

The Twelve Steps: Building the Foundation

The Twelve Steps are the blueprint, or plans, for building a strong foundation in recovery. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and related literature are the instruction manuals. The accompanying reflections on each of the Twelve Steps are my thoughts about the steps and what they mean to me. It is my hope that you will find them to be useful tools as you build your own foundation.

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Step One

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

Building a strong foundation is imperative to the recovery process. Like building a house, the time and attention devoted to the foundation will have an impact on everything else you do. It supports the weight of the structure and keeps it steady. But it's not sexy or something many people pay attention to once it's constructed. When a house is constructed, only about 6" of the foundation usually shows and most of that is covered up by shrubs and gardens. What we see instead is the house exterior: the gables, the roof, the arched windows, the brick or wood siding.

The life cycle of alcoholism and addiction is often that way. While the foundation is cracking and becoming unstable, the façade is holding up and is what most people see. For a while, you are not able to clearly see the struggles, pain and dishonesty that are taking over. Then the cracks in the wall start to show and the façade becomes damaged. You can't hide the pain and your addiction becomes more visible to all in your circle. The foundation is failing and eventually everything supported by it will come crashing in if help is not sought.

The twelve steps are a way of life and a way to build a new, solid foundation. When we pay attention to these directions, following the blueprint for recovery, our chance of having a strong and sturdy foundation is assured. But skipping over steps or working them haphazardly will only lead to problems later on—a shaky foundation in need of repair.

Powerlessness leads to empowerment: Many people struggle with the concept of powerlessness and especially admitting that they are powerless. It is, however, the first step in recovery. Step One doesn't soft peddle the issue. In order to move forward, it asks us to make a rather harsh admission. It is direct, specific and to the point. It does not suggest you are powerless over anything else, but it asks you to recognize that you are powerless over alcohol and other drugs.

One value in this admission is that for maybe the first time you are no longer fighting the reality of alcoholism and addiction. Instead, there is actual relief in this admission and acknowledgement that your drug of choice has had the upper hand, the power and the control. People who are obstinate, stubborn or unable to accept this will have a more difficult time. (That could include most alcoholics.) But it is precisely those same individuals who are most capable of embracing the steps, internalizing them and applying them in their daily lives.

The first step doesn't ask, "How powerless are you?" but it does include the qualifying, all-inclusive statement, "that our lives had become unmanageable." The beauty of the first step is that it doesn't let anyone off the hook. Sure, some have to reach a lower bottom than others and, some are not quite ready to stop, but some degree of unmanageability is universal. The results of powerlessness include unmanageability in other affairs, often reaching into all aspects of one's life: health, work, relationships, finance, legal matters and spiritual connection. Spirituality is usually the first thing to suffer or disappear entirely.

Unmanageability may not be equal in its impact in terms of consequence, loss or degree of difficulty: it doesn't have to be! There is no rating system. I tend to think the ones who stop drinking or using sooner are the luckier ones. "No matter how far down the scale we have gone we will see how our experience can benefit others." It cuts both ways.

The first step is about recognition and realization, acknowledgement and acceptance: this *is* happening to me. Before most of us are willing to explore changing a behavior, we have to experience or suffer some form of loss or consequences. For the alcoholic and addict, there is generally a series of losses that take place before a movement towards change (Step Two) can be initiated. Admitting powerlessness allows the alcoholic and addict to open the door to interventions outside of self, and eventually inside of self. It clears the way for a new kind of power to be pursued, developed and to emerge, a power of spiritual dimension and proportion.

Step Two

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

Through the steps, power is redefined and recast in a spiritual context. While Step One addresses powerlessness and the results that come from being alcohol and drug dependent, the remaining eleven Steps, beginning with Step Two, reference a "Power greater than ourselves" and the many benefits that come from employing that Power. Powerlessness leads to empowerment. Acknowledgement leads to acceptance.

I often think of approaching Step Two like you're planning for a road trip. Where do you want to go? What route will you take? How will you get there? Who will be your guide? Taking the time to plan always seems to make the journey go smoother. Certain suggestions like using a

map and stopping to look before you proceed make good sense. In the case of men, it is often said that we will drive around lost, and keep driving, pretending to know where we're going ("I know it's right around here somewhere") instead of asking someone for directions. For some reason, it is too much to just admit we don't know where we are.

If we approach Step Two without some planning and without the willingness to seek direction, we will most likely get lost and continue in our cycle of unmanageability, loneliness and suffering. Our journey will be memorable, but for all the wrong reasons. Heck, you already know what it feels like to be lost! Employ your Global Positioning System (even better than a standard map), the Power greater than yourself. Seek direction and assistance. You'll have a much better chance of getting there...sanely.

Sometimes when people encounter the second step for the first time they struggle with the concept of whom or what the Power is that will restore them to sanity. Fortunately, the Power can get to you in many forms: through meetings, other people in recovery, a program sponsor, recovery literature such as the Big Book or the Twelve and Twelve, and a God of your understanding. We are not always ready to recognize that Higher Power initially, but we can seek help from the people and the program to gain a foothold on the path.

