



Living With Crazy: My Experiences of an Abusive Wife (Part IV)

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With divorce rates in the United States hovering at around 50%, there are clearly issues creating rifts between spouses, and domestic abuse accounts for some of this statistic. However, abuse in which the female is the primary instigator is less recognized even though common (Archer, 2000). The purpose of this continuing memoir (see Farris & Baghurst, 2013a,b) is to provide an account of one man's experiences of an abusive wife. In this section, details are recounted of mistrust, a near-death experience

during a high speed chase, physical separation, efforts to discuss the marriage with church leaders, reunification, and eventual permanent separation. The overarching aim of this section of the memoir is to better understand how one man struggled to reach a decision to divorce, while overcoming some of the stigma that accompanies males who claim abuse by their partners.

Keywords: domestic abuse, violence, spouse, male victim, church

Airplanes are amazing things. They represent the accumulation of knowledge and ingenuity that sets man apart on this planet from everything else. They allow us to take a weekend, sample another culture, and be home in time for Monday morning rush hour. But, they aren't magic. They can't rewind time or unwind a twisted mind. There was definitely part of me that thought that once we landed in the U.S. our marriage would shift; from the sharp contrasts of black and white to a more pleasant and softer Technicolor like Dorothy and her house landing in Oz. This delusion did not stand very long.

Ironically, the second time she tried to kill me (for the first see Farris & Baghurst, 2013a) was because I had been out rescuing children from abusive homes. Even before we returned to the U.S. I had begun to search for work. I took the most interesting and financially generous job my BA in psychology would permit, as a Family Service Worker (FSW). FSW is bureaucratic code for child abuse investigator which is in essence someone who investigates claims of child abuse and neglect, and if necessary, removes the victims from their homes. The macabre irony of investigating abuse, while being the victim of abuse, is not lost on me. However, when it was happening, Ray Charles would've had an easier time seeing it.

There is something wholly beautiful and terrifying about our ability to compartmentalize things. It enables us to act with our minds instead of our hearts. It's at the center of a fireman's ability to run into a burning building, and it explains why I was able to learn to recognize abuse in others' lives and be so utterly blind to it in my own. That I could do this while being abused still shakes me up. It brings to light doubts about my self-awareness that I would rather leave in the dark. What else am I missing that others can obviously see?

Beyond my own lack of insight was the cultural undercurrent that sought to rob me of my right to be equally seen and treated fairly as a human being. I had been weaned on a culture where men were the default abusers and women were always the "victims" (Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). This is in no small part due to the heavy influence of feminism in society. For example, Stony Book College recently developed a men's studies program (Stony Book News, 2013), yet its founding board members have been criticized for their feminist values (National Coalition for Men, 2013).

Living Irony

Being a child abuse investigator is one of the strangest jobs in the world. No one is ever happy to see

you: not the victim, the perpetrator, not even the person who reported the abuse. At best they're relieved that they're morally off the hook.

The most you can hope for in such a case is that you're accusing innocent people of harming a child, which is in itself an awful thing. At worst, you're inserting yourself into explosive situations to remove a primary witness/victim to a crime someone has committed. You break up homes, separating children from parents, and siblings. It's not a pleasant job. FSWs generally work alone and given the sensitive nature of the work, you're not supposed to discuss it with people outside DHS. It's an oddly lonely and dangerous job.

FSWs are the first responders of the child abuse world. A call comes in through the child abuse hotline and if the call meets a legal threshold of concern, a case is generated and a FSW is dispatched. After interviewing the reported victim, perpetrator, and other pertinent witnesses, the FSW determines whether the claim is founded or unfounded. A "founded case" sets the governmental juggernaut into motion. Children can be removed from homes and perpetrators prosecuted.

I worked as a FSW for 9 months waiting for medical school to start. My last week as a FSW was also the week before I started medical school. It was also my turn to be on-call, which required me to respond to any off-duty situations that were deemed too severe to wait until the next day. During that final week on-call I took 9 children into DHS custody, including a sibling group of three.

The worst day of my week on-call was Friday. First thing that night, I took into custody a four year old boy who had been raped by his HIV positive adult relative; yes, the relative knew he had HIV. Later I took into custody a child with a leg fracture that was two weeks old. The mother had finally brought the child into the emergency room because her leg had become swollen and the skin had begun to slough off. A bone survey would later show several other fractures including a skull fracture. Think about those things and remember the queasy, punched-in-the-gut feeling you had and get when you think about Jerry Sandusky or the Catholic Church cover-up. And then, try to imagine you're face-to-face with both the victim and the perpetrator, seeing the bruises and hearing a little boy complain that he can't sit down because his bottom hurts. Then, imagine you have to ask the perpetrator what happened and have him deny it to your face. Only situations like these lend to the highest degree of incredulity, and in those moments you become an apostate of the human spirit. Think of these things as you consider my simultaneous efforts to prepare for medical school and cope with a toxic, moribund marriage.

