

A Little Off

A Member Looks at AA
Unconventionally

Jim P.



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Edited by Wendy

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For Larry K. and Ned.

Table of Contents

Notes.....	6
On Anonymity.....	6
On Sources.....	6
Foreword.....	7
Another Foreword.....	9
Jim’s Story.....	11
The Steps.....	15
Step One.....	16
Step Two.....	22
Step Three.....	24
Step Four.....	26
Step Six.....	33
Step Seven.....	38
Step Eight.....	41
Step Nine.....	46
Step Ten.....	48
Step Eleven.....	52
Step Twelve.....	55
The Traditions.....	62
Tradition One.....	65
Tradition Two.....	69
Tradition Three.....	72
Tradition Four.....	74
Tradition Five.....	75
Tradition Six.....	77
Tradition Seven.....	78
Tradition Eight.....	80
Tradition Nine.....	82
Tradition Eleven.....	85
Tradition Twelve.....	88

Random Musings	90
When Can I Skip a Meeting?.....	91
Boards and Ball Bearings.....	91
Defying Physics	91
The Spiritual Shelf.....	92
The <i>Big Book</i> as Scripture	92
Long Form or Short Form?	93
Rich, Pretty, and Smart.....	93
Old-Timer Ratio	93
The Right Thing to Do.....	94
Mixed Motives.....	94
Should I Judge?	94
Why Continue Going to Meetings?	96
Sobriety Date Change.....	96
My Greatest Responsibility.....	97
The Most Important Thing to Tell a Newcomer.....	97
Steps or Service?	98
Sharing Hiatus.....	99
“Back” to Basics	99
Sponsorship	100
Why Honesty?.....	101
Gift of Death.....	101
Groups, Individuals, and Traditions	103
Taking Another’s Inventory.....	103
Purpose of Meetings.....	104
Cowboy Boots.....	104
What Is Your Concern?	105

Notes

On Anonymity

I belong to a fellowship that encourages anonymity at the level of press, radio, and film (or, more generally, mass media). It is my intention to honor this request to the extent possible. If you know my identity, I respectfully request that you not share it on social media, or other types of media platforms.

This is only while I am alive. If I am dead, do as you will.

On Sources

Throughout this book, I quote three A.A. conference- approved books: *Alcoholics Anonymous* (which I usually refer to as the *Big Book*), *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (*Twelve and Twelve*), and *As Bill Sees It*.

I reference the third edition of the *Big Book*, though the fourth edition is the most current as of this writing. The third edition was current when I got sober so I am more familiar with it. However, the passages I quote seem to be consistent between the versions.

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Foreword

This book is a culmination of processes that have been evolving over years, even decades. It has been a labor of love, yes, but it has been at times excruciating. I am not a professional writer or a professional alcoholic. Writing this book was not easy, and it was not fun. So, why write it?

It starts with the fact that I am incredibly blessed and incredibly grateful. I am an alcoholic who has not had a drink of alcohol for more than 40 years. Those unfamiliar with alcoholism tend to congratulate me for that “accomplishment” (or doubt that I am really an alcoholic). Those familiar with the process of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) know that it is a grace, a gift of a loving higher power that I choose to call God.

The introduction to the steps of A.A. in the *Twelve and Twelve* states:

A.A.’s Twelve Steps are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happy and usefully whole.¹

Having gotten sober at an early age, I have had many opportunities to practice this group of principles as a way of life. I have reflected on, applied, and shared my experience with the application of these principles, and over time I came to notice a couple of important things.

First, I found that my interpretations of the principles of A.A. often do not correspond with typical or traditional interpretations. I would love to take credit for that, but I did not get there on my own. Much information has been shared, storied, explained, and exemplified by friends, sponsors, mentors, professionals, and strangers. I have taken much of what I have been given and integrated it with my own experience. As a result, my interpretations have evolved, and these new understandings are what I hope to share.

Second, I noticed that my experience and my interpretation of my experience do not resonate with everyone in A.A., and perhaps not even with the majority of my fellow members. (These are the ones who tend to say something like, “Well, I just try to keep it simple” or “I just know what it says in the book” after they heard me talk.²) That is okay. People must find their own path, and mine is not for everybody. As my sponsor says, “There is no wrong way to stay sober.”

But there are those who do hear and relate to what I say. Over the years I have had dozens of people say, “Gee, I’ve never heard it like that before” or “It makes a lot more sense that way.” More important, I have seen many of these people take my experience of what I have been given, integrate it into *their* experience, and find their way to a much more satisfying A.A. program than they experienced before.

So this is a niche book. It is a book for those members of A.A. who respond to the ideas I share in this book. If you are one of those individuals, you will know. I am honored to be a part of your journey.

¹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 15.

² Some might also consider me “a little off.”

On the other hand, maybe this is not such a niche book. Whether you are an alcoholic or not, we are all on some type of spiritual journey. It is my best guess that it is not an accident that you have this book in your hand. Perhaps there is something in it for you. If you benefit from any of the experiences, ideas, or interpretations offered, it was worth writing. If you happen to pass it on to another, I am overjoyed.

Another Foreword³

This book is not for everyone.

But it is for some people. I know who you are, but I cannot describe you. You wear so many different faces and come from such disparate circumstances. But I know you. You are an alcoholic. You are, or have been, a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. But all is not well with you.

You are very tired of going to meeting after meeting and seeing the same people volunteering to say the same things.

You are the one who has been the faithful A.A. acolyte and has a few years sober, yet, when you are honest, you secretly wonder whether this can be all there is to it.

You are the one who cannot understand how being a captive audience to people checking in or dumping their unresolved emotional garbage at meetings can be “recovery.”

You are the one who has climbed the A.A. service structure and found it to be wanting.

You are the one who thinks there might be a place for thoughtful reflection and considered discussion about A.A. in A.A.

You are the one who thinks that A.A. is a bit like a cult and perhaps a little too rote.

You are the one who feels like something is missing. In short, you are someone like me.

And who am I? I am an alcoholic. I have been a sober member in A.A. for (not quite) half the time that A.A. has been in existence. That does not make me special, but it is who I am.

In my time of sobriety, I have spent countless hours in discussion with sponsors, sponsees, and trusted friends, many of whom were not afraid to think about the program and the principles of A.A. I have surely spent just as many hours reflecting on A.A. and its application to my life and circumstances. The result is myriad thoughts and understandings, filtered through my own experience, which manifests as a unique understanding, perhaps appreciation, of the program.⁴ My intention when writing this book was to share that experience and that understanding with others who might benefit.

I can say that this paradigm, this model, is not for everyone. If you do not think it is for you after you read about it, then thank you for reading, and may your God bless you on your journey. As my sponsor has told me (so many times), there is no wrong way to stay sober.

But if it works for you, you will know it, and I daresay it will change how you view the A.A. program. It may even change your life.

I say that fearlessly because I have seen it over and over again. Sometimes I have shared just a bit of what you will find in this book, and it turns out to have been the match that has lit a thousand candles. Sometimes someone will come to me after a meeting and tell me

³ This is unusual, isn't it? Well, it's like this: I wrote the first foreword, and an editor wanted me to rewrite it and gear it more to current members of A.A. So I wrote this one, thinking I would merge them later. But I can't seem to merge them, so I suggest you read them both, take what you like, and leave the rest.

⁴ I say this without ego or exhibitionism. *Everyone* who works the A.A. program has their own unique experience of the program. It is why we are encouraged to share our “*experience*, strength, and hope,” rather than simply parroting what we have read or have been told.

that their sponsor is a great-grand- sponsee to me and that the thing I said about the wheat, or the cowboy boots, or the fetal-position depression really made a difference in their lives. Sometimes I hear it from people who are not even in A.A.

These things are wonderful to hear, but when I remember where it came from, it is not too difficult to stay humble. Almost everything in this book is the result of great love or great pain. It comes from stories people have told me when I was curled up in pain or they were talking me “off the ledge.” It comes from relating to things I read that were recommended to me. It comes from experiencing joy and gratitude at having been blessed so deeply.

The things in this book come through me, but they do not come *from* me. This is an important distinction.

There is perhaps one other group of people for whom I wrote this book: those who were given a copy because someone cares about whether they drink—and whether they live.

Jim's Story

My name is Jim P., and I am an alcoholic. It is by the grace of God as I understand him, *through* you people, that I have not found it necessary to take a drink since the late 1970s. For that I am grateful. Sometimes I *feel* grateful.

They are different, you know. To *be* grateful and to *feel* grateful. I didn't understand that at first, or perhaps even for a long time. This distinction caused me a bit of confusion in the early days of my sobriety because I understood that honesty is important to maintaining sobriety. I also understood that (somehow) gratitude is key to sobriety. So it worried me because I could not honestly say I felt grateful to be an alcoholic or to be sober.

Eventually my sponsor cleared up this confusion for me. He said it was not necessary for me to *feel* grateful, only to *be* grateful. He went on to explain that I could be grateful by doing different things: cleaning up after a meeting, reaching my hand out to a newcomer, taking meetings to institutions. In that way I could show gratitude for being sober. I didn't have to feel grateful.

It is an important distinction, this difference between *feeling* and *being* grateful. Feelings are core to the issue of my alcoholism. The *Twelve and Twelve* states, "Very deep, sometimes quite forgotten, damaging emotional conflicts persist below the level of consciousness. At the time of these occurrences, they may actually have given our emotions violent twists which have since discolored our personalities and altered our lives for the worse."⁵ My sponsor put it more simply: "We got sick in the feelings; we get well in the feelings."

I felt a lot when I was growing up. I cannot say I recognized the feelings as "violent emotional twists," but most of the feelings I recall from my youth were primarily negative. I felt inadequate and insecure. I felt overwhelmingly guilty. I felt like an outsider at church, at school, and in my family—pretty much everywhere.

That's not to say I didn't have good feelings as well. I felt good if we went camping, or when I got a good grade, or as I rode my bike to the YMCA. But those feelings did not last, and they quickly returned to their default state: a sense of impending doom, a sense that all is not right in the world.

In retrospect, probably one of the most confusing things about these negative feelings is that I can see no rational reason for them. Unlike some of the stories I've heard in this program, I had enough to eat, a warm bed, and sufficient clothing (though sometimes they were hand-me-downs from my older brother). No home is perfect, but I wouldn't say mine was particularly bad. Just my feelings were.

I tried different things to change or cope with my feelings. I tried to be the rebellious kid or the model student. I read and watched TV. I had an expansive fantasy life. And all these things helped—for a time. Soon I would find myself back in the doldrums.

All this changed the first time I drank enough to feel the effects of alcohol. I was about 13 years old, hanging out with a group of friends on a Friday night, and we had big plans. We were going to the football game, then to the pizza parlor. But first we were going to drink.

⁵ *Twelve and Twelve*, pp. 79–80.

Somehow we had each managed to obtain an entire bottle of wine, and we met at the bird sanctuary to drink it down. I drank mine in a matter of minutes. Thinking it was similar to drinking a fruit drink or cola, I was ready to walk over to the football game.

Then it hit.

I've never quite found the words to say what "it" was, but it was wonderful. In a single moment my world changed, and all was great. Before I had felt like an outsider; I was now a part of the pack. My words were mesmerizing—like verbal diamonds of wisdom and wit. Moments before I had been with a bunch of scrawny eighth-grade kids, but now I was in the company of glamorous and sophisticated men and women. That sense of impending doom? Nowhere to be seen! My entire relationship with reality had changed. One might say that I felt happily and usefully whole.

The next day I remember having two distinct thoughts as I reflected on the previous night. The first thought was that I had finally found what I had been searching for and that I would *never* give it up. The second was that I would never again drink so much that I would get sick.

As it turned out, both thoughts were wrong.



It's often said around A.A. that when we get sober, we are the exact emotional age that we were when we started drinking. I don't know if it is true for everyone, but it is for me. And I think I understand why: What I experienced that night was *the answer*. And for the next 10 years or so, it didn't matter what the question was, alcohol remained *the answer*. If I was feeling nervous about asking a girl out, then I would drink, and the feeling would go away. If I had anxiety about an upcoming test, I knew what to do: Take a drink, and the feelings would go away. If I felt guilty about bills piling up, a drink would fix that, too. I might or might not ask her out. I might or might not study. I might or might not pay bills. It did not matter. It did not matter what the issue was, the problem was the feelings. And with alcohol the feelings were resolved. While my peers learned to face their fears (and their bills), I practiced medicating to avoid them. If this approach still worked, I would probably still be drinking (if I was alive.)

But something happened. One day, alcohol—my longtime reliable solution and my very best friend—quit working.

It was a Saturday in April when I was 23. I really liked Saturdays because I could sleep until noon, then begin drinking. After all, everyone knew that if you drank in the morning you were an alcoholic, but no one would begrudge a man a couple of beers on Saturday afternoon. As I finished my third or fourth beer, I had a terrible realization: I was drinking, but it was not working. I could not get away from the feeling that I did not want to be where I was. I went over to a friend's house and drank. I drove around out in the country and drank. I returned home and drank, then drank some more. In short, I drank as much as I could for as long as I could.

It didn't work.

Oh, physically it did. I showed all the signs of an inebriated man: I stumbled, and peed, and mumbled, and vomited. But where it counted, in my head and in my feelings, it did not work at all. I felt worthless, inadequate, and insecure. And very alone.

By two in the morning, I was terrified. I was afraid because I knew that I could not live with these feelings. If alcohol ceased to be the solution to my feelings, I did not know how to resolve them—except, perhaps, suicide.

So I sat there wondering how I should do it, and wondering if I really would, when a miracle occurred (or at least what I consider a miracle).

My thoughts turned to a friend. We had shared a lot of what was going on in our lives: relationships, jobs, hobbies. He was sober in A.A., so of course he would share things about that on occasion. A few weeks prior he had shared with me this amazing paragraph from the *Big Book*, in the discussion of the Fifth Step, which states:

Once we have taken this step, withholding nothing, we are delighted. We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone at perfect peace and ease. Our fears fall from us. We begin to feel the nearness of our Creator ... We feel we are on the Broad Highway, walking hand in hand with the Spirit of the Universe.⁶

Delighted! Look the world in the eye! Alone in perfect peace and ease! All these things were the exact opposite of what I felt at that moment, but I wanted them so very much. I decided that I would try A.A. I would at least give it a chance; I could always try suicide later. There was one thing that might have been an obstacle to others, but not to me: Was A.A. not for alcoholics? I had my problems, but I certainly did not consider myself an alcoholic. It didn't matter, though. I knew enough to know that in A.A. the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. Even though I was not an alcoholic, I would gladly give A.A. my drinking if A.A. could make my fears fall from me and allow me to be alone in perfect peace and ease. In my mind it was sort of an economic transaction: I will trade my alcohol for your serenity.

And that's how I slid into A.A.

I started going to meetings and spending time at the clubhouse, and my life started getting better. I was around people who sometimes would not leave the room when I entered. They seemed to listen when I spoke. I began to get to work on time. And, strangely, bill collectors stop calling when you pay your bills. Who knew?

What I did not do was work the Steps. Sure, that great bit of writing about the Fifth Step inspired me to try A.A. But when I quit drinking and came in to A.A., my life started getting better without the toil and turmoil of working the Steps.

Around the six-month anniversary of my sobriety, my brother killed himself. That was the day I understood that when the old-timers said that alcoholism is a progressive, fatal illness, they meant it was for me as well. I was not an exception. In the mix of feelings I experienced during that period, I was more terrified than I had ever been in my life (which holds true today) because then I *knew* that six months prior, when I had been contemplating suicide, I could have done it. I had no magical dispensation from the consequences of my own behavior. It could have been me. I did not (and do not) know why I was spared.

Shortly after the funeral, I began writing the Fourth Step in earnest. I wrote a thorough inventory because I now knew that I was an alcoholic and that I needed to work the Steps of

⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 75.

A.A., not to feel better, but to save my life.

I have many things to be grateful for in my time of sobriety, but among them is the fact that I got sober over the years alongside a group of people who emphasized practicing the principles of A.A. as a way of life. What that came to mean over the years is that regardless of the issue facing me, I attempted to find the principle embodied in A.A. that would enable me to best address it. Whether I was experiencing a divorce, a death, the loss of a job (or a promotion), a move, financial challenges, romance—I could find the solution in the principles. Should I take an inventory? Make an amends? Turn it over? Carry the message? The individual solution may vary, but it is always there.

I have, by the grace of a loving God, been doing this for a while. The effect has been something for which I might have hoped, but never really believed would happen: I live most of the time in deep peace. It is a peace I never imagined while drinking and only glimpsed at times through much of my early sobriety. I do occasionally experience emotional extremes, but I do not live in them. Sobriety has done for me what I could not do for myself: It has changed my relationship with reality.

And those feelings? My feelings today are (usually) consistent with my thoughts, actions, and beliefs. That is probably the biggest miracle. It is perhaps my spiritual awakening, if you will.

For that, sometimes, I actually *feel* grateful.

The Steps

“A.A.’s Twelve Steps are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole.”⁷

(That pretty much covers it, doesn't it?)

⁷ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 15.

Step One

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”

You have to give these Twelve Step programs credit. They put the paradox right up there at the beginning. “So, you’ve come to lick alcohol, eh? Well, the first thing is, you can’t. Sorry.” It is not a surprise that lots of people do not make it. It is perhaps a surprise that any do.

One thing a lot of us alcoholics do when confronted with such a paradox is ... think. We analyze, dissect, evaluate— anything to avoid the action of the Step: *admitted*. My analysis went something like this: My life is indeed unmanageable. I could see (and even admit) that. If a look at my life did not convince me, I only needed to look as far as my feelings. Even I could not deny the pain that was inside me each day.⁸

So, my life was unmanageable. But powerless? Well, I’m not so sure about that. This distinction felt important to me at the time. I later came to realize that the difference was, practically speaking, wholly irrelevant. It was a bit like standing on the deck of the Titanic but insisting that my bed was made.

How did this change come about for me?

In the rooms of A.A., one often hears about “peeling layers of the onion.” Spiritual growth seldom seems to occur in a single definable instant. It is a process. My interpretation of the Step has evolved over the years, and it continues to evolve.

In my earliest days in A.A., I did not even address the idea of being “powerless over alcohol.” I did not know whether or not I was powerless, but I did know that I was miserable inside and that some people in A.A. had a peace that was almost palpable. I knew I wanted that same peace. I knew too that I did not have to be an alcoholic, or even be powerless over alcohol, to become a member of A.A. The only requirement was my desire to stop drinking.⁹ That was it. I could do that. I knew I wanted the peace that those in A.A. had, and if the cost of obtaining that peace was to quit drinking, I would pay that. I was ready to go to any lengths to find it.

The peace-for-drinking exchange was enough for a while. Later, my inability to see that I was powerless over alcohol was problematic. As I started hanging out in the A.A. clubhouse,¹⁰ my life actually began to get better. One might consider this a positive thing, but in my mind this development created quite a dilemma. Here I was, surrounded by loving, recovering alcoholics, yet I did not know if I was an alcoholic. I felt as though I had slipped in under the door or through a crack on a technicality. Yes, I had a desire (of a sort) to stop drinking. As was the custom in meetings, I would introduce myself as an alcoholic, but I would always (mentally) enter a reservation, something like “Well, I suppose by some people’s definition I could be considered an alcoholic.”

⁸ Resulting from, I came to find out later, “violent emotional twists” that had “discolored our personalities” and “altered our lives for the worse.” (See Twelve and Twelve, p. 80.) We may see this again.

⁹ That is, according to A.A.’s Tradition Three: “The only requirement for membership is a desire to quit drinking.” It’s not even necessary to have an *honest* desire to stop drinking.

¹⁰ *Of course, there is no such thing as an “A.A. clubhouse.” If you’re not sure why, keep reading. (Hint: Check out the Sixth Tradition.)*

Why did I do that? Because I understood the “honesty” part. I understood that this is (as they say) an “honest program,” that *how* it works is that one must be “honest, open, willing.” But I honestly still did not know if I was an alcoholic. I was long past fighting being an alcoholic. I was done with the denial. I just did not know if I was an alcoholic.

There were several reasons for my confusion. One reason was that I did not relate to the idea of “losing control of my drinking.” On occasion, I would hear people in the meetings say something like “Sometimes I would just intend to take a drink and find myself drunk again, and wondered how I got here again!”

Really?

I don’t know that I ever did that. What I liked about drinking (once I realized what drinking could do for me) was that it changed my feelings, and thus my relationship to reality. I liked the effect of drinking. And so, whenever I drank (or at least usually when I drank), I did it to achieve the effect. When I drank, I usually meant to get drunk, and I did. No loss of control there! I assumed this was why anyone drank. So I didn’t really relate when people spoke about losing control and ending up drunk.

Looking back, I am not sure I could see the lack of control if it had slapped me in the face. A couple of years before I got sober, I thought it would be nice to perform some sort of test to show that I was not an alcoholic and thereby get those troubling thoughts out of the way once and for all. I had heard somewhere that if one could give up drinking for a year, one probably was not an alcoholic. So I decided to undertake that test, but with a few modifications, of course.¹¹ An entire year of not drinking seemed a bit obsessive, so I decided I would just do this test for a month. And alcohol as such was not my issue; rather, it was that I perhaps drank a bit too much beer. I would just avoid drinking beer for that month (wine and margaritas were okay). I went for 28 days drinking only non-beer products, then decided, rationally and calmly, that some months end at 28 days, so my test was complete. And it was a success! No lack of control—I was not an alcoholic!

Another reason I was not so sure if I was an alcoholic was this compulsion or obsession the old drunks talked about. I could not tell you whether or not I experienced a compulsion or an obsession. I just knew that sometimes I wanted a beer, so I went and got one. There were those occasions where I began to wonder if maybe I drank too much, so I might say to myself, “Well, I’ll just have two beers tonight.” I would enjoy the first one, but about halfway through the second, I would begin to wonder if it was really that important to limit myself to two. And so I lifted the limit. It seemed a bit extreme to call that an obsession.¹²

A significant “layer of the onion” was peeled about three months into my sobriety. During a hot afternoon in July, I was working in a grocery store restocking the beer. I would load up a cart with 20 or 30 cases of beer, and then wheel them from the walk-in cooler over to the display cases. Exposed to the warmer air, the cans and bottles would begin to drip condensation. In the midst of this activity, a little thought flitted through my head: “Wouldn’t a beer taste pretty good right now?”

¹¹ I have come to believe that most alcoholics are quite capable of quitting drinking for a time, given sufficient motivation. And there is probably no stronger motivation for an alcoholic to quit drinking than to prove that he or she is not an alcoholic.

¹² Nor, apparently, did I see it as a loss of control since it was I who, rationally and calmly, made the decision to lift the two-beer rule.

I knew what to do then: Call my sponsor, say a prayer, go to a meeting. It is important for me to remember that I specifically chose not to do any of these things. I was okay. I would just *think* about taking a drink for a little while; I “knew” I was not going to actually take a drink. No way!

An hour and a half later, I got off work and was in the middle of a full-blown obsession with having a drink. I left the parking lot to head home where I fully intended to drink.

I hope I never forget what I felt at that moment. As I drove, I was acutely aware of all the new friends I had in A.A., and I did not want to let them down. I was not choosing to drink, but I was going home to drink. I had lost the ability to choose otherwise.

I arrived at the house, unlocked the door, and entered the room. I went to the air conditioner, started it, and turned toward the refrigerator.

The phone rang.

I answered it, and on the other end I heard the voice of someone I knew in A.A. He asked, “What are you doing?” In one of a series of miracles that day, I told him the truth: I was just about to take a drink. He did not lecture or berate me. He simply said, “I understand. Do you want to talk first?”

In the process of talking to him, an amazing thing happened: The obsession to drink went away. It simply disappeared. And it did so even though I fully intended to drink at the conclusion of the conversation. My desire to drink disappeared while I spoke with another alcoholic. Welcome to the miracle of A.A.

I felt humbled and extremely grateful. If the phone call had come 30 seconds earlier, I would still have been locked outside. Had it come 30 seconds later, I would have already consumed at least part of a beer. There was about a 60-second interval in which that call had to come to make a difference—and it came during that 60-second interval. That may not be the technical definition of a miracle, but I call it one.

Later, in reflecting on the incident, I learned more of my higher power. Clearly, he had a good sense of timing, but he was creative as well. Here I was, a young alcoholic who truly did not know, but really *wanted* to know, whether he was an alcoholic. The conventional wisdom would say that if you are not certain you are an alcoholic, you might consider some “controlled drinking.” Somehow that did not seem right for me—I did not want to return to the depth of my last night of drinking. And I certainly did not want to give up my three-month chip!

So here was an incident that effectively showed the alcoholic that he is an alcoholic, but without him actually taking a drink and losing what sobriety he had. Very creative! Moreover, this approach showed a gracious kindness, the type of thing one might see in a *loving* God. It was my first glimpse into the mind of a God who was simply love.

And this miracle was effective. I had experienced the powerlessness, the obsession, the inability to choose not to drink. The arguments stopped. I was convinced.

