

I've Done the Twelve Steps--now What?

There are no endings in AA, only new beginnings

IT WASN'T until sixteen years after I sobered up on the AA program that I discovered the benefits of working *all* the Steps, again and again. Until that time, I had rocking-chair sobriety: a great deal of motion, without going anywhere; a lot of activity, but not much action.

I can't expect to live on the food I ate ten years ago, or on last year's water or last month's air. I need to eat, drink water, and breathe regularly in order to live. The exercise I took five years ago doesn't make me healthy today. The same holds true for the Steps.

The Twelve Steps are a direct route to increasing freedom, sanity, and usefulness. Essentially, I drank to be free--free from the painful constrictions and limitations of my ego. I work the AA program for the same reason. The Steps give me the freedom legitimately that booze provided spuriously.

If I continue to work *all* the Steps, they continue to change me. This looks simple today, even though it took me years to arrive at this realization. In the area where I entered AA, the feeling was that you worked the first nine Steps once and from there on used only the last three Steps for the rest of your life.

I sobered up and entered AA in August 1947 and spent the first sixteen years of my AA life suffering from this unfortunate misconception. In the first two or three years, I did as thorough a job as possible with One through Nine and then attempted to subsist on Ten, Eleven, and Twelve. In 1963, I ran into the view that there was continuing benefit in persistent work with all the Twelve Steps. On the theory that it couldn't hurt to try, I went back to the first Steps and started over. I wrote out a new Fourth Step and followed it with another Fifth Step.

It turned out that there was a vast difference between a periodic written inventory and a Tenth Step spot check. While the results of a renewed Fifth Step were not as dramatic as those of the first one, years before, it swiftly became apparent that it was extremely helpful to keep opening up completely with other human beings. In my experience, the most helpful Fifth Steps have always been those taken with another AA who's working hard at this part of the program. He's helpful because he speaks from fresh, growing experience.

Our late friend Dr. Harry Tiebout, with his unique talent for clearly delineating the problem of the ego, emphasized that a reduced ego had marvelous recuperative powers and that surrender was an essential disciplinary function and experience. Tiebout pointed out that it took persistent work to keep the ego checked and that part of this lay in "repeated inventories, not just one."

I wrote out a new Eighth Step and found a number of names that belonged on it. Some had been added since my joining AA; some just had not occurred to me the first time around. I made amends to these people and found increasing freedom within myself. It gradually became clear that the Twelve Steps, *all of them*, will speak to my condition wherever I am in sobriety. Whether I've been sober a year, ten years, twenty years, or longer, they'll provide a springboard for change and growth.

Today, I work regularly and frequently with thorough written inventories and Fifth Steps. The Fourth and Fifth, along with the other Steps, open a door to growing awareness of truth. It begins, I believe, with knowing the truth about myself. Someone has defined the ego as "the sum total of false ideas about myself." Persistent reworking of the Steps gradually strips away my false ideas of myself. This permits gradual, nearly imperceptible growth in my understanding

of the truth about myself, and this, in turn, leads to growing understanding of God and other human beings.

The late Father Edward J. Dowling was one of AA's earliest friends among the clergy. A man of compassion and vision, the St. Louis Jesuit was impressed by what he felt were striking similarities between the Twelve Steps and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. While some might see differences in content and structure between the two, few could quarrel with the view that spiritual growth, like good physical condition, requires continuing work. It doesn't just happen. It demands unremitting effort.

I've read the Big Book many times and am constantly amazed at discovering something in there I have never seen before. Not until eight years ago did I notice the paragraph on page 63 that suggests taking Step Three aloud with another person, and I noticed it only because someone else pointed it out to me. Since then, I've tried this a number of times and find it a compelling and effective way of trying to turn my will and life over to God. There's evidently a stronger commitment when we make it aloud in the presence of another.

A few years ago, I read the story of Chicago's first AA, Earl T., for what had to be the thirtieth or fortieth time, and that's no exaggeration. He sobered up in Akron under the guidance of Dr. Bob and took the equivalent of the first eight Steps in his first few weeks. When they got to what are now Steps Six and Seven, Earl took Step Seven aloud with the help of Dr. Bob. I've tried taking Step Seven aloud with friends of mine after completing a Fifth Step and invariably found it helpful. For anyone who's interested: Earl's experience is on page 292, and the second paragraph on page 76 suggests a prayer to use when asking God to remove our defects.