Only in His Own House is a Prophet Without Honor

Alex couldn't completely wrap her head around the idea that there would need to be a FSW on-call, and that I would have to take my turn in the rotation. Her insecurities and certainty of my impending infidelity alienated her from reason. During that final week all she could see was me receiving a phone call late at night, me rushing out the door, and then returning exhausted several hours later. Of course I would explain what I was doing and relate to her some of the nauseatingly, sadistic details of what I had seen. I did so in an effort to assuage her doubts that I needed to be out there, and reinforce that these children needed someone to rescue them. To be sure this type of paranoid doubt and suspicion is pathologic (Enoch, 1991).

I had never cheated on her and I had never even hinted at it, but Alex was running off of scripts written on her heart long before I appeared in her world. These scripts witnessed as a child and later rehearsed by her mother and grandmother, served to chain her to the belief that men could not be loyal, and that they would cheat as soon as you dropped your defense. However, reason is little match for unfounded certainty, and there is a saying that one should “Trust the person who is pursuing truth; don’t trust the person who believes they have already found it.” Alex wasn’t searching for truth, she already thought I had broken her trust. She “knew” that I would cheat, and that I already probably had (see Farris & Baghurst, 2013a,b). She was convinced that I was having an affair with a coworker and that I was running off to a tryst during those late night calls.

It was dumbfounding to me that Alex could simultaneously express concern for my safety, fearing that I might potentially get hurt by a parent who just wasn’t willing to relinquish their child or lie that they weren’t the perpetrator, and yet also labor under my supposed philandering. It was a strange dichotomy; concern for my safety and then absolute certainty that I was betraying her. I look back on those times and grieve over the emotional and cognitive dissonance that must have tortured her. How can you live, loving someone, and at the same time be so utterly convinced they are betraying you? That was her lot and I was unable to assuage her fears. Like all of her other accusations I would unsuccessfully meet it with perseverations of my innocence.

The whole thing boiled over the Sunday before medical school started. Alex had woken up in a funk that carried through church. We had gone out to eat after the service and as we returned back home she started venting. The constant strife of our marriage and the soul crushing sadness of my week on-call had made my libido slow to a crawl. She interpreted this as sign that I was cheating on her with a co-worker. This was hardly the case. Although I liked most of my coworkers, they were all seriously unattractive and generally married. Yet, the true obstacle to infidelity was my resolute belief that adultery was wrong. The source of Alex’s suspicion came from within Alex, and it was something only she could fully articulate.

As we arrived home our argument followed us inside. An offhanded, cutting remark aimed at me, quickly escalated to Alex assaulting me.

“I bet you’d do it if your girlfriend at DHS wanted you to,” she spat at me.

“Yeah,.....that’s stupid,” I responded. I was tired and not willing to persist in circular arguments.

She responded to my comment by leaping at me kicking, her purse in one hand and a “To Go” box in the other. The assault was nothing new and I was forced to use the only weapon I had, escape. I grabbed her by the shoulders, moved her away from the doorway, and ran out. She pursued me, but her runner’s stride was limited by her high heels, “To Go” box, and purse. I got to my car, locked the doors, started it, and was backing up before she was able to cover the distance to my car. That didn’t stop her from leaping on the hood of the car, however. This might have been effective had she been Anvil or one of the Dukes of Hazard, but she weighed about 95 pounds. She slid off of the car and I pulled away. She continued her pursuit on foot, but when it looked like I was getting away, she launched her “To Go” box at my car. It exploded like an overflowing diaper against the rear

window. I'm sure to a bystander the scene would have appeared quite comical, but to me it wasn't.

At the time we lived in a gated community. Waiting for the gate to roll back and release me gave her time to catch up in her car. And, in fine fashion, once she caught up she made her presence known by slamming her car into the back of mine. The damage was minor, but it was the only impetus I needed to speed away as soon as I could squeeze through the gate.

We raced all over the city running red lights and dodging other cars. Thinking back, I didn't feel that my life was in peril if I stopped. My greater physical size guaranteed that I would be able to overcome her if I needed to. I simply didn't want to stand and take it anymore. I was tired of putting up with it. There are unspoken social agreements we enter into with relationships. That they should lack abuse seems completely obvious, and once those agreements are violated, the relationship must be dissolved. I think that is the way we should look at it. Whether or not you choose to reenter or repair a relationship is wholly a different matter. Once one person crosses that line in the sand, the relationship is done and both parties must choose to start anew. Alex had violated that most obvious and necessary tenet, that a relationship should be safe (Collins & Feeney, 2000).