Step Two asks us to open up in a way we either haven't done in a very long time or have never done at all. When you have been living under the cloud of alcohol and drug dependence, nothing is very clear. Your modus operandi is to hide, protect, conceal, isolate and shut out. That's just some of the insanity we seek to undo. By using the tools of recovery and beginning to establish or re-establish a spiritual relationship, strength and focus can be regained. The fog will begin to clear.

Recovery is a process, moving from an "out-of-control-while-thinking-you're-in-control" state of being to finding a new source of power. The second step is about realization: realizing you don't have to have all of the answers anymore, realizing you don't have to go it alone. The program and the steps are not set up for "going it alone." The program is about community, coming together to provide and receive support. The insanity usually shines through when one reflects on the struggles of trying it on their own. Our way did not work as well as hoped. Real strength comes from doing things differently. "If I do what I always do, I'll get what I always get." The program of AA loves slogans. It is these easily recognized slogans that begin to generate a new habit.

Let go. Surrender. Prepare to embrace the freedom and liberation you once sought from the bottle or other means. Step Two is about a movement towards change: changing beliefs, destructive behaviors and harmful rituals; even some people, places and things. It is about beginning to connect or reconnect with the God of your understanding. Most important of all, the second step is about hope. The simple statement contained in the few words that make up

Step Two carries a most important message. Hope. Take it to heart. Seek and you will find.

Step Three

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

The power trio: Step One: admit, Step Two: realize, Step Three: decide. For many, Step Three signals the turning point. It can be a real stretch, and more often than not, a huge leap of faith when you first encounter this step. Step Two is the necessary preparation for Step Three. It's the warm-up period at the beginning of an auto race. If Step Two introduces us to a Higher Power, then Step Three instructs to do something we don't do well: putting someone other than ourselves in charge. We are asked to surrender the control and the self-will, offering it to the ultimate authority, the God of our understanding.

Understanding God can be a rather daunting task. I heard someone say that she tells her more control-oriented sponsees "all you need to know about God is that you're not it!" A keep-it-simple response for people who turn first to analyzing and rationalizing, looking constantly for reasons, and ultimately complicating the early stages of their recovery. Put another way and in equally simple terms, let God do for you what you cannot do for yourself.

What is spirituality? It's the million-dollar question with many different answers, and all of them right. Spirituality is an open inquiry, a quest. It is unrestricted. There are no answers to "how far?" and "how much?" It is an open-ended journey. Step Three is about making a firm decision to engage in an ever-evolving spiritual journey with the specific instruction of putting our will and our lives in God's care. We are engaging God to be our guide in all matters. We still have to get out of bed each morning and put our pants on one leg at a time, but we are turning directly to God for strength, support and guidance. We are entrusting God with all that is in us and about us.

In the program one will often hear "do not mistake religion for spirituality" or "don't let your religion get in the way of your spirituality." Good input when you are detangling the web of dishonesty, resentment and mistrust encasing your life while you simultaneously work to establish or re-establish a relationship with the God of your understanding. Dr. Leland Kaiser, a noted spiritual advisor, offers this assessment of the relationship between religion and spirituality: "Religion is the software program people use to navigate the hardware of spirituality." I love this analogy! We all have different operating systems that drive our spirituality and each has something to offer us in reaching and maintaining that next level.

For many of us, religion played some type of role in forming a foundation for our faith and beliefs. Evaluating whether or not this experience was entirely positive is not as important as drawing something helpful from those traditions that will help you to reconnect with God or to connect with God in a way that you have never done before. If your religious experience has left you wounded or feeling abandoned, then go a different direction. Revisit

it another time. Focus on the wonderfully simple yet potent directive offered in Step Three. Seek comfort and care from God as you understand or experience Him.

In the 12-step program, we come together with other alcoholics and addicts and relate in a way that creates a common bond, regardless of our spiritual operating system or religious software. We are able to comfortably share in a group about the God of our understanding, and to pray and reflect as a group. Dr. Kaiser reinforces this when he states, “sickness provides an opportunity for spiritual growth, transformation or progression. It is an unparalleled opportunity to advance your spiritual journey, and is often the calling card to a higher relationship with the spiritual.” That is a true gift of recovery.

Where do you look for help, guidance, direction, reassurance, comfort and support? Where do you place your trust? To whom do you turn? People aren’t always there. Places and things are just that. As the Big Book offers, “...there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find Him now!”

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

One of the most enduring aspects of the steps is their simplicity. Step Four begins a process of formally assessing and evaluating where we have been, who we are and who we have become as a result of our alcoholism and addiction. Before you can go about the important work of “changing the things you can” you have to identify what those things are. With a new or reinvigorated spiritual connection and a support system in place, you are ready to begin this revealing part of your journey to empowerment.