It's sometimes said, and not simply in jest, that if you want to hide something from an AA member, the best place to put it is in the Big Book. Why is it that we'll carefully read everything else, searching for answers, and overlook the transforming truths in the Big Book? What's the powerful attraction in these other books and ideas? Possibly it's because we can discuss them and sound witty, intelligent, and excruciatingly smart. Perhaps we sometimes sell our program short because it's hard to believe that anything that simple can have complete answers. I've tried the full range of "expanded approaches" and today realize that, time after time, my search for spiritual answers in these other areas has been nothing but an egotistical blind alley.

The last half of the last paragraph of the last story in the Big Book tells it straight. It's on page 562. "I get everything I need in Alcoholics Anonymous--everything I need I get--and when I get what I need I invariably find that it was just *what I wanted all the time.*"

Apparently, the mind *is* "the slayer of the real." We don't find God through reading, discussing, thinking, studying, arguing, and philosophizing. We find Him through specific actions which free us from the ignorance created by our self-will. We can't do it alone. Our actions are met by God's grace, but certainly we can work as hard as we're able with the program He has given us. I find that these Steps are circular and provide fresh understanding and benefits each time around. They give me room within myself to live as a free human being.

A substantial percentage of the alcoholics I work with today have been sober for ten or fifteen years or more. They are in misery and struggling with painful conditions within themselves despite their long periods of sobriety. Just about 100 percent of the time, it turns out that these AAs either have not continued working all the Steps or never worked them to begin with. Either they have gone through the Steps once and then tried to get by on just Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, or they have managed to stay sober for years without ever thoroughly following the directions in Chapters Five and Six.

Invariably, when they start back at Step One and carefully work each of the succeeding Steps, they report dramatic improvements in themselves. They begin to experience the freedom and

joy that are integral parts of our spiritual awakening promised in Step Twelve. It happens consistently. The only members I've ever heard question this approach have never tried it enough to understand it.

Among the many benefits emerging from my reuse of all the Steps is a heightened ability to practice prayer and meditation. Persistent removal of the debris blocking me from God opens up a better contact with Him. It becomes increasingly evident, too, that prayer is not a device for getting my own way, but rather a means to become what I should be.

Continuing, fresh, growing experience in periodically working all Twelve Steps is quickly translated into specific help for others. It's axiomatic that I can help another only to the degree that I've been helped myself. The more work I do on myself, the more I have to pass on to another. Today, I'm not talking about the Fourth Step I took in 1948 or the amends I made in 1949. I'm sharing the work I'm doing right now in our recovery program.

Another benefit has been a noticeable increase in vitality. I came into AA at the age of twenty-five. In 1972, I celebrated my fiftieth birthday and twenty-fifth year of sobriety. Although this is older than I intended to be, I've noticed that I'm now able to work better and function better as a result of using all the Steps regularly.

If there are events in my past which haven't been dealt with or relationships that haven't been repaired, it takes energy to keep this material tamped down so I don't have to look at it. When I can deal with such a condition consciously and clear it out, I don't have to spend the rest of my life reacting to it unconsciously, with a consequent reduction in energy and effectiveness.

The program is a road, not a resting place. Before AA, and many times after, I looked for answers to my living problems in fields where you'd expect to find them: religion, philosophy, psychology, self-help groups. These disciplines invariably described a goal that was precisely what I wanted. It was a place of freedom, calm, confidence, and joy. There was one major problem: They never gave me a workable method of getting there. They never told me how to get from where I was to where I was supposed to be.

That's the big difference I find in our program. It takes me toward the goal: "a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps." It doesn't take me there as fast as I'd like to go, because God's timetable is always slower than mine. However, as I follow the directions and work my way from Step One to Step Twelve regularly, my spiritual awakening deepens and strengthens. I find everything I need and really want through these Twelve Steps. They provide the goal and the way to reach it. It's all here and it always was, from the beginning of my AA life.

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