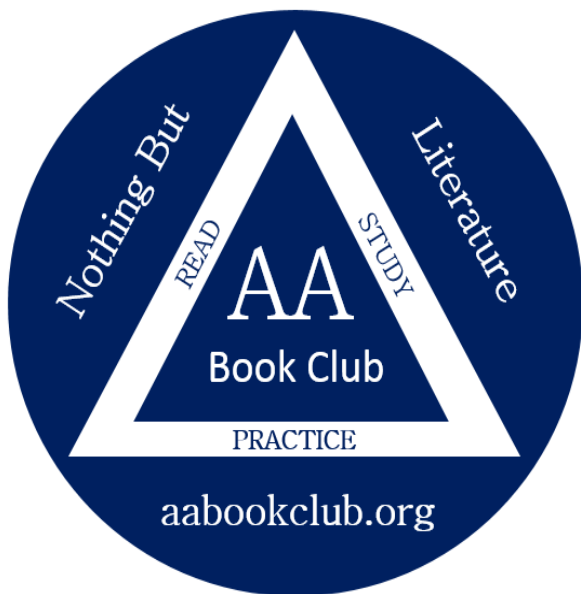


*A Book of
Recovery*

Jim B.

A Book of Recovery

How one man recovered from
alcoholism through the
Twelve Steps of Alcoholics
Anonymous



An AA Book Club publication 2021

Gratitude is a spiritual state - an energy - comprised of both faith and humility. The faith is of one's own self: that who we are and what we do is of innate worth. The humility is of the recognition that we could not be who we are or do what we do alone and without the help, inspiration, and the faith of others. Gratitude must be expressed through action if it is to become manifest in the world.

**Rabbi Paul Steinberg,
Recovery, the 12 Steps and
Jewish Spirituality**

Writing clarified my thinking and allowed me to become more comfortable being me. I experienced both spiritual and emotional growth during the process... In addition, it is my sincere hope that the reader also will benefit as a result of reading this book.

**Dr. Paul O.,
("Acceptance Was the Answer")
You Can't Make Me Angry**

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One

I had a normal middle-class upbringing, with no divorce, separation, abuse or other types of dysfunctions. There are no other drinkers in my family, but my mother was adopted, so there could be alcoholism in my blood without my knowing.

You could say that I am one of those who had the "ism" before the alcohol came along. I have never been medically treated for any psychological or mental condition (nor for alcoholism, for that matter), but I was subject to bouts of minor depression as a young man. I remember one time around the age of twelve breaking down and crying at the dinner table in front of the whole family. My mother was quite alarmed, but all I could tell her was "nothing good ever happens." I was never debilitating by depression or other emotional issues, but for long periods I was subject to three-day cycles of moodiness. These followed the same pattern most of the time and came sporadically a few times per year: a day of a mild down mood, then a day of notable depression followed by another mild day, and it would be over. The pattern was so typical and happened just often enough for me to recognize it. By practicing a simple form of mindfulness (and a sort of spot check inventory), I was able to take the edge off when these moods came upon me. After a while, I was no longer alarmed when I began feeling this way, as I knew it would soon be gone.

My first encounter with alcohol, other than a single beer with my father a couple of times, was in Junior year of High School with my lifelong best friend Kenny. There was a lot wrong with that scenario: we drank liquor stolen from his parents' liquor cabinet, I was babysitting a neighbor's two children that night, I was due to start my first payroll job the next morning and perhaps most of all: we were drinking Gin. I can still taste that stuff over 40 years later.

There must have been a curse on that Gin, for both of us became alcoholics. Kenny got the disease right away, and barely finished High School. His new drinking and drugging lifestyle, and the new friends he acquired pretty much ended our friendship in our last year of school.

It took me about 12 years to become a problem drinker and be worried about my growing habit. In the meantime, I learned after a few more bad experiences with hard liquor to just leave it alone. The times in my youth when I got drunk without wanting to were all with liquor, never beer, which I managed easily for a long time. All through my twenties, I might have nothing at all some nights and on others buy a six-pack and have a couple left over - and I might not even drink the rest the night after. Other times I might go on a mild bender, get up in the morning, shake my head and go to business. Alcohol was not a problem for me, though one friend toward the end of this period did say I had a "legendary" capacity for alcohol when I did indulge - and he was quite familiar with the glass himself.

Things were different around the time I turned thirty:

No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched all around me in all directions.

I had lost a job I was very fond of several months before. Though I was transferred to a different department in the same organization, the new job had none of the attractions of the old one. Looking back, it is easy to see now that far too much of my self-worth, social life and even personal identity were wrapped up in the job I was forced to leave. I felt alone, with few friends left. My new co-workers annoyed me a great deal: they were happy, joyous and free, while I had my old job unjustly stolen from me.

It was a time of great self-pity, resentment and even fear for the future. That occasional depression I'd

had for years became stronger and much more regular over a period of several months, and I was drinking upwards of an entire six-pack every night. That would change to most of a twelve-pack in the months ahead. For the first time, I was worried about my drinking.

On my thirtieth birthday I quit my heavy smoking habit. I had realized months before that I didn't like it much anymore, the cost was starting to increase and of course there were health factors too. As depressed as I was most of the time, I was determined that something good was going to come out of this bleak time in my life. After having told myself each day for months beforehand that I would quit on my birthday (what is now called "affirmations", and when the day came it was not difficult to do. Determination and will power were sufficient to tackle this habit, but the drinking continued unabated.

I soon had my one and only backout and my first drunk driving accident on the same night. One day I ended up drinking exactly 30 beers altogether, the last several of them after having driven over ten miles to a friend's house. (Since I threw up there, I guess I retained a net of about 28 beers!) He put me to bed on his couch, fully dressed aside from my shoes. I woke up some time later outside the house, having crawled out a window in a blackout. Finding a pair of work boots in the carport, I put them on and drove home. I missed a curve on a road I knew very well, went into the grass and ran over a road sign. You know, the mind is a funny thing: for many years afterward, I never realized that this was actually a drunk driving accident, even though there were no other cars involved and I didn't get caught (if only I could say the same for the others that followed!)

We thought 'conditions' drove us to drink, and when we tried to correct these conditions and found we couldn't to our entire satisfaction, our drinking went out of hand and we became alcoholics. It never occurred to us that we needed to change ourselves to meet conditions, whatever they were.

Someone just beginning to be concerned about his drinking already knows one thing A.A.'s are taught in the literature, namely that liquor is but a symptom. The tragic mistake is that the nascent alcoholic always looks in the wrong place for the causes: he looks outward, not inward. Thus we alcoholics early on often change our manner of drinking, get physical or mental therapy or change our environment through the threadbare idea of taking a "geographical cure". We seem to focus on everything but the alcohol itself, don't we?

My version of the geographical cure was to change jobs. It truly did seem that this would solve my problems - and take care of my excessive drinking. As it happened, I was able to leave behind the people at the former job I thought were causing me to be resentful, envious and angry, only to acquire a new set of people to be upset about: my new supervisors. There was also the false hope that the new job would be just like the old one I loved so much, and which, and formed too much of my identity. I depended on the old job for a good part of my self-image, creating an unhealthy dependency on outside factors. As we all discover sooner or later, everywhere we go, we bring ourselves with us. The newness of the different situation eventually wears off, and the root causes still remain.

Not only did I fail to dramatically improve my situation, my drinking never really declined, even during that intimal period of excitement. I became depressed once again and was totally unable to handle a major reorganization in the company. My car caught on fire while driving to work one day due to poor maintenance (how's THAT for unmanageability?) I lost the job after nearly a year, partly due to drinking, but perhaps even more so because my character defects rendered me emotionally unfit to handle the hectic situation during the changes in the company.

There I was, jobless, carless and (so I thought) virtually friendless, and drinking way too much. When an old drinking buddy decided to go into A.A. and quit drinking, the idea occurred to me for the first time to try actually quitting alcohol. She had in a

way been twelve-stepped into the program by her mother, who worked with a recovered alcoholic and thus knew something about the Fellowship. I quit one day and felt no ill effects, physically or mentally. Reading her copy of the Big Book, I got pretty frightened by the relapse stories in More About Alcoholism. Having tried to curb the alcohol by changing the outside, and briefly entertaining the idea of quitting on my own, the idea finally came for me to get help. You could say that I was twelve-stepped by my friend and by the Big Book itself!

At the beginning of recovery a man will take, as a rule, one of two directions. He may either plunge into a frantic attempt to get on his feet in business, or he may be so enthralled by his new life that he talks or thinks of little else.

That was certainly the case with me my first time in the program. First, I did the latter for a few months. Looking back, it now seems that I was engaging in a bit of spiritual intoxication ("Hey, I'm in recover now! Isn't that neat?"), and at the same time using it to rationalize putting off a job search and becoming financially stable again. Then a depleted bank account forced me to flip the script, as it were, and I did what many of us do: concentrate on taking care of financial and other material issues.

Now, there is definitely something to be said for setting reasonable goals and meeting them, earning a living and paying bills on time and taking more responsibility in life. In fact, these things fairly well define 'manageability' - something we obviously lack while living the alcoholic life. But to put such material considerations first is to treat the painful symptoms of unmanageability rather than the underlying causes. Many of us finally admit defeat and come into the program because of the pain of unmanageability, the jobs, money, cars, not to mention the friends and family we've lost. Since avoiding pain is a natural human instinct, it should not be surprising that many newcomers focus on

relieving that first.

What happened next is a tale often told. I began to say to myself, "I don't miss it at all. Feel better. Work better. Having a better time." Being granted a temporary reprieve from the desire to drink and having made good progress on most of my material issues, I no longer had any sense of urgency concerning the program, meeting with my sponsor or going to meetings. The spirituality that some of the people shared about seemed irrelevant to me, off-putting and at times even "disconcerting".

After a few months of tapering off on meetings, I stopped altogether. Soon, when I was getting close to a year without drinking, I became the "type who always believes that after being entirely free from alcohol for a period of time he can take a drink without danger." A perverse sort of pride kept me sober for a month or so, as I wanted to wait until after the one year mark passed before drinking again. At about thirteen months, I sought out my old drinking buddy Debbie. We went out for gyros and beer. I did not even try to drink "just a few" that night: I intended to get drunk, and I did. The hangover the next day, my first in over a year, was a notable one. I had the mistaken belief that after that year with no alcohol, I could now choose when and how much I could drink, never suspecting that it would quickly become daily heavy drinking again. Thus began my one and only relapse, which would last over thirteen years. When I went out, I was *all the way out*. During all that time, I never looked back: I never thought about the time I went over a year without drinking, never considered quitting again and had no memory at all about ever being in A.A. This was probably a major symptom of the alcoholic insanity developing inside me.

Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic.
Commencing to drink after a period of
sobriety, we are in a short time as bad
as ever.

Within three weeks or so, I was back up to my

former prodigious consumption levels - I was "off to the races", as they say in the rooms. A few months later, I vaguely sensed I wasn't being any too smart in drinking again. During the week of my next birthday (I love anniversaries and other significant dates!), I didn't drink at all. No intention of quitting or anything, I just wanted the reassurance that I could. Not knowing any better or having anyone around to say otherwise, this short period of abstinence seemed to prove something. I resumed drinking without worry or consequence for another several years. That is, I didn't lost anything, but on the other hand, I didn't grow either, personally or professionally. It is now obvious that this was a long period of stagnation for me, during which I gradually became more isolated.

A couple of years after relapse, I heard from my old friend Kenny, with whom I'd gotten drunk and smoked pot for the first time. Appropriately enough, I was both drunk and high when he called. I actually had the nerve to judge him for the boozing and drugging lifestyle he'd long ago adopted. He probably sensed my attitude, or my altered state of mind, or perhaps both, and he cut the conversation short. I still regret not talking more with my former best friend.

A year or two after that, I grew to dislike the feeling pot gave me. It had never been a big thing for me, it was just enjoyable once in a while. More importantly, I found that I couldn't drink after smoking any weed at all. Nothing was going to interfere with my drinking, so I just gave it up, as I had with cigarettes around five years before. Increasing alcoholism as a cure for pot smoking! (I wonder if the Surgeon General endorses this approach?) I only used a substance other than alcohol once in the next eleven years of my drinking, right at the end. Alcohol was my true love, and I was faithful to it.

I had a couple of close calls with DWI in the first few years of relapse. In one case, after cruising around with Debbie drinking on and off most of the day, I was pulled over. I did well on the field

sobriety test, and she made up a story about my rescuing her from an abusive boyfriend, that I was only out driving for that reason. The police let me go, but far from heaving a sigh of relief, I celebrated my good fortune by getting another 12-pack on the way back to her place and we had some more. Another time, I was driving to my parent's home several states from mine and pulled over to check a map for directions (this was before GPS). A police car stopped with its lights on to check out what was going on. Miraculously, he didn't smell the beer I'd been drinking all the way there or decide to look inside the paper bag on the floor of the car which had most of a fresh 6-pack inside. Again, I escaped arrest, but learned nothing from it.

When I was around thirty-five, I made a half-hearted attempt to count my beers. One per hour, it seemed, would be a reasonable pace. That lasted a couple of days perhaps, and since that went so well, I allowed myself one about every 45 minutes. Another few days, and the effort at moderation totally collapsed. About the same time, I went an entire day without drinking anything at all. Just another attempt to reassure myself that I could do it, and I did, but I was just a boy whistling in the dark to keep up my spirits. I must have been worried about drinking at some level to do these things, as I had been several years before. But outwardly I was no more anxious than in my twenties before the drinking took off. I was more or less manageable regarding most material areas and relatively happy on the surface. There were still those occasional three day cycles of semi-depression, but I'd long been used to those.

At the age of forty, the job I had ended when the store went out of business. Having come into a small inheritance around the same time, I turned down the offer to transfer to a different store the company still had. It was a much longer commute, and I wanted to take a couple of months off using the money I'd just gotten. I ended up being out of work, more or less voluntarily for exactly a year, doing little else but drink all day while watching Judge Judy and

other shows like that. I did have some standards left: I never sank so low as to watch Jerry Springer - that is one of my "not yet's". Ice beer was becoming more popular at this time, and the added strength was much to my liking. Wine also became a regular part of my drinking repertoire. It was like Goldilocks: regular beer was too weak, and liquor was too strong. But wine and ice beer were JUST RIGHT.

This period was one of three bottoms I would have in the next several years. Unlike the others, it would only become clear in retrospect how low I'd fallen during this time. The other time I was out of work so long, at least part of it was spent in the pursuit of recovery, meetings and a semblance of spiritual growth. This time, I just drank and spent twice as long out of work. The last, and most dangerous phase of my drinking career began here. My hand-me-down car stopped running at one point, due to poor maintenance and underuse. I just walked to the nearby liquor stores, the only place I ever drove, until Dad handed me down another car. It was pretty sad, watching all those shows which sometimes featured slightly dysfunctional people and judging all the 'losers', as I often thought of them. There I was, sitting in my underwear (sometimes literally) drinking beer all day, without a job in a very prosperous part of the country when we had a very strong economy. At least some of the people had wives, children, jobs - and a life, which I certainly didn't have. The truly pathetic part of it was that I loved it. If I had more money, I would have done it for two years instead of only one!

Just as it had several years before, an empty bank account stirred me into action on the job front. This time I also had a bit of credit card debt, a new situation for me. After all that time off, I was like Dr. Bob after his beer experiment: "I put on thirty pounds of weight in about two months, looked like a pig and was uncomfortable from shortness of breath." There's no reason someone as short as me should weigh over 200 pounds, but I did. I started working part time at the job I'd turned down a year before, this time for a former colleague who'd bought the store in

the meantime.

I soon got a full time job very close to home for more money than I'd ever made before. Which is not to say that it was all that much. I kept the other job one day a week, in a way making up for my former lethargy. Things were looking up!

But I was now drinking about the same amount as during that little 'vacation', despite working six days a week and never drinking on the job. I ended up drinking virtually every waking moment after work, and all day Sunday when I was off. (Sunday was my favorite day back then! It still is, but now for different reasons.) My life was pretty much work - liquor store - home, work - liquor store - home and sometimes work - grocery store - liquor store - home. The exceptions to this pattern were few, and never voluntary. Unload the precious cargo, get into sweatpants and t-shirt, then get busy with the better part of a "Happy Twelver" of Milwaukee's Best Ice, topped off at the end of the night by several glasses of Carlo Rossi Paisano from my weekly gallon jug. I had few hobbies left, aside from drinking. I drank virtually every waking moment apart from work. The exceptions were few, and never voluntary.

I was hungover quite often the next morning, as you might imagine, and there must have been alcohol still in my system from the previous night sometimes, but I never consciously went to work drunk. No breakfast or morning coffee for me, being queasy in the stomach and dehydrated. Lunch usually revived me, and I was better off until then end of the workday, when the cycle repeated. This went on for a little over three years before the consequences started coming.

During this time, I heard from the sister of my old friend Kenny. He had died, and she was contacting as many of his old friends as possible. She said he drank and drugged his entire life and never got over it. Drifting from job to job, seldom keeping one for long. He had been a good-looking guy but was missing teeth and looking pretty rough from ill health and neglect. She said he was in a mutually abusive relationship and the woman he was shackled up with blew his head off as he slept with a shotgun. Man, if

the effects of the drugs and alcohol don't kill you, then the lifestyle will. I was at home during this call, so I was certainly drinking while hearing this horrific story. But I did not think at all about how I was already far down the same path, had no self-awareness whatsoever in the matter of drinking. Just as I learned nothing from his sudden decline in high school from using various chemicals and gradually became an alcoholic myself, I learned nothing from his unmanageable life and death and drank for about three more years.

My mother passed away a few months later. The job allowed paid time off for bereavement, and I took it. There was to be a lowkey memorial service in their state several hours away. I intended to go but ended up drinking the entire week at home. A while later, we had a gathering of their oldest friends, during which we spread her ashes in the Chesapeake Bay. There was ample beer available, and though a few people drank fairly heavily, I had the most by far.

The path toward my second bottom, the one which brought me into the rooms, began very suddenly. I was arrested for DWI in a small Connecticut town at 3:00 AM on my way to Boston to meet an old friend. I had been in the car all the previous day, drinking, getting lost on the New Jersey Turnpike, backtracking a couple of times, retracing my steps. I really have no idea how I possibly spent that much time on the road and made so little progress. One exciting moment: early in the trip, just north of Baltimore on I-95, I hit 101 MPH for a couple of seconds. (Don't worry, I only had two beers in me at the time!) After that, the memory gets a bit hazy, though I wouldn't say I blacked out. We've all driven home tipsy or drunk from a party or neighborhood bar before but driving from the DC area to New England drunk and drinking even more in the car is a whole other level of drunk driving altogether.

The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink. Our so-called will power becomes practically nonexistent. We are unable, at

certain times, to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the humiliation of even a week or a month ago. We are without defense against the first drink.

Nothing can explain what happened immediately after that first DWI arrest except this form of alcoholic insanity. I finished the vacation outside New York City, visiting a second friend after the first one in Boston, returning home on a Sunday exactly a week after being arrested at the start of the trip. I was in a fine mood, not being much affected by the incident. In fact, I got a six pack for the road, secure in the feeling that I could see any cop coming up behind me in the daylight and screw the top back on the bottle and put it back in the bag, thus avoiding observation. In this way, my interstate drunk driving was just like the local variety.

The next Sunday, exactly two weeks after that first arrest, I headed up I-95 to Connecticut for an appointment with a DWI lawyer the next afternoon. The plan was to get as far up the road as possible that night, relax in a motel, then drive the rest of the way to the appointment and come back home afterward. Not being able to recall the humiliation of two weeks earlier, I drank at home for several hours then hit the road for New England once again with beer in the car. Wouldn't you know it, but I was popped AGAIN for DWI. Yes, I was arrested for drunk driving on the way to see an out of state lawyer about a recent drunk driving arrest! Simply insane. Any run-of-the-mill heavy drinker would stop drinking in the car after getting busted for it. Even most real alcoholics would just drink at home for a while, and maybe think about quitting altogether after that. But I couldn't even keep my bad habit off the road for that short amount of time.

It's small consolation, but my BAC was .20, down from .27 the first time. Talk about progress, not perfection! For the second time in two weeks I had to go to a rest stop after being released, wash up as best I could at a bathroom sink and change in a toilet stall before getting to my destination.

Ironically, I wasn't even supposed to be going to the lawyer in Connecticut after all. There had been a death in the firm and most of the attorneys were at the funeral. The office had left a voice mail at work cancelling my appointment, but I didn't get it until later. I was still in shock, and unable either to see the humor in the situation or be frustrated.

Fortunately, my attorney happened to stop by the office and we had our appointment anyway. Neither he nor the New Jersey lawyer I hired soon after ever said anything to me about problem drinking or even showed any reaction to my rather peculiar adventures on the road. Were they maintaining their professional demeanor? Or no longer surprised by the stream of misery flowing through their doors? Hard to say...

Both hearings were held within three months. Through luck and the nuances of the drunk driving laws in both states, I got out of the legal situation with only a citation for having an open container for the second incident. Minimal court costs, a single alcohol "education" course that covered both charges, and of course some reasonably hefty attorney's fees were the only consequences of these two arrests. One fringe benefit of having gone through all this: my second DWI lawyer gave me a video tape of the New Jersey arrest taken from the state Trooper's dashcam.

Even though there were few consequences, these two legal scrapes sort of burst my bubble. I began to become more morose and pessimistic. Life was manageable, at least on the surface. But emotionally, I was in decline. Even though I had two jobs and a car, it felt like the period before coming in to A.A. the first time. This time, I now see, my problems were all on the inside; there was nothing material in life to change to create an illusion of progress.

I began to feel doomed, largely because of alcohol. Physically, I had high blood pressure and tingling in both hands, which was probably the beginning of neuropathy. I gradually became convinced that I'd die perhaps 20 years before my time from some effect of drinking on my body. For some reason, I imagined that I would pass away at age 57. Far from seeing the need to stop drinking, memories of my first attempt years

before never occurred to me. During this time I never thought I could, should or would give up alcohol: I would just go on to the bitter end, enjoying life as much as I could, until I was gone. It wasn't self-pity so much as a perverse form of Acceptance. It was simply my Fate, nothing to be done about it. I fantasized several times that it wouldn't be so bad if some fatal disease were to take me out suddenly. Yeah, that would be alright, wouldn't it? No one would miss me that much, and even my family would get along without me. This feeling wasn't constant, and there was always a day or two every week when I felt human. But this was a departure from my usual periodic mini-depression: instead, I felt somewhat grungy most of the time, with little respite.

Toward the end of this period, for the first and only time ever, I took a couple of prescription painkillers on top of a lot of alcohol. The pills were mine, left over from an operation the year before, but which I didn't need at the time. Man, I saw stars! I loved the feeling the beer-and-pills combination gave me and began to wonder if I could make up something so my doctor would prescribe more. The danger of combining the two substances never occurred to me at the time, but there was great potential for harm. I really wanted to do more of this, and it really could have become a habit if Fate had not intervened. This little episode will be important later.

I was 45 and I thought my life was essentially over. My life was not important or worth anything - even to myself. We say that bottles are but a symptom, and of course, the DWI's and other troubles resulted from the bottles. But this is the true nature of alcoholism: that lost, doomed, worthless feeling. This may be the one that all alcoholics experience, despite the differences in our individual stories. The details of my story or yours may vary, and if we emphasize them too much, may even divide us; but we are very much alike in the larger issues we all tend to face.

I went on like this for just over a year, until my third and last drunk driving arrest. Half a mile from

home, on the way to the liquor store. Plenty of wine at home, but I wanted beer. The result this time was a head on collision I caused in front of the liquor store which totaled both cars, but thank Goodness, didn't injure me or the other driver. Airbags, luck and maybe Something Greater kept that from happening. But now I not only had the drinking problem, I had just lost my car and who knows what it this was going to cost me materially? When I got home later that night, I just sat and drank a lot of the leftover wine since I never got the beer.

It would not quite be right to say I was obsessed with alcohol, in the sense that I thought about it all the time: it was a fundamental, unspoken assumption in my life. I only thought about it when I couldn't drink as much as I wanted. But I *really* did think about then! A week after the accident, I had learned about the phenomenon of craving long before reading it in the Big Book. My brother picked me up and drove us back to his place for Christmas. Unfortunately, I had only a twelve-pack to last me that night and the next day. A few that night, on top of all I'd already had, was sufficient. But I had only 9 more beers to last me all Christmas Day. My fevered brain began calculating: if I have the first one at Noon to be "respectable", then have exactly one per hour after that, I could last until 8 or 9 PM, then he'd drive me home since I had to work the next day. The plan sounded good, but in actuality, limiting myself like that was very hard. I'd gone through similar periods of time before without having anything at all when it couldn't be avoided - work, car trips with others, etc. That had been tolerable but drinking a little at his home on Christmas started a craving for more which was *excruciating*. Adding to the torture was the fact that he'd just gotten the first of those awful Johnny Depp pirate movies on DVD and I was forced to sit through it while jonesing hard for more alcohol than I had on hand. But he did take me home that night to prepare for work, allowing me to reach my Recommended Daily Allowance of drinking before going to bed. So the story had a happy ending.

Men and women drink essentially because they like the effect produced by alcohol. The sensation is so elusive that, while they admit it is injurious, they cannot after a time differentiate the true from the false. To them, their alcoholic life seems the only normal one.

I liked the effect, I liked the taste of alcohol (even the cheap stuff) and I even liked the act of drinking. Despite the emotional and legal trouble, I still didn't have a thought of trying to give up alcohol again, and I never even remembered the time I did quit for a year with the help of A.A. Unlike cigarettes, I liked alcohol right up until the end. It never stopped working for me. It did not make me happy or help me live a fulfilling life, but it did its job each night by making me not-bored, not-anxious and not-depressed.

This was the bottom that led me after a time to give up alcohol, and later come into the rooms. Given the benefits of sobriety I now enjoy, I have to be grateful that it happened.

I saw a lawyer a couple of weeks after that last arrest, one who specializes in multiple DWI's. He heard the entire story of all three arrests, and said he believed I would likely have to serve several weekends in jail. This was quite a relief, for it meant I wouldn't have to go to jail for some number of months, and I knew there wouldn't be any threat to either of my jobs. Then I'll never forget what he said to me as I was ready to leave. Looking like a combination of Mr. Smithers from the Simpsons and former Vice President Dick Cheney he put his arm on my shoulder and said in a grandfatherly way, with no preaching whatsoever, "Did you ever think about quitting drinking? It doesn't seem like you can control it."

"Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences... Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives

of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them."

Two days later, I had the first spiritual experience in my recovery. The second one would be much more intense. Out of nowhere while at work that day, a quiet voice said, "It's time." Time to stop drinking. Not a Celestial voice in any way, but mine. My own voice, but infinitely stronger, from somewhere deep within. It was not a reaction to the crash, police, handcuffs or fear of upcoming legal proceedings. Rather, it was a profound and sudden intuition that the nightmare would end. I tried to fight it for half a day, but the new inner urge to stop drinking won out over the insanity of alcohol. When I surrendered to the new idea of sobriety, it was thrilling and uplifting.

Addiction vs Powerlessness

Except in two passages describing Dr. Silkworth's place of work, the Big Book does not appear to use the word "addiction"; alcoholics are never said to be addicted to alcohol nor called addicts. I have seldom, if ever, heard anyone in meetings talk about being "addicted" to alcohol. This, despite the fact that some alcoholics experience physical withdrawal symptoms ("shakes", DT's, etc.) when not drinking, not to mention the mental anguish of the unfulfilled desire for alcohol. Health professionals may use the term "alcohol addiction", but we don't. The preferred term, both in the literature and in the rooms, is we are "powerless" over alcohol.

People never say they are "powerless" over cigarettes, for example. They say "addicted" or use the equivalent slang, "hooked". Having been both a heavy smoker and a practicing alcoholic, it seems to me that addiction is an easier burden to overcome than powerlessness. Quitting smoking so long ago was a straightforward, rational process: I didn't like it

much anymore, the cost was increasing and of course, there were future health risks involved somewhere down the road. I made the decision to quit, put my mind to it, and simply exerted my power of will. The desire to give up smoking came from within, and I daresay it was easy to do.

