Spirituality and the 12 Step Programme

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INTRODUCTION

A twelve-step program is a set of guiding principles outlining a course of action for tackling problems including alcoholism, drug addiction, and compulsion. Originally proposed by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as a method of recovery from alcoholism, the original Twelve Steps were first published in the 1939 book Alcoholics Anonymous. Often referred to as the “Big Book”, Alcoholics Anonymous is one of the best-selling books of all time, having sold 30 million copies. The method was adapted and became the foundation of other twelve-step programmes.

Preferences related to the addicts' drug of choice has led to the creation of other fellowships such as Cocaine Anonymous, Crystal Meth Anonymous, Pills Anonymous, Marijuana Anonymous and Nicotine Anonymous. Behavioural issues such as compulsion for, and/or addiction to, gambling, crime, food, sex, hoarding, debt and work are addressed in fellowships such as Celebrate Recovery, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, Clutterers Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous and Workaholics Anonymous.

Auxiliary groups such as Al-Anon and Nar-Anon, for friends and family members of alcoholics and addicts, respectively, are part of a response to treating addiction as a disease that is enabled by family systems. Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) addresses compulsions related to relationships, referred to as codependency.

The relative success of the AA programme seems to be due to the fact that an alcoholic who no longer drinks has an exceptional faculty for reaching out to and helping an uncontrolled drinker.

THE AA PROGRAMME

In simple form, the AA programme operates when a recovered alcoholic passes along the story of his or her own problem drinking, describes the sobriety he or she has found in AA, and invites the newcomer to join the fellowship.

Chapter 1 of the Big Book is entitled “Bill’s Story”. Bill Wilson and Dr Bob Smith co-founded AA. Bill's first success came during a business trip to Akron, Ohio, where he was introduced to Dr. Bob, a surgeon who was unable to stay sober. After thirty days of working with him, Dr Bob drank his last drink on June 10, 1935, the founding date marked by AA for its anniversaries.
Bill had become sober when a friend, Ebby Thatcher, came to talk to him when he was at his lowest point. Ebby had the authority of one who had suffered – who had been in the place of no control over the outcome – and then come out the other side, larger and more alive, and thus able to invite others into that same bigger field. Bill could see that “there was something at work in a human heart which had done the impossible. . . . Here sat a miracle directly across the kitchen table. He shouted great tidings.” Early in his own recovery, Bill writes:

“While I lay in the hospital the thought came that there were thousands of hopeless alcoholics who might be glad to have what had been so freely given me. Perhaps I could help some of them. They in turn might work with others.

My friend had emphasized the absolute necessity of demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly was it imperative to work with others as he had worked with me. Faith without works was dead he said [James 2:17]. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic! For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge her or his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, that alcoholic could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead.”

Indeed, during times when Bill was nearly driven back to drinking, “I soon found that when all other measures failed, work with another alcoholic would save the day. . . . It is a design for living that works in rough going.” (Ibid.)

It is a commonly held view that addiction or alcoholism is caused by lack of willpower in relation to drugs and alcohol. However, the starting point for the 12 step programme is that the alcoholic is powerless over alcohol. Step 1 is “We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” (Ibid.)

The first step of the journey is the admission of powerlessness. It is where no one wants to go and no one will go voluntarily. We have to be led there through our own failure and experience of death. In men’s work, we call it the Great Defeat. Franciscans call it poverty. The Carmelites call it nothingness. The Buddhists call it emptiness. The Jews call it the desert. Jesus calls it the sign of Jonah. The New Testament calls it the Way of the Cross. They’re all talking about the same necessary step.

Powerlessness is an experience we all share anyway, if we are sincere. But Bill Wilson found we are not very good at such humble honesty: it’s much easier to live in denial. It seems we are not that free to be honest, or even aware, because most of our garbage is buried in the unconscious. So it is absolutely necessary that we find a spirituality that reaches to that hidden level. If not, nothing really changes.