I am an alcoholic.¹³

¹³ It dawned on me some years later that I need not have struggled for so long about a “loss of control.” This information was there all along; I just did not see it. The first time I got drunk, I vomited, so virtually every time I went out I resolved that, although I was going to get drunk, I would not drink so much that I would vomit. This worked out as planned maybe 40% of the time. (As you might imagine, I was not a popular attendee at parties.) But the lack of control was there all along—sometimes you just have to stay sober to see it.



Sometimes when I read *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, my experience seems wholly at odds with what I am reading. But I do like the treatment of the First Step in that book, specifically the last paragraph:

Under the lash of alcoholism, we are driven to A.A., and there we discover the fatal nature of our situation. Then and only then, do we become as open-minded to conviction and as willing to listen as only the dying can be.¹⁴

I like this because it describes accurately what happened to me. Even after I finally understood that I am an alcoholic, there was much that I did not yet understand or to which I could not relate. One thing I often heard is that alcoholism is a fatal disease. I am not sure what I thought about that, but it did not hold much immediacy for me. When I came into the rooms of A.A., I was 23 years old and, like many of that age, considered myself somewhat invincible. I did not *really* believe that, but I really kind of did. When people spoke of “the fatal nature of this disease,” I thought something along the lines of “Yes, if I continue to drink, I will probably die of cirrhosis of the liver in 40 years or so. Maybe.” It was not much scarier than the thought of getting lung cancer from smoking ... in 40 years. Not much incentive to quit there.

That all changed (and another significant onion layer was removed) at the six-month anniversary of my sobriety—the day my brother killed himself. As I viewed his remains a few days later, I understood: There are many alcoholic deaths where alcoholism never made it to the death certificate. I understood that when they were talking about a fatal illness, they were talking about me, not somebody else. And not someday, but now.

In other words, it is as they had written: “[T]here [in A.A.] we discover the fatal nature of our disease”¹⁵ and “become... as willing to listen as the dying can be.”¹⁶



Life moves on and other layers remain, waiting only for the catalyst to remove them. One of my next “layer removals” resulted from a type of boredom. In A.A., one hears of the necessity to stay “green,” meaning we should remember where we came from. We go to meetings to hear what happens to people who do not go to meetings. When one is new and the emotions are raw (and maybe the body is too), it’s pretty easy to remember that one is powerless over alcohol. And that life? Well, it’s just plain unmanageable

But after some time, let’s say a few years, the situation is not quite the same. The memory dims, life gets better, much of the imperative for sobriety is removed. How, then, does one work the First Step “100%”?¹⁷ This was the dilemma I faced when I was about eight years

¹⁴ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 24.

¹⁵ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Only Step One, where we made the 100 percent admission we were powerless over alcohol, can be practiced with absolute perfection.” *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 68.

sober. I was glad to be sober. I attended meetings, had a sponsor and was sponsoring others, and was attempting to apply the principles in all my affairs. And I was happy about it. But I did wonder, “What is the practical effect of Step One in my life?” I certainly was not suffering under the “lash of alcoholism,” nor did I wake up feeling as desperate as only the dying can be. When the question got big enough, I asked my sponsor.

What he said made complete sense. It was something like, “Yes, we don’t experience the emotional imperative at eight years that we do when we first come in (nor, probably, would we want to). But each day we make decisions—sometimes large ones like where we shall work or whom shall we marry. More often, they are smaller ones: Shall I smile at the store clerk? Shall I speed down this road?”

“The important thing to remember is that every decision I make either takes me a little closer to a drink or a little farther from a drink. And I want to make those decisions that take me farther from a drink.” Keeping this idea in mind has been a practical approach to implementing the First Step into my daily life as the days, then years, of sobriety continue to accumulate.

Since we speak now of working the First Step 100%, I have discovered this “axiom” concerning the First Step to be a myth. In the Sixth Step of *Twelve and Twelve*, it states that “Only Step One, where we made the 100 percent admission we were powerless over alcohol, can be practiced with absolute perfection.”¹⁸

Wow, *absolute perfection*. *Absolute* perfection!

I have heard it said that alcoholics tend to be people of extremes. Absolute ... *anything* strikes me as pretty extreme. Maybe Bill W. has taken some sort of poetic license here. Or maybe he knew an entirely different class of recovering alcoholic than those who show up to my meetings. But I can say with reasonable assurance that I do not think that I have practiced the First Step with absolute perfection; indeed, I cannot recall *anything* that I have done absolutely perfectly. (This might just be me.)

So I consider it rather unfortunate that Bill wrote those words. Over time, his human presence diminishes within the fellowship but his words endure, taking on a scriptural-like countenance, presented and revered as though it represents the infallible words of a saint. And people who read these enshrined words tend to believe it is absolutely imperative to work the First Step to perfection, rather than viewing this hyperbole regarding the First Step as simply an afterthought in the discussion of the Sixth Step.

Nonsense! I remember another phrase from the *Big Book*: “We found that God does not make too hard terms with those who seek Him.”¹⁹ I have found this to be true. My experience? Admit the powerlessness that I can, listen carefully, and try to do the next right thing. So far it has worked, which actually makes sense. What makes less sense is to believe that God cannot (or worse, will not!) keep me sober if I can only admit that I am 99% powerless, that the missing 1% makes *Him* powerless. It doesn’t seem like a God like that would be much help at all.



¹⁸ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 68. Or maybe just read the previous footnote.

¹⁹ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 46.

It amazes me how many people view the First Step as negative. Given the fact the Step sets a foundation for an entirely new way of life for the active alcoholic, it is not negative at all!

Although at least in one sense, the Step actually is quite negative. To see this one need only imagine what it would be like if, instead of Twelve Steps, we had a one-step program: “We admitted powerless and unmanageability, then we died an alcoholic death.” That’s it, you are toast! Not too much positive there!

But we don’t have a one-step program; we have a Twelve Step program. We have another eleven Steps. It was in the *Twelve and Twelve’s* treatment of two of them that I began to understand more fully the positive nature of Step One. The first clue to the positive nature of the First Step is found (strangely enough) in the treatment of Step Seven: “For just so long as we were convinced that we could live exclusively by our own individual strength and intelligence, for just that long was a working faith in a Higher Power impossible.²⁰ I do not consider it a stretch to say that being “convinced that we could live exclusively by our own individual strength and intelligence” is the antithesis of powerlessness. Such a position, in the opinion of that author,²¹ makes a “working faith” impossible.

Hold that thought as we look at Clue #2: “We discover that we do receive guidance for our lives to just about the extent that we stop making demands upon God to give it to us on order and on our terms.”²²

Self-will blocks the action of God in our lives. If I believed in the God that I believed in when I came to A.A., his meddling in my life would not be a good thing at all, but my experience as a result of working the Steps has been the revelation of God as love. Indeed, if the Second Tradition²³ is to be believed, this is the experience of A.A. itself. To the exact extent that I am able to admit powerlessness, love is able to manifest itself in my life.

And that would seem to be a very good thing.

²⁰ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 72.

²¹ And this one.

²² *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 104.

²³ “For our group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience....” This was copied from the *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 132. but really, there must be about a billion other instances throughout the A.A. literature.

Step Two

“Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

One often hears in meetings how difficult it is to “make a decision to turn one’s will and life over to God”—that is, to work the Third Step. I am of the belief that much of the blame placed on Step Three rightly belongs to Step Two. And why not? It is a strange Step. To begin with, its verb is in the passive voice. In Step One we “admitted” —a nice, good, solid verb. So then we come to the Second Step, where we “came to believe”? What is that namby-pamby, milquetoast nonsense? And how would we even *do* that?

When I first faced Step Two, I did not actually do it at all. I read the words “came to believe,” thought to myself, “Yeah, I believe in God. Let’s move on.” And I did. That was my (first) Second Step. It stayed like that for a while.

After a few years I came to revisit the Second Step, though I had no idea that was what I was doing. It is not that I had not been paying attention. Step meetings were a regular fixture of my meeting schedule, and I had been to many Second Step meetings. They did not usually do much for me. They often focused around the word *sanity*. People struggled with that a lot—whether or not they were insane and what, precisely, that meant.²⁴ Not me, though. I had worked in a state institution; I had seen insanity. At night after work I would return to my house and drink. This struck me as an entirely reasonable response to the day, a “sane” response. No, insanity really did not apply to me. I was not insane.²⁵

So when I initially came upon this Step, I thought myself clever to see that it was obliquely referencing God. I believed in God, and I was not insane, so there was not much left to do there. I commenced to analyze the process of decision-making (in preparation for the Third Step).

Eventually, after a few years sober, I reached a place that many of us do after a few years—I was quietly desperate. I had worked, and was working, the Steps. I sponsored and was sponsored. I was going to meetings, carrying the message. I was doing everything “right.”

But something was not quite right. I could not quite put my finger on it; I do not know even how conscious I was of it. But the world was certainly not my oyster.

One evening at a very boring meeting, my mind and my eyes began to wander. The Steps and Traditions were displayed side by side at the front of the room and I began reading the Steps. I stopped at Step Two: sanity! What was that? I was sober, working, married. Things were great, but I felt awful. Was I insane?

My eyes drifted to the right, from the Second Step to the Second Tradition, and read: “... there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God ...” Is that true? Is that the ultimate reality, a loving God?

Then it clicked: If indeed the ultimate reality of this universe is that of a loving God (and

²⁴ Yes, we are great analysts, are we not?

²⁵ Left unaddressed in my thinking is the insanity of taking the next drink, which really seems to be what the Step addresses. This nuance was much too subtle for my sophisticated mind.

my experience, indeed the experience of A.A., seems to indicate that it is), then anytime I feel or act or think in a manner inconsistent with that reality, it is insane. It does not reflect the truth. I am feeling or acting or thinking or living an illusion.

There are many times when, by this definition, I am insane. Often my feelings, violently twisted as they are, tell me the world is unsafe, that forces other than love rule the universe. And sometimes I act as though that is the case. But there are things I can do to return to sanity. I can go to a meeting, pray, meditate, read the literature. Most important, I can help another alcoholic. Each of those things helps return me to a place of sanity, a place where a loving God is the ultimate reality.

And those difficulties with the Third Step? One often hears that if one struggles with a Step, one should look at the Step before it. This certainly applies to the Steps Two and Three threshold. When I have difficulties making a decision to turn my will and life over to the care of God, or difficulties leaving the decision there, it does not usually take a lot of self-examination to see (once again) that I am not quite feeling or believing that a loving God is the ultimate reality of the universe.

When I really believe a loving God is the ultimate underpinning of the universe—if I *really* do believe it—then making a decision to turn my will and life over to love is no struggle at all. It is the most natural and logical next step. It is a relief!

After all, who doesn't want a little love in their life?

Step Three

“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

People talk of the Third Step as though it is about surrender. Early on, I often heard that one must surrender “it”—that is, one must “turn it over.” I heard that a lot, and it rankled me. It felt a little pompous, a bit “know-it-all.” Mostly, I suppose, I was irritated by “turn it over” because those instructions are not clear. Eventually I understood that, for me at least, to “turn it over” means simply to “give up my attachment to the results.” That makes sense to me now, but it took a long time to get there. In the meantime, I was content to extract my understanding from the treatment of the Third Step in the *Twelve and Twelve*.

I find this treatment of the Third Step in the *Twelve and Twelve* entertaining, almost comical. Early on, a (rhetorical) question is presented that, frankly, most of us would like to hear answered: “[O]ur problem now becomes just how and *by what specific means* shall we be able to let Him in?”²⁶ Good question! So good, in fact, that the author repeats it in the next paragraph (just to make sure we have not missed it): “[E]xactly how *can* he turn his own will and his own life over to the care of whatever God he thinks there is?”²⁷ Good question, indeed!

But the *Twelve and Twelve* does not quite get around to answering the question yet. First we go off on a discussion of Einstein and practicality and an analysis of dependence replete with a rather bold (and somewhat unprovable) assertion about the effectiveness of the A.A. program during World War II. After all this meandering, it might be reasonable to assume that some of us have lost sense of the original question, so the author graciously restates it: “So how, exactly, can the willing person continue to turn his will and life over to the Higher Power?”²⁸ Surely we shall get the answer now!

Well, not quite yet. We still need to wander through powerlessness and sponsorship. But suddenly, without warning, the answer is finally provided: “That is just where the remaining Steps of the A.A. program come in.”²⁹

Here, finally, was an answer I could understand. You want to work the Third Step? Start on the Fourth. As a practical matter, it still works.



Earlier in my sobriety, my sponsor and I had an ongoing type of word game. In it, each of us would attempt to distill the essence of a given Step down to a single word. My sponsor—experienced, smart, and sober a long time³⁰—generally won these friendly exercises hands-down. But one day, the student schooled the master. On Step Three I beat him with the word *orientation*. One might be forgiven if one did not see that immediately. Certainly, discussion at

²⁶ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 34; emphasis mine.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 35.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 39.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 40.

³⁰ A long, long time. Like seven years.

most Third Step meetings often revolves around surrender and turning one's will over to God.

I often hear in Third Step meetings of the need to couple a decision with action. One hears things like "I may decide to use the restroom, but if I don't get up and go, I'll be sitting here in wet pants. You've got to do the footwork." Maybe that is so.³¹ But the Third Step calls for a decision, and I believe the decision is the essence of the Step. It is the decision that is crucial, because in making the decision I change my orientation. Consider this illustration: Suppose I decide I will walk to New York City. I get my hat, my shoes, and a bottle of water and start walking. It does not matter how many steps I take (or how I take them) if, instead of facing New York, I am facing Los Angeles instead. The very first thing I need to do before beginning my journey is turn to face New York. I must change my *orientation*. It is true that after I have changed my orientation, I am not a single step closer to my destination; in fact, I have not moved a bit. But if I do not change my orientation, I will never get to my destination.

So it is with the Third Step. As an alcoholic, I am "self-centered in the extreme."³² Basically everything I have thought and every action I have taken has been run through this filter of self-centeredness. Everything has been evaluated on the basis of how it will affect me. This is my orientation, but it needs to change if I am ever to experience the peace that will allow me to stay sober. And the decision in the Third Step provides this change of orientation. In the Third Step, I decide to place something or someone else in the center of my life instead of me. When I do, I may not be any closer to my destination of actually turning my will and life over to the care of God as I understand him, but I am now oriented toward a life of maximum service rather than one ruled by suffocating self-concern. After that change, every step I take (and every Step I work) will bring me closer to this desired end.

You have perhaps heard it said that how well we work the remaining Steps will depend on how well we work the Third Step.³³ Here is what that means: If I do not decide to change my orientation away from self-centered concerns, yet I go on to work the Steps with me (or what I can get) as the center of my world, then it does not really matter how I work the remaining Steps. Self-centeredness is the root of our problem,³⁴ and I am simply perpetrating this problem. There is no solution in selfishness.

But if I begin to work these Steps to stay sober, to become a better person, not for what that gets me but for the betterment of all, everything changes. And nothing is unimportant.

³¹ I have become convinced that, by and large, when someone says, "I have to do the footwork," they really mean "I want to take control back."

³² *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 24.

³³ "In fact, the effectiveness of the whole A.A. program will rest upon how well and earnestly we have tried to come to a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as *we understood Him*," *Twelve and Twelve*, pp. 34–35. Also, "then it is explained that other Steps of the A.A. program can be practiced with success only when Step Three is given a determined and persistent trial." *Ibid*, p. 40.

³⁴ "Selfishness—self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles." *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 62.

Step Four

“Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”

Doing the fourth Step (and later the Fifth) was one of the most important things I have ever done. I did not know it was going to be at the time I wrote it, nor could I have known the reasons why it would be so vital in my recovery, and in my life.

When I wrote the Fourth Step inventory, I was pretty sure I knew why I did. I felt it was necessary to learn what my defects were so I would be able to turn them over to God³⁵ somewhere down the line (yes, I read ahead). Also, I was pretty attuned (I thought) with the world of psychotherapy and wanted to learn what my subconscious patterns were, with an eye toward control and correction.

Yet it seems I had failed to read the part of the *Big Book* where it says we found we were “absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.”³⁶ That is a fairly innocuous phrase, but if true, it carries enormous implications. If it is true, it means I could know everything there is to know about why I drank in the past, but this knowledge would not prevent me from drinking in the future. And if the statement is true, it means I can complete the most comprehensive Fourth Step ever written and the knowledge I gain from it is absolutely³⁷ useless in terms of staying sober. Self-knowledge is not what I take into Step Five—many of us never get *that* knowledge. Sometimes “not getting it” kills us.

I was determined to do Step Four “right,” which primarily meant *thorough*. There are numerous calls for thoroughness in the literature, but my sponsor said it best when he told me, “You get nothing for nothing and damn little for two cents in this world. So if you put two cents into a Fourth Step, don’t be surprised if you get damn little out of it.”

He need not have worried. Having just seen the fatal effect of alcoholism on a close family member, I was ready to go to any length, including conducting a “searching and fearless” moral inventory if need be. As it turns out, this inventory is exactly what was needed. And despite being unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge, the self-inventory was ultimately one of the most important things I have done in my life.

In the Twelfth Step we are exhorted to “practice these principles in all our affairs.”³⁸ When I arrived in A.A., I had no principles on which to base my actions. Up to that point, my actions had been based primarily, if not entirely, on *feelings*. I had no thought of principles; I did what I thought would make me feel good (or at least less bad). When I sat down to write my Fourth Step, I made a conscious decision to write, insofar as I was able, that which was true, irrespective of how it made me look or made me *feel*. As far as I can tell, this decision represented the first time I had ever made such a commitment, and it turned out to be a crucial

³⁵ Or, more likely, to fix them myself. That did not work out so well, as we’ll find in the discussion of Step Six.

³⁶ “But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly any exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.” Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 39.

³⁷ There’s that word again.

³⁸ It is a continuing source of frustration to many in A.A., as it was to me in the beginning, that these “principles” are not explicitly laid out and set down in some fashion. Today I revel in the freedom that we gain because the principles are not defined.

decision.

In the first paragraph of the chapter “How It Works” in the *Big Book*, it suggests three times that if you do not get honest, you probably will not get sober.³⁹ Even if it did not say that, I have been around long enough and seen enough to know this to be true. An inability to be honest is a pretty good indicator of the slim chance of potential sobriety.

This commitment to honesty was critical to what made the Fourth Step so important. The value didn’t come from what I learned about myself, or my patterns, or my neuroses. These are all nice to know, but none of this knowledge would have kept me sober.⁴⁰ It was the *honesty* that was crucial. Though I had no idea at the time, the honesty that the inventory requires is what made the Fourth Step one of the most significant things I have done.

In later years, it became clearer why the honesty was so significant. In my case (and, frankly, in the cases of most other people I know), I lived in delusion—about who I was, where I was going, and what it all means. I did not even have a clue that I was lost in a fantasy world. This fantasy world started with a need to tell a little lie. Maybe it was something like saying, “I can’t come to work because I’m sick.” One might consider this an innocuous little untruth (as I did). I was “successful” in my untruth: People believed me, I was able to keep track of what I told to whom, and more important, I knew it was not the truth. It became easier to tell the next lie, then the next. Over time, it became hard work to track what I told to whom, but I could tell myself that people believed me (though that was often probably not the case).

But eventually I came to believe the lies.⁴¹ I had to. I could not look and see the truth of my drinking and other selfish behaviors and reconcile them with my own self-image. So I started believing the lies—that it was really their fault, that I was the victim, that anybody facing the things I faced would make the choices I made. Eventually, the world in which I lived bore little resemblance to the real world, and I did not even know it.

That’s why I could not get sober unless I got honest.



There seems to be some lack of consensus on the “proper” way to do a Fourth Step. I do get a chuckle sometimes at meetings on the Fourth Step, when people (who might never otherwise quote the *Big Book*) proudly proclaim that they did it the “*Big Book way*.” It is almost as though they think that the “*Big Book way*” is the best way, or perhaps even the official way, to do a Fourth Step. I am not so sure. By and large, if a Fourth Step inventory is thorough and honest, I expect it is good. If this inventory is fearless, I expect that shows a lot of growth.

I did not do it the “*Big Book way*,” but my first Fourth Step was honest and it was very thorough. One does not hear that often in Fourth Step meetings. One is more likely to hear someone say, “Well, I did the best I could at the time.” Mine was the best I could do “at the time.” It was also thorough. But I had an interesting confluence of fortunate circumstances. I was lucky.

³⁹ This is my paraphrasing of what it says, but it is in there. Take a look.

⁴⁰ That is not to say that the knowledge gained from an honest Fourth Step is not important; it is very important. *How important this knowledge is will be explored in Step Seven.*

⁴¹ Remember my little 28 day test of whether I was an alcoholic?

The man who Twelve-Stepped me (and who was my sponsor for a time) was a recovering alcoholic with about seven years of sobriety; he was also a Catholic priest. As such, he was in high demand when people were looking for someone with whom to do their Fifth Step.⁴² He heard a lot of Fifth Steps. After a few years of hearing people's Fifth Steps and seeing how they struggled to do a Fourth Step, he wrote an inventory guide. The guide offered a series of questions (not unlike the questions completing the chapter on the Fourth Step in the *Twelve and Twelve*). The guide was long⁴³ and thorough. I used it to guide my Fourth Step inventory, and as a result, my inventory was long and thorough.

At the beginning of my Fourth Step, everything seemed to get in my way. What type of pen should I use? What color ink? Bound notebook or loose-leaf paper? My sponsor's instructions here were focused: Grab a pen and start writing.⁴⁴ Over time, I have developed some practical guidelines (with help from him and others) for writing the Fourth Step, which I often share with others when requested. A few "tricks" that worked for me are the following: Pick a set time, and write at that time. Write for 20 minutes (or at least stare at the paper for 20 minutes) but never for more than an hour. Take two nights off per week. (Easy does it!)

Perhaps one of the more important pieces of advice I give is to write the Fourth Step inventory being absolutely certain no one will ever read it. Honesty and thoroughness are key to the Fourth Step, but if I have even the slightest inkling that anyone (wife, friend, sponsor) will read it, I will always be tempted to compromise, or redact, or shade the truth. If I am the only one who will ever read it, I can be more readily honest. Along these lines, I always (strongly) encourage sponsees to keep their ongoing inventory in a locked box, even if they are "sure" no one else will read it. It is important.

I also encourage people to focus on writing actions and feelings, not thoughts. The reason for this is to keep myself from rationalizing or minimizing what I felt. I might write something like "I felt abandoned when Mom gave piano lessons to the other kids." That's good—it's real and honest. But if I add, "But we needed the money" or "It was a good social release for her," then I am rationalizing (even if it is true). I am diminishing the validity of my hurt feelings, which is not honest. That lack of honesty obfuscates the raw feelings that ultimately drove my behavior.

There is the question about the word *fearless* in the Fourth Step. What are we to make of that? In an attempt to minimize fear, some people suggest that we inventory our assets as well as our defects; I do not agree. To begin with, inventorying our assets does not eliminate the fear; it just hides or delays it. But the main reason I disagree with this suggestion is due to the purpose of the Fourth Step: We are a group of drunks who are trying to get sober. Never once in my experience did my assets get me drunk. My defects nearly always did.⁴⁵

My first inventory was not fearless, but fear is less present as I have gotten more skilled at taking my inventory. I have learned that it is not my place to judge what I write. I liken it to the time I worked at the grocery store during my college years. Once a quarter, we would inventory

⁴² I suppose this could be because he was in a position to dispense sacramental absolution to Catholics. Or it might just be that, as a priest, he had a lot of experience in keeping secrets.

⁴³ Initially, it was about 25 single-spaced typed pages. A later revision pushed it to 40 pages.

⁴⁴ I thought these instructions were far too general.

⁴⁵ This is a little different from the Tenth Step, where we do inventory our assets. Why? Jump ahead to find out if you like.

the store. I would show up at midnight, just after closing, and walk down the aisle counting the items. But I counted the cans without judgment. I might count ten cans of spinach. I never considered whether that was bad. I never asked, "Do we need more for the holiday?" or "Should the dented cans be discarded?" Those were things that did not concern me; I left those questions to a "higher power," which was, in this case, the store manager. My job was just to look and count.

So it is, I think, with the Fourth Step inventory. My job is to look and be honest, not to judge. When I can do that, there is no fear.

Having so resolved the other issues with the Fourth Step, the last big controversy remains: Do we take one or many Fourth Step inventories? The question is irrelevant, in my opinion. If we are being honest about maintaining our spiritual condition, there will be many times where we will be forced to look at ourselves, to inventory ourselves and our situation. Given what we gain from the inventory, whether we call it a Fourth Step or a Tenth Step or a mini-Fourth Step or a spot check or a globerscognich does not really make much difference, does it?

Step Five

“Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”

Despite deciding to join A.A. based on a paragraph on the Fifth Step that a friend had shared, I did not get to working any of the Steps right away, much less the Fifth Step. As I stopped drinking and started going to meetings, my life got better, calmer. So the imperative to work the Fifth Step and spend a lot of time on the “Broad Highway”⁴⁶ was significantly diminished. My life was good enough; there was no sense cluttering it up with all those nasty feelings from the past that the Steps would bring up. That changed, as I have mentioned, when I began to understand the fatal nature of alcoholism and its direct relevance to me.