What does it mean to take inventory? If you’ve ever worked for a distributor, supplier or retailer, you’ve probably had the experience of counting everything in the place to determine what it is the company has on hand. Most companies will shut down for a day or two per year for this ritual. Even in the age of computers, companies still take a manual inventory because what’s in the computer doesn’t always match what’s in the store or the warehouse. Things get overlooked, forgotten and shoved aside, but as long as they exist and are held, they still need to be counted. In a way, it is how companies decide what to keep and what to discard.

Taking stock of ourselves is much the same. Our memory is like a computer: it stores a lot of information, but you can’t always recall that information with exactness or clarity unless you match it to a list, an inventory. Putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard are the best ways to get it all down in front of you. As you write, you can look at it, you can recall, you can be prodded to look in the next bin that needs inventorying. Writing is a healthy, honest process: the thoughts flow from the mind through the heart and down the arm to the hand. We are motivated to look around the corners, in the closets and in the deep

recesses. We are working to produce a “searching, fearless and moral” record.

Searching: thorough, complete, and extensive. Actually, the search can be both revealing and rewarding. It’s not solely about the negative. Take the good with the bad. The process will reveal how you have changed. Some will see how they’ve moved from an honest, loving and compassionate place to a selfish, manipulative, resentful and dishonest one. Others may see how their entire life has been ruled by shame, devoid of trust, love, commitment and understanding.

Fearless: unafraid of what you may find or encounter. We know that fear is an emotion generally associated with impending danger or pain. If we see pain coming, we want to turn the other way. Step Four directs us to get prepared for what we will encounter. Since we tend to have a curious nature, we look ahead to find out what we are going to do with the inventory once it’s done. You might think “no way am I going to tell *that* to anyone!” So you consider editing it, or begin writing it for someone else rather than for yourself. Don’t do that! This is a very personal document.

Moral: the distinction between right and wrong; how one conducts their affairs. A moral inventory looks at who I am from a right and wrong standpoint. It asks us to recognize those things that are uncomfortable, unpleasant and dishonest. Most of us have a conscience and have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Even after taking an extended vacation from that part of our conscience, it’s still there for us to tap into. If it wasn’t intact, addicts and alcoholics could not recover.

Understandably, most people would rather overlook, forget or shove aside the “wreckage of the past.” Unfortunately, the past, in its many manifestations (anger, resentment, shame, dishonesty, etc.), has a way of rearing its ugly head again and again. Circumventing this step is a sure fire set-up for a slip, at a minimum, or a full-blown relapse. Until you take an honest look at what it is that has become you, you can’t effectively change it. The step is not about seeing how much of a victim you are. It’s about putting it all in front of you so you don’t have to be a victim anymore.

Remember, you are writing the inventory for yourself. Work your recovery one step at a time. Follow the instructions. Use all of the ingredients. If you leave the baking powder out of the cake mix, it won’t rise when baked. If this is your first time to work Step Four, do the best you can. Approach it deliberately and sensibly. It’s not a race, but finish what you begin. As you grow in your recovery, you may find that another inventory is in order. Either way, use the resources available to you: the Big Book, the 12 & 12, Step Studies, your sponsor and others who have done an inventory.

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

It's all in the cards. In poker, if you want to win, you have to play your hand. You have to show your cards. Sure, there's a gamble involved. But if you fold every time, you run the risk of never feeling what it's like to win. I don't mean to imply that working this step is like playing a game of poker, but the reality is you have to put your cards on the table for God, yourself and someone else to see. Otherwise, what's in the cards remains hidden and drags on you, threatening the progress of your recovery.

Step Five is a humbling step. We are asked to make an admission about the specific nature of our wrongs to God, to ourselves and to another human being. It's pretty straightforward. You have just prepared an inventory of yourself. You have identified the flaws and the failures, the selfishness and the self-seeking. You have identified people, situations, beliefs, feelings and actions that have included pain, resentment and hurt.

Now it is time to get it all out in the open. Go ahead. Get it out there. Unload it. Pour the contents on the table. Remove the weight from your shoulders. This step alone won't make it all better, but it will set you further along the path of personal growth.

For addicts and alcoholics, anger, fear and resentment become internalized as a toxic form of shame and corrupt the core of the individual. This inventory is not about what others had done to us and why they were wrong. It is about us and our wrongs, our mistakes. It is our chance to lay the cards on the table and show our hand.

We've all heard or used the statement "I just had to get it off my chest." It's one way of spelling relief. If you keep it all to yourself, you miss an important opportunity to begin the necessary process of healing and reconciliation. Most of the world's religions and other spiritual movements have a process for cleansing and purging the soul--confessing, revealing and stripping away the veneer, getting us back to the essence of who we are. This is in great part why the inventory is such an important part of the program. If the pain remains hidden, the possibility of relapsing grows.

Identifying the best person to share your inventory with is a critical component of working this step. If you have accepted that the best course is to reveal everything without holding back, then find someone you can comfortably do this with, such as a sponsor, another member of the fellowship, or a member of the clergy who is sensitive to or familiar with recovery. Being willing to trust is vital.