It is not necessarily bad will or even conscious denial on our part. We just can’t see what we are not told to look for. Amazing really: as Jesus put it, we see the splinter in our brother’s or sister’s eye and miss the log in our own (Matthew 7: 3-5). The whole deceptive game of projection is revealed in that one brilliant line. For many people, the only thing strong enough to make us look at our log is some experience of addiction, some moral failure, or some failing over which we are powerless.
So powerlessness over alcohol is the problem. Pages 25 and 26 of the Big Book state:

“There is a solution. Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the levelling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it. When, therefore, we were approached by those in whom the problem had been solved, there was nothing left for us but to pick up the simple kit of spiritual tools laid at our feet. We have found much of heaven and we have been rocketed into a fourth dimension of existence of which we had not even dreamed.

The great fact is just this, and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God's universe. The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never do by ourselves.

If you are as seriously alcoholic as we were, we believe there is no middle-of-the-road solution. 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. This we did because we honestly wanted to, and were willing to make the effort.”

So the Big Book says that true alcoholics are beyond human aid. Only a power greater than human aid can restore them to sanity. Recovery follows from a spiritual experience or experiences that revolutionise attitudes. By way of an appendix, the Big Book clarifies what spiritual experiences are:

“The terms "spiritual experience" and "spiritual awakening" are used many times in this book which, upon careful reading, shows that the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism has manifested itself among us in many different forms. Yet it is true that our first printing gave many readers the impression that these personality changes, or religious experiences, must be in the nature of sudden and spectacular upheavals. Happily for everyone, this conclusion is erroneous.

In the first few chapters a number of sudden revolutionary changes are described. Though it was not our intention to create such an impression, many alcoholics have nevertheless concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming "God-consciousness" followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook.

Among our rapidly growing membership of thousands of alcoholics such transformations, though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the "educational variety" because they develop slowly over a period of time. Quite often friends of the newcomer are aware of the difference long before he is himself. He finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. What often takes place in a few months could hardly be accomplished by years of self-discipline. 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. Most of us think this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it "God-consciousness."

Most emphatically we wish to say that any alcoholic capable of honestly facing his problems in the light of our experience can recover, provided he does not close his mind to all spiritual principles. He can only be defeated by an attitude of intolerance or belligerent denial.
We find that no one need have difficulty with the spirituality of the program.

WILLINGNESS, HONESTY AND OPEN MINDEDNESS ARE THE ESSENCIALS OF RECOVERY. BUT THESE ARE INDISPENSABLE.

"There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance – that principle is contempt prior to investigation." (Herbert Spencer)

All subsequent mentions of spiritual experiences in the Big Book can be taken to refer to this same appendix.

The Big Book goes on to tell the story of a business man called Roland Hazard:

“A certain American business man had ability, good sense, and high character. For years he had floundered from one sanitarium to another. He had consulted the best known American psychiatrists. Then he had gone to Europe, placing himself in the care of a celebrated physician (the psychiatrist, Dr. Jung) who prescribed for him. Though experience had made him skeptical, he finished his treatment with unusual confidence. His physical and mental condition were unusually good. Above all, he believed he had acquired such a profound knowledge of the inner workings of his mind and its hidden springs that relapse was unthinkable. Nevertheless, he was drunk in a short time. More baffling still, he could give himself no satisfactory explanation for his fall.

So he returned to this doctor, whom he admired, and asked him point-blank why he could not recover. He wished above all things to regain self-control. He seemed quite rational and well-balanced with respect to other problems. Yet he had no control whatever over alcohol. Why was this?

He begged the doctor to tell him the whole truth, and he got it. In the doctor's judgment he was utterly hopeless; he could never regain his position in society and he would have to place himself under lock and key or hire a bodyguard if he expected to live long. That was a great physician's opinion.

But this man still lives, and is a free man. He does not need a bodyguard nor is he confined. He can go anywhere on this earth where other free men may go without disaster, provided he remains willing to maintain a certain simple attitude.
Some of our alcoholic readers may think they can do without spiritual help. Let us tell you the rest of the conversation our friend had with his doctor.

The doctor said: "You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. I have never seen one single case recover, where that state of mind existed to the extent that it does in you." Our friend felt as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a clang.

He said to the doctor, "Is there no exception?"