Why do this Step? There are a couple good reasons. First, as stated in the chapter on the Fourth Step, the main purpose of doing an inventory was to apply my commitment to uncompromising honesty. So, too, it is with the Fifth Step. Or, as the *Twelve and Twelve* puts it, “Until we actually sit down and talk aloud about what we have so long hidden, our willingness to clean house is largely theoretical.”⁴⁷ The Fifth Step is a natural extension of my commitment to being honest.

This commitment to honesty leads to an interesting corollary to the Fifth Step. What should be done when someone forgets to share something important in their Fifth Step? I have heard horror stories of people returning time and time again to their sponsors because they “just remembered” something else. I am not sure this is necessary. What is important is that the “thing” was not intentionally hidden or avoided. Major events that are just forgotten during the course of the Fifth Step are rare. Usually, these recollections are right there at the top of the Fifth-Stepper’s mind—and are probably making them sweat. In addition, my Fifth Steps tend to run fairly long,⁴⁸ but I daresay you could double, or triple, or quadruple the length of these Fifth Steps, and I doubt that everything could be shared. The commitment to honesty and thoroughness is key, not whether all was remembered in a given moment. So when someone whose Fifth Step I have heard calls me to fill me in on something they have left out, I ask them if it is something they intentionally hid or avoided. If not, I assure them it is probably not a big deal. Then, if they still want to share it, I will listen. They usually do.

There is another significant reason for doing this Step, which, for lack of a better term, I label *balance*. In the discussion of this Step, the *Twelve and Twelve* first reminds us, “Going it alone in spiritual matters is dangerous.”⁴⁹ I used to look forward to the day when I would be as insightful as my sponsor about my behaviors and motivations. It was only many years later that I realized that anytime I look at myself, it will always be subjective. *Always*. My self-perception is subjective by definition. I can never take a truly objective look at myself—it is a contradiction in terms. However, one of the greatest gifts that I have been given in and by the fellowship of A.A. is association with people who will tell me the truth about myself (as they best

⁴⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 60. Sometimes Bill W. just hits it on the nose.

⁴⁸ As of this writing, I think the “record” is around 18 hours. But I was younger then.

⁴⁹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 69. If one’s experience parallels mine, we ultimately find that it is all spiritual.

understand it) without drama or condemnation. It is sometimes unpleasant—some of the most important things I have ever been told have hurt my feelings—but I am blessed: Many people do not have access to this level of honesty, this level of truth.



I have heard some strange ideas about the Fifth Step, like “I’ve pretty much done my Fifth Step at meetings” and “I do a Fifth Step whenever I get with my sponsor.” Maybe so, but I think some people confuse deep sharing with the Fifth Step. To me, a Fifth Step is characterized by sharing a Fourth Step. In the safety of the support I have found among the members of A.A., I have become more open to, and skilled at, sharing deeply with appropriate people, but that itself is not a Fifth Step. There is something particularly special—sacred, if you will—about the process of writing the Fourth Step and sharing it in the Fifth. It is like nothing else.



I suppose there are as many ways to take the Fifth Step as to do the Fourth. Normally, when I hear a Fifth now, I do not have the person read their Fourth to me. If they have followed the inventory guide I used (and they usually have, if I am hearing their Fifth Step), we read the question and discuss the answer. If their Fourth Step is a long one, the person might skim what they wrote to see if they left anything out, but the point is to have an honest conversation, not a recitation.⁵⁰



The *Twelve and Twelve* paints an interesting picture of people’s reactions to the Fifth Step: “Provided you hold back nothing, your sense of relief will mount from minute to minute. The dammed-up emotions of the years break out of their confinement, and miraculously vanish as soon as they are exposed.”⁵¹ This is not exactly how it happened with me, nor did it happen like this with most of the people I know. It could not have happened that way for me—I was so obsessed with looking to see if the dammed emotions were breaking out that they never would have had a chance. I have wondered why many others have an experience similar to mine, in contrast to the one conveyed in the book. I am not an expert in these matters, but I will hazard a guess, which is that we live in a different society today than when *Twelve and Twelve* was written. There are exceptions, but *generally*, in the 1950s people were less open about things going on with them, especially bad things. I am sure I was not the only person who was told that “we keep that to ourselves” or “we don’t discuss things like that.” It is probably safe to say that societal changes of the 1960s and 1970s provided a more open atmosphere for discussing some of these formerly taboo subjects. By the time I got to A.A., emotions were less confined

⁵⁰ There are times when the emotions are so taut or the subject so sensitive that the more loving action is to allow them to read what they wrote.

⁵¹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 62.

than when Bill Wilson was growing up. Or, as an acquaintance told me: “There wasn’t much shock in the Fifth Step when I had told the same stuff to five therapists!”

The phrase that follows captures my experience exactly: “As the pain subsides, a healing tranquility takes its place.”⁵² It did not happen immediately. Several weeks later, when I was cleaning my garage, I experienced this tranquility. I turned and saw the sun streaming through the window, with the dust particles gently floating. As I admired the beauty in the moment, I realized I was at peace, quite an unusual state for me up to that time. And though I cannot identify or quantify the mechanism through which it occurred, I believed at that moment that my peace was a result of working the Fifth Step to the best of my ability. I still do.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 62.

Step Six

“Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

Step Six is deceptively simple. As is often pointed out, it is given but a single paragraph in the *Big Book*. I find the treatment of Step Six in the *Twelve and Twelve* scarcely better; it mostly addresses defects of character and our willingness to have them removed. So it is surprising to some people when I tell them I spend most of my time on the Sixth and Seventh Steps; they form the core of my program today. That said, I never feel like I am able to explain my understanding of this Step very well. But I will try.

For years, I floundered on the Sixth Step without realizing I was struggling. I thought of this Step as the great “rest area” of A.A., as appreciated as a pit stop is during a long road trip (and a positive reflection on the founders and their wisdom).

I was not alone. I worked this Step much like I see many others work it—that is, I took the list of defects I discovered in the Fourth and Fifth Steps and began to work on them. I may have been predisposed to work the Step this way because of my belief at the time that one of the main purposes of the Fourth and Fifth Steps was to uncover patterns of behavior that I could address. Then I could “turn them over” to a higher power.⁵³

One night, my understanding of these Steps began to change as a result of something I heard at a meeting—what I sometimes think is the wisest thing I have heard at a meeting. The meeting was on the Seventh Step, and someone said, “If I humbly ask God to remove my defects, and I am not satisfied with the results, then I have not humbly asked.”

I heard that and felt as though I had been sucker-punched. I felt naked, exposed. Here was a man who perfectly captured my experience with the Seventh Step, and it did not feel good. But hearing this began a process in which I started re-evaluating all that I knew and all that I thought about the Seventh Step and then the Sixth Step. It was the beginning of a new understanding of these Steps, which led to a deeper peace within myself and a closer unity with others. That is pretty significant.

It is often said that when having difficulty with a Step, we back up to the previous Step and take a look. After hearing this man’s thoughts on the Seventh Step, I started to take a closer look at Step Six. I found that I was entirely missing the word *God* in the Step, or at least I was missing the implications of God. My sponsor at the time told me that if I was entirely ready to have God remove my defects, then I would be willing to accept that this would happen in God’s way and (perhaps more difficult to swallow) in God’s *time*.

This was quite different from how I had been working this Step. In my way of working the Sixth Step, I would pick the defect that needed to be removed, decide how to remove it, and pursue that course. I was always willing to give God credit for removal of the defect, but it did not often come up; he was not doing much. It was me at the tiller guiding our boat. Coincidentally, no defects were getting removed. No wonder I was not “satisfied with the result”! The defects seemed to be getting worse.

⁵³ Subsequently I have come to believe that the primary value of the Fourth and Fifth Steps lies in my commitment to honesty. But you have probably already read that.

That makes sense now. One need only remember that the outstanding characteristic of the alcoholic is that they are “self-centered in the extreme” or that the root of our problem is self-centeredness.⁵⁴ When I am focused on me—on what I feel and what I see as my defect—I perpetuate the disease. I am so focused on me that I cannot see that this is exactly what the problem is: It’s not the greed or lust or envy or pride—the problem is *my* focus on *me*. No wonder the defects seemed to be getting worse. They were!

As I continued the exploration of my relationship with the Sixth Step, I found that I was not only the one selecting which defects to be removed but also that I was entirely self-centered in how I selected them. I selected defects on the basis of how much pain they caused *me*.⁵⁵ Beyond paying lip service to them, I was not too interested in those defects that irritated or even harmed others. I wanted to remove the defects that caused *me* pain.

More levels of understanding revealed themselves as I kept working with the Sixth Step. It was bad enough that I was selecting the defects to be removed, and doing so on the basis of self-serving motives. Over time, I came to understand that, in a given moment, I am not sure I even know what a defect is. I do not have all the information to make that judgment. For example, if one were to take a particular point in time, say, the last week of my drinking, it is easy to make a judgment by contemporary standards. Here I was, staying in my room as much as I reasonably could, selfishly drinking to numb the pain of my self-absorbed awareness, and neglecting friends, nutrition, and basic hygiene. Surely this could be judged as a “bad” thing.

Not by me, not now. Let us be open-minded as we rethink what is “good” and “bad.” For it was in suffering through that time of gross self-indulgence that I reached such a bottom that the miracle of sobriety began to take hold. That time was the start of the reason I am sober today, is how I am graced by a deepening peace, and is how I have been privileged to provide comfort and guidance to others like me. So, is the thing that allowed that transition to happen a “bad” thing? At that time, I did not have all the information to make the judgment. I am not sure I do even now.

And so it is with most judgments. So many times, those things I have judged to be assets in my life—my intelligence or my learning or whatever—have turned out to be what have stroked my ego and separated me from my fellows and God. All in all, they are things one might consider to be bad. Conversely, things I might have considered bad—my fears, my compulsions, even my judgments—have caught my attention and allowed me to turn to the God of my understanding, a God of love. That might be considered good.

When I was six months sober, my brother, an active alcoholic, killed himself. If you had asked me at the time, “Is this a good thing or a bad thing?” I would have of course answered, “Very bad!” But was it? Did I have all the necessary information to make that judgment?

Perhaps not. For one thing, I had, and have, no idea what type of consciousness my brother now holds, if any. If he is now free, conscious of peace he seldom had on Earth, and maybe even walking on golden streets, could I honestly say he is worse off than when he was in his last moments of agony and hopelessness? I do not think so. I truly do not know that he is not

⁵⁴ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 24.

⁵⁵ Did I mention self-centered *in the extreme*?

a lot better off now.

Nor do I know what his life would have been like had he continued to live. If he had overcome his addictions and invented a cure for cancer, helped rescue dogs and orphans, and bought a retreat in the mountains where I could visit on weekends, then it is a pity, indeed, that he died so young. But suppose he spent the next 40 or 50 years living in the cold under a bridge, stealing food to eat, and desperately manipulating others to get that next drink or pill—would he be better off then? I do not know. And that is exactly the point.

But there is something I do know. As a direct result of his death, I quit viewing Alcoholics Anonymous as though it was a self-help program and started working the program in earnest, as if to save my life (which was accurate). I am convinced his death is one of the reasons I am here and sober today. I have seen many 23-year-olds come to the program much like I did, and when I did. Few of them are left.

A few years ago, I celebrated my 40th anniversary of sobriety. As I stood at the podium before the meeting, I looked out over the sea of people: people I sponsored at that time, people I had sponsored, their spouses, their friends, people they had sponsored, and people the *sponsees* had sponsored. I thought of the many people, now long gone, who had guided and influenced me in the program.

And I thought of my brother. Most of the people in that room did not know I even had a brother, but most of them had been directly and positively impacted by the work I did that was motivated by my brother's suicide. One or two of them were perhaps even alive largely because of his death. Was that bad? Others may know. I personally do not have sufficient information to determine good or bad here.

And once I realize that is true here, in this Step, I tend to find out that it is true nearly everywhere in this life. I cannot judge what is good or bad. I just do not have sufficient information. Ever.

This, itself, is important information.

Step Six is deeply connected to my insatiable need to judge. And as I continued to look at the judgments I make, I learned some things about my judgments. I learned they are ubiquitous. Judgments are the thread that was woven into the cloth of my life. No part of my life was immune. Judgment is incessant, illusory, and damaging. And it is mostly unconscious, so I was not even aware I was doing it.

I saw too that these judgments stole my peace. I am reminded of the part of the *Twelve and Twelve* where it asks, "Am I willing to take the measures necessary to shape my life to conditions as they are?"⁵⁶ In reality, I am learning that to see things as they are is enough. I seldom, if ever, need to infer, decide, or project how they "ought" to be. Things are just as they are. They just are.

I also came to realize that to judge (almost) invariably takes me out of the present. When I make a judgment, I am usually focused on something that has happened in the past. Seldom, if ever, am I focused on the present when passing judgment on people, places, and things, including myself.

⁵⁶ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 52.

This fact is not unimportant. Some of us tend to give lip service at times to the A.A. slogan “One Day at a Time.”⁵⁷ Yet to live in the present is, for me, absolutely essential to working this program. The reason is simple. As a result of working this program, I have come to see the “God of my understanding” as a God of love,⁵⁸ and I can only experience this God, love, when I am in the present. This seems to be my limitation, not his. When I judge, I am out of the present and thus disconnected from God, disconnected from love. When that happens, I am in trouble, and I am likely to bring trouble into the affairs around me.

Finally, I learned there is no such thing as a half- judgment. I cannot judge others without also judging myself, nor can I judge myself without judging others. It is inherent to the nature of judgment; it is the nature of the beast. To embrace the concept of “Live and let live,” I cannot accord myself the privilege of judging others, or myself.

So, in my closer look at the Sixth Step, I saw that I was focusing on character defects and missing the word *God* in the Step. I was the one judging which defect needed to be removed, a choice I usually made (subconsciously) based on the defect causing me the most pain at that point in time. I learned that I was unable to make that judgment because, ultimately, I do not know if it is good or bad—I do not have all the information. I learned that this judgment inside me (which I try to force on the world around me) is pervasive and incessant; it takes me out of the present moment and steals my peace. And I learned that attempts to judge myself but not others, or vice versa, are impossible; it is against the nature of judgment.

With this understanding, I find myself at a vaguely familiar place. If I come to A.A. hoping to solve my drinking “dilemma,” I am brought back quickly to the First Step. I cannot fix it. I cannot resolve it. I am powerless. And so it is with the Sixth Step. What the First Step is to alcohol, the Sixth Step is to everything else. I am powerless over alcohol and, as it turns out, most everything else.

It seems amazing in retrospect. I reach the program and I am beaten but ready—yes, I am powerless, and yes, my life is unmanageable. Then I start working a few Steps, and by the time I reach the Sixth Step all those thoughts of powerlessness are gone. I am the one who can decide what a defect is. I am the one who can decide which defect need be worked on today. I am the one who will decide what method to use to eliminate this defect. And, if I keep up this attitude, I am the one who gets drunk.⁵⁹

This idea seems so foreign to many of us and is often inherently in opposition to the values of our society. But it really is not. The concept is there, but we miss it. Here is one example: Lucifer. I, like many young boys of my era, was told that Lucifer was once the grandest of the angels. Only he had a little thinking problem. He was beautiful and smart and began to get a little jealous of God, thinking something like, “Well, I am as good as God. Why are we all sitting around worshiping him when we could be worshiping me?” God, who sometimes put up with a lot, was apparently not having it that day and directed Michael the Archangel to drive Lucifer from Heaven. Lucifer was banished to the realm of the Earth where

⁵⁷ In my mind, I often translate “One Day at a Time” to “Be Here Now.” I am not sure where that comes from, but it is succinct and has been immeasurably useful over the years.

⁵⁸ One might even say that, for me, God *is* love.

⁵⁹ The First Step says we admitted powerlessness. In no step does it say we get the power back.

he holds dominion until ... well, until he doesn't.

My first reaction to hearing this story (at age 5 or 6) was that Lucifer was none too bright. How could he have thought he was as good as God? Why, I would *never* think that!

But it is exactly what I do. Without adequate information, I incessantly make damning assessments as to what I should be doing or who I ought to be. This would be bad enough, but I also make them of you, too.⁶⁰ And when I judge, I am doing exactly what Lucifer did: usurping the role of God, effectively pretending to be God. Unfortunately, I do not get dominion over the Earth for doing it. Instead, I get a life filled with angst.



Since we are getting ready to ask God to remove our defects—in his time and in his way—there might be those who think I am saying that we are to do nothing.⁶¹ “We must do the footwork” is a response I hear frequently in these discussions.⁶² Indeed, we must. But what is the footwork?

Becoming entirely willing to have God remove all these defects of character means, I believe, to be present without judgment. It means being willing give up my agenda—any agenda—to be in the presence of the God of my understanding. Believe me, that is not doing nothing. To be entirely successful in this endeavor is rarely achieved, even briefly, but there are some “tricks of the trade” I have learned to keep me on this path.

First, a thorough and honest regular Tenth Step seems to be essential for working the Sixth Step. I have told sponsees that if there is no Tenth Step, there is no Sixth. As I become more skilled at seeing where I have an agenda, I am able to make a conscious choice (once again) to give up that agenda. We'll have more on that later.

With regard to judgment, if you are like me, you will be amazed in your Tenth Step to see the unending stream of judgment that floods through your consciousness, if you only choose to be aware of it. It is pervasive, and (as far as I can tell) it is fully endorsed as a way of life by the society in which I live, which makes it especially hard to even recognize. To give one an indication of just how ubiquitous it is, I tell my sponsees that they are not allowed to use the words *should* or *ought* in describing their trauma of the day to me. It can be hilarious to see how they will struggle to manipulate the English language to meet this requirement, sometimes stretching their mouth as though it will lend more elasticity to the words. It seems almost impossible to do (at least until one learns “the trick”). But the point is made. Most of us drown in a sea of *should* and *ought*. And to use *should* and *ought* is to judge.

And so we come to what is, I consider, the essence of Step Six: Give up the agenda. Be present without judgment.

Step Six is not really much of a rest area anymore.

⁶⁰ Remember? There is no escaping it: If I judge me, I will judge you. And vice versa.

⁶¹ Actually, there have been such people. I expect that there still are.

⁶² And we now know what *that* means, don't we?

Step Seven

“Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.”

I have come to believe that Step Seven has almost nothing to do with working on defects. Perhaps it has nothing to do with defects at all.⁶³ This Step is not where I decide which defect needs to be removed or how it needs to be removed, or for that matter, the extent to which it has to be removed. The action of the Seventh Step is to *ask*. That is it. It is pretty simple.

Why would it be so important to simply *ask*, especially given the extensive preparation in the Sixth Step? For me, this action reflects a most significant and enduring fact about my life: I am not God. Regardless of what I think, do, or say, I remain powerless over, for example, alcohol. And as life would have it (and as a few Steps reveal), I am powerless over virtually everything else—maybe actually *everything* else. So when I ask to have my defects removed, doing so underscores that I am not in charge.

This is not necessary for God. It is necessary for me. Though any prayer can be composed to accomplish this,

it is probably worth a look at the prayer in the *Big Book*:

My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen.⁶⁴

I find the Seventh Step prayer especially interesting in a couple of ways. The first is that in this prayer, we never ask to have all our defects removed. We ask only that a particular subset of them be removed: only those defects that interfere with my being of service to God and my fellows. This comes as a bit of a shock to a number of us who spent all this effort becoming *entirely* ready to have *all* of our defects removed in the Sixth Step. When I examined this line, though, I began to understand that my approach to the Seventh Step was not only unproductive but actually fundamentally flawed, because my approach was based on selfish concerns. Yes, it would be very nice to help others. But I really wanted to (feel better/look better/smell better) so that (people would think well of me/I would hurt less/I would get what I wanted). The concept of removal of my defects had everything to do with me (again). The character defect to be “worked on”⁶⁵ was selected based on how it made me look and feel.

The Seventh Step removes that self-seeking. The Seventh Step prayer invites me to look a little closer at my motives when it directs me to request the removal of a certain subset of defects it does not matter if I do not like what I do or feel; what matters is the removal of defects that

⁶³ So what is the difference between a defect and a shortcoming? The lore in the rooms of A.A. says that Bill Wilson just did not want to repeat himself. I wonder whether he would have just repeated himself if he had thought it through, given alcoholics’ fondness for controversy and splitting hairs.

⁶⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 76.

⁶⁵ Did you notice how we seamlessly we slid from “removed” to “worked on”? You’ll see that fairly often at Seventh Step meetings if you pay attention.

stand in the way of my service to others. *Only* those—nothing more. I daresay that the God of my understanding is entirely capable of removing exactly those defects (and, I am sure, has actually done so in the context of the circumstances in the moment.) Certainly, shortcomings that I considered integral to my personality were simply not operative at times when I focused on simply being of maximum service.

Another thing I find particularly interesting about the Seventh Step prayer is that it underscores (and in a sense validates) our efforts in the Sixth Step to decline to judge, because in the Seventh Step prayer we turn it *all* over, good *and* bad. There really is no point in deciding what is good or bad anymore because it will all be turned over anyway.

Part of the literature that was instrumental in helping me understand the Seventh Step came from the *Big Book*, during the discussion of the Tenth Step:

And we have ceased fighting anything ... even alcohol. We are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we had been placed in a position of neutrality—safe and protected. We have not even sworn off. Instead, *the problem has been removed*. It does not exist for us.⁶⁶

I was never able to “solve” my drinking problem. The truth is, the more I focused on it, the more I tried to resolve it, the more of a problem it became. The solution came when I quit *trying* to quit. Instead of focusing on my drinking, I changed my attention completely—to going to meetings, saying my prayers, trying to help another alcoholic. All of a sudden, I had not had a drink—for a day, a week, a month. But here is the key point: I never *solved* my drinking problem. It was *removed*.

So it is with defects: As long as I try to fix them, I exacerbate them. When I am working on *my* defects, I am wholly engaged with *me*. That is the problem: I am self-centered. It is in the Seventh Step when I give up entirely on controlling the outcome, when I give up entirely any agenda aimed at fixing or removing my defects, and give them over to this other power. When I actually do it this way, I would contend that the defects are not even any of my business anymore. It is his responsibility now. *All* of it, good *and* bad, just like the prayer told us.

The Seventh Step then has very little, if anything, to do with the removal of defects of character or shortcomings. It has everything to do with my relationship to a power greater than myself. I am not here in the Seventh Step to work on removing my defects. It is my place to ask that they be removed, then get on with “my” business: to stay sober and to help another alcoholic. The initial step in this process is simply to be present to the God of my understanding, which is love.

This is poetic in a sense. The more experience I gain in this process, the more I tend to believe that most of the things I consider defects or shortcomings result from a lack of love. To be sure, when I am feeling wholly loved, wholly accepted, I do not feel the need to gossip or to lust. I do not need to brag or impress. In love, I am relieved of the need to act in ways influenced by my defects. So to the extent that my defects are driven by a lack of love, it makes sense that simply being present to this God of love would bring healing.

⁶⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 84-85; emphasis mine.

When we reach this point in the Seventh Step where we realize that our primary purpose is to stay sober and help another alcoholic, the value of the knowledge about ourselves we obtained in the Fourth and Fifth Steps becomes manifest. My sponsor says that the better we know ourselves, the better we know all people. I may be unable to stop drinking based on the knowledge I gained in the Fourth and Fifth Steps, but that knowledge does allow me to be of better service to my fellow suffering alcoholics.

Sometimes when I say things like “My defects are really no longer any of my business” and “I’m not here to work on removing my defects,” it really raises the hackles of some people. I am often then reminded, “Well, we must do the footwork.” Of course we must do the work. The point is that if I am staying continually present to the God of my understanding, then anything that I actually need to do will be gotten to my consciousness. God has no limit to the number of ways that he can get the information I need into my consciousness if I stay present to him. I am giving up the agenda, not the footwork. But I do the footwork in the trenches, not at headquarters.

I reiterate that the Sixth and Seventh Steps form the core of my A.A. program today, but I have never felt able to adequately convey my experience with these Steps. But there is a story, first told by my sponsor, that encapsulates my experience:

I live in an area of the country that is known to produce large quantities of wheat. Specifically, we are known for our high-quality “hard red winter wheat. Winter wheat is a little different from spring wheat. Winter wheat is planted in the fall after the harvest. Sometimes by November a small, green shoot will begin to grow, but as the temperature drops and the snows come, the kernel lies dormant under the soil until spring. When spring arrives, the kernel bursts forth, past the green shoot stage, until tall green stalks with beads of immature wheat form. The stalks start to turn yellow and beads of wheat ripen. Soon the fields become the classic “golden waves of grain” that we know, and they are ready for harvest.

Sometimes it seems that I am a kernel of hard red winter wheat, and I am not happy. I look at myself and see that I am tiny, green, and squishy. So I tell God, “God, I’m not where I am supposed to be. Fix me!” God responds, “You are just where you are supposed to be.”