We are instructed not to take this step with the people most significant in our lives. It is not intended for us to bring more pain to those closest to us such as a spouse, family members, long time friends and close associates. Step Nine will provide ample opportunity to make contact with those individuals. Remember that the inventory is a very personal document and sharing it is very personal, as well.

"All the world's a stage." Addicts and alcoholics know this all too well. A huge amount of time and energy is spent

acting, pretending, making excuses, manipulating and covering up. Preserving a dishonest lifestyle requires dishonesty--wearing masks and playing charades. Step Five means it is time to put away the masks, stop acting and get ready to take action. If you elected to use the Fourth Step guide in the Big Book to chronicle your fears, resentments, anger and relationships, then your approach to working Step Five should not be too difficult.

Working a program is a growing process and some of the growth is painful, but ultimately rewarding and rejuvenating. This step helps to further organize the patterns and behaviors, putting them in the needed context and setting the stage for spiritual growth. Steps Six through Nine continue the path to reconciliation.

Whether this is a first, second or third encounter with Step Five, give it your best effort. A boat in a harbor is usually safe, but if it never leaves the harbor, it will never experience the freedom of the open water. Experience the open water.

Step Six

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

Curtis Mayfield wrote a gospel song in 1965, "People Get Ready", that reminds me of Step Six. While the song deals with the winds of change sweeping across our country's racial landscape after 1963's March on Washington and Martin Luther King's most famous speech, it also takes on a special recovery meaning for me.

The lyric starts with this powerful and moving statement:

*People get ready, there's a train a-comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesel's hummin'
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

Step Six is about preparation, getting ready for change to take place. It's about getting ready for redemption, ready to leave the cycle of pain and destruction behind. We are promised that relief is just around the corner.

I used to get caught up in trying to understand how you were supposed to work this step. Summary: You finish your inventory, then wake up one morning, turn it over to God and *POOF!*, no more dishonesty, fear, resentment, anger. All better now. I'm a changed man!

If only it worked that way. The problem with this approach is that you actually by-pass Step Six altogether and land in Step Seven *unprepared*. What happened to the spiritual preparation? Preparation is equal parts reflection and action. By taking the time to focus on and practice that which you desire to change or achieve, it becomes possible to complete the preparation needed to have those defects of character removed.

The risks of jumping in blindly to anything are apparent, but they are no more apparent than when you are flying planes. Flight preparation is rated very highly because the risks associated with failure can be serious or fatal. If you are a pilot, you walk around the plane, carefully checking

every mechanical function, the plane's condition, then the engines and instrumentation. Nothing is left to chance.

So how *do* you get ready to work Step Six, let alone get *entirely* ready? Entirely means wholly, completely, without reservation. Getting ready involves reflection, preparation and even a healthy dose of anticipation. The tools include action, practice, meditation, prayer, willingness and openness.

You just completed a thorough examination of self in Steps Four and Five. You have spent a great deal of time and energy identifying your character defects. A defect implies that something is wrong. Well, something *is* wrong and that is why we want to have it removed.

One of the challenges in Step Six is being able to recognize the impact those character defects have had in every aspect of your life. Awareness is only one-half of the battle, but an important one. How about this new awareness becoming the beginning of a lasting transformation?

It's the behavioral aspects of the disease that give us the most grief and therefore the best reason, if not motivation, for change. The spiritual component of recovery is primary and paramount to bringing about significant and lasting change to our way of life. Even in the study of addiction medicine, there is clear acknowledgement of the important benefits of the spiritual component.

Around every turn in the program is a new and deeper spiritual challenge. You can't pay lip service to your relationship with God and expect to successfully accomplish what this step is preparing you for. You need focus and dedication. Two of the rewards that lie ahead are liberation and freedom.

It's time to leave the cycle of pain and destruction behind and move towards forgiving yourself. *You don't need no baggage, just get on board.* How fitting is this lyric to the need to completely let go of "all the things which we have admitted are objectionable"? As we struggle with this, the Big Book instructs us to "ask God to help us be willing."

In Step Six we are introduced to a new kind of vulnerability, but fortunately one that is safer and more rewarding than our previous vulnerable experiences. This is not an easy step to make, but it is humbling and comforting all at the same time. With Step Six we are truly acknowledging that God will ultimately do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Step Seven

"Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings."

Seven simple words constitute Step Seven. It's a very specific set of instructions that can be abbreviated even further with four words: let go and let God. Through working the previous steps, we have been developing or redeveloping a relationship with God while learning to identify and disconnect the chains holding us to the darker sides of our past. The instructions offered in the sixth and seventh steps are specifically spiritual. They signal that

change is coming and that preparation, practice and eventually reconciliation will be necessary to achieve this desired change. They also place the ultimate success at moving towards change in the hands of God, as we understand Him.