Then again, I was never arrested for driving under the influence of nicotine, and kept going back to it, even after a second arrest; never used it to change the way I felt or to hide feelings; never came to believe that my life was useless and without purpose due to cigarettes; and never felt doomed because of my smoking habit yet was unable to even conceive of stopping. These peculiar mental twists, curious mental phenomena, blank spots, insanely trivial excuses and incredible selfishness and dishonesty, all of which I experienced in my drinking career, were entirely lacking in regard to my nicotine addiction.

So, it seems that these mental attitudes which enable alcoholic drinking are also what makes one powerless rather than merely addicted. (For what it's worth, the Wikipedia entry on addiction seems to define it in all physical terms, with little emphasis on mental factors. The phenomenon of craving discussed in the Doctor's Opinion, does sound a bit like addiction. But that only becomes active after one starts to drink. It is the alcoholic insanity that makes us take that first drink.

The Pioneers stated all this very succinctly: "Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body." Experience, aided by 20/20 hindsight, shows me just how true this is.

Practicing alcoholics don't know about the mental obsession to drink or the physical allergy, but we often do know before ever coming into A.A. that we are powerless over alcohol. I have heard several people in the rooms share that they worked Step One before joining the Fellowship, and I share that belief. Though I wouldn't have been able to explain it logically, I knew deep down inside that I couldn't quit drinking. I knew it with such certainty that the

weak tool of Reason could not make up any excuses to help me deny that I was helpless. Most of us struggle mightily to try and drink moderately, often pursuing the illusion into the gates of insanity or death or try and fail many times to stop. I, on the other hand, simply surrendered to alcoholism. I didn't have a Step One problem: I had a Step Two problem, as I saw disease clearly, but had no hope.

Two and Three

It's really a wonder that I actually got sober, given some of things I did 'wrong' at the time, or at least did them differently than some. But things have worked out so far.

Sometimes a new man is anxious to proceed at once... This is sometimes a mistake.

Given the force of the inspiration to quit drinking, it may seem out of place that I didn't have my last drink until two months later. Not being aware of this Big Book passage, I had another reason to go slow at first. Once the decision to quit was made for me and I came to accept it, I was as surprised as anyone would be who knew me, but at the same time I was certain it would be successful. I was also vaguely aware that there might be challenges ahead in this regard. Quitting smoking so easily over fifteen years earlier came to mind, as there is a surface similarity between both 'habits'. My birthday was coming up in two months, so it seemed natural to set that as my quit drinking date. I would use the time in between to tell myself ("affirm") each day that I would have my last drink on my birthday. It worked with smoking, and that's a pretty heavy addiction isn't it? Of course, I did not yet know the difference between addiction and powerlessness. My desire and determination to stop drinking for the rest of my life never wavered or weakened during this time, and the amount naturally decreased somewhat as the chosen day approached. This is why my birthday sobriety date and non-smoking anniversary are all on the same day. (But I seldom celebrate any of them, as I am glad to be alive, sober and tobacco free every day, not just once a year.)

Rather than wasting the inspiration to quit which came to me, acting on it later and thinking about it every day in between may have strengthened my resolve. And the fact that it didn't dissipate and I

didn't rationalize it away shows that it was not a mere whim.

On my first attempt to stop drinking I had the idea and acted immediately, pouring out my remaining beer that very day. Being in the throes of sudden enthusiasm, it was not necessarily a 'sober' decision (pun intended). I went to my first meeting eight days later as I recall, and I was given a Big Book and a sponsor the same night. Old Timers tell us that this is what they used to do back when A.A. was more 'authentic' or some such, but in rushing they may have overlooked the passage above. Though it worked for a while, this approach ended in failure for me.

The gradual approach this time around was one of several differences from the first time so long ago. Since this path has worked, I embrace them. However, since some of them go against common sense and received A.A. wisdom, I hesitate to recommend doing everything I did in early sobriety. Because my path to recovery was unconventional but successful, I try not to be too controlling in working with newcomers or make them follow the typical A.A. script. There is another reason that we'll go into later.

In the meantime, I lived my life as normally as possible. One of the managers at the weekday job knew something of my drinking and surmised that the accident had been alcohol-related. As it happens, his own son had just had a DWI, so I wasn't judged too harshly on that account. That was a piece of luck - or, if you prefer, perhaps something more than that. Because I had clearly been trying at the company, hadn't missed any work and had a good attitude, it seems that he and my immediate supervisor felt sorry for me rather than angry.

When my birthday rolled around, I bought an especially good, expensive six-pack of imported beer, drank four of them after several of the usual cheap cans, then it was time to go to bed so I'd be rested for work the next day. I left the last two in the fridge, and there they stayed for a few days until I was able to give them to a friend. An unceremonious end to a not-so-distinguished drinking career.

[T]he main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body.

I suffered no withdrawals or shakes after quitting alcohol, and certainly no D.T.'s; did not go to rehab or have any medical treatment whatever for alcoholism. Perhaps I had no physical reaction to a lack of alcohol in my system for the simple reason that though I drank every day, I did not drink ALL DAY. I had my share of hangovers in the morning back on the old days, then lunch and a few hours of no alcohol in the afternoon, and plenty at night. In a way, you could say I detoxed a little in the morning and rehabbed in the afternoon, only to relapse every night! You have read about many symptoms I once had of alcoholic insanity. But whatever happened to me when the inspiration came to give up alcohol, it seems to have removed the mental obsession: in over thirteen years, no matter what happened, good, bad, happy or sad, I have never had a serious thought of alcohol. I've never been tempted or even had a thought that lasted more than a second before being pushed aside in favor of the sane idea that it is not safe for me to take that first drink. My one temptation was of a different kind, as we'll see in a bit.

Many alcoholics are enthusiasts. They run to extremes.

I was transferred to a different department shortly after my accident and arrest. My new supervisor Christine was the younger sister of a high school acquaintance, and we began to get along very well. The topic of quitting drinking came up when she noticed that I went from drinking no coffee at all to two pots a day. (I drank another two pots every night at home as well.) Being jittery in the morning in my drinking days from low blood sugar and dehydration, I had little interest then in coffee and no stomach for breakfast, as much as I could have used the latter. The sudden and extreme change piqued her curiosity,

to say the least. Having had several weeks by then to get to know her better, I shared a bit of my drinking story and that I was now giving it up. She in turn confided in me that she had a drug history herself and had gone to rehab. So, not only did I have a friendly work environment as I began my recovery, circumstances provided me with a confidante before I ever went to my first A.A. meeting. Another stroke of good fortune in my early recovery.

About all that coffee. I've heard from people who've been there that rehab facilities prohibit caffeine (and sugar too). If that's true, I can see why. It became a partial substitute for alcohol for a few months. When the mind is freed from the depressive effects of alcohol, and of course is not hungover in the mornings, it works at a much faster rate. Adding a stimulant seems counterintuitive, but I was instinctively drawn to it. Seeing my two young nephews with ADHD drink coffee every morning may have suggested the idea in the first place. In the quantities I drank, coffee supercharged my brain. At work, I had my tasks and my new friend to keep me anchored a bit, though I'd get impatient sometimes with clients on the phone, slow computers and the like. Christine covered for me when there was a bit of feedback. Like before, I was trying, was always there and did get results.

My mind was even more ramped up at home. When your mind moves at that speed, you go from idea to idea and from task to task so quickly it builds self-perpetuating mental motion. First, you're thinking or doing one thing, a few seconds later there's the next thing, and another, then your mind switches back to the first thing, and it's NEW AND EXCITING AGAIN! What you lose in accuracy you sometimes make up for in speed - if you can keep track of everything going through your head later when the cycle is over. Though alcohol is a depressant, like a stimulant it keeps you from focusing on yourself and your problems.

Aside from allowing me to get through the evening without going a little crazy, I found that caffeine reduced my appetite. Though I'd lost considerable

weight after my year off, I was still heavier than I needed to be. Weight loss as well as sobriety were my big goals. I ended up using caffeine and food to counter each other, somewhat like Dr. Bob drinking at night and taking pills the next day to keep from shaking. Coffee until late in the evening allowed me to eat less, then when I couldn't hold out any longer, some food shortly before bed took the edge off all the caffeine and allowed me to eventually fall asleep. I often found myself fatigued at night but too buzzed to sleep, a state I called 'Wired and Tired'. But I got enough sleep to get by and there would be more coffee the next day.

I developed the healthy habit of walking sometimes in the evening to help get rid of the excess energy from my racing mind and all that caffeine. I'd listen to the radio on headphones as I walked, and often heard Amy Winehouse's "Rehab", which was a hit at the time. Little did we know that she was one of us and would die of this disease a few years later. After a while, I began walking at lunch and during our afternoon break most days. Our block was 1.2 miles and it would always take between 19 and 21 minutes to walk it. Getting away from phones, E-mail, and distractions helped focus my thoughts. It was a stress reliever when I felt it, and a stress preventer when I didn't.

One thing I did but would never recommend, is that I avoided A.A. meetings for nearly two months after my last drink. To my uninformed mind, I had stopped the habit which had caused so much trouble and heartache, and that was that. The other extreme is the common A.A. grassroots wisdom to do "ninety meetings in ninety days." Obviously, I came nowhere close to it. I don't object to the idea but having neither done that myself nor suffered because of it, I don't recommend it to those I work with.

There was, however, the matter of my upcoming court case. For this reason, and this reason alone, I went to a group counselor once a week for the required twenty-six sessions. A good report from him would help me with the judge later on. As I am creature of habit (drinking habit, DWI arrest habit and self-will

run riot habit, among others), I went every week without interruption and on the same night every week, even though some absences were allowed and there were sessions on other nights. Another example of running a bit to the extreme, like the coffee. I was grimly determined to do what had to be done as quickly as possible, then get on with my life.

There was some quite useful information from these group sessions, and I certainly got more out of them than the ones I'd taken the year before. Even more so toward the end. Of the fifteen or so people in the group, all there as the result of an alcohol-related arrest, only myself and one other admitted to being an alcoholic and genuinely wanted to stop drinking. Having a court charge was another different aspect of my recovery this time, and the nature of the group only reinforced that as my main preoccupation.

I am not taking a drink *just for today*.

Living Sober, an AA book aimed at newcomers unfamiliar with the program, endorses the idea of staying sober 'today', 'one day at a time' or even one hour at a time. For someone just coming into the fellowship, or like me, going through it pretty much alone, this makes perfect sense. The idea came in handy for me early on.

About a week or two into sobriety, the thought came to me that I wouldn't be able to drink or get high in any way for the rest of my life. I didn't want to at the moment, and I was not tempted, but spending a *lifetime* completely straight was a daunting, frightening prospect. Could I perhaps get 'half high'? I don't know what that means any more than you do, and it was my own question. Somehow the thought of staying sober for one day came to me, and the anxiety slipped away. Perhaps I'd heard it from Christine or at one of the weekly group sessions. This is the only time I've ever had any doubt or regret about getting sober.

I've heard people with long sobriety say that they were sober 'one day at a time,' 'I just have today,' 'Whoever got up earliest this morning has the most

time' and things like that. That mystifies me: doesn't the literature talk about the problem being removed, the obsession being lifted? Yes, the Big Book mentions a 'daily reprieve', but it also mentions quitting 'for good' and 'forever'. The Twelve and Twelve goes so far as to list 'permanent sobriety' as a goal. One day of sobriety is something even a newcomer can manage with nothing more than his will power and white knuckles; one would hope for something more after going through the entire process and experiencing the psychic change. Perhaps old-timers who talk about 'one day at a time' for themselves are trying to stay humble and avoid resting on their laurels.

Alcoholism is cunning, baffling and powerful, for it doesn't always attack in a straightforward manner. Shortly after the temporary shock of envisioning an entire lifetime no alcohol whatsoever, my disease came up with a loophole. In the space of about 15-20 seconds, I thought of smoking pot, rationalized that I was never addicted to it or had any trouble and was instantly attracted. I recalled a former co-worker who smoked almost every day and surely would sell me 'just a little' from his own stash. I'd go to his current job nearby the next day, pull him aside and ask him about it. It had been over eleven years since I had smoked any pot, and I had stopped liking it even before that. Looking back, it was a little scary how quickly the initial thought led to acceptance and then a plan to accomplish it.

I think this is what Bill meant when he talked about a 'brainstorm' in the Big Book; if there had been a negative emotion behind it, this kind of lightning-fast thought process could have led to a big resentment or fear. In this case, it came a little too close for comfort to actually breaking my sobriety - a joint counts as much as a bottle or a pill. Sometimes we have no mental defense against the first drink - or a bad idea, for that matter. This shows how important it is to keep track of one's thoughts, share them with others and remove them at once when selfishness, dishonesty, resentment and fear crop up. (But that's the Tenth Step and we're

not there yet!) Through some wisdom not my own, possibly gleaned once more from either Christine or the counselor, I quickly realized it would be ridiculous for me to smoke weed. It would have to be total sobriety or it would be meaningless.

This was the only temptation of any kind I've had in sobriety. To this day, I still have a thought of alcohol now and then, like Jim the car salesman or Fred the accountant in *More About Alcoholism*. But unlike them, none of these thoughts has ever lasted more than a second before I notice and push them aside in favor of the sane idea that I can no longer drink safely. Sort of a spot check inventory for alcohol that so far I have been able to perform both promptly and perfectly. (I have not been nearly so successful with angry or fearful thoughts, though I keep trying). Since I do not have nearly that kind of self-discipline, something greater than my own will must be involved.

I learned from that experience not to ignore drugs in A.A. Quite often meetings read statements asking those who share to 'confine themselves to their problems with alcohol.' Oldtimers remember a time long ago when there were a lot of drug addicts coming into A.A., before N.A. took off, and some felt our message was being drowned out amid all the drug talk. A.A. 'purists', forgetting that drugs are mentioned in the Big Book and in both Founders' stories, just don't want to hear about them. This is not wrong so much as shortsighted. We are taught that alcohol is but a symptom, but for some of us it's not the only symptom. There are too many stories in meetings of relapses that began with abusing prescription meds to ignore the issue entirely. And these days, 'medical marijuana' is becoming increasingly common in America, including my home state.

As psychiatrists have often observed, defiance is the outstanding characteristic of many an alcoholic.

In the weekly group sessions, it had been suggested that we attend A.A meetings. Though I admitted being

and alcoholic and had voluntarily quit drinking, A.A. was simply not in my game plan. After several weeks, the counselor insisted that I begin attending A.A. in addition to his weekly meeting. Three DWI's meant I needed to have three meetings a week. Four nights a week altogether. We actually had words in the session about it one week. That is, he set a reasonable condition and I gave him some words back. No swearing or name-calling, but I was hot and everyone knew it. I was still angry about it the next morning at work. My first resentment in sobriety!

Christine wisely reminded me that I needed a good report from this man for my upcoming court date, and I got over it after a while. Funny how being told by a trained person to do something for my own good made me angry enough to forget that he was part of the solution to my only problem in life. At least, my biggest problem, or so I thought.

After nearly two months, I went to my first A.A. meeting - on 4/20 of all days! Since it was close to work, I ended up going to the same meeting I'd begun with so many years before during my first go around. Two men were talking outside, Chuck and Dan. Chuck would later give me my first service position, and Dan would become my sponsor shortly after that. I felt a little sorry for all the people who really needed these meetings and weren't able to quit on my own, yet at the same time was frightened of them - a very alcoholic combination, I must say. It was on Step Eleven, the one about God. I heard too much about that stuff last time and it's part of why I stopped going to meetings. The next meeting would be on Step Twelve, carrying the message. 'Oh Damn! Next week they're going to try and save me,' I thought.

I soon found two other meetings in my town, making the three per week I had to attend. All three were close enough to work that I could walk to them, then walk a couple of miles home. More good fortune for me in early sobriety, for I didn't have a car yet. I complied with the counselor's wishes in going to the meetings but did not surrender. He would just have to take my word for it, as I pointedly refused to get signatures to give him. (Later, when the probation

officer began collecting my attendance forms, you can be certain they were all signed, dated, stamped and collated. You don't want to mess with her!) In a short time, I would be eager to go to these meetings, but not yet.

Luckily for me, all three of my groups were Step and Literature meetings. I heard more about the program than I would have at discussion meetings. None of them were Beginner's meetings, another benefit for me, I think. There were a few other newcomers, but most people I saw early on had some time and shared experience on all the Steps, not just the first three. Because I was exposed to the entire program, I had a better idea of what required when I finally became willing to commit. The Beginning Steps, as we are about to see, were not things I did so much as emotional states I went through on the way to a Breakthrough. I only came to understand after the fact, through the literature and meetings, what happened to me and why it was necessary.

For us, material well-being always followed spiritual progress; it never preceded.

When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.

Perhaps because I was not the kind of 'low bottom' drunk the Big Book usually deals with, my experience was different than these statements. I hadn't lost much financially, and in fact, had enough cash on hand to pay my legal fees and no debt other than my mortgage. I was feeling better, working better, having a better time. Walking everywhere (still no car) helped me lose weight steadily, even though I began eating breakfast again. Between the counselor and my required three meetings per week, I was becoming a bit calmer. My excess caffeine consumption began to level off, leading to more restful sleep and a more relaxed mood the next day. As I was a solitary drinker, I didn't drink with my friends. They were

uniformly supportive when I came clean with them about my drinking and getting sober (again). Things were looking up. As I heard months later in a meeting, "The body get sober a lot sooner than the mind."

The DWI hearing came just before my 90 days, and it went very well for me. I hadn't gotten off entirely scot-free from my previous 'adventures', as the second arrest had resulted in a reduced charge of having an open container in the car. That meant I was a two time offender and could not expect a PBJ - Probation Before Judgement - which was common back then for first offenders. I told the judge honestly and sincerely that I was embarrassed to be there and intended not to drink again, and that I had almost three months' sobriety. He probably didn't hear that very often and was used to people promising not to drink and drive anymore. There was indeed a good report from the counselor, which must have helped.

But what saved me from doing weekends in jail as my lawyer expected was having a second job on Saturdays. What I've learned from my legal troubles and have been able to pass on to at least one sponsee (even though it's not strictly part of taking someone through the steps), is that police, judges, probation officers and all the others are not looking to ruin people's lives. They sometimes mete out punishment, put you in handcuffs and whatnot, but most of them will cut you a break if you treat them respectfully and they're reasonably sure you won't do something to make them feel foolish later.

They all love it when you are employed and work because it shows you're trying. Well, the judge must have *really* loved that I had the second job. He didn't ask, and I didn't volunteer that I'd arranged to be off for several weeks after the hearing in anticipation of being 'busy'. In the end, I was sentenced to 18 months' probation only. I checked in with the probation officer the very next day, as instructed. That went fairly well, all the more so since I had the required paperwork and was ready to pay my fees immediately. Another thing officers of the court really like is when you have everything

they ask for and not a bunch of excuses. She knew I was with her program; it would be a while longer before I got with OUR program, however.

I had a long talk with my father on the phone that weekend (my mother had passed about three years before). I finally told him that I'd been arrested not once, not twice, but three times for DWI. But it was all over now - and it was paid for, so he knew that wasn't why I was calling now. Of course we talked about my quitting drinking again and that I had already been sober for exactly three months that very day. Talking with him after keeping it from him all that time was a relief.

I picked up a 3 month chip at the next meeting, my first chip either time in the program.

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 the dying can be.

We were having trouble with personal relationships, we couldn't control our emotional natures, we were a prey to misery and depression, we couldn't make a living, we had a feeling of uselessness, we were full of fear, we were unhappy, we couldn't seem to be of real help to other people...

After bouts of depression in the past, years of heavy drinking, DWI arrests and a resulting feeling of doom, I hit my lowest emotional bottom of my life a month after the hearing, at about four months sober. While physically sober, I came to the jumping off point between Steps One and Two. Where I had been a little anxious but energetic and upbeat, I started becoming more anxious, lethargic and depressed. The Four Horsemen were saddled up and ready to ride. I often had no idea how to get through the evening until bedtime - not get through it without a drink,

but to simply pass the time. No idea what to do with myself whatsoever. Sometimes I went to bed at 8:00 or 9:00 PM and slept until it was time to get up for work the next morning. On my day off I was sometimes physically unable to get out of bed until 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. I was nowhere near taking a drink or drug, but at times felt worse than when I did drink. Everything was going well in my life such as money, my jobs, friends and health; no issues like a broken marriage/relationship, kids or upcoming legal proceedings to worry about. I was afraid of everything and nothing at the same time. I had no idea of what was making me so depressed and that only made it more terrifying. Around this time, I thought of going to my doctor to describe my anxiety and depression and get a prescription for valium or some kind of medication like that. It really seemed for a moment that I needed that. But once again a wisdom not my own made me think otherwise. Other people need that kind of help, I thought, but I'm not one of them. I would have to deal with it somehow.

Around this time, I had another 'brainstorm' much more dangerous than the first. The idea came to me to buy gun and use it on myself. My second job was in the next state, which allowed same day handgun sales. Yes, I would use the work computer to look up a gun store nearby, get something that could get the job done, bring it home and as Nike says, 'Just do it'. Like the marijuana idea, the gun idea came and developed into a plan of action in about 15 seconds. Maybe less. A friend in the program who is also a trained therapist told me that such thoughts, accompanied by a practical plan for carrying it out, is taken quite seriously by mental health professionals. During all my previous troubles, I never had such a thought before. Feeling worthless? Yes. Thinking no one would miss me if I got a fatal disease and died? Been there, done that. But I'd never thought of taking my own life before, no matter how bad things were, no matter how low I felt. Something made me fetch myself up sharply at this point and come to a sudden realization. I'll never forget it as long as I live: "This really is a big

****ing deal. This problem is bigger than me."

This problem is bigger than me. Through this simple statement, I expressed 'the gift of desperation' that made progress possible. It was the part of Step One that I had been lacking. It had nothing to do with alcohol and everything to do with alcoholism. How dark it is before the dawn!

THERE IS A SOLUTION... [W]e 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 were in a position where life was becoming impossible, and if we had passed into the region from which there is no return through human aid, we had but two alternatives: One was to go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable situation as best we could; and the other, to accept spiritual help...

"A.A. is a safe place to fall," I once heard a woman say. How true. Having hit my emotional bottom and become willing to listen, I vaguely sensed I was in the right place. I became grateful to have a place to go three nights a week to be with people like me. Where I had lost interest and almost identified out after hearing others' more extreme drinking stories, I began to identify back in when people talked about their THINKING stories. I began to look forward to the night meetings earlier in the day and the positive afterglow lasted longer afterward. This is what they mean by "attraction rather than promotion."

Step Two for me was about one thing more than anything else: the raw emotion of Hope. The name of Chapter Two says it all, There Is A Solution, and the section within it on Step Two begins with that very phrase. And that hope came from other people ("We saw that it really worked in others."). The spiritual

experience I had a few months earlier relieved me of the insanity of alcohol, the topic of Step Two. But now I felt that my sanity in the everyday sense was in jeopardy. I needed a solution for emotional instability, and I couldn't provide the answer myself, for the problem was too big. I was dry and very agitated where others were not only dry, but to all appearances happy and well adjusted. As it says in *How It Works*, "If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it - then you are ready to take certain steps." The example we aspire to is provided by other people we come to admire; guidance on working the Steps comes from those we ask for help; and encouragement comes from still other people. When the Twelve and Twelve says that the newcomer can make the A.A. group his higher power, it makes perfect sense. Even the most devout believers get something out of our fellowship they cannot get from church.

I was listening more in meetings, and talking a bit with some people, but still walking to and from meetings alone, having no close friends yet. When it came to discussions on literature or working the Steps, I was either confused or unmoved. It seemed abstract, theoretical and sometimes overly devout. I was no longer completely alone but didn't know what to do next.

I'll never forget as long as I live the turning point for me in A.A. when I began to see a way out. It was July 4th, a Wednesday. I was sober barely over four months, soon after reaching my bottom and contemplating suicide by gun. Because of the holiday, there were only three of us there. Being a newcomer, I got all the attention from the two veterans I had known for a while. (One of them is now my grand-sponsor, and the other helped him early in the program.) It was a Step Ten meeting, my first since coming into the program. We read from the Twelve and Twelve, and I was exposed for the first time to the Spiritual Axiom: "Every time we are disturbed, no matter what the cause, there is something wrong WITH US." Finally! Something in the literature I could understand and identify with. I already knew that I

had no earthly reason to be so anxious and depressed, so this passage hit really home. It was so wonderful, simple and beautiful - and it made sense almost immediately. It's all black and white, no grey area: at any given moment you are either living according to this Axiom or you aren't. And most hours of most days, I wasn't. Up until then, I'd been hearing about humility, spirituality and a God many people believed in but no one ever saw. I, probably like most newcomers, had to commence on a simpler level. The Spiritual Axiom was that beginning for me.

Fate, Chance or Karma was again kind to me, as another of my regular groups also had a Step Ten meeting the next Monday. I then heard about the Tenth Step Promises, which begin: "And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone - even alcohol." Well, I wasn't fighting alcohol anymore, but was struggling with and against so many unseen enemies, problems, thoughts and emotions. The message of peace and serenity in this Step was increasingly appealing to me.

Wouldn't you know it? My last regular group out of three had a yet another Step Ten meeting on Friday of that same week! Can't remember now which book we read that night, but of course the discussion once again centered on emotional stability. I wouldn't have been able to articulate this at the time, but I know that I began to think of the Step Ten goal of peace and serenity almost as a promise in itself: they wouldn't say those things if it weren't possible to live that way. You could say I began to have faith in A.A. Not only did I see people all around me who had what I wanted but had now seen that the books and program were relevant to me in a personal way: I now had hope.

PRACTICING Step Three is like the opening of a door which to all appearances is still closed and locked. All we need is a key, and the decision to swing the door open. There is only one key, and it is called willingness.

Nothing shows willingness more than action, and I

soon acted. Chuck, one of the two men I saw outside my very first meeting, and who I typically saw twice a week, offered me a service position. Believe it or not, his sponsor later turned out to be the man who gave me my first Big Book nearly fifteen years earlier! In our area, service is often reserved for those with six months or more. But this was the simplest type of service: sitting up front, reading the opening remarks from a printed sheet and handing copies of How It Works and the Preamble to be read by others. No real responsibility, but still a visible role in the group. By now, I had heard how service is good for you, gets you out of yourself, you know the drill. But it actually works even when you're expecting it. I was starting to belong to A.A. Only one more thing remained.

Like quitting alcohol, I never really decided to get a sponsor. I just started looking for one. And, as with the alcohol issue, I knew deep down that I was serious and would follow through and make use of his advice. It was a short search, for only two men seemed likely candidates. The natural choice ended up being Dan, the other man I saw before my first meeting. As it happened, he went to all three of my regular groups, and we had been talking a little here and there. On the day I had five months he became my sponsor. I was no longer alone, and looking back, it now seems as if this is when the depression began to lift. This terrible period on my life was only two months, according to the calendar, but seemed SO MUCH longer at the time. The Big Book asks why we become afraid. "Wasn't it because self-reliance failed us? Self-reliance was good as far as it went, but it didn't go far enough." I didn't know it yet, but this stage of my recovery was bearing this out.

The biggest attraction for me was the fact that before A.A. he was practically an atheist, to hear him tell it. I recalled my past experience with trying and failing to find a Higher Power. Faking it did not lead to making it my first time around: this time I had to do it "right", and really mean it. I was willing to believe, but not to pretend. Dan was aware of my skepticism, and no doubt sympathized. But

if this man could find a Higher Power, then I could.

The Agnostics chapter is very encouraging to those of us who do not have a particular religious belief or share the conventional idea of an external God or Creator to me and existing above and outside the world. We see such sentiments as:

To us, the Realm of Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive or forbidding to those who earnestly seek. It is open, we believe, to all men...

As soon as a man can say that he does believe, or is willing to believe [in a Power greater than himself], we emphatically assure him that he is on his way...