"Yes," replied the doctor," there is. Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. 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. In fact, I have been trying to produce some such emotional rearrangement within you. With many individuals the methods which I employed are successful, but I have never been successful with an alcoholic of your description."

Upon hearing this, our friend was somewhat relieved, for he reflected that, after all, he was a good church member. This hope, however, was destroyed by the doctor's telling him that while his religious convictions were very good, in his case they did not spell the necessary vital spiritual experience.

Here was the terrible dilemma in which our friend found himself when he had the extraordinary experience, which as we have already told you, made him a free man.

We, in our turn, sought the same escape with all the desperation of drowning men. What seemed at first a flimsy reed, has proved to be the loving and powerful hand of God. A new life has been given us or, if you prefer, "a design for living" that really works."

Chapter 3 of the Big Book, "More about alcoholism", has an early restatement of Step 1:

"We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion that we are like other people, or presently may be, has to be smashed."

It goes on to consider if it is possible for an alcoholic to remain abstinent from alcohol on anything other than a spiritual basis:

“For those who are unable to drink moderately the question is how to stop altogether. We are assuming, of course, that the reader desires to stop. Whether such a person can quit upon a nonspiritual basis depends upon the extent to which he has already lost the power to choose whether he will drink or not. Many of us felt that we had plenty of character. There was a tremendous urge to cease forever. Yet we found it impossible. This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it-this utter inability to leave it alone, no matter how great the necessity or the wish."
If you've done the first step, if grace and God have been able to lead you to a place where you admit you're powerless, then your spiritual journey has begun. Until that point, it's all just information, words, dogma, and doctrine. Ironically and paradoxically, you go must go through the place of powerlessness to discover your inner source of Power and Life. In fact, the only people whose power you can trust are those who've made journeys through powerlessness.

Chapter 3 goes on to tell Fred's story:

"Fred is a partner in a well known accounting firm. His income is good, he has a fine home, is happily married and the father of promising children of college age. He has so attractive a personality that he makes friends with everyone. If ever there was a successful business man, it is Fred. To all appearance he is a stable, well balanced individual. Yet, he is alcoholic. We first saw Fred about a year ago in a hospital where he had gone to recover from a bad case of jitters. It was his first experience of this kind, and he was much ashamed of it. Far from admitting he was an alcoholic, he told himself he came to the hospital to rest his nerves. The doctor intimated strongly that he might be worse than he realized. For a few days he was depressed about his condition. He made up his mind to quit drinking altogether. It never occurred to him that perhaps he could not do so, in spite of his character and standing. Fred would not believe himself an alcoholic, much less accept a spiritual remedy for his problem. We told him what we knew about alcoholism. He was interested and conceded that he had some of the symptoms, but he was a long way from admitting that he could do nothing about it himself. He was positive that this humiliating experience, plus the knowledge he had acquired, would keep him sober the rest of his life. Self-knowledge would fix it.

We heard no more of Fred for a while. One day we were told that he was back in the hospital. This time he was quite shaky. He soon indicated he was anxious to see us. The story he told is most instructive, for here was a chap absolutely convinced he had to stop drinking, who had no excuse for drinking, who exhibited splendid judgment and determination in all his other concerns, yet was flat on his back nevertheless.

Let him tell you about it: "I was much impressed with what you fellows said about alcoholism, and I frankly did not believe it would be possible for me to drink again. I rather appreciated your ideas about the subtle insanity which precedes the first drink, but I was confident it could not happen to me after what I had learned. I reasoned I was not so far advanced as most of you fellows, that I had been usually successful in licking my other personal problems, and that I would therefore be successful where you men failed. I felt I had every right to be self-confident, that it would be only a matter of exercising my will power and keeping on guard.