As the Big Book states, we want these shortcomings that get in the way of our usefulness to God and to others removed. So now we go about the business of letting our shortcomings go. No longer do we want our actions and feelings to be ruled by our failure to reach the desired or expected standard of conduct for our lives. How we tackle their removal is a very personal and involved process, one that, at a minimum, involves prayer, practice, direction and reflection. In one respect, Step Seven prepares us to continue the process of a full and complete reckoning with events and wrongs that brought us to this point in our life.

Prior to embarking on our journey in recovery, much time was spent protecting a way of life that was destructive, dishonest, disloyal, resentful, fearful, spiritually bankrupt and predictable. Yes, predictable and familiar. Not really comfortable, but we got used to it--comfortably numb. We cover up so no one will find out who we really are and how we really feel.

Conversations with God before recovery may have resembled a bargaining session: in actuality, a one-way communication in a tightly controlled relationship where God is being asked to get us out of trouble or a bad situation. Promises, some extravagant and some impossible, were made with no intention of or ability to follow through. It was a set-up for spiritual failure and dissatisfaction. There was nothing humble about our approach and our prayer was devoid of meaning.

Doing things differently now is imperative: the same actions will afford the same results. You have to work at becoming honest, sincere, loving, helpful, understanding and humble. Becoming humble is key. Humbly asking God to remove our shortcomings involves acceptance, recognition and a great deal of resolve. You have to change behaviors that keep you grounded in dishonesty, resentment and fear. You have to put into practice that which yields recognizable results. And you have to turn to your spiritual foundation, which is under constant construction, where there is hope and help.

Humbly is defined as "in a humble way." To be humble is "to possess or be marked by the virtue of humility." Humility is the "quality of being without pride; voluntary self-abasement." Self-abasement is a humbling of oneself. To humble oneself is also to "perform an act of submission by way of apology or penitence."

It is feeling or showing sorrow for having done wrong. It is in this one small word, "humbly," that the drafters of the Steps clearly understood the power to be derived from this approach to change and the necessity of all to embrace it. Achieving a humble state makes it possible to strip away the veneer that covers up the goodness in us, thereby preventing our usefulness and service to God and others.

By this point in your program, you will notice that your prayer has evolved. Your awareness of its quality and impact in your daily affairs will have changed, as well. There's a saying we have all heard at least once, "be careful of what you pray for," implying that you might receive it. Step Seven instructs us to ask God for much, but to ask in a markedly different way. While this step and the ones that bookend it are tough no matter where you are at in your program, it is both rewarding and revealing.

Change does not come easily and this step reminds us where to turn for guidance and support. Enthusiasm for change, by definition, comes from God. It is a combination of faith and works. We cannot do it alone and we cannot have lasting change without God's help. We acknowledge this and "humbly" ask God to remove our shortcomings, helping us change the behaviors and patterns that contribute to the problems in our lives and those around us. We realize that God continues to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves or by ourselves.

Step Eight

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

I'll bet your favorite task at home is cleaning out the garage. I know it's mine! Well, not really. I can be pretty organized in other areas of my life, but straightening out the garage, even remembering what's in the garage, is not one of my strengths. So I occasionally have to open the unmarked boxes and plastic storage containers to find out what is inside them. What usually happens is I find out that it's all still there. I may have forgotten about that one certain item, but it's always right where I left it the last time I opened the container and inventoried it.

I view the mechanics of Step Eight in a similar manner: it's taking a specific group of items being stored in the garage, items you have already inventoried, and organizing them in such a way so you can do something productive with them. With this step, we are identifying the people in our lives that have been harmed by our actions, behaviors and attitudes. We are preparing to formally acknowledge this and make our peace with them, and ultimately with God and ourselves.

It's not enough to recognize who these persons are and acknowledge them only to ourselves. The framers of the steps are once again asking that we become completely willing. This time, the willingness involves preparing to face these individuals and make amends. Beyond apologies and restitution, amends is about the change that is taking place within us. It is about completing the process started in Step Four. We are now moving towards completion of externalizing the changes we internalized with Steps Six and Seven.

It is time to put it down on paper again and the inventory we wrote in Step Four is the document to work from. Most of the people to whom we will need to make amends will already be listed there. However, by the time we are ready to work this step, our understanding of who "all" persons are will have expanded. Who did we leave out of

our inventory, either inadvertently or on purpose? "All" is complete: it means everyone you can think of. No exceptions.

Who are these persons we had harmed? Spouses, significant others, parents, siblings, children, immediate family, extended family, friends, neighbors, business associates, classmates, teachers, co-workers, dealers, suppliers, customers, brief acquaintances, people we never formally met. And so on. "All persons we had harmed" should also include the person making the list. After all, the alcoholic and the addict have inflicted the most harm on themselves. While that is not the primary purpose of this step, an important part of the healing process is forgiving yourself.