I think about that for a while, and I realize God is wrong! I am a piece of wheat. We all know what wheat looks like: It is tall and yellow and all beaded out! I am tiny, green, and squishy. So I bring it back up to God, this time with more feeling: “God, you must help me. Wheat is supposed to be tall and yellow. I am green and squishy. I can’t do it. I place my whole self in your hands. Please fix me.”

God responds, “Jim, it’s only November.”

Whenever I am frustrated, whenever I am judgmental, whenever I am taking control, whenever I think I know it all, whenever ... anything, I need only to remember:

“It’s only November.”

Step Eight

“Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.”

I cannot count the number of times I have gone to an Eighth Step meeting and heard people talking about the amends they have made. Some people say it is hard to talk about Step Eight without talking about Step Nine. That is kind of a pity. The Eighth Step is separate from the Ninth Step and has an extraordinary impact in and of itself. It does not really have much to do with amends, either.

What it has to do with is the development of a particular attitude. The Step calls this willingness, but like so many apparently trivial words in the literature of Alcoholics Anonymous, this willingness is really showing us a hidden door into a “peaceful, contented life.”⁶⁷ It is a pathway to peace. Early in my sobriety, I was at a meeting where a man was talking about an amends he had made. It was apparently to no effect, or at least not the effect he wanted. He was saying all the things that we hear said in those types of cases, like “I’m just cleaning my side of the street” and “It doesn’t matter how the amends are received.”

Except that it really did matter to him how the amends were received. He said he was at peace with the amends, but he was not. Even as a newcomer who was six months sober, I could tell that he was wrestling with this feeling. He was lying. I saw it that day, and I have seen it many times since. People “make amends,” and it does not go “right.” They are (understandably) bothered and upset, so they spout pablum in an effort to sound spiritual or perhaps to feel better. Why does that happen? Why do they do that?

In my experience, it has to do with the quality of willingness one has while working Step Eight. I have, over time, experienced several types of willingness to make amends.

Early on in the program (before I ever touched a Step), I decided to make an amends. It was an important one, too. I owed a man a few hundred dollars. He had also been quite inconvenienced and was a bit peeved with me. At about six months sober, I unexpectedly came upon the same amount of money that I owed him, and I was willing to make the amends. I might also mention that I was aware that this person had the potential to further my career significantly. I paid him the money, and the relationship did begin to heal. We are, in fact, good friends today, and he did become instrumental in my career over a number of years.

One could call it a “successful” amends. But was there ever a more cynical, selfish motive (that is, “willingness”) to make the amends? It was certainly better to pay him the money than not repay it. But I cannot imagine there is a lot spiritual growth with a motive as self-serving as mine. I am grateful that my higher power was able to heal that relationship despite my best efforts.

Over the next few years, my willingness took on a different quality. By then, I had begun to listen and trust what people in the A.A. rooms would tell me. They told me to come to meetings, work the Steps, and work with others and I would not drink. They told me I could have

⁶⁷ The phrase comes from a discussion of the Third Step in the *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 49.

a better day if I started my day with the Third Step. They told me I could be alone in perfect peace and ease and look the world in the eye if I was thorough in doing a Fifth Step. I was told many things that turned out to be true. A.A. members had begun to have some credibility with me, so I was willing to make amends (only) because people in A.A. said it was a good thing to do. I had a willingness based on faith, which was a faith based on my experience with the people in the A.A. program.

Probably the real breakthrough on willingness came many years later when I came to realize that I had resentment against every single person on my Eighth Step list. The two brief references to forgiveness in the discussion of Step Eight in the *Twelve and Twelve* began to take on significance: “If we are now about to ask forgiveness for ourselves, why shouldn’t we start out by forgiving them, one and all?”⁶⁸ and “We shall want to hold ourselves to the course of admitting things we have done, meanwhile forgiving the wrongs done us, real or fancied.”⁶⁹

Forgiveness! That is the real willingness, isn’t it? Until I have forgiven those whose harms I have given or received (real or fancied), I cannot really make true amends to them. Until then I will always hold some sort of expectation in terms of a response or behavior or cling precariously (however subconsciously) to my ledge of self-justification. When I have forgiven them, when I have let them completely off the hook, only then do they have the freedom to do what they will and to be who they are, without reference to how it affects me.

Then it does not matter how or if they accept my amends. It really does not matter.



Of course, before becoming willing to make amends to the people on my list, I had to actually *have* a list. It is surprising to me the number of people I have talked to who will talk extensively about the Eighth (and Ninth) Steps who have never actually made a list. It is not really that hard, although I also delayed putting pen to paper. You just write down the names of the persons you have harmed.

A long Eighth Step list is somewhat disparaged among some members of A.A. One hears things like, “Oh, I never would believe that I am so powerful that I could harm that many people” or “I don’t really owe many amends” or “I mostly just hurt my family” or (appallingly) “I only hurt myself.”

Maybe these statements are true, but I do have a long list. It is long for a couple of reasons. First, I have come to realize (from reading the Step) that I am not making a list of persons to whom I am going to make amends; I am making a list of persons I have harmed. It is a very different list. I have harmed many more than I will ever be in a position to make amends to. Sponsees sometimes counter with something like “Harm? What is harm? How do I know if I have harmed someone? I may have pissed them off, but I don’t think I really harmed them.”

To the extent that they are trying to get out of some work, they need not have bothered.

⁶⁸ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 78.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 81–82.

To these people, I note that the *Twelve and Twelve* defines *harm* as “instincts in collision.”⁷⁰ If the truth is told, rarely does a day pass that my instincts are not in a collision with the instincts or intentions of another. Multiply that times the number of times it happens in a day times the number of days I have lived since reaching the age of accountability, and you come up with a large number of “harms”—a large enough number that it should keep one writing for quite a while. At the same time, this number underscores the fact that this list is not (and could not be) a list of persons to whom we will make amends.

I suppose this a pretty good exercise but probably not really very practical in terms of making a “final” list of persons we have harmed. I do not know today if I could define harm in a practical way. Fortunately, I do not have to. My sponsor suggested to me that I could get a workable comprehension of harms done others by making a list of people who have harmed me. If I am honestly confused about whether something I did rises to the level of harm to another human being, changing roles and imagining myself on the other side of that behavior will usually give me a pretty good insight.

If that insight is not enough, there are other little tricks, such as going back through the years and examining my relationships with other people. As I come across often long-forgotten relationships,⁷¹ I look for any inkling of an emotional response within me. These responses can serve as signposts directing my attention toward deeper underlying pain and unlock forgotten sources of discomfort.

I have heard people say they had lots of behaviors while drinking that were just drinking behaviors that did not rise to the level of harm, so the name of the “harmed” did not go on their list. The process of role reversal helps me move past such rationalizations. For instance, once when I was drinking, I took a cab home and lost a good deal of that evening’s liquid refreshment in the back of the cab. I do not know who cleaned that mess up, whether it was the driver or another employee, but it was not me. If I wanted to avoid making amends, I could certainly make the case that I did him no harm—you expect that sort of behavior when you are a cab driver and pick up drunks.

The truth is that if *I* had been driving and *you* vomited all over my cab, I would feel quite upset and would certainly feel that you owed me amends.⁷² Yes, I think we could say that a harm was done. It goes on the list even though I do not know who the driver was or really even the city in which this happened. My guess is that I will never see him again, so it is unlikely I will have the opportunity to make amends to him. But he is on the list.



A persistent question about the Eighth Step is “Do I put myself on the list?” Some people are pretty adamant on one side of the question or the other. For me, today, it is a no-brainer. The Step calls for me to make a list of all persons I have harmed. I have made choices that have

⁷⁰ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 80.

⁷¹ And, sometimes, simply interactions with some people.

⁷² I would like you to clean it up, too.

harmed me. My name goes on the list.⁷³ But because I have harmed myself, does that mean I make amends to myself? Well, yes and no. I felt pretty strongly, and still do, that I do not make amends to myself in the ways to which I would be most inclined. It always comes down to being self-centered in the extreme. If I focus on making amends to myself, I am again perpetrating my disease, in the same way as when I worked on my defects.

The Step does call for me to be willing to make amends to all the people on the list, and I agree. I consider it important that I am willing to forgive myself for the harms I have done to myself. Generally, I find it takes a power greater than me to facilitate that type of willingness. And make amends to myself? Well, making amends is another chapter, but I will give you a hint: I make amends to myself when I make amends to others.



For a number of years in sobriety, I attended regular sessions with a therapist. Therapy is another filter through which some of us view the happenings in our lives. I went with the support and encouragement of my sponsor, who reminded me to keep foremost in my mind the principles of A.A. In fact, he placed the process of therapy within the context of the A.A. “filter”—he called it working the Eighth Step. I thought that was a bit strange, but I have come to understand it a bit.

Step Eight in the *Twelve and Twelve* is explicit and repetitive on the issue of thoroughness. It calls for “an accurate and unsparing survey of the human wreckage he has left in his wake.”⁷⁴ Step Eight makes clear that a Fourth Step is insufficient; one “ought to redouble his efforts to see how many people he has hurt, and in what ways.”⁷⁵ It emphasizes that restitution is not the only point of this Step: “Though in some cases we cannot make restitution at all ... we should nevertheless make an accurate and really exhaustive survey of our past lives as it has affected other people”⁷⁶ and “the purpose of making restitution is paramount, it is equally necessary that we extricate from an examination of our personal relations every bit of information about ourselves and our fundamental woes.”⁷⁷ Similar references are plentiful throughout the chapter, but the point is that by the time the book was written, the purpose of this Step had evolved significantly in the author’s mind. Clearly, the “list” to which he refers is somewhat different from what most people would call a list. I speak as a layman, but “it is equally necessary that we extricate ... every bit of information about ourselves and our fundamental woes”⁷⁸ sounds a little bit like cognitive therapy.

Why this big change? I think the clue is in this paragraph:

⁷³ I did actually fight this for a long time, thinking that putting myself on the list is just another example of unjustified self-concern.

⁷⁴ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 77.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 77.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 79.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 80.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 80.

Very deep, sometimes quite forgotten, damaging emotional conflicts persist below the level of consciousness. At the time of these occurrences, they may have given our emotions violent emotional twists which have since discolored our personalities and altered our lives for the worse.⁷⁹

If that is true, then the rewards for devoting significant attention to this Step (and to these Steps) are stupefying. My sponsor would say that these subconscious “violent emotional twists” are like a sapling bent by the wind. One straightens it by attaching a cable and applying tension in the direction of desired growth. Not too much tension—that will snap the sapling. Just the right amount of tension to guide growth is the desired direction.

So it is with our emotional twists. These Steps provide the tension (through ego reduction in depth) to guide growth in the desired direction as well, but the rewards here are significantly greater than a straighter tree. It is no less than a “spiritual awakening as a result of these Steps.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 80.

⁸⁰ Step Twelve.

Step Nine

“Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

My sponsor did me an invaluable service at the time of my first “real” amends. He taught me how insidious my ego is. It is always present and always directive, even when working the Steps, and even as it tells me it is not really there at all.

At that time, I had completed my Fourth and Fifth Steps and was resting in the Sixth and Seventh Steps. One day I learned that an old friend, a former roommate, now lived in a distant city. The next day I was unexpectedly called into my boss’ office, where he informed me that he wanted me to take a trip to that same city.

I am not always totally oblivious to the workings of my higher power. Even I was able to see that it might be time to do an amends. I had been around awhile and had heard “You don’t work the Ninth Step without a sponsor,” so I met with my sponsor. He first questioned why I intended to make amends, and I responded with some general harms. He suggested that direct amends probably required some knowledge of specific harms and told me I was to go and inventory this relationship. I did not like that. The man was already on my grocery-

style amends list, and I had done a lengthy Fourth Step. I had hoped for a quick turnaround on this amends thing. Still, I did the inventory, and (as it happened) my sponsor was right. The depth of my understanding of the relationship increased dramatically as a result of this inventory. But this was not the “invaluable service” that my sponsor provided.

I returned to my sponsor with my inventory, and we discussed it. When it was clear to him that I was ready to make the amends, he asked how I intended to do it. I have forgotten the specifics of my response, but I know it was general, similar to the type of things you hear in meetings: Say “I’m sorry,” pay what I owe, that sort of thing. Basically, I would do whatever I thought was appropriate.

Whatever I thought was appropriate? My sponsor stopped me short. He suggested that I drop the preconceived notions of what I thought and ask the person to whom I was making the amends how I could make amends. I was then to do whatever he said.

What a revelation! At first I was horrified at the idea. I was to place myself at the mercy of someone I have harmed? What if he is unreasonable? What if he suggests I kill myself in order to make amends?⁸¹

But over time I have come to understand the beauty and importance of this one question while making amends. Despite the esteem in which I hold my own judgment, the truth of the matter is that there is no way that I can tell exactly how, and to what extent, I have harmed another human being. Only that individual can know that. In truth, it is a tremendous ego pitfall for me to believe otherwise. Who am I to say that my refusal to acknowledge someone was not harmful? Only they know. Who am I to say that a casual apology or acknowledgment of guilt is adequate to amend that broken relationship or betrayal of trust? I cannot know the extent to

⁸¹ The answer to this, according to my sponsor, was “Call your sponsor. First.”

which someone was hurt or harmed—or what will heal them.

Of course, the ego will always tell me that I can. It will perhaps allow me to “amend” a theft from a friend by giving to charity or the like. But the point is that I have made a decision to turn my will and life over to the care of a power greater than myself. That power is not the ego. And, at least in my experience, that power, that love, is far more effective in healing damaged relationships than my ego is. Turning to a higher power, though, takes a lot more trust than leaving the healing to the ego.

Then there are the indirect amends.⁸² Or are there? I am not so sure. I certainly hear a lot about indirect amends in Ninth Step meetings, but I have never seen an actual reference to indirect amends in the *Big Book* or the *Twelve and Twelve*. I would guess there are two reasons for this. The first is that some amends just simply cannot be made. Maybe the person has died or will not speak to us or is lost to the vicissitudes of life. In such cases, I suppose it assuages some feelings of guilt to say “I am making indirect amends.” Indirect amends also seem to be a convenient tool when making direct amends is possible but would be too hurtful, shameful, or unpleasant.

The point of the Step is to make “direct amends” whenever possible. When doing so is not possible, I think it is more honest to say that this is an amends I cannot make rather than saying I am making an “indirect amends.”

I personally do not consider amends made to persons that have passed away as indirect amends. In making direct amends, it seems most helpful to use the most direct medium possible. If I can meet with them, that is preferable. If that is impossible, then it is permissible to make direct amends another way—by telephone, letter, email, web conference, or any other way you can find. When people make amends to the dead (by going to the gravesite and praying, for example), I cannot say if that is direct amends. Certainly in some people’s views of the afterlife, praying is a direct method of communication. I am not one to say it is not and hope I would never discourage anyone from doing it, especially by saying pompously that the amends is not direct enough.

Like indirect amends, “living amends” is something I hear a lot in meetings but have no real affinity for. I often hear of living amends being made in lieu of direct amends, but I am not sure that is the most skillful way of living for me.

The truth is that if one stays sober and attempts to practice these principles in all of their affairs, they will most certainly be living a different life than before. This life of sobriety, far from *being* an amends, is a result of (among other things) *making* amends. To say otherwise strikes me as a bit disingenuous. To say that my living sober is an amends is a bit like saying my breathing or eating healthy food is an amends. They are all good things to do, no doubt, but they are things we are supposed to be doing anyway. Maybe we should continue to live sober, but still go and make a direct amends? Or, as the case may be, maybe we should admit that an amends cannot be made, thank the God of your understanding for forgiveness and sobriety, and go be of service to another alcoholic.

⁸² Which could be considered a bit of an oxymoron, if one thinks about it.

Step Ten

“Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.”

I had an interesting introduction to Step Ten when I was quite new in sobriety. In my group, there was no predetermined end to the meeting—the meeting ended when everyone had talked for as long as they wanted. Most people (as I recall) were somewhat aware and respectful of the time. If it was coming up on, say, 10 o’clock, then one might pass, even if they had something important to say (as is everything that we want to say at a meeting). But not Henry. Henry was a guy who took his time (and everyone else’s) to say whatever he wanted, regardless of how irrelevant, self-centered, or unimportant I thought it was.

One night Henry was particularly annoying. The meeting had started at 8:30, it was fast approaching 10 o’clock, and Henry had not yet spoken. I thought for sure he would pass, but it was not the first time I was wrong. Henry was the last to speak and spoke for his usual 15 minutes or so. With each passing minute, frustration and rage grew within me. When the meeting was finally over around 10:30, I left without speaking to anyone.

That night I called my sponsor. He knew Henry and was well aware of Henry’s tendencies, but he allowed me to vent for a few minutes. Then he asked, “What are you going to do about it?”

That stopped me. I was not sure, but I knew I wanted to give the right answer. I mentally skimmed through what I had learned in the few months I had been in A.A. and came upon a promising answer. After all, it is a spiritual program!

“I’m going to go right now and pray for him,” I said knowingly. My sponsored replied, “The Tenth Step comes before the Eleventh Step. Go do an inventory. Good night.”

An inventory? How would that help? And besides, it was late and I was tired. And I knew my sponsor. When he said *inventory*, he did not mean “think about it.” An inventory was done with pen and paper. I saw no way out. I reached for my pen.

It took about 45 minutes to complete that inventory. After about 20 minutes, I was surprised to find that I was much calmer than when I had started. By the end, the anger was gone; I was calm. But more important, I was in a place where I naturally transitioned toward prayer and meditation. The Tenth Step had worked its magic, and I was in a mindset where the Eleventh Step was a natural progression.

How fortunate I was to get a lesson like that so early in my sobriety. I was not kidding when I wondered how an inventory would help. The suggested action seemed as irrelevant as going for a walk or drinking some hot tea. But a simple inventory was the first step toward a newly centered me that night. It still is.

I am grateful for this knowledge. People in meetings have often referred to the “kit of spiritual tools” that we have available to us. Early on, that was confusing to me, I guess because I never saw anything like “The following is the list of the spiritual tools in our kit.” But the inventory is a big one. So many times it has defused a situation or allowed me deeper understanding as to the true nature of things (and myself). It has provided the space to

“approach true tolerance and see what real love for our fellows actually means.”⁸³ I daresay it is not a tool I would likely have if I had not needed to adopt it as a way of life to save my life.

One of the reasons the inventory is so effective is in the application of the “spiritual axiom”: “Every time we are disturbed, no matter the cause, there is something wrong *with us*.”⁸⁴ That is, when I take an inventory, I am taking *my* inventory. For some reason, that does not seem to be the most natural course of action. I am always first looking at the actions of the others with whom I am in conflict. If this is all I do, it will leave me with a false reality, as sure as the false reality in which I lived when drinking. The spiritual axiom helps me break through into reality.

The spiritual axiom has a hard time of it in A.A. though. Over the years, I have watched many people struggle with figuring out why the axiom does not apply to them. I do not struggle with that so much anymore. If I am upset, there is something wrong with me—I am upset! But acceptance of the axiom was not always so easy, and today I quite admire how my sponsor addressed it. He never said “spiritual axiom” or “wrong.” What he would do is stick both arms out in front of him, with fingers spread and moving. He would say, “You are trying to solve the problem out here.” He would then bring his hands to cover his heart and say, “But the solution is in here.” He was right. It was only years later that I realized he had given me a new way to look at the spiritual axiom, one that did not provoke scorn, self-righteousness, or self-justification.

When speaking of the spiritual axiom, I am reminded of the following line in the *Big Book*:

Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt.⁸⁵

In my experience, it is not easy to get past the layers of denial and rationalization that block me from seeing my part in my victimization. It is a blessing when I am able to see how I have again set myself up for another drama based on my own self-centeredness. Before I knew this, the world was a scary, unpredictable place. One seemed at the mercy of capricious influences. The deeper I understand my own part in the process, the less arbitrary the world seems to be.



A continuing discussion in A.A. meetings is whether one includes the good as well as the bad on our various inventories. The answer in my program is no, you do not include good or bad or assets and defects. Consistent with my approach to the Sixth and Seventh Steps, I try to step

⁸³ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 92.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 90.

⁸⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 62.

back from making judgments of good and bad. If I can accept something as “being,” I do not have to classify it as bad or good. This is a pretty critical aspect of my program. A large number of the things that would otherwise take my peace are no longer relevant if I refuse to judge them as “bad.”

But in saying that one does not include the good and bad on inventories because one is not to judge good and bad, I am perhaps being a bit disingenuous. How does one differentiate between things that one “should” or “should not” do?

For me, the word *skillful* comes to mind. The thought is this: In my understanding, the ultimate reality is a God of love. My journey is to become more fully capable of giving and receiving love. There are thoughts I think and actions I take that are more skillful in expressing love. There are also those that are *less* skillful in expressing love. These are what I inventory—where have I been more skillful, or less skillful, in giving or receiving love? It is an important question for living, but viewed in this way, it is much less pejorative or prejudicial than inventorying where I have been right or wrong, and this approach is less self-serving as well.

If I shoot an arrow at a target and miss the bull’s eye, I am not wrong, I am just a bit unskilled. I can get better. And so it is with living life.



In doing a daily inventory, I sometimes consider it as though I am looking at a filmstrip of my life. I came across this approach one day when talking with my sponsor. He told me I needed to develop a more positive outlook (which I had heard before) and shared one way I could do that (which I had not heard before).

He told me that life is like a filmstrip that continuously passes before our eyes. He suggested that I select positive things from the stream of images and experiences and concentrate on them.

I was appalled. I told him that was artificial, it was false. And it would lead me to be a Pollyanna!

He said this approach was not false: As life passes, it is not possible to comprehend it all, to take it all in. In fact, we make choices continuously about where our focus will be. The problem is that I already do choose subconsciously and tend to focus mostly on the negative. He told me that can change. We can consciously choose to focus on the positive. In my experience, he was absolutely right.⁸⁶ A sponsee who has done a Fourth Step with me might find this emphasis on the positive a bit strange. After all, I am the one who said that we do not inventory our assets in the Fourth Step, and my assets never got me drunk. So why the big change?

The approach changes because the intent of the Fourth Step inventory is different from the intent of the Tenth Step inventory. In the Fourth Step, we are trying to *get* sober. It is the defects that made me drink; it is the defects that need inventorying.

In the Tenth Step, we have been sober awhile, and we are trying to *stay* sober. Certainly

⁸⁶ It only struck me later that this is another way of saying, “Make a gratitude list.”

doing so requires an inventory of our defects⁸⁷ as they remain, ever ready to drop us back into the despair of active drinking. But after some time in staying sober, not all of life is dreary. Trying to live a spiritual life of service to others is bound to bring some beautiful, positive experiences into my life. It is nice to see these positives, yes. But I daresay that, over time, it is *imperative* to see the positive. I have, for example, been sober in A.A. for a good number of years. If I took a daily inventory each day of sobriety but listed only negative occurrences, it would not be realistic at all. More than that, the burden of looking at thousands of days of negative inventory would cause a heavy emotional burden that might make me look to the bottle to find relief. Whether you call it good and bad, positive and negative, or skillful and unskillful, a balanced inventory in the Tenth Step is essential for maintaining a balanced sobriety.

⁸⁷ Or, if you will, those cases where I have been less skillful in giving and receiving love.

Step Eleven

“Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.”

For a long time, I could not understand why Step Eleven, a step so focused on prayer and meditation, came eleventh. It seemed to me that prayer and meditation were a pretty integral part of this “spiritual program,” even from the beginning. Indeed, it is probably safe to say that few are going to do some of the early stuff (like admit powerlessness) without some sort of supplication to some sort of a higher power.

Part of this confusion stemmed from my interpretation of the Eleventh Step. In my mind, the Eleventh Step was something sort of squishy, like “We started praying and meditating more than we used to.” It is not hard to see how I got this impression. If you go to (almost) any Eleventh Step meeting, the bulk of the discussion is on prayer and meditation, as though that is the Step. The treatment of the Step in the *Twelve and Twelve* seems to reinforce this conclusion, spending essentially all its time discussing meditation and prayer. I find the Step is not really about that at all.

I have come to believe that the essence of the Eleventh Step is that last bit of “fluff” that is often overlooked: “praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.” Prayer and meditation are not the essence of the Eleventh Step; they are only tools or mechanisms for performing the Eleventh Step.⁸⁸ The Step is seeking only “His” will.

Oh, no wonder it is the Eleventh Step! As has been said, when I came into this program, I was extraordinarily self-centered. It is not conceivable that, in those early days, I could have moved past my concern with myself in order to pray *only* for his will for me and the power to carry it out. He was lucky if I even considered allowing him to integrate part of his will into my plans for that day. That is how it was, and at the time, that was all it really could be.

In the course of working these Steps, however, some things began to change. I began, over time, to experience the reality of a loving higher power—as opposed to the intellectual concept that I had before. Moreover, I began to change. I began to have a dramatic shift in perception. Eventually, I no longer thought, felt, or reacted as I had previously. Many of the walls had come down, and many of my defenses and defects were removed or ameliorated. I had, if you will, a spiritual awakening.