"In this frame of mind, I went about my business and for a time all was well. I had no trouble refusing drinks, and began to wonder if I had not been making too hard work of a simple matter. One day I went to Washington to present some accounting evidence to a government bureau. I had been out of town before during this particular dry spell, so there was nothing new about that. Physically, I felt fine. Neither did I have any pressing problems or worries. My business came off well, I was pleased and knew my partners would be too. It was the end of a perfect day, not a cloud on the horizon.
"I went to my hotel and leisurely dressed for dinner. As I crossed the threshold of the dining room, the thought came to mind that it would be nice to have a couple of cocktails with dinner. That was all. Nothing more. I ordered a cocktail and my meal. Then I ordered another cocktail. After dinner I decided to take a walk. When I returned to the hotel it struck me a highball would be fine before going to bed, so I stepped into the bar and had one. I remember having several more that night and plenty next morning. I have a shadowy recollection of being in an airplane bound for New York and of finding a friendly taxicab driver at the landing field instead of my wife. The driver escorted me about for several days. I know little of where I went or what I said and did. Then came the hospital with unbearable mental and physical suffering.

"As soon as I regained my ability to think, I went carefully over that evening in Washington. Not only had I been off guard, I had made no fight whatever against the first drink. This time I had not thought of the consequences at all. I had commenced to drink as carelessly as though the cocktails were ginger ale. I now remembered what my alcoholic friends had told me, how they prophesied that if I had an alcoholic mind, the time and place would come — I would drink again. They had said that though I did raise a defense, it would one day give way before some trivial reason for having a drink. Well, just that did happen and more, for what I had learned of alcoholism did not occur to me at all. I knew from that moment that I had an alcoholic mind. I saw that will power and self-knowledge would not help in those strange mental blank spots. I had never been able to understand people who said that a problem had them hopelessly defeated. I knew then. It was a crushing blow.

"Two of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous came to see me. They grinned, which I didn't like so much, and then asked me if I thought myself alcoholic and if I were really licked this time. I had to concede both propositions. They piled on me heaps of evidence to the effect that an alcoholic mentality, such as I had exhibited in Washington, was a hopeless condition. They cited cases out of their own experience by the dozen. This process snuffed out the last flicker of conviction that I could do the job myself.

"Then they outlined the spiritual answer and program of action which a hundred of them had followed successfully. Though I had been only a nominal churchman, their proposals were not, intellectually, hard to swallow. But the program of action, though entirely sensible, was pretty drastic. It meant I would have to throw several lifelong conceptions out of the window. That was not easy. But the moment I made up my mind to go through with the process, I had the curious feeling that my alcoholic condition was relieved, as in fact it proved to be.

"Quite as important was the discovery that spiritual principles would solve all my problems. I have since been brought into a way of living infinitely more satisfying and, I hope, more useful than the life I lived before. My old manner of life was by no means a bad one, but I would not exchange its best moments for the worst I have now. I would not go back to it even if I could."
Chapter 3 concludes:

“Once more: The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few rare cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power.”

Before AA there were other abstinence based approaches to alcoholism. Ebby Thatcher was a member of The Oxford Group. This was a Christian group. To be spiritually reborn, the Oxford Group advocated four practices:

1. The sharing of our sins and temptations with another Christian.
2. Surrender our life past, present and future, into God's keeping and direction.
3. Restitution to all whom we have wronged directly or indirectly.
4. Listening for God's guidance, and carrying it out.

The Oxford Group achieved some success in treating alcoholism. However, it required those seeking recovery to believe in a Christian God. AA does not require this. It provides a spiritual rather than religious programme.

The Twelve-Step program makes spirituality more palatable for many who have not had good experiences with religion. It avoids all the metaphysical, super religious language and just describes the journey itself. It could be called a rather clear and simple **phenomenology** of the process of transformation. (Phenomenology is the study of the direct objects of experience, as opposed to any metaphysical theory.)

Chapter 4 of the Big Book is titled “We Agnostics”. It begins:

“IN THE PRECEDING chapters you have learned something of alcoholism. We hope we have made clear the distinction between the alcoholic and the nonalcoholic. If, when you honestly want to, you find you cannot quit entirely, or if when drinking, you have little control over the amount you take, you are probably alcoholic. If that be the case, you may be suffering from an illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer.

To one who feels he is an atheist or agnostic such an experience seems impossible, but to continue as he is means disaster, especially if he is an alcoholic of the hopeless variety. To be doomed to an alcoholic death or to live on a spiritual basis are not always easy alternatives to face.”
It goes on:

“If a mere code of morals or a better philosophy of life were sufficient to overcome alcoholism, many of us would have recovered long ago. But we found that such codes and philosophies did not save us, no matter how much we tried. We could wish to be moral, we could wish to be philosophically comforted, in fact, we could will these things with all our might, but the needed power wasn't there. Our human resources, as marshalled by the will, were not sufficient; they failed utterly.

Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a Power greater than ourselves. Obviously. But where and how were we to find this Power?

Well, that's exactly what this book is about. Its main object is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself which will solve your problem. That means we have written a book which we believe to be spiritual as well as moral. And it means, of course, that we are going to talk about God. Here difficulty arises with agnostics. Many times we talk to a new man and watch his hope rise as we discuss his alcoholic problems and explain our fellowship. But his face falls when we speak of spiritual matters, especially when we mention God, for we have re-opened a subject which our man thought he had neatly evaded or entirely ignored.”

The chapter goes on to consider that a Power greater than oneself is not necessarily a Christian God:

“Much to our relief, we discovered we did not need to consider another's conception of God. Our own conception, however inadequate, was sufficient to make the approach and to effect a contact with Him. As soon as we admitted the possible existence of a Creative Intelligence, a Spirit of the Universe underlying the totality of things, we began to be possessed of a new sense of power and direction, provided we took other simple steps. We found that God does not make too hard terms with those who seek Him. 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.

When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God. This applies, too, to other spiritual expressions which you find in this book. Do not let any prejudice you may have against spiritual terms deter you from honestly asking yourself what they mean to you. At the start, this was all we needed to commence spiritual growth, to effect our first conscious relation with God as we understood Him. Afterward, we found ourselves accepting many things which then seemed entirely out of reach. That was growth, but if we wished to grow we had to begin somewhere. So we used our own conception, however limited it was.

We needed to ask ourselves but one short question. "Do I now believe, or am I even willing to believe, that there is a Power greater than myself?" As soon as a man can say that he does believe, or is willing to believe, we emphatically assure him that he is on his way. It has been repeatedly proven among us that upon this simple cornerstone a wonderfully effective spiritual structure can be built."
“Besides a seeming inability to accept much on faith, we often found ourselves handicapped by obstinacy, sensitiveness, and unreasoning prejudice. Many of us have been so touchy that even casual reference to spiritual things made us bristle with antagonism. This sort of thinking had to be abandoned. Though some of us resisted, we found no great difficulty in casting aside such feelings. Faced with alcoholic destruction, we soon became as open minded on spiritual matters as we had tried to be on other questions. In this respect alcohol was a great persuader. It finally beat us into a state of reasonableness. Sometimes this was a tedious process; we hope no one else will be prejudiced for as long as some of us were.”

Chapter 5 of the Big Book is titled “How it works”:

“RARELY HAVE we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.

Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. 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.

At some of these we balked. We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not. With all the earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely.

Remember that we deal with alcohol - cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find Him now!

Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon.
Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. 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.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Many of us exclaimed, "What an order! I can't go through with it." Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.

Our description of the alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas:

(a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.
(b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.
(c) That God could and would if He were sought."

"We were now at Step Three. Many of us said to our Maker, as we understood Him: "God, I offer myself to Thee-to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!" We thought well before taking this step making sure we were ready; that we could at last abandon ourselves utterly to Him.

We found it very desirable to take this spiritual step with an understanding person, such as our wife, best friend or spiritual adviser. But it is better to meet God alone than with one who might misunderstand. 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."

"Next we launched out on a course of vigorous action, the first step of which is a personal housecleaning, which many of us had never attempted." This was Step 4, "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."
“Being convinced that self, manifested in various ways, was what had defeated us, we considered its common manifestations.

Resentment is the "number one" offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically. In dealing with resentments, we set them on paper. 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."

“It is plain that a life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness. To the precise extent that we permit these, do we squander the hours that might have been worthwhile. 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.”

The chapter goes on to reflect on spirituality:

“We never apologize to anyone for depending upon our Creator. We can laugh at those who think spirituality the way of weakness. Paradoxically, it is the way of strength. The verdict of the ages is that faith means courage. All men of faith have courage. They trust their God. We never apologize for God. Instead we let Him demonstrate, through us, what He can do. We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be. At once, we commence to outgrow fear.”