We found that as soon as we were able to lay aside prejudice and express even a willingness to believe in a Power greater than ourselves, we commenced to get results.

After reading these expressions of open-mindedness and tolerance, it is disconcerting to see a fundamentalist statement such as "[W]e had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing. God either is, or He isn't. What was our choice to be?" Then and now, I hear people who heartily approve of this sentiment. Knowing Dan's story and talking to him privately, I was confident he was not the type of person to think in such all-or-nothing terms and try to force me into any spiritual box. Even after all this time I remember him talking about looking within or inside ourselves, as in "We found the Great Reality deep down within us."

Perhaps because something deep within made me quit alcohol, the idea of this Great Reality that was stronger than my unaided will and intellect, "an

unsuspected inner resource", was appealing. Indeed, whether or not I consciously realized it yet, I had already experienced it. Looking back now, it seems that I really didn't consciously do very much in these first few months of sobriety but was guided through these emotional states by some kind of inner wisdom I didn't fully understand or control. These first three Steps were not things I could have been taught, though of course my path was partly shaped by those around me.

What Dan had done in early recovery, on the advice of an old-timer, was talk to an imaginary friend every morning and evening rather than pray to a Higher Power he didn't yet believe in. He was able in this way to follow the Big Book's Eleventh Step suggestions to begin and end his day, without violating his principles, and grow from there. Being still in the shadow of the icy intellectual mountain, this seemed to me somewhat helpful, but not entirely logical. But after thinking about it for a while, I soon thought of a mantra I could silently recite and be both sincere and logical. "There is a power greater than myself" reminded me in various ways of the first three Steps. Step Two is obvious, One because I had no power myself, and Three because I clearly needed to use this other kind of power. This mantra was enough to open the door.

The wording was, of course, quite optional so long as we expressed the idea, voicing it without reservation. This was only a beginning, though if honestly and humbly made, an effect, sometimes a very great one, was felt at once.

I have read that people who are struck by lightning sometimes feel an electric charge before the bolt comes down. This is what happened to me before I was struck by spiritual lightning one night. There was an especially moving Step Two meeting at one of my regular groups. I was struck by two of the people sharing about 'just letting go' and relinquishing control. At the end of the meeting, a senior member talked about this Step coming to him spontaneously,

and not doing anything in particular to make it happen. Looking back, as one with a desire to 'do something' and to understand everything before acting or believing, these words were important for me to hear. I found myself leaving there very stirred-up, but it was a positive agitation and excitement over what had been said. Walking around to burn off the nervous energy after getting home, I wondered what had gotten into me. At one point, about an mile and a half from home I turned around and headed back. For some reason, the thought occurred to me that some people talked about being in the Program for years without doing any Steps. How foolish, I thought, I would never do that. Of course I was going to go through with all the Steps.

I know within a few square feet the exact spot where I was when the conscious realization hit me that I fully intended to follow the Program to the end. This willingness was my Third Step, Twelve and Twelve style, and I also had a prayer (of sorts) per the Big Book's suggestion. Like the Big Book says, a very great effect was felt at once. At that moment I almost did feel like being struck by lightning, so strong and sudden was the experience. Not exactly a white light, but suddenly a sort of opaque haze enveloped my field of vision and the world around me was partly there and partly not there. Objects there before were now barely perceptible and seemed very far away and irrelevant. I heard nothing and had no bodily sensations whatever. Mentally and emotionally, I felt an extreme excitement and ecstasy of a kind and degree I've never felt before. It was very much like the experience described in the Big Book story Flooded With Feeling. Other moments of extreme excitement or ecstasy I've felt have always been a reaction to an event, but this one came about entirely from within, as pieces of some kind of spiritual puzzle fell into place. It was a strictly solitary experience, with no hint of any presence or Being of any kind. Time does not exist in this state of being, but I believe it lasted for a few seconds in Earth terms.

My senses returned to normal, but a strong elation remained. On the way home it began to rain, but I was unconcerned and hid under some tree branches for cover until it passed. Upon returning I immediately sat on the edge of my bed and spoke silently with my mind and heart to a new imaginary friend, to the Universe, to nothing and no one. The restrictions of intellect and logic had been overcome, and the floodgates were now open. I probably babbled more than made sense, but I remember expressing gratitude for what had just happened, for sobriety and likely for being able to begin a primitive type of prayer without feeling foolish.

A few nights later, my home group read *There Is A Solution*, which has not one, but two footnotes referring to the appendix on spiritual Experience. Only then did I fully understand what had happened. It really was a new beginning for me. Just as that first quiet experience took away my desire to drink, the second and more profound experience began to take away that nameless, faceless fear that had gripped me before. I never thought I would drink again after coming back into A.A., but after my pink cloud was over, happiness seemed out of my reach. I knew now that everything was going to be alright.

It seems that even when the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve were new, people were aware of the "1-2-3 shuffle". You know, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-out. Both books advise rather strongly to go ahead quickly after making the decision:

Though our decision was a vital and crucial step, it could have little permanent effect unless at once followed by a strenuous effort to face, and to be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us. Our liquor was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions.

More sobriety brought about by the admission of alcoholism and by attendance at a few meetings

is very good indeed, but it is bound to be a far cry from permanent sobriety and a contented, useful life. That is just where the remaining Steps of the A.A. program come in. Nothing short of continuous action upon these as a way of life can bring the much-desired result.

Given the emotional jumpstart from this powerful experience, I was not about to rest on my laurels as I did so long before. I started working on my Fourth Step the very next day.

Four

The central characteristic of the spiritual experience is that it gives the recipient a newer and better motivation out of all proportion to any process of discipline, belief or faith. These experiences cannot make us whole at once; they are a rebirth to a fresh and certain opportunity.

This passage from As Bill Sees It echoes my story after I was struck by that lightning bolt as I unconsciously took my Third Step one evening. I had a new hope a new motivation; though I normally wouldn't use this type of language, I was in a sense reborn as the Big Book says.

But in no way did all my worries and doubts disappear immediately. It took time for them to gradually decrease to a manageable level. Knowing even at that point my tendency to become enthusiastic about something, only to lose interest later, I was wary of drastic change. "Evolution, not revolution," I said at the time, and my sponsor Dan liked this expression a great deal.

Looking back after all these years, and having heard many other people's stories, I have to be grateful that I had it so much easier than many others. I was spared that last ten or fifteen years of literal hell. And once I actually came to A.A., I hit a new bottom, got a sponsor, had an incredible spiritual experience and earnestly began the real work of the program (Step Four) in under six months. It seemed so much longer at the time, but now it is just a small fraction of the sober time I've been given.

Someone who knew what he was talking about once remarked that pain was the touchstone of all spiritual progress. How heartily we A.A.'s can agree with him, for we know that the pains of

drinking had to come before sobriety, and emotional turmoil before serenity.

These words from Step Ten precisely capture my experience up to this point. (Yet another reason it is my favorite Step!) I was brought into the rooms after unmanageability caused by drinking and poor decisions, and further suffering of a different sort was required to get me to take the program seriously. But this was something I had to learn for myself. It would not have worked if someone had told me 'everything happens for a reason', 'God has a plan' or anything glib like that. That would just speaking down from a spiritual hilltop. I would never say anything like that to a newcomer or to anyone who is suffering, for that matter. But I have related this part of my story to newcomers, along with the drinking part, and let them perhaps draw conclusions - when they are ready - that they might be alcoholic too, and that their current suffering may lead to something better, as it did for me.

The pain and emotional states I went through at that time guided me, without any help from my efforts or desires, through the first three Steps. I would not like to go through it again, and it is not necessary. These Steps do not need to be repeated, and I would say *cannot* be repeated. Their wording and their very nature mean they are one-time events, somewhat like a marriage: you can always have a second ceremony to renew your vows but doesn't mean you've been married twice. A second marriage is only possible if there is a divorce in between. Same with the first three Steps: we can repeat the prayer as many times as we like, but we can only make a decision once. Same with admitting powerlessness or coming to believe: By definition these are one-time events. The only way to actually do these Steps over, like marriages, is to repudiate them. That usually means a relapse, and if a person is lucky enough to come back in after that, it would be well to revisit these Steps. It sounds nice when people talk about doing them over, but like 'One day at a time' for

veteran A.A.'s, it seems more sentimental than accurate.

Not too long after beginning to work with Dan, my required time at the weekly counseling session ended. I began to miss having that in addition to my three regular meetings per week. Soon, I was searching for another meeting to add to my schedule. It seemed that Sunday, my day off, was the best day for another meeting. Looking through the Where & When and consulting the local bus schedule, I found an open discussion group on Sunday that was easiest to get to. I am not making this up, but it was right across the street from where I took that 'alcohol education' course for my first two DWI's less than two years earlier.

Though I rarely go to discussion meetings anymore, and largely stick to Step and literature meetings, this one was right for me at the time. Those who led were good about giving a topic and most people to it during the discussion. It was a pretty large group and so friendly that it was like a family. I learned to hug there, for example, and met a lot of new people. It was only five miles or so from my other groups, but almost no one I knew went to this club. Another benefit: every group there reads Acceptance from the Big Book before every meeting. Being so similar to the Spiritual Axiom, it impressed me deeply. I haven't been back to that group in over five years and I never read stories in the Big Book after Dr. Bob's, but I can still recite that entire paragraph from memory.

Somewhere in this time period I had a significant, but strange encounter with someone who may well have been slightly insane. Getting off the bus stop near work one morning, someone else got off at the same time. He walked beside me the entire half mile or so and babbled some nonsense about the previous day not going well on his job as some sort of delivery driver. I remember also that he held an orange in one hand and a banana in the other, remarking that the orange looked like its name and the banana didn't. I was glad when we got to the door of my building. Then he said out of nowhere, "You know, God makes

everything simple. Man makes things complicated." *I knew exactly what he meant.* The world is a harmonious and unified whole in itself, but Man has multiple conflicting desires, plans and schemes, and individuals are divided into clans, groups and nations that compete and often fight with each other. I was trying to work on my Fourth Step at the time and was beginning to get an idea of the selfish and conflicting impulses within myself. I said goodbye and walked in the front door. Once inside, I peeked out the window and watched him round the corner and walk out of sight. I never saw him again. It was like something out of a David Lynch film. But the incident was a sign of my growing awareness of spiritual matters: before my coming to A.A. I never would have been able to grasp any meaning in what this man said.

A.A. and acceptance have taught me that there is a bit of good in the worst of us and a bit of bad in the best of us; that we're all children of God and we each have the right to be here.

I happened to watch a movie around this time called *You Can Count On Me*, starring Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo, which had come out a few years before. (Mark Ruffalo is much better known for later playing Bruce Banner in *The Incredible Hulk* - you want to talk about someone who *really* has an anger problem!) Mark plays Laura's slacker brother. He drinks and smokes weed, and although he's not one of us, his life is definitely unmanageable. At one point Laura has her pastor come to the house and talk to the wayward Mark. The minister then asks him something like this: "Do you think your life is important? Not just as a brother, as a worker, a citizen or what have you. But does your life matter in the larger scheme of things?"

I was really struck by this question and talked about it with Dan soon after. He seemed pleased that I brought up a spiritual matter on my own. I don't recall anything specific we discussed on the topic, but I still remember the impression that scene made on me. Looking back, it is easy to see that at

certain times in my life I didn't feel important. Not to others, and often not even to myself. I was slowly coming out of such a period just when I saw this film for the first time. I just saw it again about a month ago, and the scene is still nearly as touching as it was then.

Perhaps a year or so later I realized a connection between this and another film - It's a Wonderful Life. Like all red-blooded Americans, I'm a fan of this movie. But perhaps I differ from everyone else in what I consider to be the climax. It's not at the very end, when the town gathers to support James Stewart and Donna Reed and they all sing Auld Lang Syne. It's a bit earlier, when James sees the way life turned out without him and he runs back to the bridge where everything changed. He calls out to Clarence the Angel to get him back to his old life, crying, "I want to live! I want to live!" THAT is the climax of the film. This scene always chokes me up, because for the longest time I didn't have that desire.

The quote above, right after the famous paragraph on Acceptance, is now one of my favorite passages in the entire Big Book. I have repeated it to some of the people I've worked with over the years, often to help them get over resentment toward others. But one friend with serious self-esteem issues needed to hear that he, too, had a right to be here - and that didn't depend on having a successful career, popularity or other material achievements. Everyone is important and no one is special. The person who gets on my nerves has a right to be here on Planet Earth - and so do I. That is something I need to repeat to myself from time to time. Today, I can answer 'yes' to the Mark Ruffalo Question, although sometimes hesitantly and with a little embarrassment. I am one of the depressive types, after all.

Of course the depressive and the power-driver are personality extremes, types with which A.A. and the whole world abound. Often these personalities are just as sharply defined as the examples given. But just as often some of us

will fit more or less into both classifications. Human beings are never quite alike, so each of us, when making an inventory, will need to determine what his individual character defects are.

The Big Book treats anger and resentment as the primary character defect or expression of self-centeredness ("number one" offender). Fear is discovered when analyzing the list of resentment in the example inventory and is only then considered important enough to justify a separate inventory. Thus, fear seems to be treated as a derivative of anger in the Big Book. This is perhaps understandable, since several of the influential pioneers were known to be power-drivers: Bill himself, Hank P., Clarence S., and of course, the original Jim B. Aggression would, of course, be uppermost in their minds. The image of the actor trying to run the whole show is an apt metaphor for a person trying to dominate other people, and it fit many of the pioneers.

However, Bill wrote the Twelve and Twelve during a lengthy period of depression, and this seems to have given him a more evenhanded outlook. Fear is treated as equally important ("...fear, a soul-sickness in its own right."), and at times seems more important than anger: "The chief activator of our defects has been self-centered fear..." and "At heart we had all been abnormally fearful." Thus, in Step Four, we see that self-centered behavior can take two forms: "Always we tried to struggle to the top of the heap, or to hide underneath it. There are also references in Step Twelve to avoiding the twin evils of domination or dependence on others. For example: "Either we had tried to play God and dominate those about us, or we had insisted on being overdependent upon them."

If we have been thorough about our personal inventory, we have written down a lot.

Therefore, thoroughness ought to be the watchword when taking inventory. In this connection, it is wise to write out our questions and answers. It will be an aid to clear thinking and honest appraisal.

Both of our major books advise us to write down our Fourth Step inventory. There are at least three advantages to this. One, writing forces our ever-churning minds to slow down and focus. Second, we can record our momentary insights before they disappear. Lastly, when everything is down on paper in front of us, we can examine them in depth and look for patterns. In my drinking days, I sometimes had insight into what I now know as character defects. I'd come home from work, say, and before I'd gotten too far into the evening's festivities, I might realize that I'd been either angry or worried about something but that my reaction was overblown. Or perhaps I thought of something I should have handled another way. But these insights were often fleeting and quickly forgotten. Certainly, there was no organized effort to list these things or to do anything about them, as our program provides. I believe that except for those who were delusional or completely oblivious, all or at least most things on our Fourth Step inventory are things we already know about ourselves at some level. We have seen the trees, but never the forest.

We began to see that the world and its people
[on our resentment list] really dominated us.

Powerfully, blindly, many times subtly, they
[instincts] drive us, dominate us, and insist
upon ruling our lives.

The fact that we often get angry or fearful when our instincts for sex, society and security are threatened means that something deep down inside us is affected. These negative emotional reactions

derive their strength from the primacy of these instincts and become focused on the source of the perceived threats. No wonder they have the power to control us as they often do. There is a fourth advantage to writing down our fears and resentments aside from being an aid to understanding them: the physicality of writing them on paper is therapeutic, for it literally gets them *outside us* and it is then possible to view the feelings as separate from us, thus reducing their power. This is what Father Martin emphasized putting intellect over emotion in his Chalk Talks, he meant something like this. In therapy, the expression "Feelings aren't facts" is similar. In Buddhism it is taught that mental phenomenon such as thoughts and feelings are 'not-Self', meaning that they are not part of one's core identity. I since have learned that fear, anger and the less violent (and less obvious) character defects are not me; they are just phenomena that pass through me. Like anything else they can be avoided or minimized. But at the time, I had a less-nuanced view of it: in the words of a sober friend, "You gotta name it to tame it."

In the Big Book, "The first requirement [of Step Three] is that we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be called a success." Then, in Step Four, it reads, "Being convinced that self, manifested in various ways, was what had defeated us, we considered its common manifestations." It took me a long time to realize the connection: character defects are self-will. That's why Steps Three and Four are together in the same chapter when Four and Five are so closely connected. Step Five completes Four in a sense, but a thorough Step Three provides the motivation for a searching and fearless moral inventory.

There is another connection between Steps Three and Four. The Twelve and Twelve calls the written inventory "the first *tangible* evidence of our complete willingness to move forward." Willingness being the principle behind Step Three. Willingness is used many times in our literature, always in a positive light. It a means to becoming, doing and

believing things of which we are not now capable and makes possible the journey from the juggernaut of self-will to the God's will. In the Big Book, we are advised to be sure we are ready to "abandon ourselves utterly to Him" before saying the Prayer.

Dr. Harry Tiebout, psychiatrist, early friend of A.A. and later a Trustee, had these things to say about the all-important difference between such a surrender or wholehearted acceptance/willingness and compliance:

It is necessary to point out that no one can tell himself or force himself wholeheartedly to accept anything. One must have a *feeling - conviction* - otherwise the acceptance is not wholehearted but halfhearted with a large element of lip service. There is a string of words that describe halfhearted acceptance: *submission, resignation, yielding, compliance, acknowledgement, concession, and so forth.*

Compliance needs careful definition. It means agreeing, going along, but in no way implies enthusiastic, wholehearted assent and approval. There is a willingness not to argue or resist, but the cooperation is a bit grudging, a little forced; one is not entirely happy about agreeing... As time passes and the memory of his suffering weakens, the need for compliance lessens. As the need diminishes, the half of compliance that never really accepted begins to stir once more and soon resumes its sway.

A friend of mine used to have an A.A. joke: "How do you know you've done your Third Step? When you've started your Fourth." This is where so many newcomers have stumbled on the path of recovery. I should know since this happened to me so many years ago. For me, it was complacency, as Tiebout describes in the last two sentences. For others, there may be a genuine but halfhearted desire to proceed that is overcome by

this daunting task: As the Twelve and Twelve says of the newcomer, "Both his pride and his fear beat him back every time he tries to look within himself."

Willingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery, but these are indispensable.

It takes willingness - wholehearted willingness - to undertake a searching and fearless inventory. THIS is the Step that separates the men from the boys and the women from the girls. And of course, honesty is required in the process of taking the inventory. But the process is not an end in itself, a way to please courts, families and sponsors, or an assignment that leads to graduation from the classes that some newcomers think the A.A. program is. Compliance can get you this far, but that's not enough.

It takes the open-mindedness of Step Two to find a personal source of inspiration, and the resulting sense of hope, in order to overcome the inertia of compliance, fear and pride to become wholeheartedly willing to undertake a personal inventory - and to do so sincerely. Since we have little concrete idea at first of God, Higher Power or Higher Principle and are guided by a sponsor who neither designed the recovery process nor determines the results, it really is a leap of faith to take this journey. Even as a non-believer, I was able to develop the sense of having a Mission or calling for such a purpose. This is part of what elevates A.A. over mere therapy and mere self-help, with their limited and defined goals.

The Big Book's Fourth Step inventory is fairly straightforward when you realize the method behind it. The book explains it thus:

We went back through our lives. Nothing counted but thoroughness and honesty. When we were finished we considered it carefully. The first thing apparent was that this world and its people were often quite wrong. To conclude that others were wrong was as far as most of us ever got.

The easy part, noticing at whom we are angry and what they did. This is the first two columns of the table in Step Four. One doesn't have to be sober to go this far, and it can be done while still angry or fearful. As the book says, most of us stopped here, and to do so is to harbor resentment.

We listed people, institutions or principles with whom we were angry. We asked ourselves why we were angry. In most cases it was found that our self-esteem, our pocketbooks, our ambitions, our personal relationships (including sex) were hurt or threatened. So we were sore. We were "burned up."

This is the point at which we break new ground in going deeper by examining our feelings. Asking why we were angry is the third column. It goes against the nature of the practicing alcoholic to have this level of self-awareness. As the Twelve and Twelve puts it, "Where other people were concerned, we had to drop the word 'blame' from our speech and thought. This required great willingness even to begin." One might even go so far as to say that this change in outlook regarding past events is a bit of a spiritual awakening in itself. I never got this far in my drinking days, though I did have some fleeting realization that I sometimes played a part in my own unhappiness. It takes the Big Book and/or a sponsor who has gone through this to show a newcomer how to do this part of the inventory. A calm mind is also required: "Instincts on rampage balk at investigation."

Referring to our list again. Putting out of our minds the wrongs others had done, we resolutely looked for our own mistakes. Where had we been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking and frightened? Though a situation had not been entirely our fault, we tried to disregard the other person involved entirely. Where were we to blame?... When we saw our faults we listed them. We placed them before us in black and white. We admitted

our wrongs honestly and were willing to set these matters straight.

The all-important fourth column is not included in the table but is discussed in this passage two pages later. It lists the exact nature of our wrongs that we discuss in the next Step. These wrongs come about because of the actions (second column) of others (first column) threaten our instincts for sex, society and security (third column). We will later "set these matters straight" (Step Nine) and we are already willing to do so (Step Eight). It is so simple when you see the Big Picture.

But I couldn't understand the pattern at this point. I tend to overthink things, then and now. Dan admitted having the same trait, and I don't believe he was entirely comfortable with the Big Book method of taking inventory. I think in terms of systems, and if I can't grasp the system and the rationale behind it, the individual parts also become nonsensical to me. (Our lives are like that too: people, places, things and situations can be confusing without a 'logical idea of what life is all about.' A.A. gave me structure at least, and the idea came later on.) If I was taking inventory of myself, then why do I list other people first? I had to see how listing who I was mad at or what I was afraid of related to how all my other character defects were expressed. Such an answer was not forthcoming.

I also faced the difficulty in asking myself the open-ended questions of who I was angry with or what my fears were. My mind naturally works in the other direction: name a person, place, thing or situation and I could easily tell you if it made me angry, frightened or what have you. After some time of pursuing the Big Book way, I became confused and frustrated at the lack of results. I dropped this effort but did not give up the goal of doing my inventory. (Later on, I attended a Fourth Step workshop with my first sponsee and was introduced to Fourth Step worksheets for the first time. I then worked with my second sponsee in a group using the Back To Basics program. These experiences helped me

understand the Big Book method, which I have used since with everyone who stuck around long enough to do this Step.)

Now let's ponder the need for a list of the more glaring personality defects all of us have in varying degrees...

To avoid falling into confusion over the names these defects should be called, let's take a universally recognized list of major human failings – the Seven Deadly Sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

This passage from the Twelve and Twelve outlines the method I used for my inventory. (The Little Red Book also discusses a list of character defects / manifestations of self-will: Resentment, Dishonesty, Self-Pity, Jealousy, Criticism, Intolerance, Fear and Anger.) Instead of beginning with people I knew and how I may have shown my character defects, I began with the defects and thought about when, how and to whom I acted in those ways. This was the reverse of the Big Book method. My list of defects included the Seven Deadly Sins, of course, but I knew even before starting an inventory that this didn't cover all the types of misbehavior I've been guilty of. The Seven Deadly Sins don't include fear, for example. The club I went to on Sundays had on the wall next to all the usual slogans a list of character defects. Over thirty of them to choose from! Some overlapped, like Racism, Prejudice and Bigotry, which I combined into one item on my list. Similarly, Lying, Dishonesty and Cheating became another single item. And so on, until I had a compact but comprehensive menu of defects to inventory. Now that I think of it, the idea may have come from seeing the list on the wall every Sunday as I began trying to do my Fourth Step.

After the idea came to me, and Dan agreed with it, I felt like I had a good method. Starting with the different types of "exact nature" wrongs usually have, I began looking for the actual wrongs I'd committed over the years. This straightforward logic

suited my way of thinking, but I still had the problem of trying to answer open-ended questions such as 'What kind of prejudices do I have?' 'What things make me angry?' and the like. The answers were not forthcoming at first.

It may have been Dan's idea, but I started doing a sort of Tenth Step inventory every day, all throughout the day. It was a very empirical, almost scientific method. Every time I caught myself thinking, feeling or acting in one of the ways on the defects list, I noted it and tried to see how it fit into a pattern. I would often be reminded at these times of past situations and be able to fit more pieces of my moral puzzle into place. My understanding and effectiveness were obviously at a beginner's level, but it was a start. When the same type of defect came up, say, three times in a week, it was probably a bigger issue for me than one which came up once a month. There are many questions in the Twelve and Twelve we are meant to ask ourselves, and it says at the end that "it is wise to write out our questions and answers." I didn't do that, but I did consider them when thinking about current and past incidents that brought up faults for my inventory. I ended up writing a paragraph or so on each of the defects - what things brought them out, why some were more prominent than others, how they made me feel, etc.

At one point, when I was beginning to make good progress on my inventory, I mentioned it to Dan and said that some defects seemed to be smaller than before since I was no longer getting upset at some of the things that used to bother me. He said that was fine, but I was still just talking about myself. That was important to hear.

I was still thinking mostly in terms of the Spiritual Axiom, so not being disturbed meant a great deal. Now I began to apply it in the reverse direction: what things did I do that made *others* disturbed? When did I harm other people and why? I listed members of my family on an index card, people from each of my current jobs on two others, friends on still another and so on. Once again, thinking

about my current interactions with people reminding me of similar past events. Every time I noted something someone had done to annoy me I began to ask if I did anything similar that bothered others - my way of putting the Golden Rule into practical effect. Now I was thinking of actions I took and how they affected those around me, not merely my internal thoughts and feelings. Any wrong actions or harms done were written next to the appropriate name as I recalled them, along with the motives involved.

Altogether, with the false start using the Big Book method, then starting over and feeling my way toward a plan that worked for me, the process took about three months. It probably shouldn't have taken that long, even after starting over again, but I was working six days a week at this time and going to four meetings. Partly by chance and partly by consulting with Dan, I ended up keeping two separate but related lists. One was an inventory of my thoughts and feelings, or character defects, and the other was of my wrongs, the things I would need to make amends for. I achieved the Big Book goal of finding both my defects and harms done, but by what seemed to me a more direct route.

Once we have a complete willingness to take inventory, and exert ourselves to do the job thoroughly, a wonderful light falls upon this foggy scene. As we persist, a brand-new kind of confidence is born, and the sense of relief at finally facing ourselves is indescribable. These are the first fruits of Step Four.

There is great relief in uncovering the things we've buried inside ourselves for so long, which is continued and enlarged when we talk about them with someone in Step Five. Further, there is a special kind of satisfaction in sensing we're on the right path, doing what we're supposed to. I definitely had a sense of fulfilling my mission as I persisted. But this is only part of the story.

It is not the purpose of the inventory to cause us discomfort. The Big Book compares it to "a fact-

finding and a fact-facing process." Sounds like a very logical and disinterested inquiry. But given the nature of this investigation into ourselves, the facts we uncover are sensitive ones. I would venture to say that any inventory which doesn't cause a fair amount of emotional suffering is too superficial to bring about the healing this Step begins to make possible. I had to pause twice during my inventory when facing certain facts was too upsetting. But I soon picked up where I'd left off and got through it. There were other, more moderate disturbances before I was done. Pain really IS the touchstone of all spiritual progress.

I have heard people share that they wrote their inventory on a computer and kept it in a protected file with a secure password. Others have mentioned keeping a notebook containing their inventory under lock and key, sometimes destroying it after the Fifth Step. I did not take such precautions, but instead wrote my inventory in a perfectly impenetrable code: my own handwriting. Not even the NSA can decipher it. I still have the sheets of paper with my Fourth Step list of defects and the index cards containing my Eighth Step list of people and harms done. They have been in the glove compartment of my car for the last several months, so I'd have them on hand to show to my most recent sponsee when he made some progress on his own Fourth Step, as a way to repay the trust he was showing in me. That is the only time I ever look at it. Alas, I didn't get the chance to share it with him.