The Twelfth Step presents this spiritual awakening as *fait accompli*, but by the time I arrive at the Eleventh Step (having worked the previous ten) I am indeed a different person. No one, not even I, can earnestly work the first ten Steps of the program and not have been brought to some degree of humility. This humility, I believe, coupled with the experience of the loving God, makes it possible to be able to pray “only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.” In other words, it is the reason Step Eleven is the eleventh step.

⁸⁸ There are other tools as well: walking in the woods, painting a landscape, playing with a puppy. Probably there are others.



I suppose a part of my confusion with Step Eleven stemmed from my confusion about prayer. I was raised in a religion that valued prayer, which prescribed rote prayers but did not discourage extemporaneous ones, yet I was not clear on their purpose. I was told that God was a loving God and that he loved me. So would not a God who was truly loving do that which was truly loving, irrespective of my prayers? Would he change what he was planning to do with me (which was loving) to something that I had asked for (which was not loving) just because I asked for it? If so, that would not be very loving. But if he would not change course, what was the point of prayer?

I was pleased when, in my twelfth year of sobriety, I was at a meeting on the Eleventh Step and the leader, an alcoholic clergyman of many years, expressed the exact same confusion. I felt like, at least, it was a valid question (and a bit relieved that I was not alone). But it did not answer the question.

I am not sure the question has been answered yet, but I have at least reached a sort of détente with it. As far as I can tell, God does not need me to pray. He is, and will be, consistent to himself, which I understand to be love. Still, somehow, it is important that I pray anyways; apparently it is important to me that I pray. Perhaps my prayers enable me to better experience, and actually “see,” the presence of the God of my understanding in my life. If so, it was pretty smart of him to invent prayer. I am certainly lifted to a higher plane of awareness when regular prayer is part of my life.

And then there is meditation. I have heard in a few meetings that the original founders of A.A. did not mean what many of us mean by the word *meditation*. To the founders, meditation meant something like contemplation. Meditation as discussed in the Eleventh Step does not mean that we empty our minds, but that we think. We think about the day, we think about God, and so on.

Maybe what these people say is true. Certainly, focused thought on my day as suggested in the *Big Book* does well by me, providing a firm foundation and good, orderly direction to my day. But I wonder whether I am missing something important if I disregard the metaphysical aspects (if you will) of meditation, even if the original founders did have a different understanding.

For years, I practiced meditation as these “originalists” would have it, and it seemed to have a positive effect. Yet I was amazed at the depth of consciousness glimpsed when I was first led through a guided meditation at about eight years sober. Since then, I have sought a deeper connection with the God of my experience through the practice of mediation. It is not my place here to teach someone how to meditate, nor do I think I could. To be sure, my practice, often sporadic and faltering, has changed and evolved many times over the years. Actually, it does not seem to matter that much what type of meditative mechanism I use—a mantra, a rosary, a guided meditation. What seems to matter is consistency. If I am consistent with meditation, my life changes for the better.

This is true in many ways, but one way in particular seems to take on special importance—detachment. When I meditate regularly, I am able to take life a little less personally, to have a (mental) distance between the rawness of the world and my internal

peace. We are told in the Tenth Step of the *Twelve and Twelve* that “nothing pays off like restraint of tongue and pen.”⁸⁹ This detachment allows me this restraint, and without a gnashing of teeth. It allows me to “wear the world as a loose garment” and, in turn, grants me freedom from automatic judgment, a chain that has chafed my neck and kept me tethered many days of my life.

But it is hard to meditate, isn't it? This is an enigma that has long confounded me and does so to this day. In my years of working this program, there have been numerous opportunities to meditate where I have not done so. Why is it so difficult to take this “action of inaction”?⁹⁰

I do not know. But I have learned a bit of a trick to keep me on meditation's golden path: doing it with others. There are various sayings in A.A.—“*We can do what I cannot*” and more simply “*I can't, we can*”—that typically are applied to the process of stopping drinking. But I have found them invaluable with regard to meditation. There is something about sitting in a room with someone else—or better, lots of someone elses—and meditating. There is something about the energy of the group that opens a door for meditation for me in a way I do not usually get to by myself. It is analogous to the energy I experienced when I attended my first A.A. meeting (and many A.A. meetings since).

Of course, if meditating in a group is good, helpful, and inspirational, it is also not always possible.⁹¹ But here is a weird thing: For some reason, when I am meditating with others on a regular basis, I find it easier to meditate alone as well. It is not quite the struggle. There is something about group meditation that carries me into the next day and the one that follows. It somehow seems more natural—easier—to meditate on my own when I have been meditating regularly with others.

Strange. *I can't, but we can.*

⁸⁹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 91.

⁹⁰ As my sponsor called it.

⁹¹ Of course, you could consider starting an A.A. meditation meeting.

Step Twelve

“Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”

It seems there is much to the Twelfth Step. So much, perhaps, because it encompasses everything: “in *all* our affairs.” That pretty much covers it. One might call it the “everything else, in case we forgot anything” Step. Like many, I tend to break it up to make it a bit manageable, or at least comprehensible.

The Twelfth Step starts: “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps ...” That is worth noting because many a Twelfth Step meeting has started with discussions of one’s various spiritual experiences, and they often devolve from there into a generalized discussion of God. It may be a nice discussion, but it misses the point.

The point is that the awakening (not the experience) is the result of a specific set of actions—working the Steps. Many spiritual practices produce healthy, well-rounded individuals with deep spirituality; most of us have met some of those people. Many of us have tried spiritual practices besides (or in conjunction with) the Twelve Steps. In fact, if one were to say, “All roads lead to Oz,” I am not sure I would disagree with them.

But ...

The God of my understanding has chosen to relate to me specifically and primarily through the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, including its suggested program of Steps. This is important for me to remember. Religion did not get me sober. Politics did not get me sober. Friendship did not get me sober. Therapy did not get me sober. Nature did not get me sober. Diet and exercise did not get me sober. The God of my understanding—expressing himself through the program of Alcoholic Anonymous—got me sober. Until I hear otherwise, I tend to presume that it is through A.A. that he primarily intends to relate to me.

Through A.A. is not, of course, the only way that God intends to relate to me, and therein lies the rub. “How might I balance the wisdom of A.A. against the wisdom of (any/all) other paths?” becomes the question. The answer is not difficult, once I set my priorities.

One way that I have been especially blessed by my experiences in A.A. is that these principles have offered me a new filter for evaluating life and everything in it. We all have filters through which we view life: traditions, religion, family mores, societal influences. For me, the principles learned through the practice of the A.A. program are primary. A.A. has become the filter by which I filter the other filters. If A.A. values (as I understand them) conflict with another filter’s values, A.A.’s filter takes precedence. Sometimes the teaching is explicit, such as when a clergyman instructed me that “if the teachings of the church ever distract you from the principles of A.A., always go with A.A.” Other times it is less direct, like when a sponsor reminded me that we are (and must be) explicitly working a spiritual program, but perhaps most of the world is not, so our values will likely sometimes be at odds with the society in which we live.

To some, this may seem complicated, but in practice I do not find that to be the case. Perhaps an example from my life can serve to illustrate.

There was a time in my sobriety where one spiritual path available to and used by me was

psychotherapy. Lust was also a significant part of my daily experience during this time. During one session, my therapist suggested that perhaps I should quit fretting and go ahead and engage in sexual relations with as many people as I could (irrespective of my commitments otherwise) and just “get over it.”⁹²

As you might imagine, there was a part of me that reveled in this admonition and was ready to implement it as a policy in my life. But just as A.A. “ruins my drinking,” it also provides me with a conscience. Somehow this suggestion just did not sound “right.” Somewhat against my own will, I decided I would mention it to my sponsor, “just to get his input.”

My sponsor was not shocked but did share with me that his interpretation of the program suggests that we not try to use people for our own selfish ends. In fact, the program encourages us to be of service to others instead. I do not know how reluctantly I ultimately agreed with him, but I did agree. In this case, the principles of A.A. as I experienced them through the Steps filtered out the selfish behavior encouraged by other disciplines. In doing so, it likely precluded me from inflicting harm on others.



There are a lot of interesting things written about the Twelfth Step in the *Twelve and Twelve*, and like other places in the literature, when I actually apply them to what is going on in my life, things change. There was a time when, through absolutely no virtue or even effort on my part, I became a staff member on a high-profile government commission. It was pretty heady stuff. After a while, I began to believe I was pretty important to the effort, perhaps thinking that my superior grace, talents, and intellect brought me to that position. (This was not the reality.)

I started playing the politics—building turf and trying to gain recognition. The problem was that I was a political neophyte playing in the big leagues with staffers who had come from prominent government agencies. It was like a Little League player trying to compete with the pros, but I was still surprised that I was not successful in becoming a “key player.” Not only had I not gained the respect of the other staffers, I was pretty roundly disliked. I tried to pretend I did not care, but I did.

One night in the midst of these struggles, I went to a meeting where they read a Step from the *Twelve and Twelve*. This particular evening focused on the Twelfth Step. Though I had more than a decade sober and had read the chapter many times, I heard a couple of things seemingly for the first time. The first was, “When a job still looked like a mere means of getting money rather than an opportunity for service ... we were still the victims of unreasonable fears.”⁹³

It is true I did not consider that job simply as a means of getting money, but neither did I view its purpose as being an opportunity to be of service to others. I had gotten lost along the way. Even if I did not consciously think it, I was acting as though the purpose of my job (in addition to providing money) was also to provide self-aggrandizement and the promotion of my

⁹² This is as I recall it many years later. I doubt that it accurately reflects what was actually told to me.

⁹³ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 121.

ego. This short paragraph in the *Twelve and Twelve* allowed me to finally see my disorientation.

Later in the reading, I was fully convinced: “True ambition is not what we thought it was. True ambition is the deep desire to live usefully and walk humbly under the grace of God.”⁹⁴ What an amazing statement! I would bet that if on the way to work I asked 10 people on the subway what true ambition was, not one of them would have mentioned “living usefully and walking humbly under the grace of God.” And how very different this was from my professional life, which was filled with manipulation and shading the truth in order to look better, and perhaps to get more time on television!

But I was not successful in my manipulations. More important, I was losing my inner peace, the peace that keeps me sober, and it was sorely missed. I resolved at that time to change my attitude completely. No longer was I going to be self-serving. From here on out, I would recognize that the job with which I was blessed would be solely an opportunity to serve others. That was my purpose. That is why I was there.

The effects of this change were dramatic. Internally, the pressure was off. No more did it matter if I appeared on TV, or had a new assistant, or got an office in the corner. It was like removing the cap from a carbonated drink—the pressure was gone. It was not long before this change began to manifest externally as well. People became, well, a lot friendlier. Colleagues would drop by my office just to say hello. Those who came by needing something no longer feared that they would be met by grudging assent or a cold decline. Over time, some of those things I previously thought were so important began to occur without my seeking them out. I was promoted, and my employment status was formalized. I never did get a corner office, but I was pretty content in the old one. I would have to be fairly dense not to see that all this came through the grace of a loving God after I decided to attempt to practice these principles in all my affairs.



Ask anyone who has been going to Step meetings for a while what the theme of the Twelfth Step is, and they will be able to tell you: It is the joy of living. The chapter starts out with “The joy of living is the theme of A.A.’s Twelfth Step”⁹⁵ and (almost) ends with “therefore the joy of good living is the theme of A.A.’s Twelfth Step.”⁹⁶

Few people seem to notice that there is a slight difference between the two, but what really interests me is the part just before that second sentence: “Understanding is the key to right principles and attitudes ... therefore the joy of good living is the theme of A.A.’s Twelfth Step.”

Understanding is the key? If that is true, then the key is a lot different than what you might hear at meetings. Understanding is a mental, intellectual process, but much of what we hear is, kindly, not intellectual. We hear things like “Don’t think, don’t drink, go to meetings.” Or “keep it simple” (or worse, “Keep It Simple, Stupid, KISS”). Nor do we read a lot

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 124.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 106.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 125.

about intellectual processes in A.A. literature. The only one that comes to mind immediately is in the Second Step, when we are told that “humility and intellect could be compatible, provided we place humility first,”⁹⁷ but there may be others.

The simplistic take by some on the nature of A.A. is interesting, because if you read the literature in which Bill Wilson was involved, it is, judging by sentence structure and words used, anything but anti-intellectual. I am fortunate that the men most instrumental in my sobriety understood that the intellect was not to be shunned. The need to understand (as much as possible) was present in me from the very beginning. It is a large part of what allowed me to relate into this program and to commit to it.

Thankfully, this need to analyze and understand was never primary. It was always relegated to a lesser priority than action. If I understood the need for meetings, that was fine; I was to go to meetings. If I did not understand the need for meetings, that was fine, too; I was to go to meetings. If I understood the philosophical underpinnings of the *Big Book*, then that was fine; I was to reach my hand out to the newcomer. If I did not understand the philosophical underpinnings of the *Big Book* ... Eventually, I got the message. I am betting you do, too.

I think that relegating thinking to be subservient to action is the implementation of the concept described previously—that is, placing humility before intellect. And thank God that we need not understand something before making use of it.

Still, what do we make of the sentence “Understanding is the key to right principles and attitudes”? I believe its placement is crucial. This statement does not come in the First Step or the Third or even the Ninth. It is placed in the Twelfth Step, at the end of the discussion, no less. Just as our emotions have experienced “violent emotional twists,” so too has our thinking. And just as the process of working the Steps, over time, slowly untwists the violent emotions (and leads to “a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps”), so too does this work change our thinking. We no longer think like we did when we first walked in the door. And it is this new, revised way of thinking that I believe the book is referring to when it says, “Understanding is the key to right principles and attitudes...” We are different now. We think differently.

This being so, humility must still come before intellect. And it remains dangerous to go it alone in spiritual matters.



When I was newly sober, I was fortunate in that there were no treatment centers in my town. The local A.A. clubhouse had a payphone on the wall, and this became the “A.A. number” for the town. If someone was in the clubhouse, the phone would get answered. If not, well, try again later.

What would usually happen is that someone would call asking for help, and someone would answer the phone and take down information, then ask or call around to find someone to go on the Twelfth Step call with him (or occasionally, her). We were taught from the beginning that we did not, were not, to go on a Twelfth Step call alone. We

⁹⁷ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 30.

just did not do it.

Given this, I started going on Twelfth Step calls early on. I do not have a lot of overwhelming and remarkable stories from those days. But two things I do remember are these: I *never* wanted to go on one of these calls when I was asked, and I was *always* glad that I had gone—when it was over.



In the Twelfth Step, we are told that we try to carry “this message” to the alcoholic. I have heard much discussion (and some contention) over what exactly “this message” is. I am satisfied that the message is simply “If you wish to stop drinking, there is a solution,” but I understand why others would want to define it differently, or perhaps to expand on it. I am pretty sure that I am not the one to provide a definitive answer to what “this message” is, but I feel fairly confident that it is contained within the Traditions. It probably has something to do with the requirement for membership, or the primary purpose, or the spirit of anonymity or unity. To be sure, whenever I am at a meeting, I am carrying a message, but it might not be “this” message; it might be “my” message. It may be the message that I am smarter than all of you or I deserve elder statesman status or I know how to dress sharp. Whatever the other message I carry (and I am always carrying messages, as are you), my message probably is not going to get anybody sober. Worse, it may drive others away from the source of “this message”—and that may kill them.

So I think it is important that I am aware of what message I am carrying at A.A. Is what I say in line with the principles I have learned in this program? Am I leaving out the things that are not relevant to the A.A. experience? This process may seem like it could be overwhelming, but with practice (and sometimes a refusal to go along with how others do it), it is achievable. I tell sponsees that I believe it is important that no one at a meeting knows my religion or my politics as a result of anything I have shared (or done) in a meeting. To do otherwise distracts from the reason we are there and disrupts the unity that is essential for our recovery.

The experience may be mine, but I do try not to carry *my* message. I try to carry *the* message.



The Twelfth Step is worded a bit strangely. It does not so much promise a spiritual awakening as much as state that one has occurred and has done so as a result of working these Steps. But that is not quite it, either. The wording predicates continued action based on the presence of a spiritual awakening. It is almost as though the Step says, “Well, if you haven’t had that spiritual awakening, you need not read any further. Go back and see what you’ve missed; there’s nothing for you here. You cannot give away what you have not gotten.” Quite an important little thing is this “awakening.”

And what is the awakening? Often at meetings when we speak of a spiritual awakening, people will interchangeably use the term *spiritual experience* as though it is the same thing. Perhaps to them it is—certainly Bill W.’s awakening came as part of his spiritual

experience. But to me a spiritual awakening is quite different from a spiritual experience. I have had many spiritual experiences, even when drinking, though without a spiritual awakening. To sit on the summit of a mountain and wordlessly view all is a bit of a spiritual experience for me. So is seeing the miracle of new life. There are others.

But to me a spiritual experience does not generally have a profound *continuing* impact. Though useful for reference during times of lessened faith, no spiritual experience has made a significant change in my attitude or behavior, at least so far. Spiritual experiences have been, for me, like little bandages, or perhaps like streetlights as I travel the road of life.

But a spiritual awakening is different. As a result of a spiritual awakening, I am able to respond at a fundamentally different level, in a fundamentally different way, than before the awakening.

One Sunday afternoon, when I was about 25 years sober, I was at an authentic Italian dinner at a farm in the Italian countryside. There were about 20 of us at a long table outside enjoying course after course of delicious, fresh food.

I noticed that across the table and a few chairs down, a little old man, the proprietor of the farm, was watching me fairly closely. Finally, he could take it no more, leaned toward me, and said in a mix of Italian and broken English,⁹⁸ “You, you are not drinking the wine.”

“No, thank you,” I responded.

A moment’s hesitation occurred before he continued, “You must drink the wine—it is very, very good.”

“Thank you for your offer,” I said, “it is very kind. But I think I will not have any today.”

Undeterred, he said, “You don’t understand. We make the wine here on the farm. It is very good. You must have the wine.” I was not surprised at his generosity, but I was a little surprised at his persistence. Sensing that I might otherwise cause offense, I decided to be more direct with him.

“Thank you very much, but I cannot. I am allergic to the wine.”

You might have thought I had just told him that his dog had died and the tax man was at the door. He looked so disappointed. But it was only for a few seconds. Then his face suddenly brightened as he said, “Oh, I do not think you are allergic to the wine. I think you are allergic to the things they put in *American* wine. We don’t do that here; we don’t add anything to the wine. You must try some.”

Feeling a little awkward, I fumbled a bit, then finally said, “I am sorry, but it is the alcohol. I am allergic to the alcohol in the wine. I cannot drink it.”

His face was downcast as my words registered, but graciously accepting that I would be unable to accept his generosity, he offered, “Oh, that is too bad.” A moment’s silence followed, then: “Would you like a beer?”

It is kind of a cute story that always gets a laugh. But later that night, as I was doing my inventory, I was struck first by how genuinely sad this kind man was that I was unable to enjoy the simple pleasure of the wine. It honestly bothered him that I, a stranger to him, could not drink the wine. Believe me, I understood. There were many times that I considered my

⁹⁸ His broken English was much less broken than my Italian.

inability to drink wine a real negative. It is as though something that had been very important to me had been taken away.

But what really surprised me in my inventory that night was when I realized my own reaction that day had been nothing like his. I was slow to recognize how disappointed he was that I could not drink because I did not feel the same. Not being able to drink wine did not strike me as a negative—even in the Italian countryside on a beautiful spring day. In respect to the alcohol, I had been placed in a position of neutrality. The life that I had been given as a result of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous gave me so much of so many good things that I did not even miss the wine. Or the beer.

That is, because of a fundamental change in my reaction to life—a spiritual awakening—I am able to experience the peace that allows me to avoid medicating my feelings, to stay sober.

And that, I think, is a miracle.

The Traditions

“But A.A. unity cannot automatically preserve itself. Like personal recovery, we shall always have to work to maintain it. Here, too, we surely need honesty, humility, open-mindedness, unselfishness, and, above all—vigilance.”⁹⁹

I do love the Traditions of A.A. I will admit, however, that I have not always felt so positive about them. I recognize that my affection for them is not universally shared. In fact, in one of my earlier home groups, the regularly scheduled Traditions meeting was colloquially known as the “Oh shit!” meeting. People would come in, and not realizing that it was going to be one of “those meetings,” would grab a cup of coffee and a chair and start visiting with their neighbor. As soon as the meeting started and it was announced as a Traditions meeting, there would be a collective muttering of that expletive as half or more of the attendees would attempt to leave inconspicuously, presumably to attend the Newcomers meeting across the hall.

It is kind of hard to blame them. Traditions meetings tend to have bad reputations. I think they have bad reputations because they tend to be bad meetings

To begin with, Traditions meetings tend to become history recitations. People leading these meetings seem to go to the treatment of the particular Tradition in the *Twelve and Twelve* and rehash the story of the cross-dressing alcoholic drug addict who wanted to be a member in New York; or they revisit the time when there were so many requirements for A.A. membership that if they all were applied universally, no one could be a member; or they bemoan the fate of the Washingtonians who sank into oblivion because they did not stick to their primary purpose. The leaders of those meetings who really want to make a good impression might even go to *A.A. Comes of Age* to get more details.

Those little history lessons, which were moderately interesting the first time one heard them, hold a good deal less charm after you hear them at 30 or 40 meetings; they border on being unbearable after you hear them for 30 or 40 years. Unfortunately, the boredom caused by this approach is probably the least of the issues; the bigger issue—and harm—is that this approach obscures the vitality of the Traditions today. Another obvious reason these meetings are not universally embraced is that in a “real” meeting we get to talk about really important things like, well, ourselves. Most of us find that topic universally interesting. But in a Traditions meeting, once the leader has shared the standard “story” of that particular Tradition, there is not usually much more that one can add. (Happy is the day that I happen to have a personal experience with the Tradition and can share it for the edification of the group!)

And finally, somehow, the A.A. Traditions have come to be viewed almost as Graduate School A.A. Though it has not always been so, it is now my experience that in any given meeting I attend, few people have any real knowledge of the Traditions. It is almost as though people think, “Well, let me work on the Steps, and when I’ve finished those somewhere

⁹⁹ “AA Tradition: How It Developed by Bill W.” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1955/1983), p. 4.

down the road, I'll start studying the Traditions." But, of course, we never do finish the Steps, do we?

These are real concerns. I doubt this list is exhaustive, but these are the main obstacles I had to walk through to get to where I am able to not only embrace the Traditions but also respect and appreciate their importance in my daily life. I am grateful today for that understanding, but like most good things that have come to me through A.A., I did not reach that understanding on my own.

The seed from which my current understanding of the Traditions has grown occurred during a discussion with my sponsor after a Traditions meeting. One often hears, "The Traditions are to the group what the Steps are to the individual." My sponsor exclaimed, "Nonsense!"¹⁰⁰ which got my full attention. Then he told me something that turned out to have a profound effect on my program and my sobriety—eventually. He said that groups do not work the Traditions; individuals within the group work the Traditions. It was his opinion that as a member of A.A., it is my responsibility to know, understand, and apply the principles embodied in the Traditions. If he had meant that I should apply these principles in all of my dealings with the A.A. group, that would have been difficult enough. But it was his belief (and later mine) that it was necessary for me to attempt to know, understand, and apply these principles in all of my affairs. I cannot be dull and selfish six days of the week, then suddenly be a spiritual sage at the group conscience meeting.

So, it is just as I expected: It really *is* all about me!

This realization changes everything. To begin with, it forces me to look past the history lessons and at my own behavior. What actions do I take that enhance or hinder unity, anonymity, or service in my meetings and my groups? Am I even aware of what principles are embodied in a given Tradition, which would help me evaluate my own behavior and attitudes? Once I start doing this evaluation of my involvement in A.A., another "secret" truth shared by my sponsor comes to light: The Traditions guide healthy relationships with other people, even those outside the program. The truth is that I (and others like me) never really got adequate information for building and maintaining good relationships. The Steps have been good for my personal recovery, and in working them, I have actually improved some relationships. For example, Ninth Step amends and Tenth Step admissions of error do sometimes tend to smooth rough patches with others.

But for direct, continuing, and powerful guidance for developing and maintaining healthy relationships, the Traditions are exemplary. I did not know the power of seeking unity with people seemingly different from me. I am not on equal footing with another when I am financially dependent on them—I will almost assuredly not be able to maintain equal bearing in our relationship; it will inevitably be colored by that dependence. And I cannot help but wonder how many of my past relationships have been needlessly strained or ended because I did not apply the knowledge that "[t]he spiritual substance of anonymity is sacrifice."

Finally, what are we to make of A.A. Traditions as A.A. Graduate School? Honest reflection on my own experience revealed to me how inaccurate this idea is. I believe that the

¹⁰⁰ Or something similar.

recovery from the disease of alcoholism occurs in me when I work the Steps, but when I came to Alcoholics Anonymous initially, I was not working—and in fact could not work—the Steps. Yet I stayed sober. It was a situation that lasted a number of months before I had the clarity and motivation to begin working them. So why was I staying sober?