Step 5. “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” It is easy to see why people in early recovery stall or procrastinate at this point. Admitting something to ourselves and to God can be done by ourselves, but to another person?

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

Returning home we find a place where we can be quiet for an hour, carefully reviewing what we have done. We thank God from the bottom of our heart that we know Him better. Taking this book down from our shelf we turn to the page which contains the twelve steps. Carefully reading the first five proposals we ask if we have omitted anything, for we are building an arch through which we shall walk a free man at last. Is our work solid so far? Are the stones properly in place? Have we skimped on the cement put into the foundation? Have we tried to make mortar without sand?

If we can answer to our satisfaction, we then look at Step Six. We have emphasized willingness as being indispensable. Are we now ready to let God remove from us all the things which we have admitted are objectionable? Can He now take them all—every one? If we still cling to something we will not let go, we ask God to help us be willing.
When ready, we say something like this: "My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen." We have then completed Step Seven.

Now we need more action, without which we find that "Faith without works is dead." Let's look at Steps Eight and Nine. We have a list of all persons we have harmed and to whom we are willing to make amends. We made it when we took inventory. We subjected ourselves to a drastic self-appraisal. Now we go out to our fellows and repair the damage done in the past. We attempt to sweep away the debris which has accumulated out of our effort to live on self-will and run the show ourselves. If we haven't the will to do this, we ask until it comes. Remember it was agreed at the beginning we would go to any lengths for victory over alcohol.

Probably there are still some misgivings. As we look over the list of business acquaintances and friends we have hurt, we may feel diffident about going to some of them on a spiritual basis. Let us be reassured. To some people we need not, and probably should not emphasize the spiritual feature on our first approach. We might prejudice them. At the moment we are trying to put our lives in order. But this is not an end in itself. Our real purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us. It is seldom wise to approach an individual, who still smarts from our injustice to him, and announce that we have gone religious. In the prize ring, this would be called leading with the chin. Why lay ourselves open to being branded fanatics or religious bores? We may kill a future opportunity to carry a beneficial message. 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.

We don't use this as an excuse for shying away from the subject of God. When it will serve any good purpose, we are willing to announce our convictions with tact and common sense. 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. Nevertheless, with a person we dislike, we take the bit in our teeth. It is harder to go to an enemy than to a friend, but we find it much more beneficial to us. We go to him in a helpful and forgiving spirit, confessing our former ill feeling and expressing our regret.

Under no condition do we criticize such a person or argue. Simply we tell him that we will never get over drinking until we have done our utmost to straighten out the past. We are there to sweep off our side of the street, realizing that nothing worthwhile can be accomplished until we do so, never trying to tell him what he should do. His faults are not discussed. We stick to our own. If our manner is calm, frank, and open, we will be gratified with the result.

In nine cases out of ten the unexpected happens. Sometimes the man we are calling upon admits his own fault, so feuds of years' standing melt away in an hour. Rarely do we fail to make satisfactory progress. Our former enemies sometimes praise what we are doing and wish us well. Occasionally, they will offer assistance. It should not matter, however, if someone does throw us out of his office. We have made our demonstration, done our part. It's water over the dam."
But perhaps Step 9 will lead to disclosure of matters which have serious consequences for us. Possibly we may be jailed or face financial ruin. What then?

“Reminding ourselves that we have decided to go to any lengths to find a spiritual experience, we ask that we be given strength and direction to do the right thing, no matter what the personal consequences may be. We may lose our position or reputation or face jail, but we are willing. We have to be. We must not shrink at anything.”

The Big Book goes on to give an example:

“This brings to mind a story about one of our friends. While drinking, he accepted a sum of money from a bitterly-hated business rival, giving him no receipt for it. He subsequently denied having received the money and used the incident as a basis for discrediting the man. He thus used his own wrong-doing as a means of destroying the reputation of another. In fact, his rival was ruined.

He felt that he had done a wrong he could not possibly make right. If he opened that old affair, he was afraid it would destroy the reputation of his partner, disgrace his family and take away his means of livelihood. What right had he to involve those dependent upon him? How could he possibly make a public statement exonerating his rival?