The most common symptoms of emotional insecurity are worry, anger, self-pity, and depression. These stem from causes which sometimes seem to be within us, and at other times to come from without.

This is one of the great insights in the Twelve and Twelve. I came to focus on this passage later on since it reflects my experience in early sobriety. As we've seen, I've had great emotional insecurity at different points in my life, that tremendous nameless

and faceless fear of nothing and everything that certainly came from within. And I've certainly been restless, irritable and discontented without it having been caused either by my drinking problem or situations outside of myself. Even non-alcoholics wake up on 'the wrong side of the bed' sometimes! These internally-based fears and angers are all the more difficult to contemplate and remedy, since they are not simply reactions to the outside world, rather they seem to go the very core of our being. Other, less violent and disturbing character defects also seem to reside within and cause situations, not come about as a *result* of them.

I regard the Fourth Step (and indeed each of the first Nine) as a onetime action. The Big Book never mentions doing another written inventory. The Twelve and Twelve is somewhat ambiguous, saying "Step Four is but the beginning of a lifetime practice," which many of us believe is continued in Step Ten - which begins with that very word. Certainly, neither book suggests doing Step Five more than once, and that likely says something about not repeating Four. These two passages from the Little Red Book, from Steps Four and Ten respectively, link the two Steps:

Experience has taught us that this step [4] should be started at once, but left open for future reference so that during the process of our mental and spiritual clean-up we can add the new items which will present themselves.

It [Step Four inventory] was indispensable at the time but fulfilled its intended use once the nature of our self-willed alcoholic habit and defects were recorded... They [the Founders] knew that new character defects would appear and that many the old ones would present themselves in disguised form. Hence the perpetual inventory to announce the advent of each old habit and a sort of mental sentry on guard to detect the new ones.

Thus, this book, very influential in A.A. before the Twelve and Twelve was published, endorses the idea of Step Four as a onetime activity which becomes the basis of an ongoing Step Ten practice.

Considering each day's events in early sobriety helped me recall wrong thoughts, feelings and actions from the past and complete the best inventory I could do at the time. In much the same way, self-examination today sometimes provides fresh memories and insights about the past, though fewer and fewer the longer I have been practicing this healthy habit. (I have a couple of good examples I mind, which I'll get to in Ten) There are only so many possible character defects/expressions of self-will, and most new recollections are simply more examples of the same things I've already named. On the rare occasion that I might remember a harm done from the past that hasn't already been dealt with, I consider it and think about a possible amends. But I never think about the past in any systematic way or for long periods. Though there may be more additions to both the Fourth and Eighth Step lists as more memories resurface, I am essentially done with these Steps.

Five

One summer when I was around twelve, my childhood friend Kenny and I used to go to the community pool together quite a bit. We were both old enough by this time to be allowed in the adult section of the pool with the deeper water - and the high dive that the older guys used. We were frightened but wanted to be one of the big boys. I went up the steps to the incredible altitude of eight feet or so, chickened out and came back down, only to go back up after some encouragement. Pausing to gather my courage, I just went for it, running to the end of the board and diving off. I landed badly, and it hurt, but there was a great sense of victory. I was no longer afraid of the high dive and went right back and did much better a few minutes later. Kenny was emboldened by my example and performed this rite of passage right after me.

Step Five is a lot like diving off the high dive: people you have come to respect have done it, but the prospect of doing it yourself is so frightening. It's probably going to hurt the first time, but you will have the satisfaction of having faced fear in order to do something important.

Such is the fear newcomers have of this Step that the Big Book, Little Red Book and Twelve and Twelve all spend more time on the need to overcome it than any other aspect. "[F]ew Steps are harder to take than Five. But scarcely any Step is more necessary to longtime sobriety and peace of mind than this one, "the Twelve and Twelve says. "No one ought to say the A.A. program requires no willpower; here is one place you may require all you've got."

...we still suffered many of the old pangs of anxious apartness. Until we had talked with complete candor of our conflicts, and had listened to someone else do the same thing, we still didn't belong. Step Five was the answer. It was the beginning of true kinship with man and God.

My friend Harold, one of the half dozen people I remember from my first time in A.A., is fond of saying that the Fifth Step is the only one which emphasizes human beings more than God. This is true: the Big Book only mentions God in the introduction and at the very end of the directions for this Step; both the Little Red Book and Twelve and Twelve state outright that confessing our shortcomings to God alone is inadequate. Harold likes this particular passage in the Twelve and Twelve since it demonstrates this heavy emphasis on the primary importance of talking things over with someone:

Until we actually sit down and talk aloud about what we have so long hidden, our willingness to clean house is still largely theoretical. When we are honest with another person, it confirms that we have been honest with ourselves and with God.

I like this passage because these two sentences sum up the reason for the Step very neatly. They contain everything we really need to know - the rest is just helpful hints and promises of spiritual results.

For example:

More than most people, the alcoholic leads a double life. He is very much the actor. To the outer world he presents his stage character. This is the one he likes his fellows to see. He wants to enjoy a certain reputation, but knows in his heart he doesn't deserve it.

There was always that mysterious barrier we could neither surmount nor understand.

Before we begin our drinking careers, we often had many negative feelings - depression, low self-worth, resentment, fear, jealousy and the like - feelings we

hid from others. Then we learned that alcohol made isolation more bearable. As the drinking increased and our lives became more and more unmanageable, the need to hide our bad deeds only strengthened that mysterious barrier. Coming into A.A. and quitting alcohol, we are still left with those feeling of shame over what we are (our defective characters) and guilt over our actions (harms done).

We search for an easier [and softer?] way — which usually consists of the general and fairly painless admission that when drinking we were sometimes bad actors. Then, for good measure, we add dramatic descriptions of that part of our drinking behavior which our friends probably know about anyhow.

But of the things which really bother and burn us, we say nothing. Certain distressing or humiliating memories, we tell ourselves, ought not be shared with anyone.

It is easy to talk about some of the events in my drinking history, even the more serious ones. I routinely tell the story of getting my second DWI on the way to see an out of state lawyer for the first one. In fact, I told it again in a meeting just last night as I write this, and it got a lot of laughs, as it usually does. But why shouldn't we laugh? We have recovered and have been given the power to help others.

Sometimes it is the smaller and seemingly minor things we've felt, thought or done that truly reveal the inner person that we've been hiding all this time, often before the drinking even started. We break through that mysterious barrier by voluntarily taking off the protective armor of the public face we put on for others, ending the facade, the secrets, the lies. We begin with one person, take the plunge by deciding to trust another human being with these things we've been hiding. Since it is from other people we have been hiding things, it is to people we must reveal them now, beginning with the person we

choose. Once we've started talking, it really does get easier. When we're done, having trusted him or her with what we've been hiding for so long, and feeling the immediate relief of having done so, the barrier is broken. It is now easier to trust a few intimate friends with the deeper things on our minds and our relations with more casual acquaintances are now more relaxed, for we no longer have deep, dark secrets to hide from them. We truly can look the world in the eye.

There are three Steps which absolutely require the participation of another person - Five, Nine and Twelve. Step Five is the only one in which we get to choose the person involved, the others are determined either by who we've harmed in the past or the present availability and willingness of a newcomer. Discussion on picking the one to hear the exact nature of our wrongs takes up a great deal more space in all three books we are examining than descriptions of the actual conversation we end up having.

The Big Book, having been written as a how-to guide for lone alcoholics without access to the two existing groups of that time, recommends "someone ordained by an established religion," "a close-mouthed, understanding friend. Perhaps our doctor or psychologist." Even a family member will do if he or she won't be hurt by our revelations. Surprisingly, the Little Red Book, written after A.A. had become well established and A.A. sponsors were available, directs the newcomer to "arrange an interview with anyone outside A.A. who will be UNDERSTANDING BUT UNAFFECTED by your narration." It even goes so far as to say that "a perfect stranger is our best bet - the doctor, lawyer, psychiatrist, priest or minister. Any of these will serve our purpose."

The Twelve and Twelve has the longest discussion on picking the person to hear our confession. It goes through all the choices offered in the earlier books and offers another choice: one's sponsor, that role having become the near-universal institution we all know today. Step Five is the last one in the Twelve and Twelve which outlines a major role for the sponsor in the recovery process: sponsors are barely

mentioned after Step Five, and not at all in Steps Six, Seven, Eight and Eleven. But the new person might tell some or all of our story to someone else, perhaps someone outside of A.A., even a complete stranger. I have only heard one or two people share about doing it with their clergyman and perhaps another one or two with their psychologist. Although these choices are listed in all three books, this seems to be fairly rare. I have never heard of anyone deliberately dividing up their Fifth Step among two or more people, but it probably happens. I never had any doubt I'd be sharing my Fifth Step - all of it - with Dan, my sponsor.

We pocket our pride and go to it, illuminating every twist of character, every dark cranny of the past.

This one sentence appears to be the only description in the Big Book of the conversation that takes place in Step Five. The book then begins describing the emotional and spiritual effects that happen soon after, the Fifth Step Promises. The conversation itself is essential, but the idea behind it is self-explanatory and need little elaboration. The Twelve and Twelve spends somewhat more time on the talk, but is still relatively brief:

When your mission is carefully explained, and it is seen by the recipient of your confidence how helpful he can really be, the conversation will start easily and will soon become eager. Before long, your listener may well tell a story or two about himself which will place you even more at ease. Provided you hold back nothing, your sense of relief will mount from minute to minute. The dammed-up emotions of years break out of their confinement, and miraculously vanish as soon as they are exposed.

Both of these passages describe my Fifth Step experience, especially the latter.

Dan and I met for brunch the next Sunday morning after watching the video. As we ate he talked about how important this Step was and before investing the time and emotional energy into hearing me out, he wanted my assurance that I was serious about continuing the program. I gave it willingly, for I truly meant business. In the years since, and after having 'lost' a few newcomers to fear or complacency, I have also asked for similar assurance. We then went to the Sunday meeting at the since we both thought that would help get us into a spiritual plane. After that, we went to a local park and talked as we walked for several hours, including a brief dinner break.

I didn't know how to begin, but he agreed when I suggested that he ask me questions to get us going. The conversation started hesitantly, not easily, but it did become eager and soon became a give-and-take, as he revealed a few things about himself along the way. Relief did mount minute by minute as the defensive barriers came down and we stood together on the Broad Highway, exploring it together. I held nothing back, but alas, we didn't have time to explore every nook and cranny of the past.

We met again at the first opportunity, two Sundays later. We spent another several hours together after a meeting at the club, as before. Dan and I explored more of the past until I was talked out. We had covered everything I could think of, leaving nothing out. Then he had one more question to ask as a way to top things off: What are the five qualities I dislike most about myself? It didn't take me long to come up with six items, which we discussed as the final part of my Fifth Step. This became my third list, after the list of my defects and the separate list of harms done.

After we were done with our second and last talk, Dan and I parted and I went home. I did not spend an hour quietly, looking at the Big Book and reviewing the first five Steps. But I did spend some time contemplating what we'd talked about.

The Big Book has some grand predictions of what happens after taking this Step, known informally as the Fifth Step Promises:

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 may have had certain spiritual beliefs, but now we begin to have a spiritual experience. The feeling that the drink problem has disappeared will often come strongly. We feel we are on the Broad Highway, walking hand in hand with the Spirit of the Universe.

The Twelve and Twelve is equally effusive:

The dammed-up emotions of years break out of their confinement, and miraculously vanish as soon as they are exposed. As the pain subsides, a healing tranquility takes its place. And when humility and serenity are so combined, something else of great moment is apt to occur. Many an A.A., once agnostic or atheistic, tells us that it was during this stage of Step Five that he first actually felt the presence of God. And even those who had faith already often become conscious of God as they never were before.

Having had a spiritual experience as a result of the first three Steps, and not believing in God as such, I had a more modest reaction after my Fifth Step. I felt great emotional relief, of course, and a sense of accomplishment. I was fulfilling the mission that had been given to me, and which carried me through the pain of Step Four. The Little Red Book says "You have no reason to doubt the psychological and spiritual value offered" in taking this Step. I think this passage from William James balances these two types of benefits and better describes what happened to me:

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticizes it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible

touch with something higher, if anything higher exist. Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him, even though it may be but a most helpless germ... He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.

Six and Seven

A couple of notable things happened right after we finished Step Five, both relating to my new car.

My youngest brother Brandon had said months earlier that things were much less expensive in the neighboring state where he lived and that he could help me get a good deal on a car. At nine months' sobriety and after nearly a year of not driving, I was finally ready. Using the money I'd sent him, he bought it and had it inspected where he lived before bringing it to me. This saved me a great deal of trouble, since during my probation I couldn't drive a car unless it had a breathalyzer installed. Brandon even volunteered to keep the car in his name and on his insurance. It was a little older than I'd expected and the mileage was a little high, but I was glad to have a car again.

Dan was able to drive the car and me over to the facility to install the "Blow and Go" device so I could legally drive. I watched a training video in the office while the work was being done. The next "customer" came in while I was still waiting for the car to be finished and began watching the same video. The contrast between us was stark: where I knew that this device enabled me to drive and was a small price to pay for the newfound freedom, he sat with arms crossed over his chest and watched the tape with a very unhappy look on his face.

Thinking back on it later, I realized that, unlike that other person who'd been caught for I knew I'd done it and didn't hold anything against the people who installed the breathalyzer. In fact, I never harbored any negative feelings toward the judge who gave me probation, my probation officer or even the three arresting officers who put me in handcuffs. Even if I'd done my Fourth Step straight from the Big Book, none of these people would have appeared on the resentment list. I only realized it after seeing the man's reaction. This is a prime example of new events casting light on old ones: it is largely how I remembered items for my one and only Fourth Step and

how I grow in understanding of the past as I continue to take personal inventory in the present in the Tenth Step.

When doing the inventory, we must ask, "Where were we to blame?" (Big Book) and "drop the word 'blame' from our speech and thought." (Twelve and Twelve) I had then and still have a certain amount of self-centeredness, but never enough to deceive myself in these matters. You must be really deluded not to see your part in that kind of situation. Therefore, I began the recovery process with a measure of perspective and humility that perhaps not all of us had in the beginning. This was another blessing in addition to my lack of material problems, enabled me to focus solely on recovery early on.

Only a few weeks later, I went to start the car and it was dead. Opening the hood, I saw the battery was corroded and held in place with bungee cords. The car a mess. The insight into this issue was immediate. Instead of being angry at Brandon, my instinctive reaction was to realize that he always lived in a very unmanageable way (despite not being an alcoholic or addict). He often took "shortcuts" in life and must have traded a favor to pass the car through inspection, for it never would have passed honestly. Nor would it have passed inspection in my state if I'd tried to transfer it into my name - hence his telling me to keep it registered to him. The car was legally tagged, registered and insured, so that part was fine. I was not angry after a moment's reflection, for Brandon had not intentionally ripped me off - he was just doing things to get by the way he usually did. It was almost as if I said to myself, "This is a sick man... save me from being angry." I WAS saved from being angry, and it came automatically. I was immediately aware of this tolerance for Brandon and lack of anger - the Tenth Step in action. Clearly, I was learning from the Steps, not merely doing them by rote with Dan.

I was able to do a quick fix on the battery and go about my business. The next time I went to the facility for my monthly breathalyzer reading, I spoke casually about the car situation and the manager was

happy to do me a favor by making a more permanent repair for me. I must have been one of the very few cheerful convicted DWI clients he had for him to go out of his way like that. When my probation was over and I got the device taken out, he even invited me to come back just to talk and socialize.

Getting the car marked my return to normal life, materially speaking. I also got my first cell phone around the same time.

It seems to me that Steps Six and Seven are like the unclaimed luggage of the Steps, the red-headed stepchildren of the program. Unlike any of the others, I don't think I've ever heard anyone talk about either of these Steps being among their favorites. Like Step Five, the idea behind these two Steps is so simple that little explanation is needed. But unlike Five, Six and Seven have no lengthy discussion of the need for them or who to take them with, as they appear designed to be taken alone.

Step Six is only one paragraph in the Big Book, and it expands only slightly on the Step as written in How It Works. In the Fourth Step Promises, "We have begun to comprehend their futility and their fatality. We have commenced to see their terrible destructiveness." and at the beginning of Step Five "We have admitted certain defects; we have ascertained in a rough way what the trouble is; we have put our finger on the weak items in our personal inventory." Step Six is about the willingness we have acquired in Four and Five to be rid of the things in ourselves we have just listed. This Step serves to emphasize and reinforce that willingness. It also prepares us for the next Step in the same way that we "thought well before taking this step [Three] making sure we were ready."

Step Seven, also a single paragraph, is a renewal and expansion of the Third Step. The Seventh Step Prayer begins, notably, with a statement of willingness, then the request is made to "remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows." In the Third Step Prayer, we are to say (or express the idea without reservation) "Relieve me of the bondage

of self, that I may better do Thy will." Remembering that self-will and defects of character are *the same thing*, the two prayers are substantially the same. The main difference between them is us, for by now we have inventory of our grosser handicaps and have a better idea of what specifically is blocking us from the sunlight of the spirit.

Describing my experience in taking these two Steps requires less space than the Big Book devotes to them. However, I will discuss some spiritual context, as both the Little Red Book and Twelve and Twelve do.

One thing that struck me years after going through the Steps was that these are the first positive Steps in the program. The first five are all about alcoholism, unmanageability, insanity, our wrongs, the humiliating act of confessing them, the wreckage of the past, etc. But Steps Six and Seven, coming exactly in the middle of the program, are concerned with removing defects of character which are manifestations of the self-will that blocks us. Though Steps Three through Five have promises at the end which describe the gradual unfolding of the spiritual awakening that culminates after Step Nine, Six and seven do not (nor does Eight). But Six and Seven *by their very nature* are concerned with spiritual progress.

If Steps Four and Five are thought of as the diagnosis of the spiritual sickness, then Six and Seven are the treatment. Steps Eight and Nine, which return once again with the wreckage of the past, are the rehabilitation in which the damage to ourselves and others stemming from the disease is undone. More promises come after this phase of our development - very extensive ones indeed.

The Twelve and Twelve spends some time in Step Six discussing natural instincts, echoing language from Step Four. It then segues into a possible source of resistance to our readiness to have our defects/excessive instincts removed: some of them are actually pleasant. It only occurred to me after several years how this insight reflects on the idea of the moral inventory itself: the Big Book concentrates on Resentment and Fear, two defects with

strong negative emotions that are as easy to detect as they are unpleasant. The Twelve and Twelve discusses a much wider range of defects in Step Four, as I wrote earlier. But the idea of different types of defects, pleasant and unpleasant ones, is now discussed in greater detail. There is also the notion here that character defects can have painful, ruinous effects or have milder, "less violent aspects." The latter remind me of the need in Step Ten to detect a "subtle and elusive kind of self-righteousness [that] can underlie the smallest thought or action" (Twelve and Twelve) and our function "to grow in understanding" (Big Book), which I take to mean discovering hidden parts of our character. This discussion of different types of character defects and different effects here could well have been included in Step Four or Step Ten instead, but in any event it has enhanced my understanding of both.

Just as the Step Six chapter of the Twelve and Twelve (at least for me) sheds more light on the inventory Steps Four and Ten than on Six itself, a close reading of the Twelve and Twelve's chapter on Step Seven is almost entirely a lengthy discussion of humility. With that quality serving as a measure of spiritual growth, it is largely an overview of the progress we make in moving from the problem of alcoholism/self-will to the solution, which is spiritual awakening/God's will.

A few excerpts show our typical evolution concerning humility:

[W]e first see humility as a necessity. But this is the barest beginning. To get completely away from our aversion to the idea of being humble, to gain a vision of humility as the avenue to true freedom of the human spirit, to be willing to work for humility as something to be desired for itself, takes most of us a long, long time. A whole lifetime geared to self-centeredness cannot be set in reverse all at once. Rebellion dogs our every step at first...

[O]ur crippling handicap had been our lack of humility. We had lacked the perspective to see that character-building and spiritual values had to come first, and that material satisfactions were not the purpose of living...

As long as we placed self-reliance first, a genuine reliance upon a Higher Power was out of the question. That basic ingredient of all humility, a desire to seek and do God's will, was missing...

We saw we needn't always be bludgeoned and beaten into humility. It could come quite as much from our voluntary reaching for it as it could from unremitting suffering. A great turning point in our lives came when we sought for humility as something we really wanted, rather than as something we must have...

The only mention of actually taking the Step is at the top of the last page in the chapter:

As we approach the actual taking of Step Seven, it might be well if we A.A.'s inquire once more just what our deeper objectives are...

If that degree of humility could enable us to find the grace by which such a deadly obsession [alcoholism] could be banished, then there must be hope of the same result respecting any other problem we could possibly have.

This valuable discussion seems to be linked to Step Seven only by the emphasis on humility: it would be just as appropriate after Step Nine, when the spiritual awakening occurs, or in Step Twelve, which describes many aspects of that awakening.

The Little Red Book discusses Steps Six and Seven together, and also spends most of the time discussing the benefits, not the actual taking of them.

For example:

This action [Steps six and Seven] brings a heretofore unknown feeling of moral strength. For the first time we are facing our REAL SELVES - the selves whose withered roots have touched and are now drawing upon an unfailing source of assurance, power and security.

We find in the consummation of these steps a NEW PEACE, a release from TENSION and ANXIETY as we are now laying our misconceptions, our defects of character in God's hands... We feel an intense humility that cries out for recognition and Divine Help.

One can't help but be reminded of the Big Book's Fifth Step Promises in this passage. Next come the objectives and results of these two Steps, which are, in effect, Sixth and Seventh Step Promises:

The several objectives of Steps Six and Seven are:

1. To gain an intimate contact with this POWER GREATER THAN OURSELVES.
2. To perfect ourselves in the practice of unselfish prayer.
3. To be aware of our defective character traits.
4. To desire their removal.
5. Complete surrender of all defects of character
6. To believe that God CAN remove them
7. To ask Him to take them all away

The results we expect from pursuit of these objectives are:

1. A reconciliation to God's way of doing business...
2. A willingness to work out a plan for suppression of self-centeredness...
3. To experience dissatisfaction and remorse as a result of our alcoholic practices...
4. Increased faith, clean hearts and minds, ability to offer unselfish prayer.
5. A spiritual courage that is fearless in its outlook on life...
6. A desire to quit bluffing and honestly give God a chance to remove from our lives all that stands in the way of our usefulness to Him, and to others.
7. Elimination of our defective character traits, acquisition of humility.

Dan and I continued our work about a month after we finished Step Five. The Holiday Season was upon us at the time and we both had work and family obligations. We saw each other at meetings and when he helped me with my car, but our time for deeper conversations was limited for a while. Neither the Big Book, the Little Red Book nor the Twelve and Twelve discuss the help of a sponsor or another person. For some reason it has become much more common in recent decades for the sponsor to take the lead in working the Steps, so we waited until we could meet.

Around the time I had ten months, we met and had a talk for a few hours. A lot of it was a general discussion of how things were going and catching up with each other. Somewhere in the middle of this he asked, regarding Step Six, if I was willing to be rid of the things we'd talked about in our earlier long talks. I was able to honestly and unreservedly say "Yes." That was about it. I'm not sure, but I don't think we even discussed Seven.

I have never said the Seventh Step Prayer from the Big Book. I do not have that kind of Higher Power, not then and not now. Dan had introduced me early on to the Eleventh Step suggestions in the Big Book, and I had adapted them to fit my spiritual outlook. What I did after that brief talk about Step Six was to continue my morning ritual of expressing a hope and desire to be free of self-centeredness and selfish motives and thinking. Though none of the books mention repeating Step Seven, in effect I wish for a 'daily reprieve' from my character defects, as opposed to one 'big prayer' to remove defects.

The Little Red Book does specifically discuss directions for taking this Step, unlike the Twelve and Twelve. Though I didn't know it at the time, the idea of a different prayer in Step Seven is as old as the Little Red Book:

Knowledge of our alcoholic problem prompts us to turn to God for help. The alcoholic must pray. There is no standard form of prayer to use. Our remorse over past mistakes and a genuine desire to correct them will indicate how we shall pray.

In this scenario we ask for certain qualities, among them "protection from self-pity, from resentments, from all selfishness. We ask for wisdom and understanding to know His will. We ask HIM to keep us willing to follow the A.A. program... We acknowledge our many shortcomings. WE HUMBLY ASK HIM TO REMOVE THEM." The Big Book suggests using one's own words for the Third Step Prayer, which I did, and the Little Red Book does so with the Seventh.

There is another way that my daily practice continues the spirit of Steps Six and Seven. The Twelve and Twelve discusses the idea of actively working for a goal in Step Six, almost implying action:

If we ask, God will certainly forgive our derelictions. But in no case does He render us white as snow and keep us that way without our cooperation. That is something we are supposed

to be willing to work toward ourselves. He asks only that we try as best we know how to make progress in the building of character.

In other words, we are not "laying our misconceptions, our defects of character in God's hands" (as the Little Red Book says). We are an active agent in our moral and spiritual growth. Neither the Big Book or Little Red Book envision repeating this Step, but the Twelve and Twelve praises the person who has the "willingness and honesty to try repeatedly Step Six on all his faults." Character building, part of the improvement sought in Steps Six and Seven, is also mentioned in Step Ten in the Twelve and Twelve:

Learning daily to spot, admit, and correct these flaws is the essence of character-building and good living.

The Big Book version of Step Ten also makes an implicit connection to Six and Seven:

Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God at once to remove them.

Continuing to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear/learning to spot defects of character shows the willingness of Step Six and correcting these flaws/asking God at once to remove them are the essence of Step Seven. I almost never think of these Steps outside of meetings or working with newcomers. The daily practice of maintenance Steps Ten and Eleven embody the spirit of Six and Seven: there is no need to repeat these middle Steps.

Eight and Nine

Around the time I was talking with Dan about Steps Eight and Nine, it was getting within a month or so of my first anniversary - nearly six months since Dan and I had started working together. The people at the club I'd been going to for the last few months thought celebrating anniversaries was important - especially for newcomers. None of my other groups held celebrations, but this one did.

I was pretty skeptical about seeming to take credit for being sober when we're taught from the beginning to depend on a Higher Power to get sober. And being the center of attention for an entire meeting didn't appeal to me either. But Dan said that since this group, which I liked a great deal, put such emphasis on anniversaries and encouraged me to celebrate, it might be a good idea to do so. He felt it might seem like a snub to the group if I didn't.

So I celebrated my first anniversary a while later when the time came. I had Dan and someone from the group speak for me and invited a few friends from my other groups. My friend and co-worker Christine came too. It was not as nerve-wracking as I'd expected, and I was glad I did it. It was nice to get one of those heavy brass chips after all the lightweight aluminum ones I'd gotten each month up until then. (I've kept all my chips over the years in my desk drawer, which is mere inches away from my right hand as I type this out.) I ended up celebrating my first five anniversaries there at the club.

People I've been close to in the program have had different attitudes about anniversaries. In the time I knew him Dan only celebrated once, and then only because he was moving away soon and it happened to be a round numbered anniversary. Other years, he'd just get a chip and keep it at home. Paul, now my closest friend and confidante, neither celebrates nor gets a chip. His sponsor John, the man who helped introduce me to the Tenth Step, giving me hope in my hour of greatest need, celebrates every year. He is the one person who I *know* means it when he says it's "for the

newcomer." This is true because he is very attentive to new people and always has a fairly new person speak for him. John is such an obviously humble man that you simply must believe him when he says his celebration is not about him. So many people say that, but the focus nearly always remains on the person with the anniversary.

I've only celebrated once since that last time at the club, and I may never do it again. That was on my tenth anniversary, and only because it was a chance for one of my sponsees to speak after the milestone of his Fifth Step, which we had just completed. It was his first time leading a meeting and he did a very good job (Ironically, it was also just about the last time I ever saw him.) Now I just get a chip every year and keep it in my pocket until the next year rolls around. It's there whenever I look for change at the checkout line in a store. People sometimes see it and ask what it is - and without mentioning A.A. alcoholism, I merely say that some friends gave it to me for not drinking for this many years. (They will either congratulate me effusively or lapse into embarrassed silence. Perhaps that's happened to you if the subject of past drinking ever comes up in conversation.) Once in a while it's an "undercover alcoholic" who sees my chip and reveals his secret identity and starts a conversation with me. That's always a pleasant surprise when it happens.

