

The Missing Piece: The Spiritual Malady

From “The Doctor’s Opinion” to the end of “More About Alcoholism” the Big Book discusses the first part of Step 1, which states, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol”. We’ve discussed, studied, and internalize material from the “Doctor’s Opinion” to page 23 to see how we’re powerless over alcohol bodily. We’ve used pages 23 – 43 to help us experience how we’ve been powerless mentally. Now I’d like to talk about a part of our “disease” which is seldom discussed in meetings nowadays: the **"spiritual malady"**.

We often hear people say something like, “I have a three-fold disease: body, mind, and spirit.” When you ask them to describe what they mean by that statement, they seem to have a firm grasp on the fact that we alcoholics suffer from “an allergy of the body and an obsession of the mind” – that once I put any alcohol in my system whatsoever it sets off a craving for more alcohol. And when I’m stone-cold sober, at my very best, the thought will occur to me to take a drink – or sometimes I think very little about it or not at all and I come-to out of a blackout after having experienced what page 42 refers to as a “strange mental blank spot”. And of course this vicious cycle of my mind continuously taking me back to a drink and my body dooming me to not drink like “normal” people puts me in a senseless series of sprees and it makes it virtually impossible to stop. It is agreed that the “mental obsession” is the part of our “disease” which leads to the first drink; and it’s the first drink that triggers the “phenomenon of craving”. But, what about the part of my “disease” that triggers the mental obsession in the first place? Why is it that people who have remained abstinent from drinking in Alcoholics Anonymous for 1 year... 2 years... 5 years... 10 years... and in some cases even 20 years or more, go back to drinking? We know the physical craving does not cause these people to drink because it’s been medically proven that after a few days of not drinking alcohol is processed out of the body. And, if you’ve been in the AA Fellowship for a while, for most people, the mental obsession dissipates. So why is it that after a long period of sobriety many people in our fellowship return to drinking – EVEN WHEN THEY DON’T WANT TO? What is the third fold of our illness that triggers the mental obsession – WHEN NOT DRINKING – HAVING BEEN SEPARATED FROM ALCOHOL FOR A LONG PERIOD OF TIME? Through closely examining our Big Book, along with much experience and practice with our Twelve Steps, as well as vigorous work with other alcoholics, the “missing piece” of Step 1 appears to be what is referred to on page 64 as the “spiritual malady”.

Now, let me attempt to discuss the second half of Step 1: “– **that our lives had become unmanageable.**” For a long time I thought my life was unmanageable because of all the crazy insane things I did while drinking – like the car accidents, hurting people when I didn’t mean to, failed relationships, loss of jobs, family dysfunction, jails, asylums, etc. Finally, someone explained to me that those things are not *the insanity* that the Big Book talks about; nor are those things why the alcoholic’s life becomes unmanageable. Of course those things can be classified as “unmanageability” – but they are external unmanageability. The unmanageability that the 1st Step is pointing to is the INWARD unmanageability of our lives – the restlessness, irritability, and discontentment that most alcoholics have even BEFORE they ever picked up their first drink. There are many names for this “inward unmanageability”. Some refer to it as “untreated alcoholism”. Others use the term “bedevilments”, which comes from page 52 of the Big Book (which I’ll be discussing in a moment). Page 64 simply refers to this “inward unmanageability” as “**the spiritual malady**”. Our book promises us that “**When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.**” The mental and physical factors of alcoholism are put into remission AFTER the “spiritual malady” is overcome – which means I’m still in danger of drinking until I have a spiritual awakening – whether I think so or not.

Two key points I’d like to focus on from this point forward:

1. What really is this “spiritual malady” and how, if left untreated, can it drive an alcoholic back to drinking?
2. What is the remedy for it?

(By the way, our Big Book answers both of those questions in masterly detail in Chapters 4 – 11.)

What is this “spiritual malady” we alcoholics suffer from and how can “untreated alcoholism” cause an alcoholic to return to drinking – EVEN WHEN HE/SHE DOESN’T WANT TO? Imagine three layers. The first layer is our bodily reaction to alcohol when we ingest it - the physical craving. Under that is the second layer: the insanity of the mind just before the first drink - the mental obsession. Under that is the third layer: the inward condition that triggers the second layer, which in turn triggers the first - the “**spiritual malady**”. Symptoms of this “third layer” as described in the Big Book include:

1. being restless, irritable, and discontented (page xxvi), 2. having trouble with personal relationships, 3. not being able to control our emotional natures, 4. being a prey to (or suffering from) misery and depression, 5. not being able to make a living (or a happy and successful life), 6. having feelings of uselessness, 7. being full of fear, 8. unhappiness, 9. inability to be of real help to other people (page 52), 10. being like “the actor who wants to run the whole show” (pages 60-61), 11. being “driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity” (page 62), 12. self-will run riot (page 62), 13. leading a double life (page 73), 14. living like a tornado running through the lives of others (page 82), and 15. exhibiting selfish and inconsiderate habits. These name just a few of the symptoms of the “spiritual malady” that’s described throughout our text. But still in all, these are just *symptoms* of the “spiritual malady”. What is it really? What is the driving force of the symptoms described above?