My belief today is that during the time when I could not effectively assist in my own recovery, I was kept sober by the grace of a loving God as he was manifest through the Traditions. It was my good fortune join a group early on that had members who were serious about the Traditions—people who knew what the Traditions said and tried to apply them in (and after) the meetings. As a result, I was in a safe place to be sober. I was not a subject of gossip. I was free to contribute financially, or not. I was treated respectfully even if I felt that I was the person least deserving of it.

This atmosphere of acceptance, assistance, and altruism was manifest as a result of people trying to implement the spirit of the Traditions. The Traditions kept me sober before the Steps could begin to work their magic. Far from being A.A. Graduate School, the Traditions functioned as a type of A.A. Kindergarten instead. That is why it is important to study them—not just for the future, but for the present.

Tradition One

“Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.”

The depth of this Tradition amazes me, but it has not always been so. For years, my eyes would breeze past this Tradition and my mind would respond with something like, “Oh, yes, we’re all one” or “We must be nice to each other” or “Yes, we have to listen politely” or some similar superficial thought. But not today. The First Tradition is anything but superficial. It is, in fact, deadly. That understanding came to me one day when I was thinking about the Tradition, trying to reword it so I could get past the rote dullness and understand its true meaning. Here is my wording of Tradition One: It is better for me to die an alcoholic death than to disrupt the unity of A.A.

Having seen alcoholic deaths, I do not say this lightly. But I do believe this statement reflects the imperative for me that is inherent in this Tradition. Unfortunately, my reworking of the Tradition suffers from one of the limitations of the original: What exactly is A.A. unity? Does it mean that we never argue? Does it mean we have to shake hands after we do? I also do not know if my actions can actually affect A.A. unity. Do they mean A.A. as a whole? There is probably little I could do to disrupt the unity of A.A. as a whole. Does it mean that I should just be nice in my little group?

I am not sure what it means, but I do know that if it is better for me to experience an alcoholic death than to disrupt the unity of A.A., I had better come up with some idea of what unity means for me. I believe it hearkens back to what we said about the message I carry in the chapter on the Twelfth Step—that is, if I am not carrying the A.A. message, then I am potentially disrupting A.A. unity.

Because sharing is the essence of what occurs in A.A. meetings, it is not surprising that in my sharing I must be particularly attentive to what I am saying, and why, to ensure it is appropriate. What is appropriate is, to a large extent, determined by how I view the purpose of an A.A. meeting. My understanding of the purpose of an A.A. meeting comes from my interpretation of this gem from the *Twelve and Twelve*: “If our turn comes to speak at a meeting, we again try to carry A.A. message.”¹⁰¹ The A.A. meeting is not where I talk about my problems but where I talk about my experience with the solution.¹⁰² This is an important difference. Instead of saying, “I am so angry because my boss just yelled at me,” a statement more conducive to the spirit of A.A. unity might be “Yes, I am angry because my boss yelled at me, but I have learned through this program that I don’t have to drink because of my emotions. I know my Tenth Step inventory will help me understand my part in this.” The first statement brings no solution to the alcoholic looking to stay sober. It does not promote A.A. unity. The second statement invokes experience with A.A.’s solution, which hopefully will help others faced with similar challenges.

Is it ever appropriate to share my pain when I do not have the solution? On occasion, yes.

¹⁰¹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 110.

¹⁰² I cringe inside when I hear “I haven’t worked this Step, but ...” Perhaps a more skillful share in a case like this might be “I pass.”

Yet the number of occasions where that type of sharing is appropriate is rare and best reserved for cases of severe existential pain.

The quote I referenced from the *Twelve and Twelve* hints at another destroyer of unity at A.A. meetings with “If our turn comes to speak at a meeting ...”¹⁰³ Probably the most disturbing change I have seen in meetings over the course of my sobriety has been the shift toward having people volunteer to speak. This trend tends to thwart A.A. unity because it often leads to the same individuals speaking each week, which is unfortunate in itself. The bigger loss may be that we never hear from some of the other people. Many people with important things to say may not volunteer because they are simply introverted. Others do not volunteer because they were taught (as I was) that you simply do not raise your hand to share.¹⁰⁴ There are better ways to select people in meetings, and all of them have this in common: The person who wants to speak does not get to decide when he or she speaks.¹⁰⁵ My personal favorite method is for the leader to pick the first person to share (hopefully a person whom the leader knows has a solid A.A. message) and then go around the room. This approach has three major advantages from my perspective. First, it gives everybody a (more or less) equal opportunity to talk. Whether one is called upon to talk (or if their “turn comes to speak at a meeting ...”¹⁰⁶) is pretty much left up to Chance.

The second advantage of this method is that you will hear from people you otherwise would never have heard from, because they would never have raised their hand for whatever reason. It does not matter if this is an old-timer or a newcomer—sometimes their sharing is just on the mark. Sometimes this happens quite unexpectedly. It always happens more than I expect it to.

Finally, this method of picking people to share allows me to learn humility. There are times when I am absolutely certain I must share my wisdom. “If only they knew how brilliant my sharing was going to be, I am certain they would have started with me, but they started on the other side of the room and never got to me.” As far as I can tell, no one yet has gotten drunk because I did not get to share a particular tidbit. In fact, what I have to say is probably never as important as I think it is. It is good for me to be reminded of that periodically.

Among challenges to unity emanating from sharing at meetings is the issue of cross talk. One big problem with cross talk is that nobody seems to agree on what it is. If cross talk means interrupting someone’s sharing with a question or a comment, then I agree that it is almost always inappropriate, with one big exception: If a person sharing is disruptive, the unity of A.A. demands that the person be interrupted. This often happens with people who are drunk or mentally unbalanced. But us “normal,” sober people can get disruptive sometimes, too. This kind of thing happens when a person shares way too long, or is way off topic, or is clearly angry and perhaps aggressive. An A.A. meeting is not a place where anyone can say anything with impunity. It is a place where recovering alcoholics come together to share principles of recovery. Sharing anything else is outside the scope of A.A. and clearly violates the Fifth Tradition. But I believe the case could be made that these situations threaten the unity of A.A.—

¹⁰³ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ Or, as my sponsor put it, “How do you raise your hand to talk about ego deflation in depth?” Think about it.

¹⁰⁵ Except that, of course, anybody can pass at any time.

¹⁰⁶ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 110.

the First Tradition.

Of course, we have all been to meetings where the sharing is “off topic” or too long or the like, and nobody stops the sharer.¹⁰⁷ Who should? When should they? How should they? Ideally, the leader of the meeting would take responsibility for guiding the meeting into remaining an A.A. meeting. I have also seen old-timers jump in and make the correction when it was warranted but not done by the leader. I can provide no hard and fast rules as to when such intervention is warranted, but alcoholics working the A.A. program, who are intimately familiar with the principles and actively seeking to live in the presence of a Higher Power, tend to know when the time is right to intervene.¹⁰⁸ To many of us rigid alcoholics who want the rules in black and white, this may seem inadequate, but it is the best I can do when we live in a world punctuated by shades of gray. I do know *how* it should be done, though: It should be done as kindly as possible.

There are other ways my sharing can impact the unity of A.A. Gossip, true or not, in or out of the meetings, can certainly impact A.A. unity. Breaking someone’s anonymity (or breaking my own for selfish or egotistical reasons) can affect A.A. unity. Giving direct advice is another example. I am certain there are others, but I do not need to itemize all possible threats to A.A. unity emanating from my sharing. My point is that if I am serious about the importance of A.A. unity, I must be serious in evaluating *my* sharing in A.A. meetings.

I must also be serious in evaluating my behavior. Many threats to A.A. unity occur not in response to my sharing, but in response to my behavior. One behavioral threat to A.A. unity that I have seen has been the use of mobile phones. The ringing phone and the shuffling of chairs as the recipient leaves to take the call is only one way the phone is a disrupter of A.A. unity. There are others.

Distraction is one. The distraction to the person who possesses the phone is a problem, true.¹⁰⁹ But from a perspective of ensuring A.A. unity, the distraction caused by my use of a mobile phone to those people around me may be the bigger problem. If I am texting or browsing the web or looking at social media, then I am likely distracting the person behind me, and the person beside me, and the person facing me.

It gets worse. Another impact of phones on A.A. unity: Virtually every mobile phone has video and audio recording capabilities. And whatever else has changed, and whatever else is true, Alcoholics Anonymous believes anonymity to be crucial. It is not decorative; it is not a nice thing to have. It is crucial.

When I came into the A.A. program, if anyone had shown up at the door with a camera or a tape recorder, it would have been addressed quickly. You would only find recording equipment at speaker meetings or conventions. You would never find a camera in a meeting. Now they are ubiquitous, and their prevalence does have an impact. I know members with long-term sobriety who have quit going to meetings specifically because of this violation of A.A. tradition. It would be nice to say they are paranoid, but in fact they are not. I know of at

¹⁰⁷ It used to happen more, I think, than it does now. I muse on this a bit later.

¹⁰⁸ Or, conversely, to *not* intervene.

¹⁰⁹ How many times I wished I could tell someone who is staring at their phone that what is going on in the meeting, if they really listen, is so much more important than anything, anything, that could be on their phone.

least one instance where, in a closed A.A. meeting when an old-timer began to speak, another attendee took out their phone and started a video recording of that old-timer talking. The person with the camera was, in this case, immediately prohibited from continuing to record by knowledgeable members at the meeting, but one cannot help but wonder how many times a similar thing has happened and not been corrected. I wonder how often pictures have been taken or talking recorded surreptitiously. I wonder, too, how many A.A. members have been lost to us due to the use of phones in meetings.

But I do not wonder why it is important to consider how my actions affect A.A. unity. Remember? These people are here to save their lives. It is better for me to die an alcoholic death than to disrupt the unity of A.A.

Tradition Two

“For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.”

As I have discovered with most of the Steps and Traditions, I have come to find that Tradition Two means much more to me now than it did after my initial reading. It tells me first of all that a loving God is the experience of A.A. I am free to debate or experience or define *God* or *god* or *Higher Power* or *Spirit of the Universe* as much as I want with whatever energy I can spare. It does not change the fact the experience of A.A. is that of a loving God. I might consider that their experience of loving God is a measure of how far off base my interpretation of God is. I might consider that reaching my own experience of a loving God is a worthy goal, or perhaps a milestone, in my own spiritual journey. Or I may consider that another person’s idea of or experience with God has no relevance to me. Yet I am told by this Tradition that A.A.’s experience is that of a loving God. That information is most valuable to me.

This Tradition declares that A.A. does in fact have an ultimate authority, and that authority is a loving God. This was definitely a bit of wisdom that struck me by surprise when I first came to A.A. I was pretty sure there were few organizations with which I was affiliated, or even knew of, that had God as CEO.¹¹⁰ Such an organizational structure certainly appealed to me because it would mean that the self-righteous meeting chairman or that rigid, opinionated loudmouth (like the kind I was at business meetings) would not have the final word. They may, in fact, be totally irrelevant. They are, at best, trusted servants.

Another significant breakthrough came to me as a result of this strange term, “a loving God.” When I first came to A.A., I could not even conceive of what a loving God would look like. As related in the Second Step, I was reflecting on the term itself when I began to envision what sanity would mean for me. Wherever my feelings, thoughts, and actions reflect the ultimate reality of a loving God, then, to that extent, I remain in sanity—I am sane. This understanding has proven to be a boost to faith when faith has faltered.

I have found over the years that some members of A.A. misread this Tradition. These members consider the group conscience to be the ultimate authority in A.A. It is not. The ultimate authority is God (who, in this case, is loving). This God *may* be manifest in a given decision of the group conscience. Or it *may not*.

I suppose what determines whether a loving God is expressed in the group conscience has everything to do with the degree to which the members who compose the group¹¹¹ conscience seek to manifest the will of a loving God, even at the expense of their own agendas. I believe that as a member of the group conscience, it is worth striving to achieve this motivation, even though I may fail.

But what of those instances that are clearly not a manifestation of a loving God? Anyone who has spent time in A.A. has probably come across these instances. Perhaps a

¹¹⁰ Chief Executive Officer

¹¹¹ Remember that it is not the group that works the Traditions. It is the individuals within that group.

clique within the group meets in the dead of night and passes some resolution to address their fears or egos. Maybe anger at a particular situation or activity has temporarily blinded members to the will of a loving God in their considerations. What then?

In the big picture, I believe I am not bound to abide by such edicts. What that may mean on a practical level will vary from situation to situation, and sometimes, perhaps, it will mean nothing at all. But each member is responsible to evaluate the group conscience, hopefully with the assistance of a (good) sponsor while using the tools of the program that help minimize self-indulgence. Most important, we should evaluate our group conscience in the company of a loving God.

While we are speaking of the group conscience, I believe it is a bit of a shame that “a group conscience” has become synonymous with “a majority vote.” My understanding is that it has not always been this way, but to the extent it is true today, A.A. is poorer for the experience. If 51 people vote for a resolution and 49 vote against it, one side has a majority, but it is far from a consensus; 49 people disagree with the decision. I daresay it is not a “group conscience” if nearly half of the members disagree. On a given day, this vote could have gone another way and could well have a different outcome if the vote is taken the next day.

How much better it would be if the group conscience was defined to be a three-quarters or two-thirds of a quorum? How much more slowly and deliberately would the hand of a loving God move among us? The chance for cheap results due to politics and manipulation would be minimized, and there could be scarce doubt that the result was more likely to reflect a true consensus.¹¹² Of course, this true group conscience might still fall short of the will of a loving God. Even large groups of people can be motivated by fear, prejudice, and greed. It can happen. It is just less likely to.



Trying to understand how the principles of a given Tradition can apply to my life and to my relationships with others is sometimes difficult to figure out. This Tradition is not so hard. In a relationship, if I continuously try to relate to the other person as I believe a loving God would, my relationship will be about the best it can be. It may not be perfect, but I have also had relationships in which I engaged in manipulative behavior and unchecked emotions, and I have observed firsthand that those did not work out so well. The ones where I try to determine the will of a loving God work out much better.



There is a hidden gem in this Tradition: “Our leaders are but trusted servants ...” The key here is *servant*. My sponsor gave me this key when he told me that in his worldview, all true authority derives from service. It took a while for that to sink in. *All true authority derives from service. All true authority derives from service.*

¹¹² It might be noted here that any group can make this their tradition.

This is different from how we as a society view authority. Society believes that authority derives from a position in a hierarchy or is granted by governmental authority. And I suppose someone who does not recognize these types of authority is apt to experience a lot of pain in life (as many an alcoholic can attest!).

But my sponsor's point was that all *true* authority derives from service. So what is true authority? It may be difficult to define, but I daresay we have all seen it. This true authority is in the police officer who comforts the dog who has been hit by a car. It is in the clergyman who does not judge those whose values are different from his. It is in the older person who goes to the nursing home to comfort those less fortunate.

And we see it in the face of the elder statesman in A.A. This person does not showboat. He (or she) engages the newcomer in conversation, though the newcomer tends to ramble. He helps clean up the room after the meeting. He has been known to loan a few bucks or buy a bite of food for someone who needs it. He listens much more than he speaks.

But when he speaks, people listen. He has true authority.

Tradition Three

“The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.”

This is the one Tradition that has probably saved more lives than any other single Tradition. It certainly saved mine.

When I was in the nadir of my drinking and my emotions and beginning to consider how I would kill myself, I had a memory of a visit I had made to an A.A. meeting. More than the meeting, I remembered the people. And even more than the people, I remembered the sense of peace they shared. It was almost palpable, and I wanted it. My problem was that they were alcoholics who had gained that peace by working the

A.A. program. I was not even an alcoholic!¹¹³

As it happens, this was not a problem at all. The Tradition does not state that I must be an alcoholic, only that I have a desire to stop drinking. If I had to be an alcoholic, I could not have qualified, at least to my understanding. But a desire to quit drinking? Yes, I could manage that, and quite easily. I will happily give up my drinking if A.A. will give me some of that palpable peace in return.

As a result of coming into this program, I learned that I was indeed an alcoholic. I learned that alcoholism is a progressive, fatal disease and that it would kill me at some point (and make me pretty miserable in the interim). But I did not have to know any of this to begin the program. And it was this Tradition that allowed me to come and stay long enough to learn these truths.

Tradition Three has got to be the most direct of all the A.A. Traditions, but it is amazing how complicated A.A. members can make it. To this day, I hear people questioning whether this or that type of person can be a member. The most common question I hear concerns whether a person who identifies as a drug addict—and perhaps only as a drug addict— can be an A.A. member. I cannot say I have ever understood the question.

Yes, they can be a member if they have the desire to stop drinking.

Whether a drug addict can be an A.A. member is as irrelevant as asking if someone who is a fireman or a Norwegian or someone who does not believe in the Second Law of Thermodynamics can be a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. The answer is yes, if they have a desire to stop drinking. Period.



By nature, it seems, we tend to exclude others who differ from us in some way. This principle reminds me to look past the superficial differences and relate as best as I can to the essence of each person. An attempt to live this principle has brought a diverse set of people and experiences into my life, almost always to my benefit.

But just as A.A. would tend to exclude those who do not have a desire to stop

¹¹³ Or so I thought. You understand.

drinking, are there times when this principle of inclusion should not be honored? Most decidedly, yes. Such instances occur when the other person is demonstrably destructive, as might occur with someone who is physically or emotionally abusive.¹¹⁴ But absent these extremes in behavioral deficiencies, it seems appropriate to welcome all with the inclusiveness with which A.A. first welcomed me.

¹¹⁴ The need for unity expressed in Tradition One would trump meeting attendance in these cases.

Tradition Four

“Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.”

Once, during a frenzied period in my life about one thing or another, my sponsor asked me what principle would best apply to that situation. I never did guess correctly, but finally he told me the answer: MYOB—Mind Your Own Business. I thought he sometimes came up with “principles” that did not really have anything to do with A.A., and I thought this was one of those times. I was wrong—MYOB is the principle on which this Tradition is based.

I derive a good deal of peace from this principle. A.A. and its meetings have changed, and not always for the better. I see many things in meetings that I consider detrimental to the program: labeling different types of A.A. meetings (men’s, women’s, lawyers, professionals, Catholics, etc.), acceptance of cameras and recording devices in meetings, volunteering to share, and more. But each group can make such decisions since they are autonomous. If I do not like what they do, I can stick around and try to change it or move on to another group, but they are allowed to do it.

Early on, I seized on the exception in this (“except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole”), but I have come to believe this exception probably does not provide a viable path to criticism of a particular group. In a world with around 118,000 meetings,¹¹⁵ it is hard to imagine that the actions of a single group can realistically impact the other 117,999 groups, though perhaps in cases of broken anonymity or cult-like protocols the exception could be invoked.¹¹⁶ In any other situation, I might as well go ahead and accept that which I cannot change and be at peace with it. Those groups have the right to be wrong.

¹¹⁵ 118,305, according to “Estimates of A.A. Groups and Members as of January 1, 2017,” which was shared by A.A.’s General Service Office. It might be a safe assumption that the figure is artificially exact.

¹¹⁶ Though it is difficult to know who would invoke it.

Tradition Five

“Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.”

After a few months in A.A., I had a secret. The secret was too devastating to tell, and I did not want to lose the acceptance I had found in A.A. The secret was this: Tradition Five had to go. These A.A. people do not know what a great thing they have! They just limit their recovery to people with alcoholism.¹¹⁷ Even I, in the brain-addled early days of my recovery, could see that anyone (perhaps *everyone*) could benefit from working the Twelve Steps. I thought A.A. was a bit narrow, perhaps a bit selfish, to limit the program to alcoholics.

I believed this for a while. I would give lip service to the Traditions during Tradition meetings, but although I was a wholehearted believer in Tradition Three, I thought Tradition Five was a bit misdirected. Amazingly to me, I kept this a secret from most people.

It took only one day to change my mind, a special day. An old-timer in my home group, a trusted pillar, a man to whom I listened when he spoke, had hung himself. I was beyond shocked—I could think of no way to process the shock, the emotions, the implications. I went to an A.A. meeting.

The particular A.A. meeting I went to was an open meeting. In this particular group, that meant that not only could anyone attend but anyone could participate. In fact, the meeting that day was not led by an alcoholic at all, but instead by a member of the Al-Anon family groups. Although I have forgotten some of the particulars, I remember that after the leader spoke, none of the next four or five speakers were alcoholics. During the first 45 minutes of this A.A. meeting, we heard from an Al-Anon member, a drug addict, a member of Overeaters Anonymous, and a recovering codependent who was also a member of Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous. So, in a moment when I was experiencing real emotional turmoil, I heard no discussion of how to live without alcohol in an A.A. meeting.

I did stay sober, and I came away with a new understanding of, and profound respect for, the Fifth Tradition. I came to believe something that I had not understood before: Not all addictions are the same. It is true that addictions can be similar and often look the same; the Twelve Steps may be effective treatment for any or all addictions. But not all addictions *are* the same, and people who have not realized as much will experience unnecessary pain. Even more important, we must remember that the “very life of our Fellowship requires the preservation of this principle.”¹¹⁸ I daresay that if alcoholics of the future ever need to figure out why A.A. died, this would be a good place to start looking.



“‘Shoemaker, stick to thy last’ ... better to do one thing supremely well than many badly.”¹¹⁹ I have always considered this particular platitude an unfortunate illustration of the

¹¹⁷ Or, more accurately, to those who have a desire to stop drinking.

¹¹⁸ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 150

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 150.

Fifth Tradition. It does not stand up well under the strain of time. Even when I got sober, shoemakers were few and far between. Today, you would be lucky even to find a shoe repairman. Indeed, during many of my years of sobriety, I did not even know what a *last* was; I had no experience with *last* as a noun, and every reading of the paragraph sounded a bit like a mistake.¹²⁰ Perhaps it would have been better if Bill Wilson had used a lasting profession and said, “Baker, stick to thy dough.” But I suppose we are a bit off-topic here.

What is quite on topic is *why* I, as a shoemaker, ought to stick to my last.¹²¹ Two reasons come to mind. I was told that in A.A. we share our experience; we do not give advice. The reason I was told (and have subsequently experienced) is that if I give advice, it is easy to have a vested interest in having my advice accepted. If the recipient of my advice does not accept it, my temptation to argue is strong, because I will want to illustrate to the poor soul *why* my approach is so much better than their misdirected way. The real problem for me as an advice-giver is that my advice can be deemed wrong and not followed.

I do not have this temptation when I simply share my experience. When I share my experience, there is no right or wrong, as it is simply what I have experienced. A person can evaluate my experience in light of their own and decide whether it applies to their situation. I have no need to convince them to follow my path.

There is, perhaps, an even greater reason for sticking to my own experience, which is that I do not suffer the consequences of someone else’s decision, so I cannot decide what is best for them. I see this more often than I wish. I have seen sponsors tell sponsees that they should leave (or stay in) a marriage or quit a job. Or return to school. Or get a dog (or have a child). The problem with offering this advice is that the sponsor does not suffer the consequences of the decision.

It is better for me, then, to offer my experience with staying sober and my attempts to apply A.A. principles to my own decisions. Others will live with the consequences of their decisions. They should be the ones to make them.

¹²⁰ For those similarly unfamiliar, a last is the metal thing, shaped a bit like the sole of a shoe, that is stuck on a wooden box. It is where one places the shoe to work on it.

¹²¹ Or better, why I as a baker ought to stick to my dough.

Tradition Six

“An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.”

If Tradition Five is what we do, Tradition Six is one of the ways we do it. This Tradition impressed me in my earliest days and impresses me still.¹²² As far as I can tell, this Tradition has been honored meticulously during my sobriety by A.A. World Services and every local group and clubhouse to which I have been exposed.

We do not endorse.

As with all the Traditions, it is important for me to reflect on what this Tradition says to me about my own behavior. I tell sponsees that I believe it is important that no one know my politics or my religion based on what I say at a meeting. When referring to God, it is better to state explicitly that I am referring to the God of my understanding (unless repeating this becomes stupidly redundant). Many potential recovering alcoholics have turned away from meetings discouraged because they think A.A. is a hook back into a Christian God, a Catholic God, a new age God, and so on. But we do not endorse.

What can be easily overlooked but is just as important as what I do not say is my choice of casual apparel in meetings. Why risk losing the opportunity to bring the promise of recovery to a newcomer by wearing a T-shirt showing my endorsement of a candidate, which could be construed as a party affiliation for the group (particularly if I am a trusted servant of the group). To be sure, choosing apparel that does not imply endorsement can be challenging. Should I avoid apparel espousing a particular religious or political perspective? Probably. If I wear a Ford or Chevrolet T-shirt, am I endorsing or advertising the product? What about apparel for sports teams or my bowling league shirt?

It's hard to say. It relies largely on judgment, which varies among members. For me, as an A.A. member at an A.A. gathering, it is probably better remain conservative about actions and clothes that could imply endorsement. A.A. does not endorse.

¹²² This is why there are no A.A. clubhouses. And because of this Tradition, there cannot be an A.A. clubhouse.

Tradition Seven

“Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.”

Once I landed firmly in A.A. and began to experience the relative calm that comes from being (slightly) less of a selfish jerk, the imperative to work the Fourth and Fifth Steps—indeed to work any of the Steps—decreased. Yet this Tradition of self-support was one of the most accessible and powerful for me, even in my early fog.