The Big Book has little to say about the Eighth Step, only a single paragraph, just like Six and Seven. As with the other two, the short passage on Eight merely re-emphasizes the quality of willingness that we should already have. After all, the last of the Fourth Step promises reads "we have listed the people we have harmed by our conduct and are willing to straighten out the past if we can."

I happened to hear an episode of the Recovery Radio podcast as I began thinking of Step Eight for this book, and the host summed it up very nicely. He said that Steps Six, Seven and Eight in the Big Book are statements more than Steps - for the very reason I just mentioned here and in the last chapter. They

really are nothing new, except that instead being implied as the result of the earlier Steps, the willingness in Six through Eight is stated outright. Bill stated that one of the main reasons for expanding the former word of mouth recovery program to twelve Steps was to any 'wriggle room' for the lone alcoholics using the Big Book to get sober, hence the need to avoid any confusion over what was expected. It is important to emphasize willingness at this point to ensure we wholeheartedly accept the program of recovery, as Dr. Tiebout wrote, and are not merely complying. A potentially difficult Step comes after this one, and sincerity based on wholehearted willingness will help ensure we carry it out successfully.

The Little Red Book adds little to the Big Book's treatment of Step Eight, but does mention one new idea not in the Big Book: "FEW of us realize that our own names head the list of those have wronged..." (The Twelve and Twelve also mentions "the emotional harm we have done ourselves," but does not go so far as to recommend putting ourselves on our own Eight Step list.) It never fails to make me cringe when someone shares this notion in a meeting. The idea of making amends to oneself in the same way we do for others is nearly as bad as the slogan "Whoever got up earliest today has the most sobriety." We are taught to think of ourselves less in A.A., and of others more: we recover from alcoholism through the program and become better people. *That* is our reward. In fact, that is what the Little Red Book itself goes on to say in the next part of the sentence above: "...and that by living this program we are first making amends to ourselves - to our outraged constitutions - to our confused minds and to our troubles spirits." I ended up agreeing with the LRB years before ever reading it! People often seem to forget this last part.

As we saw earlier, the Twelve and Twelve expands Six and Seven from one paragraph each to an entire chapter by placing them in a larger spiritual context but adding little in the way of new directions. Not so with Step Eight: the Twelve and Twelve has more to

say on all the Steps except One and Nine than the Big Book, but especially in this case (and most of all with Step Eleven).

The difference can be seen in two sentences describing Step Eight. The Big Book says of the list of people we have harmed, "We made it when we took inventory." The Twelve and Twelve says of a survey of the human wreckage the alcoholic has left behind him, "TO A DEGREE, he has already made it when taking moral inventory, but now the time has come when he ought to redouble his efforts to see how many people he has hurt, and in what ways." (Emphasis added) This redoubling of effort is what I did, in effect, though Dan and I were not explicitly following the Twelve and Twelve's suggestion. I just found it easier to understand the process by keeping separate lists of character defects for Four and of harmful acts for Eight, adding to the latter long after our Step Five discussions.

The ways in which we have harmed others is certainly a matter worth considering. Just as we discuss the "exact nature of our wrongs" in Step Five, meaning the motives behind them, our Step Nine amends should be shaped by the exact nature of the harms done, not by the acts that produced them. In looking at my own list, I didn't find much that needed further examination: I knew what I did and the effect on others was fairly obvious. But one can imagine more complex situations from the past that do need more thought to fully understand and rectify.

While the purpose of making restitution to others 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 difficulties that we can.

This is an even larger expansion of Step Eight's mission. Step Eight thus becomes another inventory Step to go with Four and Ten, though one with our personal interactions as the subject matter instead of thoughts and actions. But like the Fourth Step, I

see the Eighth as being continued, when needed in Step Ten, the continuous examination of the present - and the past. The advantage is that by the Tenth Step, after certain changes that take place, we have clearer insight that at this point.

The Big Book and Twelve and Twelve discuss amends to different groups of people, including business acquaintances and friends, enemies, creditors and wives, with the Big Book devoting chapters to wives, families and employers that spell out what is expected of recovering alcoholics after they stop drinking. The Little Red Book, in discussing Step Nine, makes an explicit list of categories of people potentially owed amends: 1) Friends and business associates, 2) Families, 3) Creditors and 4) The deceased. (My Eighth Step list was actually written like this, on index cards with names divided into groups such as family, friends, current and past jobs, and miscellaneous people I'd previously wronged in some way.)

Regarding the deceased, the Little Red Book reads, "We reason that the harm done would be partly offset by the new philosophy we are living." It seems reasonable to extend this principle to other cases where we cannot make direct amends due to circumstances involved. The book also mentions the need to make amends to God Himself, about which it says, "The A.A. program is ONE BIG AMEND broken up into twelve parts." One wonders if this is the source of the idea of "living amends" that is now part of A.A. grassroots wisdom.

The Little Red Book contains another useful Step Nine discussion which impacts our Eighth Step list:

We are often inclined to clutter up our list with petty wrongs long forgotten and of no great importance. Amends of this sort would never end; they should be forgotten. Many of us have been uncertain over the advisability of making some amends. The yardstick to use in this connection is your conscience; if the wrong bothers you it should undoubtedly be amended.

This sounds like an important and valuable limiting principle regarding amends. Certainly, we don't want to spend years tracking down or waiting to encounter every person we ever had words with or inconvenienced in some way - even more so if the incident in question was in the distant past. Going out of our way to bring up such petty things they may not even remember could be more of a bother than the original events.

Conscience as our yardstick in making amends sounds appealing to me. Years after my own Eighth and Ninth Steps, and also years before reading the Little Red Book, I heard a similar piece of advice in a meeting regarding whether to make amends to someone. This is called "The Grocery Store test": if you imagine meeting anyone you know by chance in the grocery store or wherever, and you'd be EMBARRASSED to see them, then you should think seriously about why you'd feel that way and what amends you probably owe them for past misdeeds. It is wise to let our newly-inspired instincts guide us, rather than a rigid adherence to the letter of Steps Eight and Nine, or some rational formula we may come up with.

Step Nine is not easily or quickly carried out. Some restitution is started upon our acceptance of the A.A. program as a "Way of Life." This is usually quite limited as it is not until we have spent several months in A.A. and have fortified our sobriety with good fundamental knowledge of the program that we acquire the courage and understanding to discreetly dispense reparation.

This passage from The Little Red Book shows its influence in the second one from the Twelve and Twelve, which came out several years later:

Good judgement, a careful sense of timing, courage and prudence - these are the qualities we shall need when we take Step Nine... Most of us begin making certain kinds of direct amends from the day we join Alcoholics

Anonymous. The moment we tell our families that we are really going to try the program, the process has begun.

Both books agree that starting A.A. and talking about that with people we have affected is a beginning of making amends to them. The Big Book, written as a guide for lone alcoholics hoping to recover without benefit of the new fellowship, is silent on this matter.

The major difference between all three books is at what stage amends should be made. We see that The Little Red Book advocates several months in A.A. to develop the courage and understanding to do so properly. Dr. Bob famously made his amends on the very day he had his last drink and pill, a story referred to in A Vision For You. The Twelve and Twelve says that simpler amends at home can begin very quickly, and for many amends at work as soon as "several weeks," if we first make sure "we are on the A.A. beam" [a phrase used earlier in the Little Red Book] before attempting reparations. Based on what I've heard in meetings in the course of my time in A.A., the Little Red Book is closest to current reality, and may even be fairly optimistic as to how quickly many people begin actual amends.

One thing all three books agree on is a limited role for the newcomer getting advice in making most amends. The Big Book recounts a member asking the authors for advice in a matter which might involve his going to jail, and makes the general statement:

Before taking drastic action which might implicate other people we secure their consent. If we have obtained permission, have consulted with others, asked God to help and the drastic step is indicated we must not shrink.

The Little Red Book offers this guidance:

The older members [of A.A.] will be helpful, if consulted, whenever perplexities are encountered. Do not act hastily or in doubt -

invite their opinions - then formulate a plan of action with God and start making right the wrongs for which you are responsible.

And lastly, the Twelve and Twelve has this to say about the 'razor-edged question' that can arise in different departments of life, situations with heavy consequences or which may affect others:

Are we going to be so rigidly righteous about making amends that we don't care what happens to the family and home? Or do we first consult those who are to be gravely affected? Do we lay the matter before our sponsor or spiritual adviser, earnestly asking God's help and guidance - meanwhile resolving to do the right thing when it becomes clear, cost what it may? Of course, there is no pat answer which can fit all such dilemmas.

None of the three books recommend the advice of others for simple, routine amends to those we have hurt. When third parties may be affected or 'perplexities are encountered', we are to get advice, but it is clear that any human advice is not meant to be the final word. This is a far cry from the now-common sentiment that we must run everything past our sponsors and do what he or she says.

The fact is that almost all of my amends were of the simple, routine variety. As I wrote earlier in Eight, I had little drama in my drinking life and was not a major troublemaker for those around me. No advice was needed when I began to talk with my friends, family and some co-workers, nor did I ask Dan for any. He did share a few stories of his own amends as general guidance, and I shared about some of my talks with others after the fact. There was only one situation that required Dan's advice, and it perplexed me enough to later consult others. We'll save that one for last, in part because it was the last and most important Ninth Step issue I ever dealt with.

That first phone conversation I had with my father at three months falls under the category of a beginning amends by joining A.A. As with most of my amends, I was not consciously thinking of Step Nine, and many of them came before I was formally at this point in the program. The talk with Dad, like many of the other conversations I had with friends and family, was motivated by an instinctive desire to clear the air. By talking about my problem and what I was now doing to get over it, I believe I ended up dispelling their worry and confusion about my past and create hope for my future in recovery.

There may be some wrongs we can never fully right. We don't worry about them if we can honestly say to ourselves that we would right them if we could.

My mother died three years before I got sober, as I mentioned earlier. There were one or two things I said growing up - over and above the usual parent/child disagreements - that made her cry. I know from my father that I caused both of them to worry when my drinking took off after moving out on my own. She did not live to see me get sober my second time in A.A. but did see me fail my first time and go back to drinking for over ten years before she passed.

There is no way I can make direct amends. I have heard people share that on the advice of their sponsors they wrote letters to deceased relatives or friends, sometimes read them at the gravesites and burning the letters afterward. That never appealed to me, but it certainly helped those people. I cannot make things up to my mother now, but I can honestly say to myself that I would if I could. As it turns out, I was able to do something to 'pay it forward' later on. More about that later.

We feel that elimination of our drinking is but a beginning. A much more important demonstration of our principles lies before us in our

respective homes, occupations and affairs.

I am single and childless, so my 'household' consisted of myself and the roommate/tenant who rented my extra bedroom during my heaviest drinking phase. He lived with my drunken presence for some time before I got sober. Nothing outrageous happened, for I was by and large a quiet drunk. But even 'high bottom' alcoholics like me have minor chaos going on around them. I fell asleep once while cooking something in the oven and it burned, causing the smoke alarm to go off. Small things like that. He was free to move out any time he wished, but the relatively low rent seemed to partially compensate for the unpleasant atmosphere. In my last full year of drinking, my tenant lost his job and it took quite a while for him to find another one. Out of contrition for my being somewhat depressing to live with, I allowed him to delay payment for several months, extending into my early sobriety. This was quite a sacrifice on my part, as I was paying off both of my first two DWI lawyers and monthly probation fees on top of my everyday living expenses. For the first time in my life, and despite having two jobs, I was living paycheck-to-paycheck. I never mentioned how poor I was during this time or that I was trying to make up for my behavior and lifestyle. This act of kindness was compensation for my past (and current) behavior, a 'pre-amends' if you will. Certainly, it was meant in that spirit.

The first amends I intentionally made after getting sober was to my former supervisor at the weekday job. None of the replacements hired to replace me worked out for long, and he was often shorthanded and overworked. With Christine's permission, I began doing some of his paperwork to lighten his workload. During especially busy times I went to his department and provided hands-on help, again with Christine's blessing. He thanked me each time I helped, but I always replied that I felt I owed him for all the times in the past when I didn't do a good job or carry my weight. Same thing every time I helped out: he'd thank me and I said, "No, I'm making up for the

past." I never thought of Step Nine, I was just doing it. One day, after I told him yet again I was paying him back, he brushed it aside. He no longer accepted this reply after my helping a number of times, and he treated us to lunch. To my mind, this was a tacit acknowledgement that I had paid my debt to him, and by extension, to the company. He was the one in the best position to judge how much trouble I caused in his department before and how much I'd done to make up for it since. He and Christine were the only ones at the company who knew of my former drinking since that understanding manager retired soon after I got sober. I later went back to that department as its new supervisor.

But our man is sure to be impressed with a sincere desire to set right the wrong. He is going to be more interested in a demonstration of good will than in our talk of spiritual discoveries.

When I was about eighteen months sober I went to visit my father and stepmother at their home, a nine hour drive. The first time I met her was at the home of one of my brothers about a month before she and my father were married, and I was drunk. I didn't say or do anything out of line, but it was certainly disrespectful to show up in that condition. Not a good first impression, to say the least. Now I was sober and about to see them for the first time. It turned out to be a very fruitful visit, quite unrelated to any intention or effort on my part. We all got along fine during my visit, our first meeting having apparently been relegated to the past. I had been keeping my father up to date during our regular phone calls about my progress in A.A. in order to reassure him that he needn't worry about me anymore. While there, I did not talk about anything spiritual or go into detail about what I was doing to stay sober. I merely excused myself a few times that week to go to meetings I'd found online in their area. I did invite both of them to come with me to an open meeting in the next town one night. Dad came, but she

politely declined. It turned out to be a Step Ten meeting, much to my delight. Something magical happened when I was in my car and ready to begin the long drive home. I blew into the breathalyzer installed in the car, started it and as it idled I bid goodbye to them both. Then she leaned in my open window and out of nowhere said to me, "It's a good thing you're doing. Keep it up." I was surprised - and pleased. What she said stayed with me as I drove up I-95 back home. I knew this was an important event. My grand sponsor at the time, Paul (now my closest A.A. friend and confidante), happened to call when I was most of the way home and I told him what had happened. He was also impressed by this turn of events. I was so happy about it that soon after, when a tractor trailer came extremely close to running me off the road, I was hardly bothered. But there's another part of the story that I didn't find out until six months later. My stepmother's daughter was married to an active alcoholic at the time. That man was a real low-bottom drunk who stole, wrote bad checks, lost jobs on a regular basis, was in and out of rehabs, you name it. In other words, she had seen what alcoholics are capable of and how insincere about recovery they can be. But my demeanor must have showed her something she had never seen in her son-in-law (who died around five years ago). This is my second most significant amends story.

I still go down to visit them every year. At some point I began hugging them when arriving and leaving to come back, a habit I learned from the family atmosphere and very friendly people at my A.A. club. We weren't touchy-feely as a family growing up, and neither was my stepmother's family apparently. They accepted this gesture awkwardly for a few years, then loosened up gradually. It now seems very natural to receive and give this expression of love and gratitude.

A few years ago, when I was leaving to return home, I was saying goodbye to my father and uttered a thought that had come to me after some of our conversations in person and on the phone over the years: It was a little funny given my former problem,

but now I was the only one of his three sons that he *didn't* worry about anymore. He laughed because it was true. Both of my younger brothers had issues other than drugs and alcohol that bothered and worried Dad. This was not meant to denigrate my brothers, just to point out the irony of the new dynamic in our family.

Speaking of my brothers, I talked to both of them in my first year or so of sobriety. We had all gotten along pretty well as children and teenagers. There were the usual childhood squabbles growing up, but nothing out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, I felt the need to talk about my past problem and new situation. My middle brother Daniel was rather indifferent when we spoke about it, for as I said, we didn't grow up emphasizing feelings all that much. He mentioned sometime after our talk that he didn't like being compared to me in school when he'd have the same teachers I did the year before, and he sometimes didn't do quite as well (He is now much more successful than I am, by the way). It almost sounded like a resentment on his part, though one which had faded over the years. Obviously there was nothing I could do about that, but on the other hand, I feel no guilt over this since *I didn't cause it*. Just as my own resentments are not always 'caused' by other's actions (my reactions often cause them), resentments toward me are not necessarily my issue to resolve.

As with Dad and Stepmom, I started a kind habit after a few years of sobriety by taking Daniel out to dinner on his birthday. And in the same way they responded to my new hugging habit after a while, after a few years he began taking me out for my birthday as well. We have a fairly good relationship for two non-talkative, middle-aged men with few interests in common aside from family ties.

My youngest brother Brandon was more interested in talking about my past drinking problems. He always lived pretty far away, and unlike my middle brother Daniel, I rarely saw him in person. Brandon never developed the problems I did, but he knew how to party on occasion with drinking and pot. We ended up talking a number of times about my past excesses and attempts at a new life and to make up for the past.

We also had no serious difficulties growing up, and there were no particular incidents either of us needed to address. That changed after I got sober.

Brandon developed financial and other troubles as time went on, and when we heard from it was often because he needed money again. This was only part of what caused my father to worry about him. I began to silently judge him ("Sulking and silent scorn") whenever he called or his name came up in family discussions. As far as I know, this only came out once, when I yelled at him on the phone for only calling when he needed something, never just to talk. It was factually true, but that doesn't make it right. But that outburst served one useful purpose, since he did send Christmas cards that holiday season to the rest of the family for the first time in years.

Brandon came down with cancer and of course we were all supportive - as much as we could be via phone that is, for he lived halfway across the country and the rest of us were not in a position to travel. Treatments were going well, he said, and he was planning a trip back east to visit his stepson's new baby, which was expected in a few months.

I hadn't seen Brandon in person in about 6 years, and I'd only seen him twice since getting sober. I was looking forward to the three of us brothers being together again, if only for a day or two. The thought came to me that it would be a chance to make amends of sorts. Not so much for the time I got angry on the phone, for he seemed to shrug that off and our relationship went on as before. But I felt regret over the way I had judged him - in sobriety no less - for being needy, for poor lifestyle choices and the like. Though I largely kept this from him, the rest of the family talked about him and I took part. It seemed only right that I make some kind of gesture when I could finally see Brandon again in the time of his greatest need, and show him the love, tolerance and compassion I was lacking before - whether he knew it or not.

There are special moments that you come to recognize in A.A., whether you believe they come from

God, Fate or Karma. Brandon called me at work on a Friday about two years ago using a new video app on his phone. We were thus able to see each other for the first time in several years, albeit in digital form. I had limited data, so we switched to regular phone service after a few minutes, and we talked about his upcoming visit to our area. I had to get back to work or we might have spoken longer. If only I had known. He died suddenly the following Monday of a pre-existing heart condition. I cannot make any gesture to him now, but at least there is the consolation in seeing him briefly at the end of his life and that my last words to him were kind ones.

In a vague way their families and friends sense that these drinkers are abnormal, but everybody hopefully awaits the day when the sufferer will arouse himself from his lethargy and assert his power of will.

My oldest friend Dave saw the entire arc of my drinking career. We met in college about forty years ago, long before I developed a problem and watched as I progressed into active alcoholism, tried A.A. for the first time, relapsed, declined further, then finally succeeded this time around. Since my drinking took off after moving away from home and I seldom drank around friends, no one else who knows me well has seen the effect of alcohol on my life as he has. He was the one I was going to visit in Boston when I was arrested for DWI the first time (which led indirectly to my second arrest, you may recall).

One time after getting sober I picked him up from the airport during a visit back to this area to see his mother. I began to talk about my past troubles with alcohol and how I wanted to make things right now. He had seen me drunk in varying degrees more than anyone else over the years and at times I wasn't sure which felt worse: when it bothered him and he said something, or when he said nothing because it just seemed to be expected I'd be a little out of it.

But he cut short my attempt to begin an amends. Dave simply said that we've all had difficult times

in our lives, that he was glad to have the "old Jim back." What he said was true, for he'd had a serious personal crisis a couple of years before my drinking became troublesome. At that time, I was supportive and understanding, and he recovered from that episode. It now seemed that he was repaying my understanding I showed all those years ago.

About a year later I went with him to see her in the hospital when she was on her deathbed. I held her hand and spoke to her, wishing her well and that I was glad to have known her all the time I had been friends with her son. She squeezed my hand in acknowledgement - it was all she could manage. Dave spoke to her one last time, then we left the room as the doctors began unhooking the life support machines in keeping with her stated wishes.

He later said I was helpful then and when he made funeral arrangements. This surprised me, as I did little except pass on a few messages, make minor errands and mostly just be there. But my being there is part of what he found helpful and reassuring. Sometimes friendship is simply a matter of *being there*. (Sponsorship is a lot like that too at times.) When his father passed away three years earlier, I was in my last and heaviest year of drinking and was buzzed the entire time during the arrangements and funeral. I'm quite certain no one noticed, but I was hardly helpful in the family's time of need. I was able to make up for that this time by giving some practical help, providing moral support and giving this wonderful woman the warm sendoff that I couldn't give to my own mother. I hope that my positive involvement here helps make up for what I didn't or couldn't do before. Being sober and attentive to the needs of others enables us to make this type of change for the better.

It does not lighten our burden when we
recklessly make the crosses of others heavier.

My most important amends story concerns the one I didn't make: to the woman whose car I wrecked in my last DWI. That accident I caused, which could have

killed both of us, is easily the worst outcome of my drinking. I had discussed with Dan as we got to this Step when I had around a year. He was hesitant to give a definite opinion, but was doubtful I should approach her, and advised holding off until later. I followed that advice for a few years, but never forgot the issue. Then, when the five year anniversary of the accident was approaching, I began to feel some urgency to deal with it once and for all. I remember clearly at my court hearing that since my insurance was valid and her car was paid for, no reparations were due. But in A.A., we have higher standards than the legal ones found in the court system.

I still had the police report with her name and address and began mentally composing a letter to her. I was going to write that I had gotten sober as a result of the accident and arrest and was in a group that helped others get sober as well. I had changed my ways and was trying to do something to make up for what I had done. Expressing my regret over the damage I caused, I was going to offer to meet her if she liked and hear anything she wanted to say. It was all well-intentioned and I felt pretty good about the endeavor.

Dan and I had parted ways by this point, but I asked other others with good judgement I knew. Andrea, my new confidante from the club, my old friend Paul, my sponsee Phil, and a few other people I looked up to. I asked seven people in all. One person gently suggested that my continued sobriety and efforts to help others get sober were my amends. Two thought it might seem creepy for her to hear from me out of the blue. One man, an old-timer with over thirty-five year's sobriety who had said his sobriety is due mainly to Steps Eight and Nine, consulted with another old-timer and adamantly told me *not* to contact her: the chances of my causing harm was that much greater than the possibility she might be helped by hearing from me. The reasoning was different in most cases, but everyone I asked arrived at the same conclusion.

I had all but written the letter in my mind, but I was dissuaded from typing it out and sending it by the unanimous opinion of my friends. I did not act, but in fully addressing the matter I have laid it to rest. I rarely think about it anymore, and when I do the most common thought is to wish I had hit a tree instead of someone else's car.

The Big Book ends Step Nine with the following well known promises:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

One group I visit every year in another city, my home group away from home, reads these at the beginning of every meeting and calls them The Twelve Promises. Twelve sentences, twelve predictions of positive changes in our outlook on life, our fellows and ourselves. Such changes are the hallmark of a spiritual awakening. There are promises in Steps Three, Four and Five which outline a gradual growth toward this phase of development. But those promises are concerned with internal changes necessary to get to this place. The Ninth Step Promises are not only more numerous, but they also cover a wider range of our thoughts and feelings which guide our actions in the world and relations with others. In my reading of

the literature, these promises are the culmination of the spiritual awakening mentioned in the Steps.

The Little Red Book makes this point rather explicitly:

Step Nine has reclaimed many broken friendships; it has brought peace and happiness to the lives of those who suffered because of our alcoholism. Its great rehabilitative power has also affected the lives of thousands of alcoholics through **the spiritual awakening they have experienced.**

Because of this step, these same alcoholics have recovered their self-respect, the have taken on courage and confidence, they have assumed responsibility. They sense God's presence and with His presence comes the realization that their lives are again manageable.

(Emphasis added)

Having diagnosed our problem of self-will in all its manifestations in Steps Four and Five, then treated the problem by starting to remove it in Six and Seven, then undertaking rehabilitation - our and others - in Steps Eight and Nine, the healing process concludes as we clean up the past.

I have been through these Steps with a sponsor, have relieved the shame of what I was by admitting it, and have done my best to be rid of the guilt over what I've done by correcting those mistakes. Being free of these hindrances, I am now emotionally, mentally and spiritually free to live life on a better basis than before. If there is any doubt as to when the awakening is expected to happen, see what all three of these books say about a new life beginning in Step Ten. Or just turn the page in this book, for I'm just about to get into that!

Ten

This thought brings us to *Step Ten*, which suggests we continue to take personal inventory and continue to set right any new mistakes as we go along. We vigorously commenced this way of living as we cleaned up the past.

AS we work the first nine Steps, we prepare ourselves for the adventure of a new life. But when we approach Step Ten we commence to put our A.A. way of living to practical use, day by day, in fair weather or foul.

It is clear from these opening lines from the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve respectively, that we enter a new phase of recovery beginning with Step Ten. The first nine Steps, through which we clean up the past, prepare us for a new way of living. We neither regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it, and see how our experience can benefit others, but at the same time the past has been taken care of. "We have made our demonstration, done our part. It's water over the dam."

We have entered the world of the Spirit.

This third sentence of the Big Book's brief Step Ten is quite revealing. 'World of the Spirit', like 'Fellowship of the Spirit' and 'Realm of the Spirit' elsewhere in the Big Book, indicates a spiritual awakening has taken place. The broad outlines of this awakening are found on the Promises in Steps Three, Four, Five and especially in Step Nine in the Big Book.

The Little Red Book says this in Step Ten:

Remember that your NEW PERSONALITY IS NOT COMPATIBLE WITH MORAL DEFECTS OR CONCEALED ERRORS. (Emphasis in the original)

In other words, a 'new personality' has been acquired at this point, the psychic change having occurred.

There is no indication whatever in the Big Book that any of the first nine Steps ought to be repeated. The Twelve and Twelve does mention a few times practicing all twelve Steps, and a few of the individual Steps discuss repeated application. But there is little in the way of practical advice on how or when to do so, and there is certainly nothing in the Twelve and Twelve about going through the entire cycle of Steps more than once. I personally favor the Big Book view on the first nine Steps. But as we shall see, we still need to act when 'more is revealed' about the past.

Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve are not so much specific things we do so much as they are healthy habits we acquire over time and practice on a continual basis. They 'become a regular part of everyday living, rather than something unusual or set apart.' Ten and Eleven especially can easily be woven into all our affairs, the very fabric of our lives; indeed, practicing these new habits actually shape our affairs and our attitude toward the world and our fellows. The first nine Steps are all discrete mental or physical acts, done alone or with certain individuals, outside our normal daily activities. They can be done repeatedly if desired, and many A.A.'s do, but they cannot be done continuously and will always be done outside of everyday life.

Steps Ten through Twelve are often called the 'Maintenance' Steps. The Little Red Book, a possible source for this term, uses it only in reference to Ten and Eleven. Although all three are meant to be practiced repeatedly, we will see later that the Twelfth Step is different in kind than the other two.

Maintenance in the A.A. sense is not merely preserving the improved spiritual condition granted after taking the first nine Steps. Keeping and defending what we now have is too cautious and conservative for us. As they say, "If you're not growing, you're going." Supporting and nurturing is

more like it. Coincidentally, as I began writing this chapter, I happened to hear a speaker say that "To maintain a living thing is to promote its growth."

Our next function is to grow in understanding and effectiveness. This is not an overnight matter. It should continue for our lifetime.

A continuous look at our assets and liabilities, and a real desire to learn and grow by this means, are necessities for us.

