does not make obvious or rapid moves. For me, it began with a sensitive, shy personality and a trauma that sent me looking for a way to "feel good." The vulnerable child that I was took that trauma and shoved it down deep where it turned into resentment that festered like an abscess. Over a period of years, my need to "feel good" increased to the point that I was a full-blown drug addict. Once that hook became completely imbedded, the piece of me that had a conscience vanished. It was all about getting up the cash to score enough dope to satisfy my own need and still have enough profit to go around again. If that meant robbing people, or hurting people, or conning, lying, and deceiving, it was all part of the game of getting, using, and finding ways and means of getting more. My need became a driving obsession that I could not control.

My longest incarceration was for nine months, which is long enough to get clean and for the brain to start working again in a logical way. By the time I was released I knew that I wanted my life back and I was determined to make that happen. The problem was that I did not have the tools to make it happen and I was still convinced that the rules did not apply to me and that I should be able to do as I pleased. In recovery, we call that having 'entitlement issues.' I went back to jail for short periods three additional times after that, for breaking the rules of my parole. I finally found myself equipped with a steel ankle bracelet that tracked my every move and was required to report to Multnomah County Day Reporting Center, an alternative jail sanction. I reported every day to a counselor named Bruce, and for the life of me, I can't tell you exactly what he said that got my attention, but somewhere along the way the haze of self-deception started to clear and stuff started to fall into place.

About the same time, I went to my first Narcotics Anonymous meeting to pacify my parole officer, though I did not believe for a minute that they could actually teach me anything; after all, they were drug addicts and everybody knows those people are low lifes. I was different, right? As I listened to the people in those rooms share their experience, strength, and hope, I began to recognize a pattern: The details of the stories were different but the pattern of obsessive and compulsive behavior was the same. Many of the people in those rooms were educated, intelligent people who had a life once upon a time, just like me. They got their feet on that slippery slope and down they went. Just like me! But I saw people, not much different from me, breaking the addiction cycle. That got my attention and I wanted to

know how they were doing it. So, I kept going back, only now, I was going for me, not to please someone else. After a lot of soul-searching, I gradually acquired the clarity to start putting my life back together.

Recovery is an ongoing process and my life will never be the same again. The process of working the twelve steps of recovery involves an intensive look deep inside oneself in all of the places that we fear to go. Courage to face our fears plays a huge part in this process and one of the most profound things that I learned from my involvement with NA is, "Courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness to walk through it." If you want to build a healthy life you have to be willing to poke, prod, and expose the very things that caused you so much pain in the first place. Once I put the trauma of my inner child into perspective, I was able to let go of the resentment. It is only when you revisit these things and view them through the eye of the mature and rational adult that the healing can begin. "Working the steps," as it is called, is the best way I've ever come across to address anything that bothers you, whether you're an addict or not, because it encourages a process of analysis that is formidable and foolproof, if utilized properly.

It has been almost two years since I last used drugs or alcohol, but I have learned enough about myself and the disease to know that the work is never done. In order to keep what I have, I must continue to do the footwork and it is an empowering endeavor. I heard it said once, "My addict does push-ups outside my front door waiting for me to open the door and let him in." As long as I remember that, I will be able to stay one step ahead of the mudslide.