

Working Together Through the Twelve Steps

WHEN BOB joined our Tuesday night Step group, he was sober nine years. He had gone to meetings regularly, but when he came to our group he was consumed by anger, depression, and fear. He had never worked the Twelve Steps, and so he'd never found the freedom the program promises.

Within just one month of his first meeting with us, Bob had done a good job of working the first eight Steps and was making progress on his amends. In the next several years, he swapped a number of Fifth Steps with the other members of the group. He cleaned up his amends by making them *directly* to those he had harmed. He learned about taking Step Three aloud with another AA member and did that numerous times. He did the same with Step Seven. He continued to write thorough Fourth Steps and follow them with the cleansing of Step Five.

Bob explained, "By example and encouragement, members of the group helped me find the benefits of the program that had eluded me. The promises began to come true. Anger, depression, and fear gradually dissolved and disappeared. Freed from the past, I began to live easily in the present."

In our view, a group is strong to the degree that its members are working the Steps. This releases the vitality needed for change, and all the members share in its power. A member joining the group is picked up and carried by this vitality. It starts him doing the things that make him well.

Martha came into our group two years ago, sober just a few weeks. Soon after that, several of the women helped her with her Fourth Step. When she was ready for her Fifth Step, Martha took it with a woman in the group, who took hers at the same time. They took Step Three and Step Seven aloud. Then this older member helped Martha write out her list of persons she had harmed, Martha began to make amends. She has continued to work all the Steps.

She has stayed sober in the past two years despite difficult personal problems. The example of the group encouraged her to keep following the program's directions. This, in turn, enabled her to handle each day's trials. "As I worked the Steps, I found my own answers and gained the strength to put them to work in my life," Martha said.

We meet in members' homes and each Tuesday night take one of the Twelve Steps. When we get up to Twelve, we start over again. The comments are alive because each person is working every one of the Steps and is speaking from fresh experience. It's a working group, not a discussion group.

The spiritual life demands honesty responsibility. It recalls the pungent observation of St. Theresa: "God is among the pots and pans." Speaking from where we are generates an honesty that helps each of us become a bit more sane. Persuasive in its power, the strength of the group helps us move along in the program. It carries a transforming message for all, whether new or old in the Fellowship.

Working the Steps slashes through the empty rhetoric of conversation *about* God and provides an experience *of* God. The gap between the two is measured in light years. To go from knowledge to experience is to move from one side of the earth to the other.

Each Tuesday night, the meeting begins with a quiet time. Someone reads "How It Works." The host or hostess speaks on the Step for that evening, each member comments, and the meeting

closes with the Lord's Prayer. There's an unofficial collection, and occasionally we have a *brief* discussion of what to do with the money.

Our members live in about eight different suburbs west of Chicago. Recently, we donated Big Books to the libraries in each of these suburbs. Later, we may give them copies of the "Twelve and Twelve," too. We support local and world AA services, but we take care of these obligations with a minimum of time and no confusion.

I've spent a good bit of time in AA activities, committees, and so on, and some of those meetings should have been held in the violent ward of the local state hospital. Members of our Step group are concerned with the message--experiencing the carrying it. We spend no time in business-bickering.

Our Fellowship has Three Legacies: Recovery, Unity, and Service. Recovery starts with working the Steps. As long as I'm a member of AA, my recovery will continue through the Steps. That's where the message comes from. Without a solid base of experience in working the Steps, we'll ultimately have no need for either Unity or Service. There'll be nothing to unify and no understanding of how to serve.

We could find ourselves in the same predicament as a town with an elaborate water system--gleaming pipes, tanks, pumping stations, filtration plants--but no source of water. Many other spiritual movements have drifted down that dismal path where structure supplants spirit.

The power in our group is tangible, but not coercive. Each of us works the Steps because friends are witnessing to what they find through the Steps. A vehicle for God's love, our group liberates the wonderful spiritual alchemy that takes the worthless past and transmutes it into a useful present. It turns garbage into gold.

Initially, the bond in AA is one of mutual suffering. Then it becomes mutual aid, and finally a vision of a future we couldn't reach anywhere else. In the spirit of Tradition Eleven, we have attracted members from all over the Chicago area. Several other Step groups have formed from ours in the past few years.

One of our members, Bill, was sober eleven years when he joined us six years ago. In those eleven years, he had gone to countless meetings, made innumerable calls on new members, sponsored a number of alcoholics. He'd made one slight omission, however. He never worked the Steps.

Depressed, afraid, angry, he frantically sought relief from his symptoms caused by sobriety without Steps. "I went to a psychiatrist who explored my subconscious and checkbook with equal enthusiasm," declared Bill. "I tried other therapies. Nothing helped."

Then he visited a treatment facility near Chicago and talked to the chief psychologist, who supposedly knew something about alcoholics and AA. The psychologist suggested shock treatment. Bill now calls him "Dr. Electrode." Fortunately, before Dr. Electrode could connect him up to the current, Bill ran into a member of our group.

The member explained that Bill's symptoms were the inevitable result of stopping drinking without working the program. Step by Step, he helped Bill follow the program's directions, right through Step Eight, which he helped Bill write after they had shared a Fifth Step. Bill joined our group, continued to work the Steps, and quickly lost his depression and other miseries.

In general, the experience of the AA members who have joined us testifies that *recovery is a process, not an event*. Some had been sober many years before they began to honestly use the

program as it's designed. Others had been around AA for years, unable to find freedom from the insane obsession that kept bringing the first drink to their lips.

From these varying personal stories, they've all drawn the same conclusion, however: The program works just as the Big Book says it will; the payoff comes from persistent effort with all the Steps. Our group stimulates that kind of action in each of us.

No one can throw us out of AA, but we can throw ourselves out by living in a way that forfeits our membership. On occasion, I've nearly done that. Dishonest, irresponsible, self-centered, I've pushed myself to the outskirts of our Fellowship. My friends in the Tuesday night Step group have seen what's happening, caught me, and said, "Hey, come back. Stick with us or you don't have a chance." They've been right, of course, and they've saved my life.

P. M.
Riverside, Illinois