Though we have already had a spiritual awakening by this point, there are promises in each of the last three Steps, for the growth we continue to enjoy as we practice them has beneficial results. These Steps are sometimes called the Growth Steps for this reason. Our first function, according to the Big Book, is to grow in understanding and effectiveness. The way I have come to see it is that I grow in understanding through self-examination over time, which I'll talk about in a bit. For me, the major spiritual tool for growing in effectiveness is in daily (and nightly) practice:

Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God at once to remove them.

A spot-check inventory taken in the midst of such disturbances can be of very great help in quieting stormy emotions.

I have found that the key to effectiveness is immediate awareness of negative emotions and other undesirable thoughts. Having 'ascertained in a rough way what the trouble is' in our written inventory, we now know what to mentally look for moment by moment

in our daily lives and affairs. Mindfulness was discovered by the Buddha over 2500 years ago and is very fashionable these days in the self-help arena. But A.A.'s founders seem to have discovered it independently and have made it an integral part of spiritual maintenance and growth.

Such awareness makes possible the most common practical suggestion for daily life in our literature. This is the most important thing I do in everyday life:

As we go through the day we pause, when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action.

When resentful thoughts come, try to pause and count your blessings.

In all times of emotional disturbance or indecision, we can pause, ask for quiet, and in the stillness simply say: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Thy will, not mine, be done."

When in doubt we can always pause, saying, "Not my will, but Thine, be done." And we can often ask ourselves, "Am I doing to others as I would have them do to me—today?"

As the day goes on, we can pause where situations must be met and decisions made, and renew the simple request: "Thy will, not mine, be done."

The advice to PAUSE is mentioned explicitly these five times in our two major books and implied a few more times. Someone I see in meetings likes to use the acronym WAIT - "What Am I Thinking," which is wonderful since it goes along so well with PAUSE and HALT (which I'll discuss in a bit). As I get better at it, I grow in effectiveness - that is, in detecting then removing these thoughts. PAUSE goes hand in hand with the spot check inventory.

To have a thought of alcohol or an angry or worried thought from time to time is perhaps unavoidable and is likely harmless in itself. But any of these thoughts can become dangerous if they persist. A thought of a drink that takes root becomes a deadly obsession; an angry thought that we nurture becomes a resentment ('Number one offender'). A worried thought over time becomes fear ('Chief activator of our character defects'). Alcoholics are susceptible to these thoughts and I am convinced that there is a link between the three types that we tend to harbor and nourish. The alcohol obsession is removed by a spiritual awakening, but the other two types of thought we must work to remove ourselves, and often must be content with patient improvement. We aid in our own sobriety by maintaining our spiritual condition in part by 'spotting, admitting and correcting these flaws.'

Of the five PAUSE examples, I have come to appreciate #2 lately: "When resentful thoughts come, try to pause and count your blessings." This comes from the Wives chapter, of all places. I can tell you from personal experience that it works for fearful thoughts just as well. As I grow older, I find that this is more of a problem than resentment. My primary fears normally arise when financial or emotional security are threatened. When they arise rather suddenly, it is hard to PAUSE, and I sometimes can only do so when the fear ebbs a bit. Then I try to recall some of the past times when I've been in worse situations financially, socially, legally, you name it. Something, whether Fate, Karma or Something Greater, got me out of those jams. I have been tens of thousands of dollars in debt, out of work for an

entire year and faced *two* out of state DWI charges at the same time - all while drinking an insane amount of alcohol nearly every waking moment. No problem I face now compares to those. When this realization sinks in, the worry is lessened and often goes away after a while. I do sometimes reach the point of despair before reason begins to take over, but I've never again come close to thinking that a gun would be the answer.

Being an alcoholic, I am of course unable to drink moderately, so with help I've quit altogether. I find that at times I am also unable to be angry or fearful moderately. Unchecked negativity sometimes seems to feed from an unknown source of power and grows until it colors my perceptions of people, places and things around me. My friend Harold has talked about having 'emotional blackouts' in which some negative emotion gets his mind racing so fast that he 'comes to' after it slows down again and he can't remember exactly what's happened. Pausing before these thoughts become established helps maintain my spiritual condition and thus protect me not only from alcohol but also the ill effects of anger and fear on my spirit. The emotion then goes away - sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, and sometimes with an 'emotional hangover', as Bill calls it.

I am also capable of taking fear and resentment beyond current situations and by means of a 'brainstorm' create mental scenarios of something that might happen, often the worst-case-scenario. I then get worked up worried over something that is possible, and sometimes plausible, but far from a definite outcome. Or, if something good happens, I might build it up in my mind and create an overly-optimistic scenario, only to see a moderate outcome and have my grandiose hopes dashed. Though resentment normally concerns the past (and fear is in regard to the future), I have been known to create and harbor a resentment about something that hasn't happened yet and may not occur. Harold also has a name for this, so I must not be the only one; he calls it a 'presentment'. How apt! These negative thought cycles can become self-sustaining and wreak havoc like a

tornado through my mental life. Since I've been known to go from zero to planning on smoking a bowl or shooting myself in fifteen seconds, there is no limit on how far my mind will take me and how quickly. PAUSE can help me avoid a brainstorm if I'm very effective at spotting it form, or at least refrain from dwelling in the heightened negativity if not. Thus, I get back into emotional balance.

Our first objective will be the development of self-restraint. This carries a top priority rating. When we speak or act hastily or rashly, the ability to be fair-minded and tolerant evaporates on the spot. One unkind tirade or one willful snap judgment can ruin our relations with another person for a whole day, or maybe a whole year. Nothing pays off like restraint of tongue and pen. We must avoid quick-tempered criticism and furious, power-driven argument.

As with the Spiritual Axiom on the preceding page of the Twelve and Twelve, this passage applies whether our disturbance is 'justified' or not. As it says, we are not always the best judge of what is justified. I am also not very good at focusing my anger strictly on the person I blame for it. When angry, I am capable of showing it to anyone around me, whether they're involved in the offending situation or not. Restraint, the 'first objective' of Step Ten is the primary way we regulate our actions in everyday life, avoid new mistakes and make possible the love and tolerance that is our code. PAUSE makes restraint possible.

Our actor is self-centered – ego-centric, as people like to call it nowadays. He is like... the minister who sighs over the sins of the twentieth century; politicians and reformers who are sure all would be Utopia if the rest of the world would only behave...

I've almost come to have a Tenth Tradition attitude about contentious social and political issues: In

order to prevent arguments, I often avoid stating my opinions in public, keeping them to myself and those close to me who won't offend or be offended. I also practice such discretion in the rooms when I have different interpretations on the literature, group policy and the like. In recent years, I seldom feel the need to convince others of my opinion is such matters. And since I try not to have my self-identity wrapped up in them, I am not often driven so strongly by negative reactions (i.e., 'triggered') when faced with those who disagree with me. I try not to be a preacher, politician or reformer and be that type of self-centered person.

There are those who have certain personality types which rub me the wrong way, or who tend to be very vocal about certain issues. I do not think it necessary to be around people like that. The Serenity Prayer gives us two choices in a situation we don't like: change it or accept it. It may sound like heresy to some, but I think this is a limited choice. There is always the option to leave a situation, or better yet, to avoid it altogether. Sometimes it is not my place to change someone or something, and to practice acceptance may take too much spiritual energy to be worth it. Best to save it for when I can neither accept nor change things. Of course, if I have an obligation to a person, cause or institution, I must tend to it and may have to accept or change. But if I have no duty to be there, I am free to get out or avoid a situation entirely. In this way, I fight only battles which I cannot avoid. There is nothing that says I must engage anything and everyone around me. Why expose myself to behavior, situation and opinions that will only cause frustration and anger, and no benefit to anyone? Do I even need to know about them? I'll state it provocatively: So long as I am not abandoning a moral, family or social obligation, I firmly believe in avoidance and ignorance. Indifference is the proper response to trivial matters. Acceptance or change, and the wisdom to know the difference are rare commodities and should be saved for weightier things. For example, I have seen on social media several people I know

personally who shared many angry posts on political and social issues. I have stopped following them but remain friends. This keeps lines of communications open, but spares me their gratuitous anger, and in fact I am not longer even aware of it. Two of those with many angry posts are in the program and have more than double the sober time I have. I once posted without attribution the line above on avoiding furious and power driven argument, hoping they'd see it. But their posts continued, and I stopped following one of them. The other is a woman I like, so in that case I put up with it!

The same goes for sulking or silent scorn. These are emotional booby traps baited with pride and vengefulness. Our first job is to sidestep the traps. When we are tempted by the bait, we should train ourselves to step back and think [PAUSE]. For we can neither think nor act to good purpose until the habit of self-restraint has become automatic.

When I first noticed the phrase 'silent scorn' it really hit home for me. Over the years I have developed a habit of substituting a sort of aggressive judgmentalism for resentment when people don't do what I think they should. It is a way of minimizing and dismissing them, which both rids my mind of them while giving me a certain amount of self-satisfaction. In other words, it feels better to judge and condemn than to stew over people. Even when we don't act or speak, our inner emotional reaction to people, places and things blocks the intuition and wise judgment we need to find the right response we need in any situation.

HALT - Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired

The slogan comes from a 1971 Grapevine article, and these four topics are discussed separately in Living Sober, and without using the acronym. This is one of the very few things I remember from my first time in the program so long ago. These four factors, two

emotional and two physical, are said to be threats to sobriety, especially for newcomers.

Over the years since I've been sober, I began thinking of HALT as an early warning system for my spiritual condition and adapted it for my own use. HALT is still a defensive maneuver, as is PAUSE, but it's one stage earlier in the process of becoming disturbed. The first two for me are precursors to anger and resentment and the latter to worry, nervousness and insecurity.

Hungry - Everyone knows how hunger can put one in a bad mood, hence the slang term 'Hangry' (Hungry and angry at the same time). Before the term hangry came about, I found myself thinking of having the 'mean hungries'. When I had low blood sugar, I'd often be in a foul mood, intolerant, even downright angry. When the body is thrown off balance this way - or by being dehydrated, poor nutrition, over-caffeinated and the like, I'm more susceptible to becoming disturbed as the physical discomfort starts to bring about mental/emotional agitation. A proper diet obviously prevents this, and a timely snack or beverage can sometimes do wonders for my mood.

Angry - Anger is Danger without the 'D'. Obviously, we can't have that. But I've noticed a couple of warning signs of anger before it is readily apparent. As I learned from outside spiritual talks (Step Eleven in action!), intense emotions are often accompanied by bodily tension. If I am aware of tense muscles in my face, arms and chest as quickly as possible, I am more likely to anticipate negative feeling before they have time to fully form. (Mindfulness of bodily sensations is another principle of Buddhism) I also find that impatience is a precursor to anger. For example, if other people and things appear to be moving more slowly than usual, it probably means that my mind is moving faster and it only SEEMS that everything else is slow. When my mind goes too fast, the mental momentum could well carry me off into some negative thought cycle or brainstorm. Same thing if I am under stress

from traffic, work conditions, too many things happening at once, etc. Walking to get adrenaline flowing and a few deep breaths to relieve stress and tension can help a great deal here.

Lonely - I am reminded of the passage in the Big Book (Step Four) about fear resulting when self-sufficiency failed us. When I'm alone too often or for too long, it is as if emotional self-sufficiency fails me. No man is an island..., but sometimes I try. I might think about my phone seldom ringing or seldom getting messages while failing to consider that I seldom reach out myself. Given my depressive temperament, I sometimes unconsciously mistake the lack of contact as a measure of my worth. I have rarely 'needed a meeting' in sobriety, but I make a point to go to a few per week simply because it's healthy for me to be around people - even if I'm not lonely at the time. Reaching out to someone is the obvious solution to this problem - if I can think of it while in that mood.

Tired - Fatigue during the day might be from poor sleep, or stress, but I usually know that if one of these is the cause. Being in late middle age, that is always a consideration. These are the innocent explanations, but I have often found that feeling tired can be a sign of boredom or a depressed mood. A short nap can clear my mind, as can a little exercise. At other times, I might be coming down with something, though that is pretty infrequent for me.

When in doubt, always PAUSE, WAIT and HALT! Again, it is the most important thing I do in daily life.

With those we dislike we can begin to practice justice and courtesy, perhaps going out of our way to understand and help them.

Sometimes there is a need for a long term application of PAUSE, not just a moment calling for restraint. Work often provides situations which we cannot avoid or change, so acceptance, or at least tolerance, is called for.

I had a supervisor, Katy, for about three years who was very erratic and created a chaotic work situation. My friend Christine was in fear for her job based on Katy's mood swings and kept silent. She was let go anyway after two years. Her replacement had enough of Katy at one point and walked out on the spot one day to get away from her. A third woman got into an incredible screaming match with her. As for myself, I had around five arguments with her over that period. I've never been so angry with anyone for so long - not even the robbers I mentioned back in Step Four.

But I found out something that made me try as hard as I could to get over that anger and tolerate her behavior as much as possible. She confided to Christine one day (and of course she told me right away, being my partner) that her husband was an alcoholic and she'd been through a great deal with him. It's not that I am obligated to make amends for another alcoholic, but the fact that she had deep personal issues calls for some understanding. I took as much from her as I could, and though I had enough of her sometimes, when we did get into it I never swore at her, called her names or insulted her. I forcefully defended myself against her snapping at me and unprofessional behavior in the office. That was the best I could do sometimes. I even "prayed" for her a couple of times, although I don't believe in the sort of Higher Power which intervenes in that way.

I can honestly say that after finding out about her personal situation, I never hated her. The partners I had in that office may have, but I was able to separate the person from the behavior for the most part. Most of my anger left me after I was alone in the office with her twice when she got some bad personal news and broke down crying. You have to have a heart of stone not to see the humanity in someone who is suffering like that, and I can tell you it makes you see your 'enemy' differently. I was so used to being on the defensive and wary of her next outburst that a tense silence was the best relationship I could manage with her. When she was

laid off later on, I did not rejoice, for I never wanted anything bad to happen to her; I just wanted her to leave me alone.

Five years later, as I began writing this book, I started another job in the same industry and Katy works at the same company, but at her home office. I took the job knowing this, and truthfully assured the president I had no problem working with her again. She visited our office once (so far) and we were cordial with each other. She seems healthier, both physically and emotionally, and I was happy for her.

When a person offended we said to ourselves, "This is a sick man. How can I be helpful to him? God save me from being angry. Thy will be done."

Finally, we begin to see that all people, including ourselves, are to some extent emotionally ill as well as frequently wrong, and then we approach true tolerance and see what real love for our fellows actually means.

My second long-term Step Ten issue took place at another job only about eighteen months ago as I write this. Me and a certain coworker got along very well for the first three years of working together. Then he suddenly started behaving rudely to me, making sarcastic comments and snapping at me. There had been no argument, nothing said or done by either of us to explain the new attitude. Not an everyday thing, but enough to notice. I considered taking him aside and politely asking him about it, but that didn't seem to be a solution. I was completely mystified until I remembered that he'd told me himself earlier that he was seeing a therapist for anger issues. Sometimes when the literature says we're dealing with a sick person, it's metaphorical like Katy and sometimes it's literally true. I realized that the comments didn't really affect me, I just a little mystified. They simply stopped after a couple of months, and we

were as close as ever. He seems to have worked out whatever issue caused his behavior on his own.

If PAUSE is the most important thing I do every day, then the second is the quiet time I take just before bed when I take stock of the day just ending. The Big Book places this practice as part of Step Eleven, of course, but the Twelve and Twelve moves it to Ten. My guess is there are two reasons for this: One, to have both daily inventories together in order to be consistent, and Two, Bill expands the mission of Step Eleven in the Twelve and Twelve and didn't want to overload that chapter. At any rate, I tend to think of the nightly inventory as a Step Ten practice for both these reasons. Since this activity involves both prayer and inventory, it is logically part of both Steps. Ten and Eleven are very much intertwined, and this is just one way.

As I wrote before, I began this practice in early sobriety ("You can do any of the Steps with a 1 in it right away!"), and it was an important tool for me in writing my Fourth Step list. This is something I never, ever skip. The last time I failed to perform this nighttime ritual must have been when I had under two years - which means that for over ten years I have accounted each and every day's thoughts, words and deeds. I spend more time on this than the morning ritual and find it more satisfying.

I am fortunate in that no matter how stressful the day has been, no matter how I may have been worried, angry or what I may have done that I now regret, I nearly always become relatively serene in the last couple of hours. This is true whether or not I've been to a meeting. Something about there not being any more obligations or deadlines left to be met. Ideal conditions for constructively reviewing the day.

In no way can I remember each and every resentful, selfish, dishonest or fearful thought experienced during the day. The chances are that I noticed most of them at the time, and hopefully hit PAUSE and practiced restraint. But at night, hours after the events in question, when emotions are not running high, some things glossed over at the time may now

become apparent. Or perhaps a connection between things is seen in hindsight that was not apparent before. It is at this time that I sometimes notice a certain type of issue coming up enough to see a pattern. This, in turn, becomes something to look out for going forward.

Even if there is an unresolved issue, something I must deal with tomorrow, I acknowledge it without worry or anger. I rarely take any negative emotion to bed with me. As the Twelve and Twelve suggests, having considered my day with neither fear nor favor, I am grateful for my blessing and sleep in good conscience.

The idea of an occasional, periodic inventory is the most important new idea the Twelve and Twelve adds to Step Ten. This periodic practice is the means by which I learn more about myself, examine both the recent and distant past and grow in understanding, the second function of Step Ten:

The consideration of long-standing difficulties had better be postponed, when possible, to times deliberately set aside for that purpose.

Then there are those occasions when alone, or in the company of our sponsor or spiritual adviser, we make a careful review of our progress since the last time. Many A.A.'s go in for annual or semiannual housecleanings. Many of us also like the experience of an occasional retreat from the outside world where we can quiet down for an undisturbed day or so of self-overhaul and meditation.

I can't speak for others, but I am not able to plan ahead when the right frame of mind will come along for this kind of introspection. I merely try to take advantage as best I can when it does come. The idea of a formal retreat, which some A.A.'s take part in, does not appeal to me since I cannot know in advance if the time would be right. And, knowing myself,

being a relative loner, the social aspect of meeting so many new people at once and trying to remember that many names would be very distracting, even distressing. In any case, it does not seem from the context that Bill meant this type of retreat, though many swear by them.

For me, self-examination, like meditation, is a solitary adventure, and at the deepest level is almost the same thing. The line between Steps Ten and Eleven is never a clear one, is it? When the time comes, I mentally retreat from the world for twenty minutes here, perhaps an hour there, and if I'm lucky some kind of insight comes along. The greater the inspiration, the longer the period of self-examination. It is not unusual for me to PAUSE even in this calm and silent activity, and listen to music, walk or distract myself in some way while a new idea percolates on its own and fits itself into my existing way of thinking. Much like life itself, I cannot force such things to happen or manage their direction. I can only create conditions to foster new understanding and let that come in the way it is meant to. I have kept a journal more or less continuously since beginning college around 40 years ago. Not only has that recorded many events in my life, but my emotional ups and downs, increased drinking and alcoholism, my bottoms and finally my recovery and all its phases. It has turned into an informal inventory over the years, done a few times a month. Some of the time it is mere bookkeeping, recording events and sometimes my reactions. But this sometimes leads me into deeper reflection and insights. A week or so between entries obviously provides greater distance and a longer period in which to observe any patterns which may be developing. I still have the notebooks with aging lined sheets from the earlier years in my closet. For the last 18 years, it's been an electronic journal. A few years ago, my desktop crashed, costing 15 years of entries covering my alcoholic decline, arrests, and first ten years of recovery. Maybe I can have the hard drive restored, but I am not much concerned about it. I rarely reread anything in the journal:

the main purpose has been to aid my memory, focus my attention and literally get things out of me as I wrote them down. It has served its function well.

I have done two formal, written Tenth Steps during my sobriety, at around three and seven years. Both were in the Big Book format for the Fourth Step, which I began to understand as I stopped overthinking it, and both contained only names and situations which came into my life since the last one. Not surprisingly, both took a great deal less time than my Fourth Step list. In both cases I shared the most important items with a trusted friend in a semi-formal way. But I no longer feel it necessary to do another inventory like this. When an issue comes up enough times in my daily or nightly inventory, or in the journal, I notice the pattern and talk about it when I can with another person if need be. I deal with it promptly, especially if it is a serious issue. Because of this, I do not have enough concerns at any given time to constitute a list, not even a small one. In all kinds of self-examination, daily, nightly or on special occasions, I sometimes recall past events which current ones bring to mind. As I said before, this is primarily how I wrote my one and only Fourth and Eighth Step lists. My mind does not normally work well with open-ended questions such as "where have I been resentful?", "What are my fears?", "Who have I hurt and how?" and the like. But current fears and resentments, among other character defects, when they arise lead me to recall past feelings and resulting actions. It was both possible and necessary to write out a list in early sobriety because I had never done so before. It was much easier then to compile an actual list of defects and wrong acts. Now, as before, I do not think about the past in a formal or comprehensive way. Rather, I deal individually with each new memory or new insight.

Since I self-examine so regularly and often using Tenth Step principles, I could only make another written inventory, whether it is called a Fourth, Eighth or Tenth Step, collecting items one by one and waiting until there were enough to comprise a list. But this would mean delaying action on them and

possibly doing harm while such a list was being compiled. Better to deal with things as they come up.

Reading the Little Red Book all the way through for the first time in the midst of writing this recovery memoir, I was delighted to see that the author as long ago as the early 1940's anticipated adding to the initial Fourth Step list as part of the recovery process, not as a part of a separate list to be done later. I previously cited these passages on Steps Four and Ten, respectively, but they bear repeating:

Experience has taught us that this step [4] should be started at once, but left open for future reference so that during the process of our mental and spiritual clean-up we can add the new items which will present themselves.

They [the Founders] knew that new character defects would appear and that many the old ones would present themselves in disguised form. Hence the perpetual inventory to announce the advent of each old habit and a sort of mental sentry on guard to detect the new ones.

This is exactly what I do - recall past people, places, things and situations as I can, then talk about them, try to remove newly-discovered defects of character and make amends when needed. Thus, I work Steps Four through Nine regarding anything about the past drudged up by my regular inventory of the present.

There is a spiritual principle running through the earlier Steps which suggests we ignore, forgive or understand others who we think have wronged us:

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. So our troubles, we think, are basically

of our own making.

Referring to our list again. Putting out of our minds the wrongs others had done, we resolutely looked for our own mistakes... Though a situation had not been entirely our fault, we tried to disregard the other person involved entirely.

When a person offended we said to ourselves, "This is a sick man. How can I be helpful to him? God save me from being angry. Thy will be done."

The question of how to approach the man we hated will arise. It may be he has done us more harm than we have done him and, though we may have acquired a better attitude toward him, we are still not too keen about admitting our faults... Under no condition do we criticize such a person or argue... His faults are not discussed. We stick to our own.

We learned that if we were seriously disturbed, our *first* need was to quiet that disturbance, regardless of who or what we thought caused it.

[I]f my disturbance was seemingly caused by the behavior of others, why do I lack the ability to accept conditions I cannot change?

It doesn't make much sense when a real tosspot calls a kettle black. Let's remember that alcoholics are not the only ones bedeviled by sick emotions. Moreover, it is usually a fact that our behavior when drinking has aggravated the defects of others. We've repeatedly strained the patience of our best friends to a snapping point, and have brought out the very worst in those who didn't think much of us to begin with. In many instances we are really dealing with fellow sufferers, people whose woes we have increased. If we are now about to ask forgiveness for ourselves, why shouldn't we start out by forgiving them, one and all?

This principle culminates in Step Ten, after which we can practice it to a greater degree than ever before. In Step Ten it is expressed perhaps more distinctly than before in the literature:

And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone...

It is a spiritual axiom that every time we are disturbed, no matter what the cause, there is something wrong *with us*.

It will become more and more evident as we go forward that it is pointless to become angry, or to get hurt by people who, like us, are suffering from the pains of growing up.

With those we dislike we can begin to practice justice and courtesy, perhaps going out of our way to understand and help them.

Finally, let us not forget this, the fraternal twin

to the Spiritual Axiom:

And acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation—some fact of my life — unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment.

These expressions have taught me that the highest and truest practice of Step Ten in daily life is not admitting when we are wrong, as important as that is: the most sublime application of this Step is *when we are in the right and endure without rancor when things do not go as we wish*. It is harder to accept when we are right than to admit when we are wrong, but it is more beneficial to us. Such Acceptance is the essential ingredient in the peace and serenity we gain by this part of our practice.

The Tenth Step ends with these promises:

And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone—even alcohol. For by this time sanity will have returned. We will seldom be interested in liquor. If tempted, we recoil from it as from a hot flame. We react sanely and normally, and we will find that this has happened automatically. We will see that our new attitude toward liquor has been given us without any thought or effort on our part. It just comes! That is the miracle of it. 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. We are neither cocky nor are we afraid. That is our experience. That is how we react so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition. It is easy to let up on the spiritual program of action and rest on our laurels. We are headed for trouble if

we do, for alcohol is a subtle foe. We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.

The first paragraph of the Tenth Step Promises is the fruition of Step Two. It describes a strong protection against the insanity of the first drink, which sets the whole cycle of drinking in motion. This part of what it means when the Big Book addresses the newcomer: "If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it - then you are ready to take certain steps." For most newcomers, that is ALL they want in the beginning. It doesn't do to minimize this blessing of A.A. and therefore its attractiveness to new members, even if doing helps some of us stay humble. The Big Book spends sixteen lines promising protection against alcohol so that we need not be afraid of it any longer, and only five warning us not to be cocky, followed by several lines of suggestions on spiritual maintenance. That's about a three to one ratio, a healthy proportion of confidence versus caution in regard to one's sobriety.

My recovery story is a bit unusual in that sanity returned concerning alcohol (but in no other sense) when I had a minor spiritual experience near the end of my drinking. Dr. Jung says this happens, "Here and there, once in a while."

Far from being a flash in the pan, this inspiration has stayed with me for my entire sobriety,

now over a dozen years. I have had only one temptation in all that time, that little 'brainstorm' about pot in early sobriety. No temptation whatsoever about alcohol. I do get thoughts about it now and again, but none of them has lasted more than a fraction of a second. So far, I have a perfect record of noticing an alcohol thought *immediately* and pushing it gently away. Such thoughts have never had a chance to take root in my mind, as they did with Jim and Fred from More About Alcoholism. Something

greater than my own will power and self-discipline enable me to do that so completely: if only I had that capability with angry and fearful thoughts!

Maybe you're like me: I can be around others around others who are drinking socially, see ads on TV and the like and be immune from temptation. But one thing I cannot do is *ignore* alcohol. I *always* know when it's physically present. I am neither tempted, cocky or afraid, but I cannot be unaware when it's around. Just a little reminder that the fascination is still there inside me, lying dormant. For example, a few years into sobriety, I was in the lobby of a theater waiting to be admitted to the seating area. There were several other people, a woman behind the ticket window, and little else. No concession stand or any refreshments at all. All of a sudden, I was aware of a familiar scent: I turned around and saw that a man across the lobby had just opened a bottle of stout ale. I hadn't been thinking of any beverage being present or heard the bottle being opened, but still knew it was there. I have a poor sense of smell, but I certainly smelled *that*!

A couple of years or so after that, I was in Union Station in Washington, D.C. looking around before catching Metro back home after a day of sightseeing on the National Mall. I passed a liquor store and happened to glance inside through the open door. It may sound unbelievable, but my eyes latched onto a particular bottle on the top shelf in the very back of the store. It was tall and thin, with squared sides and frosted white glass below the neck. I intuitively knew it was Gin, the only alcohol I've ever seen in that kind of bottle. I always hated hard liquor, as you know, and only ever had Gin that one time, on my first drunk, with terrible results. It had been over 35 years ago at that point. I was revulsed and disgusted - but I did recognize the bottle.