As Alex chased me for miles and miles, the eyes I saw in my rearview mirror were murderous. At some point we wound up on the interstate. Sensing that my car could outrun hers, she pulled in front of me and slammed on her brakes. At 70 mph and with cars to my left, I was forced off of the road and onto the median. Think of this: 70 mph. Whether or not she intended to kill me, this action could have easily resulted in it. We can only take away from situations what we've experienced, and if an explanation can give us fuller context than we can reframe that experience. However, some experiences carry such gravity that even a fuller understanding doesn't change our perspective. Alex would later say during counseling, choking back the tears, that she only wanted me to stop. She had slammed on her brakes because she wanted to talk to me. If I had held a knife to her throat because she kept accusing me of cheating, and then later said it was because I had only wanted her to stop, would this diminish the crazy, recklessness of that action? Of course not.

I fished-tailed in the median, eventually righting my vehicle before pressing the accelerator so hard into the carpet that the marks still show today. I passed her and took off later finding out that she drove another 20 miles before giving up her pursuit. She returned home and called my father at around 9 p.m., who later told me that she had sounded angry and wanted to know if I had called him. She had suggested that I wouldn't be telling the truth when, or if, I called.

I drove for another 40 miles before I eventually realized that she was out of sight and that my only danger was from a state trooper. I didn't know what to do, and I found myself to be in complete poverty to action. I knew that things were broken. I knew that it was no small miracle that I was alive. I knew that things could not continue. It was about 11 p.m. when I parked my car in my parent's driveway. I sat there for hours. I debated what to do. Call the police? It would result in Alex being charged, probably losing her visa, and ruining her life. Talk to my parents? They would be worried, they were already asleep, and what could they do anyway? I realize now that these thoughts were flawed and not at all in my best interests, but in the end I decided to go home.

I got back to our apartment around 3 in the morning. Alex heard me come in and when I

didn't come upstairs she yelled at me to come up. I told her I wouldn't and that we would talk in the morning. There must have been something in my voice or some change in her because she didn't push it. The next day I called a mutual friend of ours that Alex had been staying with when we were dating and asked if she could stay with her. I told this friend that we were having problems and that it would be best if Alex came to stay with her. She was agreeable.

I don't remember how the "You need to leave, now!" conversation with Alex went. My mind was burnt out from adrenaline and lack of sleep. She packed a single bag, gave me a tearful goodbye hug, and left. I changed the locks as soon as she left and began medical school the next morning. The stress of my crumbling marriage, the realization of what I had been living with, and the pressure of outside forces (i.e., my family, her family, friends, and church) created an incredibly toxic environment. Blend that with the incredible academic stresses of medical school, and I was left in a state of constant exhaustion and stress. I didn't sleep for days, maybe weeks, but I can't be certain. Most nights I would lay in bed awake until I heard a noise, thinking she might still be able to get in. Then, I would get out of bed, check the windows, and finding them secure would stay up, too tired to study, too anxious to sleep.

The Quest for a Resolution

I know that the time between when she left and when she moved back in was 9 months. I know this because of calendars, not because of memories. In fact, those months are a blur of being overwhelmed with knowledge in medical school, contemplating our relationship, and the constant pressure to work on my marriage. During this time there was a steady stream of phone calls, text messages, and emails from Alex, her family, my family, friends, and other concerned parties.

I can't remember the exact sequence of events after she left, but soon after she was gone, she began meeting with a Christian social worker/counselor and going to a Christian 12-step program. A few sessions in, her counselor invited me to one of their sessions. I remember checking in with the secretary and taking a seat. Alex came in shortly after me, signed in, and sat several chairs away from me in the waiting room. The tension and unsettled emotion filled the room; floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall. Our turn came and the counselor invited us back to her office.

My role was to provide perspective on Alex and what had been going on. We sat in separate chairs side-by-side facing the counselor on a couch. She began with an open-ended question.

"Saul, tell me what's been going on with Alex?" I was sunk into the chair, the anger driving the color from my knuckles, and the brim of my hat pulled low over my eyes.

"She punched me, kicked me, spit on me, tried to kill me, lied about me, and threatened to have me falsely arrested," I growled.