On page 62 the text explains that “**Selfishness—self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles.**” This “**SELFISHNESS—self-centeredness**” (or the “**ego**”, as some people refer to it as) drives us to respond to life situations with the above “symptoms” as well as disorders and addictions other than alcoholism.

If this selfishness—self-centeredness continues to manifest in an alcoholic's life - EVEN IN SOMEONE WHO IS NOT DRINKING AND CONTINUES TO ATTEND MEETINGS - and the ego is not smashed and re-smashed by continuous application of all twelve steps, the sober (or "just not drinking") alcoholic is sure to drink again eventually... or even worse, continue to live miserably being "undrunk" (better known as a "dry drunk"). This is why we see people with 10 years in AA wind up in mental institutions - AND THEY HAVEN'T HAD A DROP TO DRINK!

You see, if I continue to act out with selfish – self-centered – ego-driven behaviors I will continue to experience the symptoms of the "spiritual malady". If I continue to experience this inward unmanageability, eventually my mind will seek out the "sense of ease and comfort" it *thinks* it can receive from taking a drink. Or, my ego can deceive me into thinking I'm doing perfectly fine. (i.e.: Fred's story in Chapter 3... Fred drank when there wasn't "a cloud on the horizon".) Typically, we'll tell ourselves and others, "*Well, at least I'm not drinking.*" All of a sudden, I can experience a "strange mental blank-spot" – otherwise known as a "sober blackout" - and before it even hits me I'm pounding on the bar asking myself "*How'd this happened?*"

So, ask yourself if you're suffering from the "spiritual malady" - particularly if you haven't had a drink for a while. What condition is your "inner life" in, currently? Are you experiencing any of the symptoms listed previously? (Also refer to the "**Step One Unmanageability Exercise**" also included in this issue of "*This Day*".) Has it been a while since you've taken another alcoholic through the Steps? Has it been a while since *you* have gone through the steps? Have you ever taken all of AA's Twelve Steps? Have you done more than one 4th Step inventory? Have you completed all your 9th Step amends wherever possible? Are you working with the disciplines and practices of steps Ten and Eleven (self-examination, meditation and prayer)... consistently... EVERY DAY?

Page 62 says, "Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness ('the ego'). We must, or it kills us! God makes that possible. And there often seems no way of entirely getting rid of self (ego) without [God's] aid." Page 25 tells us, "There is a solution. Almost none of us liked the **self-searching**, the **leveling of our pride**, the **confession of shortcomings**, which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it. When, therefore, we were approached by those in whom the problem had been solved, there was nothing left for us but to pick up the simple kit of spiritual tools laid at our feet. We have found much of heaven and we have been rocketed into a fourth dimension of existence of which we had not even dreamed." This "fourth dimension", which we find out in the 10th Step is the "world of the Spirit", takes us beyond the physically, mental, and emotional dimensions of life - and eliminates the selfishness (ego) of the "spiritual malady". The term "spiritual malady" does not mean that our "spirit" is sick. It simply means we are *spiritually blocked off* from the Power of God, which enables us to remain sober, happy, joyous, and free.

To conclude, it's not my body - my allergic reaction to alcohol - that's going to take me back to drinking. It's really not my mind - the mental obsession – that is the underlying root of what will take me back to drinking. It's the "spiritual malady", as manifested by my **EGO** (selfishness—self-centeredness), that can eventually lead me back to drinking or sometimes even suicide. On pages 14 and 15 Bill W. writes, "For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work, he would surely drink again, and if he drank, he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us it is just like that."

Thankfully, the "spiritual malady" is no longer a "missing piece" of Step One for me. It is a reality of my powerlessness and unmanageability and enables me to see why I so desperately need to seek a Power Greater than myself. And unless this malady is recognized, and a course of action (the Twelve Steps) is taken to enable God to remove it, the *root* of our alcoholic illness can lie dormant and burn us when we least expect it.

Mike L.
The Carry THIS Message Group
West Orange, NJ