"Why should I make amends to someone who has wronged me?" Even though you harmed someone, if they harmed you first, the temptation will be to focus on their wrongs instead of your own. As we are constantly reminded in this simple program, we are working these steps to build a strong foundation in our personal recovery. We do this for us. Keeping score is something you do in a ballgame, not in recovery.

How did we harm them? Harm is being mean spirited, dishonest, manipulative, conniving and misleading. It is making hurtful statements and judgments. It is expressing our anger inappropriately. It is taking advantage of someone, taking what does not belong to us. It is putting our own selfish needs before someone we are responsible for. It is inflicting emotional, physical or sexual harm. It is all of this and much more. To work a thorough Step Eight involves gaining an understanding of what harm is.

Step Eight is about taking personal responsibility. We know the blame game is not productive and does not move us forward. We are reminded that this is about us—our actions and our behaviors. Yes, alcohol and drugs may have shaped and driven the behaviors, but the behaviors are ours to own. We need to engage in the process of reconciling, continuing the journey towards spiritual redemption, reclaiming our self and our being.

Step Eight is both action and preparation. It is a process of identification, specification, acknowledgement, recognition and reflection. It is also a necessary step in taking care of old business. The breeding ground for misery, fear and resentment includes unfinished business. Go ahead, pull the boxes and containers off the shelves, and get ready to do something important with the contents.

Step Nine

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

If you've ever been backpacking you know the value of the statement "travel lightly." Long hiking trips involving multiple nights out mean carrying everything you need on your back. Your water, food, tent, tools, clothing, toiletries and gear all have to fit neatly into a fairly small space. And then you have to carry it. The more you pack, the heavier

it is. Along the way, it may get so heavy that you are forced to discard some of the items you packed. Otherwise, your forward progress is dramatically slowed or even stopped. So you decide to take only what you absolutely need and leave out the rest.

Your life up to the time you began your journey in recovery may have resembled that scenario. The weight of your addiction and all that it comes with slowed you down and sometimes immobilized you. The big difference is what you had in the bag. Instead of carrying what you needed, you carried around all of the things that needed discarding. Step Nine wraps up the work of emptying out the bag of “stuff” that’s been weighing you down, controlling your life, and causing you and those around you pain, suffering and equal amounts of misery. By the time you complete Step Nine, the bag should be much lighter and contain only the things you need to sustain a life more spiritually centered and balanced.

The Big Book does quite a masterful job of defining and explaining this step. No less than nine pages in Chapter Six “Into Action” are devoted to helping the reader figure out how and when to make amends. The coolest thing is that the section on Step Nine segues into Step Ten with the Promises, signaling that all the hard work is paying off with the dividends becoming more apparent all the time.

All that said, the task at hand is challenging and some might initially think it unnecessary. Here you are feeling better about yourself, feeling more vibrant and lively, and experiencing some of the many rewards sobriety has to offer. Then you find out you have more cleaning up to do. You are instructed to continue dealing with the wreckage of the past. Well, it has to be addressed in a thorough and deliberate manner or it will flame right back up, threatening the very progress you have worked so hard to achieve.

While in the depths of our addiction, we had stopped checking our moral compass. Our wrongs included our mishandling of personal and family matters, financial affairs, professional situations, sexual relationships, fears, resentments and anger. As uncomfortable as it may be to revisit this, it is necessary in order to achieve personal growth, personal forgiveness and the liberation that the steps promise us. With Step Nine, we have an opportunity to encounter someone who we treated poorly, hold a deep resentment of or harbor a fear of, primarily because of the harm we caused, and to move forward by reconciling.

Amends signals change and reveals it in the form of changed behaviors, attitudes, approaches and even beliefs. The process of making amends involves making an important announcement, although subtle and humble, about our transformation in recovery. It is both a repudiation of our faults and a validation of our new life.

While the amends process isn’t about making someone else feel better, that may happen in many cases. Yes, making amends can be anxiety producing. But it doesn’t have to be that way. The preparation and action that took place in Steps Six and Seven help pave the way for the readiness to face those we had harmed. Instead of

looking down when we encounter someone we had harmed, we want to look up. Making direct amends is one more way to eradicate the negative shame that is in us.

There are many ways to make direct amends without bringing injury to those persons or others who may be impacted. A sponsor is a good person to consult with for guidance when it is not clear. There are also many ways to make indirect amends in those situations where injury is likely. Finding a way to make restitution and perform charitable works in those cases is equally important. When making face-to-face amends is not advisable or possible (due to distance), writing a letter or making contact via the phone may be a way to open the door to amends.

If we are to truly be of service to God and our fellows, we have to remove the weight from the baggage we carry. After all, if you’re putting all of your energy into fighting with a heavy bag or backpack, then you’ll have no energy for anything else.

If you ever want a good chuckle, read “A Walk In the Woods” by Bill Bryson. It’s about two guys who decide to hike the Appalachian Trail. Reading it will provide you with a clearer understanding of what to take and what not to take on a long hiking trip.