Back in those days, everyone (it seemed) wanted a part of my money. There were those to whom I owed money who thought I should pay it, of course, but it seems everyone else did too. The church, the government, schools, abused animals, homeless veterans, starving children, people suffering from various ailments, firemen, doctors (with and without borders), and so on. The list seemed endless.

And yet here was an organization that was literally saving thousands of lives on a daily basis, and they wanted none of your money if you were not a member, and only wanted what you chose to give (up to a point) if you were a member. It seemed a bit unbelievable. In fact, I was not sure I did believe it. There were a number of times early on when I would obviously—perhaps too obviously—put no money in the basket. I speculated who around that table would pull me aside and suggest that I should give a little something. This did not happen. I will not say such a suggestion will never happen or has not happened to others. But in my experience, no one has ever made a comment about whether I contributed or how much. It almost makes you want to give more.

The wonders of this Tradition do not stop there. For example, A.A. will not accept donations of any amount from nonmembers, even when left in a will. And the lucky few who are allowed to contribute are limited in how much A.A. allows us to give.¹²³

As with all Traditions, the principles of Tradition Seven require knowledgeable members to adhere to them. I have seen situations where large bequests have been made to local A.A. groups or intergroups, yet the members have struggled, sometimes for years, as to whether it would be okay to accept the donation “just this once” because of “all the good it can do.” Strangely, this occurs in spite of the principle having been firmly established for quite some time. There is nothing like a little money to threaten the unity of A.A.

And why would this be so? There are several reasons,¹²⁴ but the most pressing is, as the *Twelve and Twelve* states, that “[whoever] pays the piper is apt to call the tune.”¹²⁵ This phenomenon underscores one extraordinary benefit to applying this principle to one’s personal life. Surely most, if not all, people who are not fully financially independent have at some point felt their independence nibbled away by the “requests” of the financially dominant partner, if only disguised as “reasonable requests.” This was certainly my experience. It is reason enough to take action to become financially self-supporting.

¹²³ At the time of this writing, A.A. members are limited to a maximum donation of \$3,000 per year and a maximum of \$10,000 if left in a will.

¹²⁴ *Twelve and Twelve*, pp. 164–165.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

But this common experience is not the only reason to become self-supporting. In my sobriety, I have been both financially dependent and financially independent, and I can state unequivocally that financially independent is better and leads to new freedom. True, one has greater freedom to choose how to respond to “reasonable requests” without the emotional encumbrance of guilt, but the freedom comes from more than that. Any alcoholic who is entirely self-supporting experiences a confidence, a peace of mind, that is not often granted to people of our predilection. We are lifted to a mental and emotional state where we may help others in a way that was unavailable to us before. And it is much easier to look the world in the eye.

Tradition Eight

“Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.”

It took me an inordinate amount of time to understand this Tradition, which distills down to this: We do not charge for Twelfth Step work. That is, we do not charge for carrying the message of A.A.—that there is a way to stop drinking and recover from alcoholism if you want it—ever. Period. In any way. (But yes, we do pay the janitor. No one should have to pick up after drunks for free.)

Many recovering alcoholics, after a few years of sobriety, decide they want to be either a clergyman or an alcoholism counselor.¹²⁶ Among those who pursue these ends, I see a number of people—not all, true, but certainly some—who strain the Eighth Tradition to very near its breaking point, or maybe even past the breaking point. I am grateful that I am not among those so tempted. My professional life has always been markedly distinct from carrying the message of A.A., which makes my life simpler.

But as I write that, I hear the cynical (and quite legalistic) second-grade parochial student deep inside saying, “But what of the spiritual awakening? As you work the A.A. program, you become a new person—thinking and reacting in a way you never could have conceived on your own. If coworkers, especially people who drink, are attracted to that aura and solicit your input on how to achieve serenity without drinking, is that not the same as being paid for Twelfth Step work?”

To my young self, I would say this is a wonderful example of just how we can get paid for Twelfth Step work without violating this Tradition; it is practicing these principles in all our affairs. (Then I add the fact that I am no longer a cynical and legalistic parochial school student to my gratitude list.)



I have heard the essence of this Tradition as it applies to my personal behavior expressed in many ways in many writings from many traditions. “Do what you love!” “To yourself be true!” “Do not define who you are by what you do.” “A.A. should remain forever nonprofessional.” All of these statements underscore a basic truth and point us in the direction of personal fulfillment. The problem for me for many years was that I could not do what I loved because I had no idea what that was. It was impossible for me to be true to myself because I had no idea how to do that or what this would even look like.

Luckily for me, I did not have to know. When I stumbled into A.A.,¹²⁷ I was given the ability and opportunity to carry the message of A.A. to others. Little could I have realized before then that to try to be of maximum service to others was, in fact, being true to myself.

¹²⁶ That is, if they recover young enough.

¹²⁷ Almost literally.

It is a simple program for complicated people.

Tradition Nine

“A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.”

I once thought of this as the Pandora’s box of Traditions. Surely this Tradition was added when Bill W. looked around and said, “Uh-oh. I only have eleven Traditions. I have got to come up with another.” After all, can you imagine the number of alcoholics who would struggle with a book titled *Twelve Steps But Only Eleven Traditions?*

A quick look at the wording of the Tradition itself foretells of trouble to come. Is the creation of service boards or committees not an attempt to ... organize? And is organizing not something they already do, if not well, then in detail? Anyone who has a passing familiarity with the A.A. service structure will not find such a thought to be a stretch.

But I think I miss the point if I focus on the organization of A.A.¹²⁸ The beauty of this Tradition is what it does *not* say about organization; the *Twelve and Twelve* explains, “Though Tradition Nine at first sight seems to deal with a purely practical matter, in its actual operation it discloses a society without organization.”¹²⁹ Not surprisingly, this Tradition is about being of service.

When I first got to A.A. and began to learn about it, I was intrigued. This society had only one requirement for membership? And that membership costs only what I choose to pay? What a strange place this is! And perhaps nowhere is A.A. more enigmatic than in this Tradition, where we learn that there is no authority.¹³⁰ Here, we learn that “[n]owhere in A.A. is there to be seen any constituted human authority that can compel an A.A. group to do anything.” This anarchy applies to the individual within A.A. as well, as is made clear in the *Twelve and Twelve*: “Neither the General Service Conference ... nor the humblest group committee can issue a single directive to an A.A. member and make it stick, let alone mete out any punishment.”¹³¹ Though apparently intricately organized, A.A. has no actual authority. (As a friend of mine says, “Create all the service boards you want. It doesn’t matter.”) How, then, does such an unorganized society without authority function? The presence of a higher authority enables it to function: “Unless each A.A. member follows to the best of his ability our suggested Twelve Steps to recovery, he almost certainly signs his own death warrant.”¹³² Anyone who continues to come to A.A. will see people who insist on signing their own death warrants. We always have the option to join them.

How might I apply the principle of this Tradition in my own life? This Tradition reminds me that the most important service I can perform is done directly. I may attend an area assembly. I can be an area delegate or a GSR¹³³ but it seems that reaching out and inviting a shaking newcomer to coffee or listening to a tired old windbag or taking a meeting to a hospital

¹²⁸ And I have, at times, been focused on the organization of A.A.

¹²⁹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 175.

¹³⁰ This is not true, as we shall soon see.

¹³¹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 175.

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 174.

¹³³ General Service Representative

are all more direct, personal, and effective forms of service. It is not always easy to do these things, but when I falter, I take encouragement from some of the most beautiful (and truthful) words in the *Twelve and Twelve*: “Great suffering and great love are A.A.’s disciplinarians; we need no others.”¹³⁴

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 174.

Tradition Ten

“Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.”

It might appear that this Tradition simply serves to underscore that of the Fifth, that our primary purpose is to carry the message of A.A. Tradition Ten really goes beyond that, though, as it is trying to protect the reputation of A.A.¹³⁵ This Tradition says that A.A. is what it is, nothing more (or less), regardless of what type of nonsense you may have heard in discussions about A.A.

Of course, honoring this Tradition does reinforce the primary purpose. If A.A. has no opinion on which political candidate (or system) is most amenable to its goals or whether antidepressants are a violation of sobriety, or about the efficacy of other treatment options, then this illustrates what A.A. is. It is a method of recovery from alcoholism for those who want it. Strangely enough, A.A. does not even have an opinion about things I consider quite important. In the course of my sobriety, I have had opinions on many outside issues, and some have actually changed over the decades.¹³⁶ How grateful I am that A.A. did not embrace some of my earlier opinions as official dogma; doing so would have made A.A. much less useful to me as my sobriety evolved.

If A.A. has no opinion on outside issues, it is probably best that I have no opinion on outside issues when I am attempting to carry the message of A.A. The social programs espoused by Candidate A may well be more conducive to recovery from alcoholism and more in line with the principles of A.A. (as I understand them), but such opinions are better shared in the company of close friends after the meeting. At a meeting or on a Twelve Step call, I am *only* attempting to carry the message of A.A. In those cases, I find it best if I have no opinion on outside issues, either.

¹³⁵ In the commercial world, this might be called something like “protecting the brand.”

¹³⁶ Alcoholics are not generally known for their flexibility.

Tradition Eleven

“Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.”

I use my last name at closed A.A. meetings¹³⁷ and have for decades. Yet this is not the norm where I live, and people sometimes wonder why I do. The answer evolved over the first year or so of my sobriety.

Over the years, I have heard from many people who have not known the last name of someone who is in their own circle of recovery. It can be quite embarrassing to go to the hospital (or the funeral home) and ask to see Bob “G.” “You know, that guy who’s kind of tall and has a *Mother* tattoo on his arm. We’re close friends, you see.”

But it is not just the embarrassment of not knowing your friend’s last name. At about 11 months sober, I was having a rather bad day. I said my prayers but thought I should talk to someone. My sponsor was unavailable, so I thought I would call one of the folks I had gotten close to over the previous year. As I mentally went down the list of people I could call, I realized that I knew virtually none of their last names. And these were the people to whom I was the closest. One could call it bad planning, but even in my small town way back then, it was unlikely that you would get a phone number from the telephone company by asking for a listing for Frank in the brick house by the park.

Another reason I use my last name is that my sponsor did, and he suggested that I do it as well. His reasoning was that I am a specific human being who is admitting I am an alcoholic; I am not a generic Jim (or John or Bob). He said I should use my last name because it reminds me that it is I, specifically, who is an alcoholic. Such reminders, he thought, were important. I agree.

I guess I was ambivalent about using my last name in meetings at first. A change came when I was a little more than a year sober. I was perusing the November 1980 issue of the *AA Grapevine* when I came across a passage where Dr. Bob comments on this Tradition:

Since our Tradition on anonymity designates the exact level where the line should be held, it must be obvious to everyone who can read and understand the English language that to maintain anonymity at any other level is definitely a violation of this Tradition.¹³⁸

Just in case that was not clear enough, he continued:

The A.A. who hides his identity from his fellow A.A. by using only a given name violates this tradition just as much as the A.A. who permits his name to appear in the press in connection with matters pertaining to A.A. The former is maintaining his anonymity above the level of the press, radio and films, and the latter is maintaining his anonymity below the level of press, radio and films—whereas the

¹³⁷ I have also been known to use my last name at open meetings, but this is usually because of ignorance or carelessness. I do think it better if I do not.

Tradition states that we should maintain our anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.¹³⁹

This passage certainly got my attention. I had always considered that it was Bill Wilson who was the showman, the extrovert given to hyperbole. Dr. Bob was the humble co-founder who worked quietly and tirelessly in a hospital in Akron getting people sober. So to hear Dr. Bob use such strong language—“everyone who can read and understand the English language”—means this point must be important!

I am no longer worried whether it was okay to use my last name, and I have since used my full name in meetings, even when it is a little awkward.¹⁴⁰ But that forthrightness extends only to my verbal introduction. When I write my name down (in the context of A.A.), I always write “Jim P.,” whether on a meeting member’s list, on an announcement of an anniversary celebration, or in this book.



This Tradition only mentions three types of media: press, radio, and films. Does that mean all other media are open? I do not think so. In a way, it is unfortunate that Bill actually lists some forms of mass media. They were relevant at the time the Tradition was written, perhaps, but even then they were almost obsolete given the near ubiquity of television within a decade. And today, there are forms of mass media that even the most future-focused science fiction writers of the 1950s could not have imagined. What is the place of these formats in A.A. today?

The principle is the same. If my identity can be associated with my membership in A.A. by people unknown to me, it is probably better to remain anonymous. If I post my anniversary on social media and it can be seen by all, I am better off to respect the spirit of this Tradition and refrain from posting. If the post can be seen only by the people I choose, my friends, then I think I should be grateful for the evolution of communication.



Our public relations policy that emphasizes attraction rather than promotion is precious to me. I came into A.A. after a time of significant evangelical fervor. This fervor lessened over time, as I began to see how ineffective and manipulative my brand of preaching was. “Attraction rather than promotion” was like music to my ears. No longer did I need to count my value by how many came to agree with me. I only needed to be available to those who might want the message of recovery. One can almost feel the pressure escape.

What is good in A.A. has been good in life. Virtually any time that promotion has been at the forefront of my life— whether self-promotion or promotion of my ideas, plans, or beliefs—the

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Like when the chairperson says that newcomers and visitors are welcome to introduce themselves “by their first name only.”

results have been, at best, disappointing. Perhaps others are more skilled at promotion, but not having to promote, convince, or badger others has been a decided boon to the serenity of my life. This Tradition is largely responsible.

Tradition Twelve

“Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.”

One of the greatest gifts of A.A. is that it has given me another set of criteria to use when deciding how to act. Before I was a member of A.A., my feelings were the sole criteria for deciding how to behave. I chose to do whatever would make me feel the most good or the least bad.¹⁴¹ I had other values, of course, such as those thrust upon me by my upbringing, but even then I largely followed “what I ought to do” because it made me feel better, or perhaps less guilty, than if I did not do it. In A.A., I was finally able to make a choice based on something other than my feelings: A.A. principles.

A.A. principles are not delineated anywhere. There is no place that I know of where you can read a definitive list of principles. There are some principles that nearly all members would agree on—honesty comes to mind—but others are less universally endorsed. So how exactly are these principles uncovered? They are uncovered by working the program. They are uncovered in the conversations with my sponsor about my latest inventory or my behavior at work. They are uncovered in the process of making amends and in quiet meditation. They are uncovered in carrying the message to the still-suffering alcoholic.

One of the most interesting things to me is how, in a given situation, principles seem to contradict each other. How do I react unselfishly if I am attempting to be true to myself? How do I carry the message and mind my own business at the same time? This would seem to be a conundrum, but as a practical matter, it is not. It does, however, require a couple of things that were quite foreign to me as a practicing alcoholic. The first is my attention. I must be willing to look at the different aspects of the situation in light of the various principles, often in concert with a sponsor. It is this process that leads to the alcoholic maturing. To make basic choices in a world of gray based on rational examination of principles and consequences is indeed a mark of significant progress for most alcoholics. It is growing up.

At the same time, this apparent conflict of principles underscores the need to be present to the God of my understanding. Being in the presence of my God provides the catalytic intuition necessary to make principled choices in a world that is not black and white.



In the early 1990s, I had the opportunity to visit Bill Wilson’s grave and childhood home in Vermont. The experience was a bit surreal. For a man who espoused anonymity in life, his life seemed to be celebrated in death. Some might say he was exploited. “Bill W.” had almost become “Saint Bill.” He might have enjoyed it, but I am not so sure he would have approved. In just a touch of irony, in the living room of his childhood home was a plaque with Bill’s last

¹⁴¹ At least in the short term. Long-term planning, i.e., “delayed gratification,” seldom entered into my decision making.

message to the fellowship, which reads, “If I were asked which of these blessings I felt was most responsible for our growth as a fellowship and most vital to our continuity, I would say, the ‘Concept of Anonymity.’” The plaque also included this statement: “On the spiritual level, anonymity demands the greatest discipline of which we are capable.”¹⁴²



In the world of mantras, one could do worse than “principles above personalities.” This simple phrase from this Tradition, when repeated to myself in times of turmoil, has brought me untold peace. Even early in my sobriety, I was reminded that my conflict with another person (of which there seemed to be many) was small, relative to the greater principles. I may not have known what the principle was, but I knew the mantra. It was the truth. It was important. And it was bigger than me. One need not be a newcomer to appreciate the peace one can choose by remembering to place principles above personalities.

¹⁴² <https://www.aa.org/bills-last-message>. Accessed July 24, 2022.

Random Musings

When Can I Skip a Meeting?

When I was young in sobriety, I began to have questions about meetings. A particularly pressing one was “When do I know if it is okay to skip a meeting?” Meetings are important, I got that. But if a relative is coming in from far away for the evening, or the once-in-a-lifetime championship game is being played, is it okay to skip a meeting?

My sponsor’s response was, predictably, not what I would have predicted. He told me to take a quiet look inside myself and decide the minimum number of meetings per week I needed to attend to stay sober. “When you have done that,” he said, “always make that minimum number of meetings. On a given day, it just might be okay to skip a meeting, but it is never okay to fall below your minimum. When you do, that is your subconscious mind setting you up to take a drink.”

I followed that advice pretty faithfully for more than 30 years. The beauty of this advice is that it gives me an objective measure of my actions with regard to the number of meetings. It may be some of the best advice I have ever gotten in A.A.

Boards and Ball Bearings

“Feelings are not reality!” is something we hear in A.A.¹⁴³ My sponsor gave me an illustration to help me understand one aspect of the nature of feelings. He said that if you take a board and roll a ball bearing down it, the ball bearing simply travels to the bottom. If you do it again, it happens again. But if you do it again, then again, then 1,000 times, then 100,000 times, something happens: A groove begins to form on the board. When that happens, rolling the ball bearing down the board changes. Now, if that ball bearing goes anywhere near that groove, it will drop into the groove regardless of what its path might otherwise have been.

So it is with feelings. Often when I am faced with a situation similar to one in the past, my feelings will react as though my current situation is the same as the previous one. Those feelings may be totally inappropriate to the current situation, but it does not matter: The ball is in the groove.

The answer is the same as it is in so many areas of my life: Work the Steps. Just as applying the Steps will slowly straighten the “violent emotional twists,” they also will repair the groove with wood filler and sandpaper. Then maybe, one day, we are as good as new.

Defying Physics

My sponsor once said to me that for an alcoholic to be sober is a miracle roughly equivalent to walking on water. We are not as amazed by seeing someone sober as we would be watching them walk across a pool—maybe because we in A.A. see a lot of sober people—but perhaps we ought to be.

I think of this comparison when people insist on differentiating between *dry* and *sober*, as

¹⁴³ Or “Feelings are not facts!”

in “I wasn’t drinking, but I wasn’t working the Steps, so I was staying dry but I wasn’t sober.” To be sure, not having alcohol in an alcoholic’s system does not ensure a life of peaceful grace and deep serenity.¹⁴⁴ But that does not detract from the fact that the dry alcoholic has achieved, or been granted, a reprieve comparable to the suspension of the laws of physics.

The Spiritual Shelf

Some alcoholics, when reviewing a relapse or other difficult times, might say that they “failed to maintain the spiritual part of the program.” To them I might suggest that there is no spiritual *part*. It is *all* spiritual.

I used to look at these things in a compartmentalized fashion, like a row of books on a shelf. On this shelf were the various parts of my life: home, health, career, romance, and, of course, spiritual. I have come to understand that my spiritual condition is not one of the components of my life like one of the books. Rather, it is the bookshelf itself. My spiritual condition is the foundation for all other components of my life. Without my spiritual life, there are no other components to my life, just as there are no books on the shelf if there is no shelf. The books would just be a jumbled mess on the floor. Many sober alcoholics remember a time when their lives were just that—a jumbled mess on the floor.

A corollary to this analogy is that all those components of my life, resting securely on the bookshelf of spirituality, become spiritual themselves. My life is not composed of home, health, career, and romance. It is more accurate to say that my life is composed of spiritual/home, spiritual/health, spiritual/ career, and spiritual/romance. And that is true even when I think or act as though it is not.

The *Big Book* as Scripture

The *Big Book* is not Scripture.

Some people, when trying to convey the righteousness of their opinion, will often point to some passage in the A.A. literature as though it proves or justifies their position. To me, this proves nothing, though I am always a bit tickled when I see someone do this. Here is a person who, if you had spoken to them when they were drinking and pointed out that they needed to stop drinking because the Bible—Scripture!—condemns drunkenness, they would have been (at a minimum) a bit irritated, and certainly not convinced. Yet here they are a few years later doing the same thing, but they have replaced the “Good Book” with the *Big Book*, quoting it as though it had the authority that some attribute to Scripture.

The *Big Book* fails when I try to read it like Scripture. Instead, I try to read it for what it is: the combined experience of 100 or so individuals who have “recovered” from alcoholism. There is another place where I encounter alcoholics who have recovered (or are recovering) from alcoholism: A.A. meetings. I listen intently at meetings. I try to hear what I can relate to and compare it with my own experience. Sometimes I cannot relate and I am tempted to dismiss

¹⁴⁴ In fact, probably, just the opposite.

what I have heard entirely, but when I am responding more reasonably, I simply state (internally) that this is something to which I cannot relate— yet! Then I will put it up on the mental shelf, where it remains available for review as my experience expands and matures.

I can honestly say that I have never accepted what has been said in a meeting as scripture. To do so would likely lead to a lot of problems—I have heard some crazy stuff in meetings. So it is for me when I read the *Big Book*. Here is a group of people who have experienced a higher power that has enabled them to stay sober. I read it for hints and clues for what might work for me, and I read it to relate. If I don't relate, I might try to set it on a (mental) shelf, where it might be useful in the future. But I don't use it to prove to myself that I am right. And it usually does not turn out well if I use it to show others that they are wrong.

Long Form or Short Form?

Some people will use the long form of the Traditions to better illustrate their particular understanding of an issue, sometimes even implying that the long form is somehow more authoritative, or at least more definitive. I rarely mention that it was actually the short form of the Traditions adopted by A.A. at the First International Conference in 1950.

Rich, Pretty, and Smart

I have been told that there are three reasons people do not get sober: They are too rich, too pretty, or too smart. I suppose that means these people are spared many of the consequences of alcoholic living. It is more complicated than that, of course, but I have seen a myriad of drunks unable to stay sober because of their self-reliant reasoning. I have seen deference to rich or attractive people even among A.A. members who you would hope would know better.

Among the many gifts of A.A. that I experience is knowing people whom I trust and respect who will tell me the truth as they understand it. They are willing to hurt my feelings for the sake of my life. I value that quality and fear that many people do not have such honesty in their lives.

So I hope I will not hesitate to share the truth of my experience with you because you are wealthy or pretty. But if you are really smart and try to debate A.A. with me, I will likely simply step away and hope you find the way that works for you.

Old-Timer Ratio

It seems that numerous people with years of sobriety struggle with the content of many meetings today. These meetings often appear to forego the opportunity to share the experience of A.A. principles. As I attempt to explain my struggle to make myself go to these meetings, I am often confronted with something like "Isn't it up to the old-timers to speak up and bring it back to 'real' A.A.?"

Maybe so, but I think I understand why they do not. Back in my early days of A.A., there

were at least 10 old-timers for every newcomer in the room. If a newcomer was drifting from the A.A. message, an old-timer might say something like “Why don’t you take the cotton out of your ears and stick it in your mouth?”¹⁴⁵ The old-timer who says this knew there were nine other old-timers who were silently supportive.

In today’s A.A., the ratio is the opposite, and the consequences are significant. For every old-timer in a meeting, there may be 10 newcomers who do not quite experience the essence of A.A. as the old-timer has. If an old-timer now suggests that maybe the newcomer’s feelings are not quite as important as the discussion of the A.A. principle, he may likely have a newer member reproach him by saying, “He has a right to share whatever he wants.” Unfortunately, there are nine other newcomers who think the same thing. The old-timer, suitably chastened for not being sufficiently compassionate, probably looks for another meeting, or perhaps stops going to meetings at all.

And so A.A. becomes a victim of its own success. But maybe there is something the old-timer can learn from this new reality. And maybe, just maybe, the old-timer might have some wisdom they can offer the newer members, if only encouraged a bit.

The Right Thing to Do

Others often ask me, “What is the *right* thing to do?” The problem is that the question presumes the structure of the answer—that there is a “right” thing to do. It’s not surprising that an alcoholic would ask the question this way; we are known for attempting to live our lives in a world of black and white.

But the real world is filled with many shades of gray. Perhaps a better way to phrase the question might be “What is the better thing to do?” As I look over my own life decisions, I am surprised by how many times a “bad” or “wrong” option was not even under consideration. It is usually more a question of which option will better enable me to become the channel of peace I hope to be. Sometimes I simply need to consider which option is less self-serving.

Mixed Motives

It is not too surprising that an alcoholic, self-centered in the extreme, might have selfish reasons for doing unselfish things. Often when choosing to act, I have mixed motives. The issue is not that the motivation is hypocritical or bad but that it is mixed.