Like all A.A.'s, I have drinking dreams. A couple early on were very vivid and frightening. There haven't been many in the last several years, just enough to remind me that I even though I'm not tempted, alcohol still does have a certain

fascination. For example, when I see people drinking in movies, and sometimes in real life, I do tend to notice when they take too long to drink their beer or whatever. I find that a bit irksome - either drink or don't, but don't be a lightweight! But you know, I notice certain things with smoking, when they put out a cigarette with half of it left or the ash at the end gets too long and is about to fall off - and I've been tobacco-free for over twice as long as I've been sober. And I do notice continuity errors in movies when the level of alcohol in people's glasses goes up and down between different camera shots. And I notice it even more with the length of cigarette and ash increasing and decreasing as a scene progresses. These details are important to those of us who have been there! Actually, these little quirks of mine (and maybe yours?) regarding former vices amuse me a bit.

I've actually had my sanity concerning alcohol (as in Step Two) tested a couple of times. The two stories that come to mind right away both happened when I had between two and three years. Can't remember which happened first, but they were fairly close together. One happened at my weekday job. The President had just come back from a foreign trip and had brought in some treats to share with some of us in the office. A woman from the accounting office took around a box of nice chocolates to offer to the rest of us. I took one and eagerly bit into it. Suddenly, there was an unpleasant burning sensation: the chocolate had some kind of liqueur inside. I reacted calmly and was like Bill Clinton: he didn't inhale, and I didn't swallow! Luckily, there was a bathroom close by. I walked (rather briskly, I must admit), spit out the offending treat, and rinsed my mouth thoroughly. Next, I brushed my teeth, had a Diet Dr. Pepper and all was right with the world. It occurred to me a while later, long after the brief danger had passed, that I should call my sponsor Dan. Not that I was upset by the incident, it would just be odd not to call one's sponsor after something like this. After all, even though it was accidental, I did have alcohol in my mouth. It would have been quite

upsetting if even that small amount of alcohol had gotten inside me. But sanity, aided by that nasty burning taste that liquor has, kept me safe. No harm done, and it almost seems funny now.

The other story was very funny, indeed, but also has much more meaning for me. I was at the dentist around this same time, to have a couple of teeth pulled, which I had never had this done before. Only a long time later did I make the connection between this substance I was given to breathe and the cans of whipped cream my old friend Kenny sometimes bought in order to inhale the propellant - Nitrous Oxide. I never did it for fear of brain damage, but that was called doing 'Whippets'. Because the assistant was young and beautiful, I was already in a pleasant frame of mind. I inhale the gas and the dentist soon has her hands inside my mouth. She was using pliers on the teeth in question to break them and pull out the pieces. My mouth is being held open with a bite block inserted between my jaws to prevent my biting down on her hands as she used my lower jaw for leverage to apply more torque to get the roots out. The Nitrous was really starting to kick in and I would have laughed right out loud despite the awkward position I was in, for it occurred to me just then that this was how Thomas Jefferson would have had teeth removed in his day over 200 years ago. We have all this modern technology and we're still doing it the same way! At the moment this seemed like the funniest thing of all time.

And then I forgot all about the tools and large hands in my mouth. I was only aware of how the Nitrous felt. *It was exactly like the time I took those two painkillers on top of all those beers.* It was just as wonderful as that experience, which at the time made me want very much to start doing that combination again. It was also a bit like the major spiritual experience I had a few months into sobriety, almost an out-of-body experience. Again, there was no sense of time, but it was probably just a few ecstatic seconds.

But in the midst of this medicated state I had perhaps the sanest thought of any in my sobriety, given my condition: "This is a one-time thing. It won't be repeated. Enjoy it while it lasts." And I did. But something deep down inside the core of my being was not going to let this affect me deeply. I was in a placed in a position of neutrality - safe and protected. It wore off quickly, and I did not have the slightest desire for it again. If it hadn't worn off so quickly, it would have after long, for Dan was in the lobby waiting to give me ride home. You know what a buzzkill sponsors can be! I had another tooth pulled a few years later and didn't even feel anything that time.

Given this history and my intention never to stop maintaining my spiritual condition, I think more about the sanity, safety and protection granted me regarding alcohol than I do about any daily reprieve. This is not cockiness: it is confidence in the gift I have received. I do not believe I will ever drink again.

Eleven

Step Ten transitions as smoothly into Step Eleven on the pages of the Big Book as it does in daily practice. Having cleaned up the past in the first Nine Steps and having entered the world of the spirit and begun daily maintenance of our spiritual condition in The Tenth, we have paved the way for further development.

It is a principle found in several places in the Big Book that we have greater spiritual awareness when we are not angry, fearful, disturbed or full of self-centered thoughts:

The real significance of my experience in the Cathedral burst upon me. For a brief moment, I had needed and wanted God. There had been a humble willingness to have Him with me—and He came. But soon the sense of His presence had been blotted out by worldly clamors, mostly those within myself.

Actually we were fooling ourselves, for deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of God. It may be obscured by calamity, by pomp, by worship of other things, but in some form or other it is there.

But with the alcoholic, whose hope is the maintenance and growth of a spiritual experience, this business of resentment is infinitely grave. We found that it is fatal. For when harboring such feelings we shut ourselves off from the sunlight of the Spirit. The insanity of alcohol returns and we drink again. And with us, to drink is to die.

Since we have acquired the new habits in Step Ten of

looking for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment and fear, we are better prepared to be aware of a power greater than ourselves and to receive guidance. Hence, Step Eleven begins with promises to this effect:

Much has already been said about receiving strength, inspiration, and direction from Him who has all knowledge and power. If we have carefully followed directions, we have begun to sense the flow of His Spirit into us. To some extent we have become God-conscious. We have begun to develop this vital sixth sense. But we must go further and that means more action.

At this point, the Big Book discusses the nightly inventory, which we may think of as an accounting for how well such strength, inspiration and direction has influenced our thoughts and actions during the day just ended. I talked about this reflective part of spiritual practice in the last chapter.

Our day ought to begin, the Big Book advises, with a period of prayer and meditation:

On awakening let us think about the twenty-four hours ahead. We consider our plans for the day. Before we begin, we ask God to direct our thinking, especially asking that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives. Under these conditions we can employ our mental faculties with assurance, for after all God gave us brains to use. Our thought-life will be placed on a much higher plane when our thinking is cleared of wrong motives... We ask especially for freedom from self-will, and are careful to make no request for ourselves only.

Remember that in Step Three self-will is seen as the source of all our problems: "Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us!" Having cleaned up the past, we seek a fresh start for each new day. This is something

that I have done virtually every day since I began working the Steps in earnest. The wording has changed over the years as my understanding of a higher power evolved. But I have always in some way asked or expressed a hope for freedom from self-centered motives.

However, I have always showered and dressed first, then I perform my morning ritual, not upon awakening. Not being a morning person, I am not always fully alert immediately after getting out of bed. But I always have this sort of quiet time before I engage with the world, other people or work for the day. As I seldom wake up with anything serious on my mind, it doesn't seem that this short delay causes any harm. In this way, instead of springing into action driving to work, planning the day and generally building up that mental momentum, I begin the day with this PAUSE before my unaided and unguided will can take off in its own direction. As I said in Step Ten, PAUSE is the most important thing I do during the day, and I view my morning ritual as a way to practice it at the very beginning.

We usually conclude the period of meditation with a prayer that we be shown all through the day what our next step is to be, that we be given whatever we need to take care of such problems.

Step Eleven, like Ten, is meant to guide and direct us in all our daily affairs. It is not merely something to be practiced in the morning and/or evening. Both of these Steps are meant to guide us not only every day but *all day*. It is not even possible to truly practice the other Steps every day, let alone throughout the day.

Ten and Eleven work together as the *Maintenance Steps*. The Little Red Book, the possible source for this term, uses it only for these two Steps. At the end of the Tenth Step Promises, in the short section warning against cockiness, we see the one use of the relevant word:

What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition. Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of God's will into all of our activities. "How can I best serve Thee—Thy will (not mine) be done." These are thoughts which must go with us constantly. We can exercise our will power along this line all we wish. It is the proper use of the will.

We maintain our spiritual condition by keeping ourselves relatively free from self-will as we "Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God at once to remove them." (i.e., the spot check inventory and PAUSE). As we see, this *immediately* leads to the idea of carrying a vision of God's will into our daily lives - that is, the practice of Step Eleven.

As we go through the day we pause, when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action... We are then in much less danger of excitement, fear, anger, worry, self-pity, or foolish decisions.

My favorite of the Ninth Step Promises is the eleventh one, which coincidentally presages this part of Step Eleventh Step: "We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us." This does not mean logically figure out what to do in those situations, nor does it mean we'll hear a Voice from the heavens telling us how to proceed. It means that a quiet thought will come to us under the right conditions - when the mind is free of disturbance, self-will. In other words, when the Committee has been shut down and I'm not up in my own head, or inside someone else's.

My first sponsor Dan remarked once that Step Eleven is about more than knowing how to conduct my affairs. That is largely what the Big Book covers under this Step, though it hints at more in other chapters. The Twelve and Twelve goes further, as we shall see in a

bit. It would be several years before I was ready to investigate these other aspects.

One aspect of the Eleventh Step that people rarely talk about in meetings is outside spiritual reading. This is so, even though it is clearly encouraged in the literature. Our two major books contains these references to outside spiritual literature and guidance:

If not members of religious bodies, we sometimes select and memorize a few set prayers which emphasize the principles we have been discussing. There are many helpful books also. Suggestions about these may be obtained from one's priest, minister, or rabbi. Be quick to see where religious people are right. Make use of what they offer.

Though the family has no religious connections, they may wish to make contact with or take membership in a religious body. Alcoholics who have derided religious people will be helped by such contacts. Being possessed of a spiritual experience, the alcoholic will find he has much in common with these people, though he may differ with them on many matters. If he does not argue about religion, he will make new friends and is sure to find new avenues of usefulness and pleasure.

The actual experience of meditation and prayer across the centuries is, of course, immense. The world's libraries and places of worship are a treasure trove for all seekers. It is to be hoped that every A.A. who has a religious connection which emphasizes meditation will return to the practice of that devotion as never before.

But the results of all this encouraged spiritual reading, is outside the purview of A.A. itself, as we see in these passages:

Meditation is something which can always be further developed. It has no boundaries, either of width or height. Aided by such instruction and example as we can find, it is essentially an individual adventure, something which each one of us works out in his own way.

Those having religious affiliations will find here nothing disturbing to their beliefs or ceremonies. There is no friction among us over such matters.

We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals. This should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in the light of past associations, or his present choice. Not all of us join religious bodies, but most of us favor such memberships.

We represent no particular faith or denomination. We are dealing only with general principles common to most denominations.

As non-denominational people, we cannot make up others' minds for them. Each individual should consult his own conscience.

(As Bill Sees It also provides these thoughts:)

We are only operating a spiritual kindergarten in which people are enabled to get over drinking and find the grace to go on living to better effect. Each man's theology has to be his own quest, his own affair.

When the Big Book was being planned, some members thought that it ought to be Christian in the doctrinal sense. Others had no objection to the use of the word "God," but wanted to avoid doctrinal issues. Spirituality, yes. Religion, no. Still others wanted a psychological book, to lure the alcoholic in. Once in, he could take God or leave him alone as he wished... Every voice was playing its appointed part. Our atheists and agnostics widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack thereof.

We can reasonably interpret these passages as promoting two distinct principles A.A.'s are suggested to follow. One, that as part of the maintenance and growth of a spiritual awakening, the recovered alcoholic should consider spiritual ideas beyond the 'general principles common to most denominations' found in A.A. literature. Two, that though study of and learning from these outside sources is an integral part of Step Eleven in the program of recovery, the lessons and inspiration gained apply to the individual only.

Combining the two ideas, it seems that A.A. saves our lives and makes a spiritual life possible but *should not define or limit that spiritual life*. The Big Book and Twelve and Twelve were never meant to be an end-all and be-all; they are jumping off points for our spiritual growth.

[T]here is none among us who has any living capacity for emotion but must have known at some time or at some place what it is like to really

'uncanny', to have a feeling of 'eeriness'... This experience of eerie shuddering and awe breaks out rather from the depths of the soul which the circumstantial, external impression cannot sound, and the force with which it breaks out is so disproportionate to the mere external stimulation that the eruption may be termed, if not entirely, at least very nearly, spontaneous.

This is from *The Idea of the Holy* by Rudolf Otto. I found it a few years ago in a thrift store of all places, and just had to get it for the title alone. It happens to be a very influential book, but more importantly, it was astounding to read this passage reflecting my personal experience. I had never heard of the book or author and wouldn't have thought to look for it. But Fate, Karma or Something placed it in my hands. "Eerie" is even the word I thought of concerning certain incidents in which I had intimations of "Something Else":

- At around five years old I was playing outside my house on a hot summer day. I had a momentary image of myself from above, as if I had left my body. I still remember these few seconds after more than fifty years.
- As a teenager some forty years ago, I was looking in the bathroom mirror and the reflection became more vivid for a second as I looked into my own eyes and thought to myself, "I'm real." A different type and higher degree of self-awareness.
- Over twenty years ago, I was having a beer at a bar on the beach. A serene feeling fell over me as I watched the waves advancing and receding, then perceived these small events as part of the larger movement of the tide ebbing and flowing. The sun caught my attention over my shoulder as it began to set. The Earth rotating to cause the sunset takes place as it revolves around the

- Sun, as the other planets do, and our galaxy itself is revolving, rotating and expanding within the Universe. I had a sense of there being cycles within larger cycles, all part of an order and perhaps even a Design.
- At around two years sober, I stood with a friend outside a church after our meeting. It was on a hill overlooking an intersection. The image came to mind that what I was seeing was an organic, something like a body. The cars were blood cells; single lane roads carried the cars and led to dual lane roads just as small blood vessels connect to larger ones; people left their cars and entered the buildings on the land bordering the roads the same way oxygen and nutrients are transferred from blood cells to the surrounding tissue; and the way larger blood vessels lead to arteries was like the major road in front of us leading to an interstate (sometimes called an artery) about a mile away.
- A few years later, I visited a beach resort town well after the season was over. As I walked the deserted streets on a Sunday night, only the occasional bar or pizza delivery place were open. The closed shops, the beach equipment locked up in fenced-off storage areas, the lack of people or cars in sight all made it seem as if I were on an empty stage after the actors had left. ("All the world's a stage.") The props left behind were useless and absurd without anyone to use them. I was free to wander, aloof and unaffected, where others' make believe dramas were acted out and taken so seriously by an eager audience. Seeing the stage without actors on it truly puts the play into perspective.

I have already mentioned the decision derived from an unknown inner resource to quit alcohol and the much greater sudden experience that came with my Step

Three. So, when Dan talked about looking within, and often quoted his A.A. hero Walt to that effect, I was ready to accept that when the idea of a God as *most people understand Him* did not ring true for me. Some of the rather specific and certain claims made in the literature and by others in the rooms strike me as 'disconcerting' and sometimes presumptuous. But I know that there is more to this world than what we sense or understand rationally, another level of Reality, for I have felt it. However, there are enough literature passages without theological pretense for non-theists like me to appreciate. Here are two:

We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found. It was so with us.

With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves.

The purpose of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, mentioned twice in the Big Book as we know, is to reconcile religious belief and its study with the science of psychology. This goal is helpful to nonbelievers and should be acceptable to those with faith.

[W]e can trace the stages of progress towards the idea of an immediate spiritual help, experienced by the individual in his forlornness and standing in no essential need of doctrinal apparatus or propitiatory machinery. Psychology and religion are thus in perfect harmony up to this point, since both admit that there are forces seemingly outside of the conscious individual that bring redemption to his life.

In the conclusion he discusses the psychological concept of the subconscious and compares it to the something 'more' humans have in addition to sense perception, emotion and rational thought which makes religious intuition and conversion experiences possible. James shares this passage from 19th Century spiritual researcher Frederic Myers:

Each of us is in reality an abiding psychical entity far more extensive than he knows - an individuality which can never express itself completely through any corporeal manifestation. The Self manifests through an organism; but there is always some part of the Self unmanifested; and always, as it seems, some power of organic expression in abeyance or reserve.

This unmanifested part of self or inner resource, be it called God, Soul, Higher Power, Atman, Buddha Nature, innermost self or subconscious mind, is the rallying cry for us all. Whether agnostic, atheist or former believer, we can stand together on this concept. It is the purpose of meditation to access and experience this inner resource identified with a conception of a higher greater than ourselves. No theological assumptions or beliefs are needed here, and it is indeed comforting to learn that we can commence on this simpler level.

As William James further wrote:

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adapting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.

This is more or less a restatement of Step Eleven. One can call this unseen order 'God's will,' 'Karma,' or not call it anything and simply continue to 'Do

the next right thing.' Prayer for the agnostically inclined (which I still sometimes call talking to an imaginary friend) does help bring one's will in line with the way things are meant to be, and to promote Acceptance.

The following section would not be appropriate for an A.A. meeting or official A.A. literature. But this book is both personal and unofficial. This is meant only to describe in more detail my journey brought about by an often-ignored practice which ought to be part of everyone's Eleventh Step.

I read a great deal more outside spiritual literature than I do the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve. I have read and studied both very much over the years, and taken notes on the Steps, Traditions and even the Concepts. Most of what I've learned about them recently, however, has been from working them, hearing others' experience in meetings and carrying the message to newcomers when I can. These are our common heritage as recovered alcoholics.

However, my spiritual reading is essentially a solitary adventure. There is no English speaking community close to me that I know of which practices my new beliefs. Reading and downloaded talks from spiritual leaders are my tools for furthering my Step Eleven practice. I can trace the precise path of reading that led me to a set of spiritual principles to live by along with the Steps. Probably most people are inspired by talking with others who have faith; I do too, but also from books written by inspired people. In this way, rest quietly with the thoughts of someone who knows, so that I may experience and learn.

Buddhist ideals chose me to follow them in the course of recovery from alcoholism, and now compliment and reinforce that recovery, for there are many similarities between the Steps and the Path. My A.A. friend and confidante, Paul, several years ago recommended *Addiction and Grace* by Gerald May, who was a Christian and psychiatrist. I am not terribly inspired by the Bible, and have never been to therapy, yet I was able to learn from his book ("Make use of what religious people have to offer").

Another book of May's, *The Awakened Heart*, led me to the work of an anonymous 14th century monk, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. I got the impression that for him Church rituals and rules were merely things to be endured while pursuing his individual adventure. He seemed to conceive more of an ultimate Reality which could be directly experienced than a self-conscious Supreme Being. Now we're talking!

The mystical outlook of that ancient monk reminded me of *The Three Pillars of Zen*, a book I had partially read in college some thirty years before and was impressed enough to keep all that time. I now delved into it again, inspired by that medieval Christian monk, and read it cover to cover for the first time. I was reminded of the one idea about Buddhism I'd retained from my school days: that the idea of individuals are really part of one large spirit, and separate identities are a delusion. I realized then that I had unconsciously begun comparing the notion of discarding the belief in a separate self with A.A.'s goal of getting rid of self-will. The two ideas are entirely compatible, though the Buddhist goal is perhaps more radical.

One section of *Three Pillars of Zen* deals with the Enlightenment experience, which is said to come suddenly, though years of training and study normally precede it. One classic personal description of how it felt at the moment of Enlightenment stood out, and reading it again made me realize I had actually half-consciously remembered this passage and had compared it to my own sudden experience in which I transcended Self, albeit briefly. As with the *Big Book*, there is a collection of personal accounts. One of them is by a woman in A.A. who studied Zen in recovery and realized her true self.

I soon came across *Zen for Americans*, a book of writings and talks by Zen Master Soyen Shaku from around the time of the *James* book. The first sentence of this passage neatly summarizes my attitude toward the idea of a Supreme Being. In the others, he reflects the A.A. notion of finding 'the Great Reality deep down within us':

A God who, keeping aloof from his creations, sends down his words of command through specially favored personages, is rejected by Buddhists as against the constitution of human reason. God must be in us, who are made in his likeness. We cannot presume the duality of God and the world. Religion is not to go to God by forsaking the world, but to find him in it.

Realizing that Buddhism had already influenced my thinking about A.A. and partially explained my intense emotional episode years earlier, I consciously steered my reading in that direction. I soon came across a copy of *The World of Zen*, edited by Nancy Wilson Ross in a used bookstore. Finding it seemingly at random and selecting it based on the title alone, this book, like my old schoolbook, was a fortuitous circumstance. This was the book that cemented my belief in Buddhism.

Perhaps the greatest single passage in the *World of Zen*, the one that 'sold' me on Buddhism, was this one from Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki. It is a rallying point for us all. Whether agnostic, atheist, or former believer, we can all stand together on this sentiment:

We now know the significance of life, we know that it is not blind chance nor is it a mere display of brute forces, but that while we know not definitely what the ultimate purport of life is, there is something in it that makes us feel infinitely blessed in the living of it and remain quite contented with it in all its evolution, without raising questions or entertaining pessimistic doubts.

I doubt that we really choose the fundamental things in life, such as our spiritual beliefs. We make casual daily decisions based on fashion, personal taste, and other subjective factors. We are perfectly free in these matters, and they are seldom important in the larger scheme of things. When certain spiritual ideas really move us, it is because

they appeal to an inner need and suit our fundamental nature in ways we can neither choose nor fully understand. When our minds and hearts are open and we are properly exposed to the right ideas, we are drawn to them regardless of the conscious will which directs so much of our everyday lives. In other words, though there may be no external compulsion, we are not as free to choose our spiritual beliefs as we are the clothes we wear, nor are they as easily changed. I no more chose to follow Buddhism than I did to stop drinking several years before. After my sudden experience in early sobriety, followed by reading and reflecting, there was not much conscious choice involved, rather I followed where I was led. The Buddhist spiritual life is not a theory, and I found that I was already living it in part. It was up to me to pick up the rest of the tools in the spiritual kit offered by this ancient way of life.

A few years ago, I was glad to read this in a 1940 Akron pamphlet *Spiritual Milestones in Alcoholics* anonymous, commissioned and approved by Dr. Bob:

Consider the eight-part laid down in Buddhism: Right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindedness and right contemplation. The Buddhist philosophy, as exemplified by these eight points, could be literally adopted by AA as a substitute for or an addition to the Twelve Steps. Generosity, universal love and welfare of others rather than consideration of self are basic to Buddhism.

Today I can hear the spiritual testimony of others in meetings and elsewhere without getting caught up in things I don't understand or agree with, for I have ceased fighting anything or anyone - even Big Book thumpers and disconcerting individuals. While I do not believe in God as such, I can still benefit from hearing the experience, strength and hope of those who do. It is not necessary for me to reach the same spiritual conclusions in order to learn from them: I need only respect the honesty and sincerity

of their quest.

From contemplation and practice of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, belief in which came partly from my Eleventh Step practice of outside spiritual reading, I have a logical idea of what life is all about. I do not have a God of my understanding, nor even a Higher Power so much as a Higher Principle by which to live in a sane, sober and somewhat serene way:

Therefore one desiring his own good,
Aspiring for spiritual greatness,
Should deeply revere the true Dhamma,
Recollecting the Buddhas' Teaching.

In discussing the nightly inventory, Bill mentions the 'stream of life.' Self-examination might be likened to climbing onto the bank of the stream and reviewing our stroke, whether we went with the flow or against it, etc. Meditation is like sitting on the streambank and looking at its course, noting that it is sometimes placid here, full of rapids there, and noting where the rough spots are. In this way, we both improve our stroke and by resting, regain strength for the journey back in the stream.

But there is more than mere practical value in sitting on the streambank, resting and surveying our course. Life is more than staying afloat, and Step Eleven is more than just finding out what we're supposed to do in daily life. Streams flow into other streams, combining into rivers, and all rivers flow eventually into the Great Ocean. We are, indeed, sometimes granted a glimpse of the Ultimate Reality. In its fullest application, and with persistent practice, we find out not only how we're supposed to act: we discover *who we are*.

Twelve

The Twelfth Step is often considered the third maintenance step, along with Ten and Eleven, though it is not classified as such in the Little Red Book, the likely source of the term. Like the previous two, this Step is meant to be an ongoing practice. But Step Twelve is unlike all the others in that it absolutely depends on the continued participation of another person who must act while working the Steps during his or her recovery; Step Five requires the relatively brief presence of someone to hear us out, and in the Ninth, another person need only receive our attempts at making amends. Because carrying the message normally takes place over the course of time spent with a newcomer set aside for that very purpose, it cannot be a part of our everyday affairs. And since there is not always a willing participant, it is not possible to practice this every day, let alone all during the day as we do with Ten and Eleven. Step Twelve cannot be part of our daily maintenance, though it is still vital for continued sobriety when possible.

Step Twelve is thought by most people as having three parts: a spiritual awakening, carrying the message to other alcoholics, and practicing these principles in all our affairs. But the way I think of it, this Step only introduces one new idea: carrying the message. The spiritual awakening happens, as we have seen, with the Ninth Step Promises, for we have entered the world of the Spirit by the beginning of the Tenth Step. The awakening is further enhanced through the Tenth and Eleventh Step Promises. The last clause of Step Twelve, we tried to "practice these principles in all our affairs," refers to the Maintenance steps Ten and Eleven, which are the only ones that apply to our daily affairs. Therefore, I understand the wording of Step Twelve as summarizing the program up to this point in mentioning an

awakening and our affairs while bestowing upon us the ongoing mission of helping other alcoholics. This seems to be the intent of the Big Book, since the chapter on Step Twelve is called Working With Others, and that is the only topic discussed.

Like the last Step, the Twelfth begins with promises:

Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail. This is our twelfth suggestion: Carry this message to other alcoholics! You can help when no one else can. You can secure their confidence when others fail. Remember they are very ill. Life will take on new meaning. To watch people recover, to see them help others, to watch loneliness vanish, to see a fellowship grow up about you, to have a host of friends—this is an experience you must not miss. We know you will not want to miss it. Frequent contact with newcomers and with each other is the bright spot of our lives.

Note that these Promises, unlike earlier ones in the Big Book, predict actual physical events, not changes in our way of thinking. (The Promises to potential new members in the early pages of A Vision For You do as well.) It states twice in the chapter that the newcomer, to whom we try to carry the message, has helped us more than we have helped him. I never believed it until it became my turn to carry the message. I'm still not sure it's entirely true, but I can definitely see why so many say it. Recovered people are not just making the effort out of pity for sorry newcomers, but out of compassion and personal need. Dr. Bob, the "Prince of all Twelfth-Steppers", had this to say about helping new A.A. prospects:

I spend a great deal of time passing on what I learned to others who want and need it badly. I do it for four reasons:

1. Sense of duty.
2. It is a pleasure.
3. Because in so doing I am paying my debt to the man who took time to pass it on to me.
4. Because every time I do it I take out a little more insurance for myself against a possible slip.

Notice that protection against relapse is the last and possibly the least important reason he gives. As it says in A Vision for You about the first sober A.A.'s, "Though they knew they must help other alcoholics if they would remain sober, that motive became secondary. It was transcended by the happiness they found in giving themselves for others."

A.A. folklore tells us that Lois said to Bill after he failed with his first half dozen alcoholic prospects, "But you stayed sober." She wasn't wrong - she just had the wrong emphasis. Not being an alcoholic herself, she did not have the need that all of us do: "Our very lives, as ex-problem drinkers, depend upon our constant thought of others and how we may help meet their needs."

It comes off as smug and self-satisfied for one of us to make such a statement without considering the newcomer's continued suffering. While we cannot stake our own sobriety or happiness on whether others get sober or not, we naturally have compassion for those who do not want or cannot accept the A.A. message. The Pioneers "experienced a few distressing failures" in their day. Such was their reaction when someone didn't get it. On the other hand, "[p]ractically every A.A. member declares that no satisfaction has been deeper and no joy greater than in a Twelfth Step job well done." Surely, we are more effective with the Twelfth Step, like the Ninth, when thinking first of the other person instead of ourselves, with our continued sobriety being an additional benefit.