Step Ten

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

I have a 40 year-old car that is fun to drive and own. It’s a 1964 Corvair Spyder convertible, turbocharged, 180 horse power, 4-speed manual transmission, wire wheels and lots of chrome in all the right places. This rear-engine, air-cooled beauty shines! But it requires regular maintenance and constant attention. It won’t stay running well and in top condition if I don’t take care of it or tend to its needs.

In fact, it can look really good on the outside but still have its share of mechanical problems underneath the hood. These problems are not always noticeable or predictable but they do affect performance and sometimes immobilize the car completely. No matter how good it looks on the outside, it isn’t going anywhere until I recognize, identify and fix any problems.

Our life in recovery is not much different. With Steps 1-9 we just completed rebuilding the engine and other components that drive our very lives. Now we are asked to continue the process of monitoring, maintaining and “tuning up.” To stay happy and healthy requires paying constant attention to our spiritual, emotional, mental and physical needs. Step Ten opens the door to a new phase in our recovery: the strengthening and fine-tuning phase.

Step Ten is to the point and very simple. Continue to take stock, assess and evaluate. When you are wrong, admit it promptly. Step Ten is asking us to pay attention. It is reminding us not to get so bogged down in the daily routines and rituals of work and other aspects of life that we forget to reflect on who we are and where we are at today. This day. One day at a time.

You just spent a good deal of time emptying out the bag and taking the weight off. Now you're given a simple instruction: don't fill it back up with useless stuff. You have worked so hard to recognize the nature of your wrongs and rid yourself of them. The last thing you really want to do is set yourself up for more of the same. Complacency and resentment are not your friends.

"Continued to take personal inventory" means ongoing. That's what we've been doing since we engaged in the inventory process with Step Four. Keep the self-examination and evaluation going. Journaling is a good way to stay the course. Writing or using the computer to do a daily inventory is one way to stay in touch with feelings and monitor behaviors, actions and reactions. Talking with a sponsor or other friends in recovery is also a good way to keep everything in check, including your ego.

Step Ten offers a key to keeping us humble. We will continue to make mistakes and need to reconcile. The step doesn't suggest this as a possibility but as an absolute. "When" wrong not "if." Step Ten reminds us that we are not perfect beings. We do not strive for perfection but for the ability to recognize and sustain the positive changes that are taking place within us. We find that we are turning more and more to our spiritual relationship for strength and guidance.

The inability to recognize and admit our faults limits the effectiveness of our recovery and puts a barrier between God and us. The program places great importance on our being of service to God and our fellows. Denial of our wrongs complicates matters and limits our ability to serve.

Once we encounter Step Ten we have finished an important part of our program. Does this mean we're done? Does this mean it's time to coast? Not hardly. We have accomplished much and reached a significant recovery milestone. It's no mistake that this is the point in our program where the Promises begin to be more fully revealed to us. Success has been achieved and continues to be realized by working a program. To keep the changes you have made intact requires attentiveness and continuing effort.

Earlier in this series I referred to the first three steps as the "power trio." I like to call Steps 4-9 the "middle six." They focus on the business of recognition, change and finishing up with cleaning house. Steps 10-12 are often referred to as the maintenance steps. But they are more than that. They really are an introduction to a new phase of growth in your recovery. I call them the "strengthening" steps. They are reminders of what to do as we grow and move forward with building our foundation in recovery.

Step Eleven

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

I recently received a phone call from someone fairly new to recovery. This person was a fence sitter. He was struggling with going to meetings and finding a sponsor--and still drinking. He mentioned that he was learning to play blues guitar and had purchased a Mel Bay lesson book, was working with an instructor, and was practicing daily. He knew it would take time, focus and practice. He wanted to become an accomplished blues guitarist like some of his favorite players, some of whom were friends of his and others of the more famous variety.

I continued to listen and then noted that when he is watching an accomplished blues guitarist play, it probably appears almost second nature for that person. However, getting to that point required hard work, focus, patience and lots of practice. Before something becomes second nature, it needs to become part of our nature. I suggested that if he applied that same energy, effort and patience to his personal recovery, he would learn how to work a program that is fruitful and rewarding.

The same can be said of relationships, whether with friends or loved ones. Any relationship that we hold dear requires effort. In a developing romantic relationship there is a "honeymoon" period where the infatuation, attraction and passion overshadow any misgivings or problems encountered along the way. At some point we realize that, in order to make the relationship prosper, there has to be a level of commitment that is supported by strong effort. We have to work at it and practice doing those things that will nurture it and make it grow. If we stop nurturing it and investing in it, it becomes less beneficial and less important. We may eventually take the relationship for granted and realize that it isn't as fulfilling as it once was.

Step Eleven is preventive medicine. It is a prescription for life enhancement. It is an affirmation for that which works and a reminder of how far we have traveled in our journey in recovery. It is about improving our most significant relationship: our relationship with God as we have come to know and understand Him. There is more work to do. It is not just a matter of carrying on and remaining static in our relationship with God, it is about improving that relationship, cultivating it, making it better, more meaningful and fruitful.