I don't remember looking at Alex during the sessions, but I remember sensing that she felt shamed and hurt by what I said. She didn't deny any of it, but she never took ownership of what I said either. The counselor would later pull out a copy of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR (2000), turn to the personality disorder section, and do an inventory of

Alex's behavior and suggest borderline personality disorder as a possibility. By my count she had 7 out of 9 traits which was confirmed by the counselor. According to the DSM IV-TR (2000), Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is manifested by a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five or more of the following:

1. Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment. Note: Do not include suicidal or self-mutilating behavior covered in (5).
2. A pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation. This is called "splitting."
3. Identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self.
4. Impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (e.g., spending, sex, substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating). Note: Do not include suicidal or self-mutilating behavior covered in (5).
5. Recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior.
6. Affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood (e.g., intense episodic dysphoria, irritability, or anxiety usually lasting a few hours and only rarely more than a few days).
7. Chronic feelings of emptiness.
8. Inappropriate, intense anger or difficulty controlling anger (e.g., frequent displays of temper, constant anger, recurrent physical fights).
9. Transient, stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms. (pp. 706-711)

I believe Alex exhibited all of these traits except 4 and possibly 9. She was constantly afraid that I would leave her for another woman. Many of our arguments were the result of Alex expressing these fears and her inability to be convinced otherwise. Alex was very black and white in her thinking. For her, people fell into one of two camps; either good or bad. There were many times when someone would merely disagree with her and she would write them off forever, such as the first couple she stayed with when she moved to the United States. Likewise, people she favored could do no wrong. Alex struggled constantly with who she was. Although she was a bright, charming, and capable woman, the smallest slight or setback would send her reeling for days, even weeks. In these articles I've related some of the multiple times that she would feign suicide or hurt herself to force my submission (see Farris & Baghurst, 2013a,b). Her mood would rapidly oscillate without obvious cause. One moment she might be happy, the next angry, the next sad, all without an identifiable cause. After we were married she would relate feeling "empty" inside. I thought this was related to an understandable sadness associated with our separation, but these feelings persisted even after we were reunited. And, if you've read some of the previous articles, then you can clearly recognize the irrational anger and uncontrolled outbursts.

The way I think of BPD is that it's a disorder of mood and relationships; I think that captures what Alex was going through fairly well. Of course, Alex felt differently. She didn't see most of the traits in herself. Moreover, she had a strong aversion to any kind of label. The counselor would later tell Alex that based on my demeanor, she felt there was a less than 5% chance that I was still in the marriage, and that Alex should work on herself, for herself, and not do counseling in order to win me back.

I had not divulged the dysfunction in my marriage to my family or closest friends. After I started talking about it I found that they were supportive. They feared for my safety because of Alex's behavior and thought that divorce would be the safest route for me to take.

Even before Alex walked out she wanted to get back together. She would've been satisfied with jumping right back into our marriage without any mediation or counseling. She lacked the basic insight to see how dysfunctional our relationship was. Many people from our church, including most of the leadership, felt that the "sin" threshold necessary to grant a divorce had not been reached, which they believed to be unrepentant adultery. They felt that Alex's physical and verbal assaults were egregious, but didn't meet the criteria necessary to Biblically sanction divorce. They hoped that we could be reunited through: (a) earthly intervention such as counseling and their 12-step group, and (b) heavenly intervention including prayer and meditation on the Bible. I believe they were unreasonably certain that Alex's behavior could be overcome. I also think they were unable to fully appreciate the gravity of what she had been doing to me.

In thinking that she wouldn't change I run the razor's edge of profaning one of the core tenets of Christianity; that Jesus has the power to change people not just in a legalistic, rule following sense, but more similar to mending a broken soul. I know many people would read this and think that I'm being ridiculous. She tried to kill me and yet I'm beating myself up because I didn't give her the benefit of the doubt, but that's the strength of my convictions.

During our reunification process, most of the third parties involved were men. This is not an inconsequential matter. I believe their perceptions were partly clouded by our current cultural understanding and expectations of the social dynamics of domestic violence (Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). That is, that our default perspective of domestic abuse is that men are the abusers, women the victims. I have to admit that I was guilty of the same perspective prior to my experience with Alex. The idea that the man is the abuser and the woman the victim is insidiously ingrained in our culture (Brown, 2004). Think of all the movies that reinforce this paradigm, "Enough", "The Burning Bed", and "Sleeping with the Enemy" to name a few. Try to name one movie where that paradigm is switched; it's difficult to say the least. The few times I've seen this role reversal played out, the focus was on the pathetic weakness of the man, not the tyranny of the woman.