After consulting with his wife and partner he came to the conclusion that is was better to take those risks than to stand before his Creator guilty of such ruinous slander. He saw that he had to place the outcome in God's hands or he would soon start drinking again, and all would be lost anyhow. He attended church for the first time in many years. After the sermon, he quietly got up and made an explanation. His action met wide-spread approval, and today he is one of the most trusted citizens of his town.”

This story also touches on the final part of Step 9, “except when to do so would injure them or others”. It might have been possible for the alcoholic here to convince himself that disclosing the situation would injure his wife and partner, and so would not be necessary. Having consulted with them, he was willing to proceed and accept the consequences of so doing. The Big Book goes on to give another story relevant to this point:

“The chances are that we have domestic troubles. Perhaps we are mixed up with women in a fashion we wouldn’t care to have advertised. We doubt if, in this respect, alcoholics are fundamentally much worse than other people. But drinking does complicate sex relations in the home. After a few years with an alcoholic, a wife gets worn out, resentful and uncommunicative. How could she be anything else? The husband begins to feel lonely, sorry for himself. He commences to look around in the night clubs, or their equivalent, for something besides liquor. Perhaps he is having a secret and exciting affair with “the girl who understands.” In fairness we must say that she may understand, but what are we going to do about a thing like that? A man so involved often feels very remorseful at times, especially if he is married to a loyal and courageous girl who has literally gone through hell for him.
Whatever the situation, we usually have to do something about it. If we are sure our wife does not know, should we tell her? Not always, we think. If she knows in a general way that we have been wild, should we tell her in detail? Undoubtedly we should admit our fault. She may insist on knowing all the particulars. She will want to know who the woman is and where she is. We feel we ought to say to her that we have no right to involve another person. We are sorry for what we have done and, God willing, it shall not be repeated. More than that we cannot do; we have no right to go further. Though there may be justifiable exceptions, and though we wish to lay down no rule of any sort, we have often found this the best course to take.

Our design for living is not a one-way street. It is as good for the wife as for the husband. If we can forget, so can she. It is better, however, that one does not needlessly name a person upon whom she can vent jealousy."

What if there are some things for which we cannot properly make amends:

“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. Some people cannot be seen—we send them an honest letter. And there may be a valid reason for postponement in some cases. But we don’t delay if it can be avoided. We should be sensible, tactful, considerate and humble without being servile or scraping. As God’s people we stand on our feet; we don’t crawl before anyone.”

This brings us to the Step 9 promises, perhaps the most beautifully written section of the Big Book. If we are successful in giving up alcohol, what does the future hold for us, and what do we need to do to secure this future?

“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.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.

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. We have entered the world of the Spirit. Our next function is to grow in understanding and effectiveness. This is not an overnight matter. It should continue for our lifetime. Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God at once to remove them. We discuss them with someone immediately and make amends quickly if we have harmed anyone. Then we resolutely turn our thoughts to someone we can help. Love and tolerance of others is our code.
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. 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."

The final chapter of the Big Book is "A Vision For You".

"FOR MOST normal folks, drinking means conviviality, companionship and colorful imagination. It means release from care, boredom and worry. It is joyous intimacy with friends and a feeling that life is good. But not so with us in those last days of heavy drinking. The old pleasures were gone. They were but memories. Never could we recapture the great moments of the past. There was an insistent yearning to enjoy life as we once did and a heartbreaking obsession that some new miracle of control would enable us to do it. There was always one more attempt—and one more failure.

The less people tolerated us, the more we withdrew from society, from life itself. As we became subjects of King Alcohol, shivering denizens of his mad realm, the chilling vapor that is loneliness settled down. It thickened, ever becoming blacker. Some of us sought out sordid places, hoping to find understanding companionship and approval. Momentarily we did-then would come oblivion and the awful awakening to face the hideous Four Horsemen-Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, Despair. Unhappy drinkers who read this page will understand!