As much as the recovered alcoholic needs to work with others to maintain sobriety, surely the newcomer's need to hear the message of recovery is more urgent. The literature does describe in *A Vision For You and Tradition* five episodes in which Bill was shaky and needed to work with a drunk to get through it. That must be the case at times for others, but surely not very often. I have never heard anyone share about a similar situation, just people speaking generally about looking out for newcomers and being in service to prevent restlessness. The newcomer who wants a sponsor and actually goes through the Steps is almost sure to have some measure of desperation. That was certainly true in my case the second time, the time that worked.

In any organization, the more senior members commonly have more authority, whether explicit or implied. In my early months, I naively assumed that since everyone around me had more time, they must 'outrank' me in the meetings. The literature suggests otherwise, but newcomers don't know that. The ones who are ready to go to any length only know that this person has been sober for an incredible (to him) amount of time and is usually the one he understands and trusts the most - and sometimes may be the only person the newcomer trusts. This all gives the would-be sponsor a certain amount of leverage. It is tempting to try and use it, though whether he does or not depends on his personality and experience with his own sponsor.

I was 'successful' with my second sponsee, though we did hit a snag early on. I happened to be at his very first meeting after getting out of rehab, and he soon asked me to sponsor him. After meeting a few times and going to some other groups together, his interest seemed to wane. I began following up with him to try and get him to make more effort, not knowing yet that he "should not be pushed or prodded" and that "he is the only one who can make the decision to exert himself." He pointed out that I was doing all the calling, and more or less said I was being a little too aggressive. Looking back now, I see that although my motives were good, there was

self-will behind my pursuing him: I was eager to prove myself. I backed off but remained available. Soon enough he was willing to act, suggesting we go through the Back to Basics program. The club I attended and had introduced him to hosted that workshop regularly. We went through it together, and after it was done, he promptly told me he was not going to go to meetings anymore. He intended to continue staying sober, but was dropping out of A.A. That was a bit distressing, for I remembered what happened to me all those years ago, and I honestly but mistakenly felt his dropping A.A. reflected on me somehow. He came to my two year anniversary about six months later and was still sober, but there has been no contact since then. Overall, it was a very satisfying experience, encompassing all four of Dr. Bob's reasons for working with newcomers.

By the way, I have decidedly mixed feelings about Back to Basics. It is literature-based, as is well documented in the workbook. But it feels more like following a script than the give-and-take between a recovered and a recovering alcoholic.

It was my turn to feel pressured during the next year. It is not my intent to denigrate the man who put a great deal of time and effort into taking me through the Steps and taught me so much in the first couple of years. But, as the Twelve and Twelve says about being 'successful' with sponsees:

Here the temptation is to become rather possessive of these newcomers. Perhaps we try to give them advice about their affairs which we aren't really competent to give or ought not give at all.

I had worked all the Steps by around one year, had sponsored a man through the Steps before the end of the second year and had been in service constantly. Dan wanted to do more with me, but I felt I was doing what I needed to do. He became more insistent over time, but I resisted. Our relations became strained.

When things between us were starting to get tense, I felt almost trapped. I didn't know who to talk to about it, since it seemed as if everyone I knew, Dan knew better. Between that authority older members are sometimes given and the common assumption that "Sponsor knows best", I felt no one would understand. I was afraid I'd be shunned or at least looked down on by the others for resisting my sponsor. It was a very upsetting experience. I finally talked about the situation with a man who knew both of us, but who I had met first. That helped a bit.

Eventually it seemed that he commented on many things I said, giving advice or opinions I never asked for and often didn't want. He seemed more a possessive sponsor than a friend and confidante. I didn't handle it well and finally blurted out at dinner one night, "I'm not a newcomer. I don't need this kind of intense sponsoring. I need some space!" He was taken aback. If I had been more effective than in my Tenth Step practice, I would have been more conscious of my growing feelings of being dominated and worked it out calmly with him. He soon got back to me and said we'd do things at my pace, but by then things had gone too far. When a sponsor and sponsee no longer feel comfortable speaking freely and casually with each other, the most important thing of all has been lost. He gradually drifted away from the groups we had in common, and I seldom saw him after that. Dan moved away about five years later, but I made sure by then he knew how much I appreciated what he'd done for me.

Just a year ago a young woman came to my home group and shared about having to end things with her sponsor. She was sitting right next to me as she broke down in tears when talking about it. She was sad over possibly losing the friendship, but a great deal of her distress was just like mine ten years earlier: she seemed to feel guilty and ashamed about changing sponsors, perhaps even in danger of drinking. I shared my story, my conflicted feelings and how it all turned out well in the end. I think it helped her.

It's not supposed to be like this.

There is a certain school of thought in A.A. that emphasizes what I call the 'strong sponsor' role. People sometimes share that they have their sponsees call them every day, run every major decision by them, select the sponsees' meetings and service positions for them, you name it. I have even heard of people belonging to 'sponsorship families' consisting of someone's sponsees and their sponsees, which share the message of the Sponsor. Such families, resembling clans in tribal societies, sometimes gather en masse like a family reunion in order to hear the chief's message. It seems to be a common assumption that this type of sponsorship is traditional, based on literature and effective. Everything was simpler and stricter back in the old days, wasn't it - in society at large as well as A.A. Those who claim to be Big Book enthusiasts are sometimes in the camp of promoting the strong sponsor idea.

It is simply not possible that the Big Book was intended to promote this idea, since it was originally written for lone alcoholics to read on their own and follow its directions without any personal guidance from recovered members in the fellowship. But Clarence S., one of the biggest promoters, self- and otherwise, A.A. has ever seen, fully embraced the Big Book when he split off the 'Cleveland contingent' from the Akron group and Oxford Group

In the book, after the new person has taken the Steps, he or she is encouraged to begin Working With Others. Half the chapter is devoted to finding prospects, describing in detail the disease of alcoholism and laying out the spiritual toolkit before them (This is now partly outdated as rehab facilities perform many of these functions, sometimes aided by A.A.'s performing H & I service.)

Believe it or not, there is only one sentence in this chapter directly bearing on the recovered person's role in helping the newcomer overcome drinking:

He has read this volume and says he is prepared to go through with the Twelve Steps of the program of recovery. Having had the experience yourself, you can give him much practical advice. Let him know you are available if he wishes to make a decision and tell his story, but do not insist upon it if he prefers to consult someone else.

Giving 'much practical advice' on the Steps is a much humbler task than supervising his or her entire recovery. The Book spends much more time outlining how much material aid to give the new person and how to promote spiritual principles to the spouse and children (the latter part is also partly outdated, as Al-Anon and Alateen now serves their spiritual needs).

The family chapter also contains this passage outlining a reduced scope of the sponsor's task:

When we see a man sinking into the mire that is alcoholism, we give him first aid and place what we have at his disposal... But those of us who have tried to shoulder the entire burden and trouble of others find we are soon overcome by them.

The pamphlet Questions and Answers on Sponsorship has a number of bullet points limiting the sponsor's role, followed by this passage:

The sponsor underscores the fact that it is the A.A. recovery program - not the sponsor's personality or position - that is important. Thus, the newcomer learns to rely on the A.A. program, not on the sponsor. A sponsor well-grounded in the A.A. program will not be offended if the newcomer goes to other A.A. members for additional guidance or even decides to change sponsors.

I understand that those with assertive personalities and firm convictions can inspire confidence in others, especially newcomers. In "a society composed almost entirely of promoters," as Bill called A.A., dynamism and enthusiasm are often characteristic of many alcoholics. Instead of self-promotion or sales, some may devote their energies to working with others and leave modesty behind. I do not deny that this type of personality and a more assertive sponsorship style appeal to some newcomers and may be the only way to reach them. Sponsor and sponsee can certainly take this path despite the literature if they choose, for the Big Book does say "Our book is meant to be suggestive only." As you've already seen from my story, I feel free to deviate here and there from the literature and improvise in trying to follow its general goals. But I do feel strongly that we should understand what it says and not misrepresent its valuable suggestions. Even more so if the misrepresentations serve to bolster the egos and reflect the personalities of some within the fellowship at the expense of the Founder's intent. A.A.'s can sponsor and be sponsored any way they choose, but please don't say the strict approach is based on the literature. It's just not there. When any misreading of the literature, even if unintentional and well-meaning, becomes widely accepted it corrupts our program. If we are using our own approach and say so, then we are not distorting the message.

Just as I don't want that kind of sponsor, I don't want to be that kind of sponsor. My opposition was based initially on visceral feelings from being pushed and prodded. Later, as I read more of our literature and studied it (not just accepted what others told us it said), I realized that this opinion was firmly grounded and not mere bias resulting from my experience.

Burn the idea into the consciousness of every man that he can get well regardless of anyone. The only condition is that he trust in God and clean house.

I first met Phil when I had just over two years, at a Big Book meeting I'd been going to for the last year. I saw the GPS on his ankle before seeing his face when he came in the door. He nervously sat down next to me, being the only person in the room at the time and started talking. He got out on bail the night before and came to a meeting first thing after arranging for the court-ordered tracking device. Phil then opened up completely to me about the events of ten days prior, when there was an incident while very drunk and on drugs involving firearms, a barricade situation and a SWAT team. He thought he was facing over 50 years in jail. I've never met a person in or out of the rooms facing that kind of trouble, yet he's still sober today, over ten years later. If he can get sober under these circumstances, then *anyone* can.

I didn't react outwardly at all, and my only thoughts were that he was in an awfully bad place, indeed, and I wondered how long he'd stick around in the rooms. I'd already seen enough newcomers come in seeming very eager to get sober but disappear soon after. But I didn't judge him for his actions. Nor did all the others when he repeated a shorter version of the story in the meeting. He has said publicly many times that after we accepted him that night, he knew immediately that he was in the right place.

Much to my surprise, Phil kept coming to meetings every week without fail. After six months or so, I casually asked him how he was doing and did he have a sponsor. Just making conversation. "Do you want the job?" he asked. Of course, I said agreed.

Having already heard his story over the previous months, we were able to get into the Fourth Step almost immediately. We'd usually get together a couple of hours before the meeting to talk about his current Step and whatnot. Sometimes regular things too, for we came to genuinely enjoy each other's company. We went quickly by today's standards, but not nearly as with the Back to Basics program I'd done with the other man. The results were much better this time, I think. It's the difference between microwaving food versus a slow simmer to let the

flavor of the ingredients blend for a more satisfying meal. For example, after doing the Fourth and Fifth Steps we spent time just talking about things that came up in his life during the past week and analyzing them in the manner of Step Four to drive home those lessons and make it a regular habit. We didn't even have to go over literature very much since we saw each other at a Big Book meeting just about every week.

Phil was even more fortunate in court than I was, and I'll leave it at that. After months of weekends in jail, I was able to give him solid advice on dealing with his probation officer, having done that myself. Talk about seeing how your experience can benefit others! We kept on going to that same meeting for about five years, getting together early most weeks and sharing with each other. Sometimes he helped me with things, such as advice when I was seeking and answer on how to approach the woman I collided with in my last DWI (He was one of the people who told me to let it go). It became a true partnership and spiritual friendship. There were several times when we talked about our experience, strength and hope and there was no teacher and student, mentor and protegee or sponsor and sponsee. It was more like both of us being together on the Broad Highway and looking toward the Light. *This* is what sponsorship can be: not following a script, no one making demands of the other.

He moved to a different part of the state after about five years, but we still get together almost every year around his anniversary. As I said, he's been sober for more than a decade. I go into some detail because it was such a thoroughly pleasant experience, and his sobriety is the best tangible evidence that I have been of use in A.A.

It's usually better if men sponsor men and women sponsor women.

This passage from *Living Sober* reflects advice commonly given to newcomers, and I've said this myself a number of times. But I have sponsored a

woman and had the equivalent of a female sponsor myself. Six months or so after Dan and I parted ways, I did my first written Tenth Step. I was conscious of the slogan "ISM - I Sponsor Myself," and wanted to make sure I wasn't unconsciously avoiding A.A. practices when demanding space. It's a suggested part of the Step in the Twelve and Twelve that I hadn't done in over three years of sobriety.

Andrea is a woman I had known for a couple of years at that point. We would often talk at great length after our Sunday meeting at the club. Since she had a lot more time than I did and had dealt with office politics before, I went to her for advice on handling the situation at work with my erratic supervisor Katie. It thus seemed natural to go to her when my inventory was done. She was very surprised and was genuinely honored. She acted as if I made her day. We met a week or two later and carried out the task. She ended up being my closest friend in A.A. for nearly four years and was my main confidante when anything important happened. We never used the word 'sponsor', but she pretty much filled that role for me. Andrea helped me a great deal in handling all the drama with my supervisor Katie, and we both liked talking together. It was a natural connection.

On the very same day Andrea agreed to hear my inventory, I ran into Karen, a young woman from one of my groups. We talked about this and that, then out of the blue she asked if I would be her sponsor. I was even more surprised than Andrea was, for we hadn't spoken all that much. I would never refuse someone's request for help "if he means business." But the S-word made me pause. Karen had already worked the Steps with a female sponsor, but they were drifting apart. Like me, she wanted to avoid ISM. She was just comfortable talking to me, which is the most important thing of all.

The fact that Karen was not a newcomer, and we had no romantic chemistry made me comfortable working with her. I called myself her big brother and she was my little sister (She is twenty years younger than I am). True, there were areas of life where I couldn't advise her from personal experience, but that was

also true with some of the men I have worked with. The biggest hurdle for us was not the male/female divide, but the outside issues she had (she shares openly and freely about this, or I wouldn't bring it up). But I was there to listen and give advice when needed.

We began riding together to my home group, thus guaranteeing regular contact. It was entirely unintentional, but at my home group we had four "generations" of AA: Karen, who I sponsored, myself, my friend/sponsor Paul and his sponsor John, the man who helped explain Step Ten and the Spiritual Axiom to me when I was so desperate in early sobriety. We were not a "sponsorship family" in the usual sense, for none of the sponsors involved have that authoritative attitude, and none of us took the sponsee through the Steps originally. This arrangement lasted over eight years, until Karen moved away about a year ago.

All went well for a time, but he failed to enlarge his spiritual life.

My other, and so far last, 'success' with a newcomer began about three years after meeting Phil. I was leading a meeting one day, and a man came up to me afterward and asked me to be his sponsor. *It was his first meeting.* I've never even heard of that before. Turns out he had been in the program before, so he already knew what a sponsor was. Still a very rare event, I'd have to guess. Greg once had a bit more sober time than I did then and had gone back out for sixteen years. That's even longer than my thirteen-year relapse, yet here he was, ready to try again. (I once met a woman visiting my home group who had long term sobriety, went out for twenty years, then came back in and had been sober for a year. There's always hope for recovery, no matter how low we fall or how long we stay there!) I was a bit skeptical but had to see what I could do. I helped Greg buy a Big Book from the secretary and asked him to read the Doctor's Opinion and the first four chapters. He called the next night and said he had

read all that material. I know he was telling the truth since he called himself a jaywalker! I can work with someone like that.

Greg and I went through the Steps relatively quickly, just as Phil and I had. I even had Phil meet one-on-one with him, since Greg had an issue in an area that I had no experience with. We had some of those moments in the Light as we worked together. One in particular stands out now, several years later. We were on a path in the woods and stopped to sit on a bench as we talked about Step Eleven. I had recently begun my Buddhist reading and had some new spiritual ideas as a result. Not trying to indoctrinate in any way, I was sorting things in my mind by speaking out loud. I remember talking about each of us having a part of us that doesn't work, eat or sleep, play, make plans, etc. There's an inner part separate from normal life that we live most of the time, and Step Eleven focuses on that. In other words, I was beginning to understand the concept of Buddha Nature - what A.A. calls an 'inner resource'. In trying to communicate this idea new to me, my intuition guided me and I became a channel of understanding for both of us. Greg seemed to get a lot out of this discussion. I remember the exact spot where we had this discussion, and even walked past it once during the time I wrote this chapter.

We finished the Steps, then it seemed as though the work we were meant to do together was complete. Greg and I didn't have the same friendship that Phil and I did. Since our schedules were quite different, we seldom went to meetings together. His interest in the fellowship, service and spiritual maintenance began waning, and I had the sense that my sponsorship duties had been fulfilled. Greg and I got together once in a great while but had little communication in between. About two years ago he moved out of the area.

A few months ago, as I write this, he posted a photo of a microbrew on his Facebook page, followed by a one of a mixed drink a few days later. I guess I know what he's doing in retirement. I'd be distressed about it like the pioneers were when someone

relapsed, but I had already resigned myself to the possibility when he ignored advice to keep up the healthy habits he'd started.

One of our Fellowship failed entirely with his first half dozen prospects.

For example, we may set our hearts on getting a particular person sobered up, and after doing all we can for months, we see him relapse. Perhaps this will happen in a succession of cases, and we may be deeply discouraged as to our ability to carry A.A.'s message.

I'm sorry to say that it's been several years since I've met anyone interested in working the program with me and going all the way through the Steps. Four men worked with me through Step Five, then dropped out. One between Phil and Greg, and three after that. Three out of the four simply stopped calling or returning messages; one was courteous enough to let me know he wanted to change sponsors, and I appreciated the notice. My last three sponsees I 'lost' in about a month: Each of them got a start on Step Four, then had to take a trip for family or business reasons, failed to attend meetings while away and never got back into the A.A. groove - at least not with me. There have been a few others over the years who didn't even get that far.

Yes, I stayed sober the entire time. And it's possible I planted a seed that will grow in the future. But it is only human to want to see a result from one's effort. It is also important to see that working with others is not about me, my self-image as a good A.A. and sponsor, or how spiritual I might be.

As with any pattern of events that happen around me, I am the common denominator, so I have looked to see if there was anything I could have done to keep their interest. I do know that most of my 'failures' came during a period of heavy Buddhist reading when I was new to it, followed by another couple of years

off and on extensively studying and writing on A.A. literature and history. Could I have become overly intellectualized to be useful? I consciously tried to avoid that with the last couple of men I worked with but got the same result. Maybe it was just chance that several men in a row couldn't maintain enough willingness to stick with the program. There's no way to tell.

A visitor to my home group said something that comforts me about my recent drought of successful sponsees. He said that there are different types of people in A.A., with different abilities. For example, some are great at sponsoring newcomers, and others are better at helping those with time. Some people are great at service and love doing that. Some are really into the literature. And so on. I've been a 'service guy' before, and I am definitely a 'literature guy' in my home group and among those who know me well. Maybe that is the role I'm supposed to play for the time being. But I remain willing to try and sponsor again when the opportunity presents itself. This willingness is constant, unlike activity of sponsoring itself, but it is enough to help keep me sober between sponsees.

I still greet all new people to the groups I attend, those with time and newcomers. I encourage newcomers to talk to people and get phone numbers, but no longer press them to take my number. Since I was hesitant at first, I don't want to crowd new people. Also, if someone is willing to work the program, asking for the phone number himself is tangible proof of willingness. All I can do is recommend getting people's phone numbers and give mine if the newcomer takes the hint and asks for it.

Your job now is to be at the place where you may be of maximum helpfulness to others, so never hesitate to go anywhere if you can be helpful. You should not hesitate to visit the most sordid spot on earth on such an errand. Keep on the firing line of life with these motives and God will keep you unharmed.

This refers to a recovered alcoholic visiting someone still suffering, what we now call a Twelfth Step call. This appears to be another aspect of Step Twelve that has largely fallen by the wayside with changes in the world of alcoholism. It seems as if nearly all new A.A. members are referred by courts and treatment facilities. When I was Intergroup rep a few years ago, the office manager reported the number of calls received by volunteers every month. Those from alcoholics seeking help averaged between one and two per day as I recall, in an area with over 2.5 million people. The few times I've heard about Twelfth Step calls have been from old-timers and usually took place years ago. All but one of the people I've sponsored I met in meetings - and not once in a beginners meeting. But it is not an entirely lost art: my friend Phil met three people needing help outside of meetings, through work and friends, although none of the men stuck around long.

I have gone on two Twelfth Step calls over the years, both by myself. It's common in our area to hear advice not to go alone, but I haven't seen that in the literature. When I had about two years, someone I knew from the program called my cell phone and was nearly hysterical. My friend Christine let me leave the office so I could go to the man's house and try to help. It was a sordid spot indeed: he was very drunk, and a few dozen empty beer bottles lay all around the place. He continued to drink, but at a slow pace. I was able to calm him down and get him to talk about his troubles. I made sure he wouldn't go to do anything rash, then had to go back to work. We talked on the phone that night and he didn't remember seeing me at all during the day. *He was in a blackout the whole time.* I have never experienced that before. But I had talked him down from the ledge, as it were, and was able to be of some use. He continued to come to the club where we first met, but it's not clear if he's gotten sober.

The other one happened about two years ago. I got a group text from a woman I knew in the program. She was a secretary in a local church and got a call from

a man looking for help. The scenario was very much like Bill in the hotel lobby, but in reverse. Instead of the shaky recovered alcoholic down to his last nickel desperately calling to find a drunk to work with, this alcoholic in trouble called several churches in the phone book trying to get help and reached my friend at the last church on his list. It happened to be my day off, so I called the man right away, got directions and went to his home. It turned out to be a man I'd met the year before at my home group. Though we had first met in the rooms, this renewed contact came about the 'old fashioned way.' He was still in a bit of discomfort from withdrawal, and I drove him to a nearby pharmacy to fill a prescription he'd gotten from his doctor. As we talked in his home, he asked me to sponsor him, and I agreed. I spoke to his wife when she called to check on him, explaining who I was that we'd be working together on the program. We began, but soon he had to travel for a family emergency, then he dropped contact. Part of me thought that the great story of what brought us together that day made it certain we'd be able to finish our Step work and fulfill some sort of destiny. But it was not meant to be this time.

Around nine or ten years ago I got a call at work from a woman I knew in the A.A. She had relapsed a number of times on alcohol and drugs after a couple of years' sobriety. Kim was hysterical and talking about suicide. I was close to another woman in the program who had tried suicide and knew her story. Based on my friend's experience, I sensed that Kim was acting out more than thinking of ending her life. Still, it was more serious than the earlier call I got a from a distraught A.A. friend. I couldn't leave, but managed to calm her down considerably, and get her somewhat emotionally stable by talking and listening. I then contacted a couple of women who had taken her to the ER during an earlier incident. That crisis was averted, but she never stayed sober for any period as far as I know. She died about a year ago, I believe from alcohol and drugs.

If our turn comes to speak at a meeting, we again try to carry A.A.'s message. Whether our audience is one or many, it is still Twelfth Step work... We can be the ones who take on the unspectacular but important tasks that make good Twelfth Step work possible, perhaps arranging for the coffee and cake after the meetings, where so many skeptical, suspicious newcomers have found confidence and comfort in the laughter and talk. This is Twelfth Step work in the very best sense of the word.

Thus, the Twelve and Twelve takes a more expansive view of Twelfth Step work. Because the program was by this time pursued almost exclusively in established A.A. groups, Bill added this kind of service in the definition of Step Twelve.

The Little Red Book takes a different approach to the Twelfth Step, dividing service to others into two classes:

Much well-meant but misguided effort by sincere members results when they fail to differentiate between "Carrying the message" and "Working with Others." Sponsorship amounts to a pact between two alcoholics in which one, admitting he is powerless over alcohol, requests help and supervision from the other, a seasoned, qualified A.A. member, who in turn, agrees that he will devote his best effort in helping the other to make A.A. philosophy his "way of life."

"Carrying the message," according to the Little Red Book, consists of service in the group. Sponsoring is everything else I talked about before that. Both are included in Step Twelve, and though they are related, they are separate parts. This makes a great deal more sense to me than classifying together all effort on behalf of the individual, the group and the larger service structure. True, sponsorship and service are both efforts made on behalf of others, selfless and without thought of reward. They are alike in this way. But sponsorship is always one-on-one, private

and tailored to the newcomer's spiritual needs; service is always for the group, public in a certain sense and is involves managing practical details. But service supports sponsorship, for as Bill said, it helps "make good Twelfth Step work possible."

I have been in service almost continuously since getting that first position at four months. At times I was a very 'busy alcoholic', having three or four service positions at once. Serving as GSR, Intergroup rep and board member at the club were only one day a month. I was still working six days a week but ended up chairing meetings both Saturday and Sunday nights when others dropped out. I was a "Service Guy" for a few years in there. Luckily, I was able to gradually pass those commitments on to others. I learned to pace myself after this experience. But service is one Twelfth Step practice in which I can remain active, regardless of my success (or not, as it happens) in sponsoring. Writing and publishing this very book on an anonymous and non-profit basis is another way to carry the message.

And the best sponsors are really delighted when the newcomer is able to step out past the stage of being sponsored. Not that we ever have to go it alone. But the time does come when even a young bird must use its own wings and start its own family. Happy flying!

The passage from Living Sober will no doubt be shocking to many, even more so to 'strong sponsors.' But it is very appropriate. Something fundamental changes in the alcoholic after working all twelve Steps. We have had by this time a spiritual awakening and have begun to heal physically and emotionally as well. Having gone through the process, we no longer need the same level of guidance as newcomers. I knew it instinctively when I resisted Dan's pressing me for continued intensive sponsorship, but consciously know now what my gut told me then. This lesser need for direction made it possible for me to sponsor a woman who had already worked the Steps and allowed me

to have a woman as my main advisor and confidante after I was temporarily without one.

The word 'sponsor,' of course, does not appear in the Big Book. The word normally means to vouch for someone, and to take responsibility for him or her. That is what Akron members did when bringing prospects to be treated by Dr. Bob and Sister Ignatia: the A.A. member vouched for the sincerity of the would-be patient and promised to pay the bill in case the new man (or woman) couldn't.

We don't do that anymore. Indeed, that practice violates the Third and Sixth Traditions. Yet the term survives. My friend Paul from my home group pointed out to me some years ago that the only word used in the Big Book for the person bringing the message to alcoholics is actually "friend." I verified that the word is used in just this way several times in A Vision For You. "Friend" also refers to the person receiving the message. It is a democratic term very much in keeping with A.A. principles.

When the topic comes up in discussion, to make things simpler I just say I have a sponsor. It's the term most commonly used in the fellowship, and I'm not going to hijack a conversation by pointing out the exact wording used in the Big Book or insist on my own preference over everyone else's. But in my mind, what I've really had for the last several years, the second half of my sobriety so far, is a friend. Paul is a friend, advisor and confidante all rolled into one. From The Best of Bill:

Of course, we cannot wholly rely on friends to solve all our difficulties. A good advisor will never do all our thinking for us. He knows that each final choice must be ours. He will therefore help to eliminate fear, expediency, and self-deception, so enabling us to make choices which are loving, wise and honest.

Friends don't have authority over each other, hand out assignments for Step work or give orders. But they do give advice when asked, and sometimes even when not asked - just like friends in the outside

world sometimes do. Friends share their experience, strength and hope with each other on a more intimate level than could ever happen in meetings. Paul, sober more than twice as long as I, of course has much more experience to draw on. (And yes, time does matter so long as one is actively maintaining and growing.) He has helped me more than I have helped him, for example, in recommending the books that led me to my present spiritual path. But friendship is never one way; it is always give-and-take, or it risks becoming an unhealthy dependence on one side or the other. I know, because he has told me, that Paul has learned from me as well. Both from some of my own observations and from a book or two I have recommended to him. Friends, both in and out of the rooms, help each other through this journey we call Life.

With friends like Paul and my 'grand sponsor' John, my wider circle of A.A. friends, and with my continuing effort, I can't help but make progress as I trudge the Road of Happy Destiny. However, the longer I have been on this road, the more I see that just as the problem was bigger than me in the beginning, the solution is also bigger than me. It is bigger than any of us. Quite a humbling thought.

Thank Goodness we're not alone. Once again, from The Best of Bill:

... I SEE HUMILITY FOR TODAY AS THAT SAFE
AND SECURE PLACE BETWEEN THESE VIOLENT EMOTIONAL
EXTREMES [PRIDE AND GUILT]. IT IS A QUIET PLACE
WHERE I CAN KEEP ENOUGH PERSPECTIVE, AND ENOUGH
BALANCE, TO TAKE MY NEXT SMALL STEP UP THE
CLEARLY MARKED ROAD THAT POINTS TOWARD ETERNAL
VALUES.