The step directs us to use the tools of prayer and meditation to improve our spiritual connection. Prayer, in general, involves communicating and talking with God while meditation is more of a state of listening, being open to God's knowledge and message. Both involve reflection and introspection. To improve our conscious contact is to further develop and maintain a presence with God. It is building an awareness that God is working through us. It is an ability to witness intervention of a divine nature versus mere coincidence.

Step Eleven asks us to engage with God. Specific instructions are given and the results we desire are stated as well. To pray *only* for the knowledge of His will for us is about as direct as it gets. No longer is it helpful to ask for things that are self-serving. We are reminded to use prayer to bring us closer to God and closer to that

conscious knowing of His intentions for us. We also pray for the power to carry out those intentions. No more self-will as the driving force behind our actions. We become an instrument of God and thereby more useful to our fellows.

The quality and depth of our communication with God will continue to change and grow as we continue to work the program. At this point in our program, or some other time, we may also desire to expand our spiritual relationship through involvement in an organized religion or other activities that introduce us to new dimensions of growth.

Step Eleven instructs us to use the tools of prayer and meditation to acquire knowledge of God's will and the strength to live it. The power we receive is the truest gift of recovery: spiritual empowerment. When we reach this step, the spiritual transformation within us is taking shape. Just like the musician who spends the time, effort and energy to master their craft or the individual who takes the time to invest in growing and improving their relationship with another person, we must do the same to achieve the goals of expanding our connection with and service to God.

Step Twelve

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

I often say that recovery is a journey, not a destination. Each step along the way of our path, from the baby steps to the major leaps, reveals something new, something to be lived and experienced. It's not always enjoyable and challenges will remain, but we now have the spiritual tools to deal with whatever comes our way. You don't arrive or finish, instead, you begin to live life fully and apply all that you have learned to all that you do.

Each person who gives themselves over to working this simple program will encounter their spiritual awakening: a coming to life, signaling a new direction. Not a reawakening but an awakening – that spiritual source which has been in us but never truly tapped, opened, experienced and explored. The awakening comes as a result of engaging in an inquiry process. Having had this spiritual awakening, we are instructed to carry this message to other alcoholics and addicts and reflect this message in daily practice through our actions, words and deeds.

Spiritual awakening can be likened to spiritual redemption. Think about life before recovery. What has changed? Are there not significant differences today? Isn't the person in the mirror a different person than the one who began the journey? To fully engage in recovery is to eliminate the attraction of our former ways. The commitment is genuine, not superficial. We know that addiction manifests itself in behaviors that bring pain, suffering, loneliness, emptiness and loss. While we may still experience periods in our life that include these feelings, they will not be central characteristics of our spiritual awakening.

Step Twelve is not celebratory but it could be. At the core of our self is a great person. Recovery is about releasing that great person inside. Recovery is about rediscovery and taking ownership. Recovery renews the spirit and fires the soul. Recovery incurs struggles and presents challenges. Recovery inspires and provides pleasant surprises. Recovery is like watching the sunrise over the horizon- a peaceful first light.

Those who know me well know of my affection for all things music. I listen to many genres and keep an ear open for lyrics that address addiction and recovery themes. Artists like Stevie Ray Vaughn, John Hiatt and Dream Theater, among many others, have referenced recovery themes. Some songs are subtle, making sense only to the recovering faithful, while some are in your face.

One of my favorite groups, the British progressive rock band Marillion, released an album back in 1987 titled “Clutching at Straws” that focused entirely on one person's struggle to accept their alcoholism and addiction: the contemplation stage where they know they have a problem, everyone around them knows they have a problem, but they are still holding on to the last vestiges of their addiction, hoping to avoid making the radical changes necessary to save themselves. The following lyric, from the song *That Time of the Night*, speaks volumes about the impaired state of spirituality before recovery: “...so if you join me, we'll get on our knees and pray. I'll show you salvation, we'll take the alternative way, clutching the short straw.”

With Step Twelve the recovering person is empowered and instructed to take a truly alternative way and carry a very different kind of message to those whose shoes they have walked in. Chapter 7 in the Big Book, entitled *Working with Others*, is devoted entirely to this subject. What message will we deliver? How will we deliver it? It is often said that in order to keep what you have you have to give it away. That is the combination of selfish and selfless all in one. Whatever our motivation is for reaching out to others is not important. It has to be done. That is our service instruction. Those little things we do to carry the message remind us “there but for the grace of God go I.” What more powerful reminder is there?

I have a friend in the program named Leo H. who embodies the here and now. When you ask him that standard introductory question, “How are you doing?” he always answers “Good for today.” Because that is all we have: today. As the Promises indicate, we see that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. In essence, that is as much a part of the spiritual awakening, or coming to life, that we experience with our recovery. It is to recognize the hand of God in our lives, to see the impression of His fingerprints and to walk along the path He guides us on.

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