No matter. I am told that in cases where there is reason to act but motives are mixed, I can choose to operate out of the best motives and let the others be. It seems to work pretty well.

Should I Judge?

I came to A.A. seeking peace, not sobriety. Little did I realize at the time that one was

¹⁴⁵ They might even say it more gently than this.

not available to me without the other. Peace began to come to me through working the Steps.

As I became more experienced in working them, I began to see that my mind was in a constant state of judgment— judgments about you, me, society ... pretty much everything. I was surprised to see how hidden my judgment was, and how ubiquitous. As I continued to learn about my incessant judgment, I came to understand that if I am judging you, I *will* judge myself. If I am judging myself, I *will* judge you. It is inherent. It is the nature of the beast. Clearly it was necessary to contain this beast, but how?

The solution for me started coming when I reframed my understanding of right and wrong, or sin and virtue. To me, sin was binary. It was either wrong, or it was not. It was a sin, or it was not. My sponsor, who was better schooled in these things, helped me understand sin a bit differently. He told me that *sin* was originally an archery term. It indicated how far off the bull's-eye the arrow was. If the arrow was two inches from the mark, that was the amount of the "sin." It was not a crime, it was not evil, it was not bad. It was simply a measure of skill.

What then is this "sin," this lack of skill, in my life?

Through the program of A.A., I have come to experience, then believe in, a God who is love.¹⁴⁶ And if God is love, it is my deepest desire to know God—that is, to receive love, then channel that love. This is the ideal. This is the bull's-eye.

There are many ways to fall short of this ideal. Many thoughts, actions, and attitudes can block me from experiencing my existence in the flow of love. But there are many things I can do to bring me back into awareness of this existential love (many of which I have learned in A.A.).¹⁴⁷ These things bring me closer to hitting the mark.

Is this change of understanding about sin important? For me, it is, absolutely! We hear in meetings sometimes that we are not bad people trying to get good, we are sick people trying to get well. I am an unskilled person trying to get more skillful at being a channel of love.

A trick I learned in the Tenth Step to see my judgment is to look for the times I use the word *should* (or its offspring¹⁴⁸). I suggest one try going through the day without using the word *should*. My sponsees do. You "should" see them squirm when they try to tell you what they should do, without using the word.

In the new understanding, it is easy not to think in terms of "should." It's not that I should go to a meeting but that going to a meeting is a more skillful way of giving and receiving love. It's not bad that I skipped exercise this morning; I am just more skillful at giving and receiving love if I do exercise. It's not that I should meditate in the morning ... well, you get the idea.

Some may complain that these are mental gymnastics (and also a bit difficult, don't you think?). I disagree. I live in a society that continually judges ... everything. Unless I take responsibility for my awareness and part in the process, until I address my relentless judgment, I will not have peace. And if I do not have peace, I will not stay sober.

¹⁴⁶ If I read the implications of the Second Tradition correctly, this seems to be essentially consistent with the experience of A.A. as a whole.

¹⁴⁷ Say a prayer, go to meetings, work with another alcoholic, read the literature, clean up ashtrays, reach out to a newcomer, meditate. There are others.

¹⁴⁸ Such as "I ought to ..." or perhaps even "You ought to ..."

Why Continue Going to Meetings?

Over the years, I have had a harder and harder time going to meetings and suggesting that others go. Certainly, the essence of meetings seems to have changed since I began attending them. A 40-year-old memory can reasonably be questioned, but in my memory, meetings were a place that you would discuss, or hear discussion of, the solution. If it was a Step meeting, one discussed their experience with the Step. If it was a topic meeting, one discussed how to apply the principles of the program to that topic. The meeting where an alcoholic would “check in” or go on about something going on in his life or talk because his sponsor told him to share it with the group rarely happened. Today, this type of meeting seems to be the norm.

My criteria for sharing, at least after I got a hint of recovery, is best summed up by the *Twelve and Twelve*: “If our turn comes to speak at a meeting, we again try to carry A.A.’s message.”¹⁴⁹ To actually attend a meeting where this is faithfully done by the attendees is a bit like finding an oasis in the middle of the desert.¹⁵⁰ But like the oasis in the desert, it is rare.

And so it gets harder to go to meetings. I have not yet gotten to the point where I do not go, but I know many who have stopped going and for exactly this reason. For me, abandoning meetings does not seem to be the most skillful way of dealing with the issue for now. But I cannot help but wonder why one would, or should, continue going to meetings that are not focused on the solution and are roughly as pleasant as the sound of fingernails on chalkboard.

But lately I may have had some insight into why I should continue: fellowship. That is, meetings are about the place where we find people like ourselves. With them, we build a relationship—friendship, spouse, romantic, whatever—or we don’t. A meeting is like a petri dish for relationships. I guess it is not time for me to quit going yet.

Sobriety Date Change

As of this writing, the anniversary of my last drink was April 7. My sobriety date is April 13. Why the discrepancy?

After the events of a particular April 7, I decided to stay sober in A.A., at least for a while. The following week a friend came by and asked me if I wanted to go for a beer. When I told him I had quit drinking, he hesitated only briefly before asking if I wanted to smoke a joint. I hesitated about as long before I agreed.

Please understand that I never had a problem with pot. I was never a big fan of smoking pot. For one reason, people I smoked with always eventually came to the point of saying something like “Jim, you really can’t handle this stuff very well. Chill out.” It was embarrassing. And they were right. I preferred alcohol much more because I felt like I controlled it much better than I did smoking pot (which may actually show how skewed an alcoholic’s perception can get).

¹⁴⁹ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 110.

¹⁵⁰ Full disclosure: I have never actually found an oasis in the desert.

But I wasn't thinking of all that when my friend asked if I wanted to share a joint. I was thinking of the fun and conviviality of getting stoned with a friend who would actually come by. I hesitated just a moment until I remembered that the only requirement for membership in A.A. is a desire to stop *drinking*. I was certain it must be okay to smoke.

That certainty lasted until I began to inhale the first toke, at which point another one of those early sobriety miracles occurred. Deep in my being, I knew that regardless of the mental justification, smoking a joint ended my sobriety. I remember clearly the thought, the choice, that if I was to consider myself sober, it meant no pot for me. That was the first miracle. The second was that I made that choice. I handed the joint back and smoked no more. To date, that remains true. Later, after much soul searching and mental gymnastics, I moved my sobriety date to April 13 from April 7. Others may do it differently. I felt I had to do it in order to stay. And to stay real.

My Greatest Responsibility

One of the “promises” of A.A. is that “we will find a new freedom.”¹⁵¹ One of the freedoms I have found is a freedom from rules—or most rules. One rule remains paramount: What is the most loving thing in this moment?

My sponsees are often excited (or doubtful) to hear that there are so few rules we must follow, at least until they hear what that rule is. How exactly are we to know what is the most loving thing at this moment? If someone is cross-talking at a meeting, should I attempt to set it straight? The college championship is tonight—do I have to go to a meeting? Should I agree to sponsor someone who is of the opposite sex or gay? In A.A., it is suggested that we take life “one day at a time.” Similarly, the Sanskrit proverb quoted in the beginning of (non-conference-approved) *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* says that this day “is the very life of life” and within it “lie all the verities and realities of existence.”¹⁵² That is a pretty ringing endorsement of today. And it may be true, but (of course) I want to know *why* it is true.

To my current understanding, it is something like this: My God is love; my purpose is to experience love, to be able to fully give and receive love. But the only time I am able to experience love is in the present. I may have a memory of love in the past, or I may anticipate love in the future, but I can only experience love, experience God, in the present. “[A]ll the verities and realities of existence.” Whoever wrote this proverb was not kidding.

So my greatest responsibility is to stay in the present, where I can experience my God—love. I find that if there is something I should do, God is entirely capable of getting that information to me one way or another. He is, after all, God.

The Most Important Thing to Tell a Newcomer

¹⁵¹ *Big Book*, p. 83.

¹⁵² This book was written by an anonymous member of A.A.; Hazelden Publishing of Center City, Minnesota, holds the copyright and distributes it. The book has no page numbers, but you can find the proverb immediately preceding the entry for January 1.

I am sometimes amazed that anyone ever gets sober. And I wonder, given the nuances and the many questions (or erroneous assumptions) that a newcomer must have, what is the most important thing to tell a newcomer? When someone comes to their very first meeting, what is the one thing I would convey to them?

For me, it is easy: “Keep coming back!” At the first meeting, we can never convey all that is important: that there is a solution, that we stay sober a day at a time, that God is as you understand him, that we have no dues or fees or presidents, how one might get a sponsor, and so on.

But keep coming back. If you just keep coming back, you will find out all those things and an unbelievable amount of good stuff besides.

Steps or Service?

Early in my sobriety, I began to realize that not everyone saw or worked the program as I did. It almost seemed that there were two major factions within A.A.: those whose program focus was on the Steps (of which carrying the message was a part) and those whose program focus was on service work. I still see these different approaches today.

I guess such differences are not really a problem. My sponsor repeatedly emphasized to me that there is no wrong way to stay sober. I always would want to argue the point—it *seems* like that should not be true. I have not yet been able to make that case, so he might be right.

That being said, I wonder if sometimes we are too free with our definition of *service*, as in “to be of maximum service” or “get involved in service.” I really do not personally have much use for the “service structure.” Not that all A.A. service is bad. It is not hard to believe that Alcoholics Anonymous World Services in New York is providing a valuable service by acting as the repository for the A.A. experience. And A.A. World Services is a valuable place for international coordination—they seem to do a fine job of managing translations of the literature and handling other needs.

I have also seen the value of A.A. operations at the local level. A clean, dry meeting room with hot coffee and perhaps a few cookies is a welcoming site to a new alcoholic. Setting up a meeting is an excellent experience for many an alcoholic, old and new. Local intergroups are also very important. I have availed myself to their meeting lists numerous times over the years, and many alcoholics have started their journeys with a phone call to the “A.A. hotline.”

So I do not really have an objection to the local and national or international service focus. What I find superfluous is all those intermediate levels. You hear information about them announced at meetings: “District 37 will host an ‘eating meeting’ at ...” and “The regional and state conventions this year will be ...”

I do not like these intermediate levels for several reasons. First, they take time away from “real” meetings. Second, it seems to me that nobody (except those involved in the “service” structure) really knows what those districts and things are. But the main reason I object to these intermediate levels of “service” is that in my time of sobriety within A.A., I have yet to see a decision come out of these gatherings that has enriched, or even significantly impacted, my sobriety. When I think of the millions of dollars spent over the years to rent

space and for travel and lodging, and relate that to the benefit actually coming back to members of A.A. (who did not attend the event), I am discouraged. The return, it seems, is near zero.

It would be better, I think, to simply stick out your hand to people you do not know at a meeting. And to listen to them, even the boring ones. That is service.

Sharing Hiatus

During my anniversary month, I do not share at meetings. It's not that I do not have great things to say—I always do, or so I think. And therein lies the problem. I cannot think of a meeting I have attended when I have not had something I could say, and I have never had something to say that I did not think was great. Or at least really, really important.

Of course, if I could live in “objective reality,” I would see that I seldom, if ever, actually have something uniquely great to say. Taking a month off from sharing reminds me that none of this swirling in my head is going to make anybody drink or keep anybody sober. I am not really that important. I am just another alcoholic trying to find my way, as are most of us. It serves me well to be reminded of that regularly, year after year.

Advice, Strength, and Hope?

In Alcoholics Anonymous, we are encouraged to share our “experience, strength, and hope.” Why *experience*? Why not *advice* or *counsel*?

Sharing experience eliminates the possibility of argument which is a distraction from getting sober. If I tell you that you ought to go to three meetings a week, you (if you are inclined) can argue with me. You might tell me that you do not need that many, or you cannot make that many, or you know someone who stayed sober on fewer meetings. But if I tell you that I go to three meetings a week, and I am sober, there is no argument. It is just true. You can take it and apply the experience to your own situation. You can ignore it. You can decide that it does not apply to your circumstances. But the possibility of argument is removed.

“Back” to Basics

There seems to be a type of movement within A.A. encouraging a shift back to basics. These groups seem to have a lot of rules. Maybe a person is not allowed to share until they have a certain amount of sobriety or have jumped through certain hoops, like working the Steps with a member of the group. Maybe the group insists (or at least implies) that the *Big Book* way is the only real way to work the Steps.

Such back-to-basics groups are mistaken, I think. They are well-intentioned mistakes, to be sure, but mistaken all the same.

I am not oblivious to the need. When you go to enough meetings where people think that anyone can say pretty much anything for as long as they want and it is still A.A., one quickly recognizes the need for some structure.

If the “anything goes” meetings are an extreme swing of the pendulum, then back-to-basics meetings seem to be a swing in the other direction. In my limited experience, a major problem with back-to-basics meetings is that it is not a return to anything. A.A. does not really seem to have ever been as structured as what back-to-basics meetings tend to make it. The real problem is that these highly structured rules preclude what was, for me, one of the most important draws of A.A.: the value of the freedom of the individual. No organization in the world “more jealously guards the individual’s right to think, talk, and act as he wishes. No A.A. can compel another to do anything.”¹⁵³ This is evident throughout the Traditions and literature, from the only requirement for membership (a desire to stop drinking) to our primary purpose (carry the message to the alcoholic), from the many ways of working a Fourth Step to the fact that only an individual can identify as an alcoholic. Compulsory activity or requirements seem to go against the spirit of A.A. as much as discussing in a meeting what your therapist says about your overeating.

I wish we could hold the pendulum steady in the middle— recognizing that A.A. is not just anything you would like it to be, but we also cannot really tell you what is your A.A. But, it seems, we are a people of the extremes.

Sponsorship

When someone asks me to be their sponsor, I never say yes. Almost invariably, I will say something like, “Why don’t we meet for coffee and discuss it?” Sponsorship, despite being addressed in official A.A. literature, remains a nebulous thing: Everyone has their idea of what sponsorship is. It is probably best to have an understanding of what my potential sponsee is expecting when they ask (and for them to have an understanding of what I think sponsorship is) before I agree. This preliminary discussion saves a bit of confusion (and maybe a few hard feelings).

Some people who ask for sponsorship are really seeking friendship or companionship. Sponsorship, to me, is not that, or at least not initially. I have over time (sometimes over a long time) developed deep and abiding friendships with people I have sponsored, but it is not the primary purpose (or expected result) of sponsorship.

Others look to sponsorship to have the authority figure they are looking for in their life. In my experience, that is not a good role for me.

I ask the potential sponsee two questions: “Are you willing to go to any length to stay sober?” and “Are you willing to take direction?” It may not be purist A.A., but it does winnow down many less-than-serious candidates. I want to be available for the serious ones.

The primary purpose of a sponsor, in my view, is to share one’s experience, strength, and hope with another, particularly in working the Steps of A.A. Two pieces of advice given to me by my sponsors have helped me understand and stay in my role. First, I was told (by my sponsor’s sponsor) that as a sponsor, I owe you nothing but the truth as I understand it.

¹⁵³ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 129.

That almost covers the role as a sponsor, but not completely. The other piece of advice came after a long discussion with my sponsor about the difficulties I was having in sponsoring one particular person. After listening for a while, he looked me in the eye and said, “Sometimes we’re just called upon to love them.”

That covers it.

Why Honesty?

Why is honesty so important in A.A.? We are told three times in the first paragraph of “How It Works”¹⁵⁴ that without honesty, it is unlikely that I will stay sober. But why is honesty important?

God as I understand him is love. If one looks carefully at the nature of love, it is clear that without honesty, there cannot be love. If I tell you that I am a successful real-estate tycoon (when in fact I am a short-order cook) and you fall in love with me, you have not fallen in love with me at all. You have fallen in love with an image of me that is real only in your head (and perhaps mine).

For you to love me, it is essential that you know me, and you can only know me if I am honest, and you are too. One begins to see why “Step Four is but the beginning of a lifetime practice.”¹⁵⁵

Gift of Death

One blessing of the A.A. program for me has been (what I call) the “Gift of Death.” It does not necessarily feel like a gift at the time of its occurrence, but what a blessing it is!

I first began to understand this, slowly, when my brother died. I understood that this man in his mid-twenties had succumbed to alcoholism and that it really could be me. That is when I began the practice of the Steps in earnest (and is what inspires me to continue with them to this day). Unfortunately, he was not the last one. Over the years, I have seen many people die from alcoholism.

Somewhere in my first year, I went to a meeting where I spied a man I’ll call Bob. Bob was one of those guys who was successful in business but just could not string together more than a few weeks of sobriety. As I saw him, it looked as though Bob was coming back from another bender. I sat next to him and asked him how he was doing. He told me he was doing “pretty good.” He had a couple days sober and he was “really going to make it this time.”

The next evening, Friday, Bob began to drink again. After a few, he began to get abusive toward his wife, but she decided she was not going to take it this time and called the police. This apparently enraged him even more, and he met the police at the door holding a shotgun. He was dead within seconds, another example of the fatal nature of this disease.

I have known others. There was the drunk who came to the clubhouse during the middle

¹⁵⁴ That is, Chapter Five of the *Big Book*.

¹⁵⁵ *Twelve and Twelve*, p. 50.

of a meeting and promptly fell asleep on the couch. By the end of the meeting, he had died. During one bleak winter, three members of my home group killed themselves. And it was such a surprise when a man who was a pillar of our group, more than 17 years sober, was found hanging from a tree in his backyard. There have been many more.

A.A. is not a self-help group. It is a program of recovery from alcoholism that has the potential to save our lives, to save *my* life. Each death from alcoholism is a reminder of the grace that manifests itself in my being alive today. And each death from alcoholism is a reminder of what can—what likely will—happen to me if I slip away from the program.

“Specialty” Meetings

I tend not to support “specialty” meetings. Men’s meetings are specialty meetings, but it does not stop there. I have seen men’s meetings and women’s meetings and lawyer meetings and celebrity meetings and gay meetings and doctor meetings and more.

The basic problem with specialty meetings is that they violate the spirit of the Traditions, if not the letter. The Third Tradition states that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. The discussion of the Third Tradition in the *Twelve and Twelve* talks of the evolution of this Tradition, stating that, in the early years of A.A., if all requirements for all groups had been applied everywhere, no one could have been a member of A.A. The “only requirement” is a good idea, I think. It is important that male alcoholics and female alcoholics and celebrity alcoholics and gay alcoholics and alcoholics who are attorneys are simply alcoholics. Like me, they are nothing special.

I have heard some adherents try to finesse their way around the exclusivity of specialty meetings by stating something like “If a man came to a women’s meeting and needed a meeting, we would hold an impromptu group conscience to open it to him.”¹⁵⁶ I wonder if a gay meeting would need to have a group conscience if a straight person showed up. (And would the straight person be obliged to state that he is not gay so they would know to have the group conscience?) What would happen if someone who thought they were a celebrity (but maybe weren’t really) showed up at a celebrity meeting? Do you send them to the B-list celebrity meeting?

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. It’s a good requirement for attendance at closed meetings too.

Of course, we live in a world of grays, and as soon as I find myself painting a black line on this, I am forced to reconsider. I know of a situation where the program of recovery was seldom practiced within the rooms of A.A. People, usually women, would come to these meetings and immediately be Thirteenth Stepped¹⁵⁷ by several, if not many, of the other attendees. There seemed little chance for the women to get sober.

Finally, several sober women with strong programs started a Women-only Step meeting. Gradually, women started coming, staying sober, working the Steps, and carrying the message

¹⁵⁶ Worse, sometimes they add, “If there are no other meetings he could go to.”

¹⁵⁷ “Thirteenth Step” is a rather unskillful A.A. slang term that refers to when one more experienced member of A.A. attempts to develop a romantic liaison with a newcomer.

to other women. Was this not the better way?

It would be hard for me to say it was not the better way. If ever the situation called for a specialty meeting, this was probably it. I am glad the women are staying sober. I hope that if I come across a similar situation in the future, I will be willing to withhold my judgment and support carrying the message.

Groups, Individuals, and Traditions

I have found slogans and other little things we say in A.A. to be of immeasurable help to me in staying sober and sane. Many times I have been calmed by repeating a phrase we hear in the program.¹⁵⁸ Some things are repeated to the point where they become axiomatic. Unfortunately, some of them are just not true.

“A group that doesn’t work the Traditions will die.” How I wish this was true! But it is not. In my time of sobriety, many groups have been founded. I remember there was a time when we would wait for the next meeting list to come out and we could brag that there were more than 700 A.A. meetings in this metropolitan area. The next year there were 1,000 A.A. meetings, and the next year it was more than 1,500 A.A. meetings! You might think this would be a good thing, and it probably would be, if they were actually A.A. meetings. But sometimes they were centered completely around a personality, had other membership requirements, were associated with outside enterprises, or embraced a particular religion or philosophy. They retained the A.A. name, but these meetings were unlike anything I would call A.A.

For a time, I took comfort in the fact that these groups would fold, since “a group that does not work the Traditions will die.” After a long time, I realized they did not die, and it did not look like they would. It’s quite a dilemma: Almost anyone can say they are A.A., whether they have a passing notion of the A.A. program or not.

This truth offers another reason that it is important for me to know, and to attempt to apply, the principles of the Traditions of A.A. in my life. It is reminiscent of my sponsor reminding me that A.A. groups do not work Traditions; individuals within the group work the Traditions.

Or perhaps they do not.

Taking Another’s Inventory

I have been reminded more than once that I am to take *my* inventory, not other people’s inventories. That is fine until they turn around and tell me, “Stick with the winners.” How would I know who the winners are if I am not taking their inventory? The truth is I do take others’ inventories, and on a regular basis; I want to stick with the winners. I want to see who stays sober, who is at peace, and I want to do what they do. There are also those who just cannot stay sober or are on a dry drunk. I want to know what they are doing, or not doing, too.

I think Bill Wilson would agree with me. In *As Bill Sees It*, he writes, “[W]e should assess

¹⁵⁸ “Live and let live” comes to mind.

the capacity for harm as well as the capability for good in every person that we would trust. Such a private inventory can reveal the degree of confidence we should extend in any situation.”¹⁵⁹

Bill has imposed an important limitation on this inventory-taking: It should be *private*. Taking inventory is not an invitation to become a gossip, even if one would be an insightful gossip. Nor is it an invitation to shed the care we have come to develop for our fellows, for his comments are immediately followed by “however, this inventory needs to be taken in a spirit of understanding and love.”¹⁶⁰

So yes, it is okay that I take another’s inventory, and perhaps critical that I do. But if I cannot do it in a spirit of understanding and love, it is better that I just stick to my own inventory.

Purpose of Meetings

At one point, I began to wonder about the purpose of meetings. I had spent a couple years doing serious Step work and considered that to be the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. I believed the program kept me sober, but I could not help but notice that there were a fair number of people who did not really work the Steps, and they were staying sober (whatever the quality of their sobriety). Could it be that we stay sober by simply going to meetings?

For some, it seems so and may actually be so. Yet I have come to understand that I go to meetings because if I do not, I will not work the Steps. I do not know why that is true, but it is. So, for me, the Steps keep me sober. But if I do not go to meetings, I do not work the Steps. So yes, meetings keep me sober. (Still, meetings are not the program.)

Cowboy Boots

For years, when my father would come to town, we would go out for a nice dinner. Almost invariably, sometime after dessert, he would look wistful and say, “I remember when you were a little boy, not more than two or three ...” And he would proceed to tell this story.

Apparently, my older brother had gotten a nice pair of cowboy boots, and I wanted them. Unfortunately, my brother was two years older and two years stronger and had already shown a willingness to physically restrain me. So I turned to subterfuge.

Each night, I would wait until my brother fell asleep, when I would climb out of bed, put on his cowboy boots, and climb back into bed. I could then drift off to sleep. My father would finish the story with, “And that is how we found you each morning: in bed with your orange pajamas and your brother’s cowboy boots.”

It is kind of a cute story, but it also told me something important about myself. From an early age, even before I had formed a memory that would endure and long before I would ever take a drink, I was looking for something outside myself to make myself feel “happily and usefully

¹⁵⁹ *As Bill Sees It*, p. 144.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.144.

whole.” At first, it was my brother’s cowboy boots. It was only a matter of time before I found that alcohol was a much better plug to the “God-sized hole.” Even then, it was only for a while.

The spiritual awakening that comes as a result of these Steps truly plugs that hole. When I remember this story, I understand just a little better how significant a miracle that awakening is.

What Is Your Concern?

One Day,¹⁶¹ a famous celebrity revealed his membership in A.A. I was so incensed that someone would blatantly violate A.A.’s tradition of anonymity that I actually went to my sponsor. The conversation went something like this:

“I am so upset! So-and-so broke his anonymity at the level of press, radio, and film!”

“What is your concern?”

“I’m concerned that he may get drunk and that would reflect poorly on A.A.!”

“Well, what is your concern?”

“I’m concerned that it will encourage others in A.A. to break their anonymity!”

“Jim, I don’t think you are hearing me. What is *your* concern?”

[Jim sits in confused silence.]

“Jim, your concern is to stay sober, and help another alcoholic. That’s it.”

[Jim’s palm slaps his forehead.]

¹⁶¹ This actually happens on many days, but this was one particular day.