I think those involved in reconciling our marriage undervalued what had happened to me whereby the combination of their preconceived ideas about roles in domestic abuse and the striking differences between our physical statures allowed them devalue the abuse I dealt with. I don't believe this was a malicious or even conscious process. However, I don't think they would have had the same approach to our reconciliation had our sexes been reversed. Most of the male pastors/elders in our church had no or little exposure to the reality that women could be just as violent as men. I asked

several of them, out exasperation at their inability to see my perspective and persistent belief that we she should work it out a very simple, very direct hypothetical; “Would you feel this way if our genders were reversed? If I was abusing Alex, would you tell her to stay, at great personal risk to herself?” To their credit, most admitted that they would, in fact, counsel differently. Most would have pushed for legal action and a longer term period of counseling. There had been several instances where they had granted divorce when the perpetrating husband refused to change. After 9 months apart, Alex and I had the permission of our counselors and mediators to get back together. She moved back in March during the spring break of my first year of medical school.

The Final Straw

Imagine what it was like to get hit in the leg with a piece of shrapnel or a bullet during the Civil War, to feel your leg slowly grey and die, and to have it finally amputated. I think that analogy is a fairly good metaphor for my marriage to Alex. The bullet was the first time I asked her to leave, the slowly creeping death of gangrene as the time between when she returned and I asked her to leave the second time, which was the final amputation.

Alex was just as insecure and suspicious of me as she was prior to our separation. The verbal abuse and manipulation had not improved. However, the physical abuse was absent. She had learned that violence was not acceptable. I think this had been pressed upon her in the Christian 12-step program she had attended. Other women who had been abused and were reformed abusers, chided her for its use in our past relationship and held her accountable for it in our post-reconciled marriage.

But, things had changed for me too. I was unable to let go of everything she had done to me. Likewise, Alex was resentful that I had kicked her out of our house. And so our relationship withered. The self-effacing benefit of the doubt I had extended Alex was gone. I now called her out every time she was abusive or suspicious. I no longer avoided conflict. For her part, she was cooler towards me. She was not violent, at least at first, but she was also less loving.

Our relationship slowly soured, and over time Alex became more physically confrontational. Shortly after moving back in she stopped going to both her 12-step program and counseling, saying that they weren't helping her and that it wasn't fair that I wasn't going also. At first, when we argued, she wouldn't yell, but that changed overtime. When she was not able to “win” arguments, she would turn up the volume, and so would I. Likewise, her physical posture became more aggressive, from sitting to standing, to blocking my path with her body, to physically bumping into me on purpose.

The final episode that ended our marriage came after a Friday test I had in October. I was mentally exhausted, as per the usual post-test malaise. I'd come home to an empty house and started to watch an episode of *Sons of Anarchy*, a TV show about a motorcycle club. Alex came home to find me vegged out in front of my laptop at the dining room table. She asked me what I was watching and then went to sit down on the couch. Unbeknownst to me she Googled the show and decided it was pornography.

“Saul, I don't want you watching that,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because it has naked women in it,” she replied.

“I haven’t seen any,” I retorted.

“I don’t care. You need to turn it off!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” I replied.

She yelled back. “If you don’t turn it off, I’m going to email Tim and tell him you’re looking at porn!”

I replied sarcastically. “Don’t bother. I’ll do it for you and I’ll tell him you’re acting crazy again!”

And, with that she flew off of the couch at me. She yelled, “I’m not going to let you do that!” as she was trying to wrestle the computer away from me, clawing at my hands to let go.

It was in this moment, for the first time, I wanted to hit her. To be frank, it scared me. I’d never wanted to hit a woman as far as I could recall. I knew at that moment that I was going to divorce Alex. I couldn’t take the chance that I might act upon that impulse, and I knew that Alex was slowly going back to her old pattern of physical abusiveness. I was terrified that at some point she would hit me, and instead of just taking it, I would hit her back. Once I had made the decision to divorce her, that tension and the possibility that I might strike her, went away. All of this, the desire to strike back, the recognition that I needed to end our marriage to avoid that outcome, and the decision to divorce her, occurred while she was trying to wrestle the laptop away from me.

“Alex, I won’t email Tim and I won’t watch the show. We can watch something on TV together,” I said in a mild tone.

“You promise?” she asked bitterly.

“I promise.”

Near the end of November, I informed Alex that I would be divorcing her, and that nothing could change my mind. Her family was coming from Brazil in early December to visit her. I hoped having them there would help her transition into her new life away from me so I went to live with my parents until she moved out at the end of December. After her constant hyper vigilance including paranoid phone calls, emails, and text messages, when she finally left it was like a huge emotional vacuum. Our marriage ended with a whimper and not a bang, with ice and not fire. Once she was gone I enjoyed the silence for 18 months.

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