Now and then a serious drinker, being dry at the moment says, "I don't miss it at all. Feel better. Work better. Having a better time." As ex-problem drinkers, we smile at such a sally. We know our friend is like a boy whistling in the dark to keep up his spirits. He fools himself. Inwardly he would give anything to take half a dozen drinks and get away with them. He will presently try the old game again, for he isn't happy about his sobriety. He cannot picture life without alcohol. Some day he will be unable to imagine life either with alcohol or without it. Then he will know loneliness such as few do. He will be at the jumping-off place. He will wish for the end."
The Chapter ends:

“Our book is meant to be suggestive only. We realize we know only a little. God will constantly disclose more to you and to us. Ask Him in your morning meditation what you can do each day for the man who is still sick. The answers will come, if your own house is in order. But obviously you cannot transmit something you haven’t got. See to it that your relationship with Him is right, and great events will come to pass for you and countless others. This is the Great Fact for us.

Abandon yourself to God as you understand God. Admit your faults to Him and to your fellows. Clear away the wreckage of your past. Give freely of what you find and join us. We shall be with you in the Fellowship of the Spirit, and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny. *May God bless you and keep you until then.*”

A READING OF THE TWELVE STEPS

Richard Rohr wrote *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*. The cover notes for this say the following:

“We are all addicted in some way. When we learn to identify our addiction, embrace our brokenness, and surrender to God, we begin to bring healing to ourselves and our world. In Breathing Under Water, Richard Rohr shows how the gospel principles in the Twelve Steps can free anyone from any addiction – from an obvious dependence on alcohol or drugs to the more common but less visible addiction we all have to sin.”

Before the main body of the short book are two quotations:

“I did not come for the healthy, but those who need a doctor.” *Luke 5:31-32*

“You see. Alcohol in Latin is “spiritus” and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison.” (Letter from Carl Jung to Bill Wilson in 1961).

The title “Breathing Under Water” is taken from a poem by Carol Bieleck:

I built my house by the sea.  
Not on the sands, mind you;  
not on the shifting sand.  
And I built it of rock.  
A strong house  
by a strong sea.  
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.  
Good neighbors.  
Not that we spoke much.  
We met in silences.  
Respectful, keeping our distance,  
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.  
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,  
always, the sand between.  
And then one day,  
-and I still don’t know how it happened –  
the sea came.  
Without warning.
Without welcome, even
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand like wine,
less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.
Slow, but coming.
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.
And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning and I thought of death.
And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it reached my door.
And I knew, then, there was neither flight, nor death, nor drowning.
That when the sea comes calling, you stop being neighbors,
Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance neighbors,
And you give your house for a coral castle,
And you learn to breathe underwater.

In the introduction, Richard Rohr states “I am still convinced that on the practical (read
“transformational”) level, the Gospel message of Jesus and the Twelve Step message of Bill Wilson are
largely the same message, even in some detail”

He goes on to say:

“We are all spiritually powerless, however, and not just those physically addicted to a substance,
which is why I address this book to everyone. Alcoholics just have their powerlessness visible for
all to see. The rest of us disguise it in different ways, and overcompensate for our more hidden
and subtle addictions and attachments, especially our addiction to our way of thinking.

We all take our own pattern as normative, logical, and surely true, even when it does not fully
compute. We keep doing the same thing over and over again, even if it is not working for us. That
is the self-destructive, even “demonic” nature of all addiction and of the mind, in particular.”

Richard Rohr writes Breathing Underwater with 4 stated assumptions:

“We are all addicts. Human beings are addictive by nature. Addiction is a modern name and
honest description for what the biblical tradition called “sin” and medieval Christians called
“passions” or “attachments”. They both recognised that serious measures, or practices, were
needed to break us out of these illusions and entrapments; in fact the New Testament calls them
in some cases “exorcisms”! They knew they were dealing with non-rational evil or “demons”.

Stinking thinking is the universal addiction. Substance addictions like alcohol and drugs are
merely the most visible form of addiction, but actually we are all addicted to our own habitual way
of doing anything, our own defences, and most especially, our patterned way of thinking, or how
we process our reality.

All societies are addicted to themselves and create deep codependency on them. There are
shared and agreed-upon addictions in every culture and every institution. These are often the
hardest to heal because they do not look like addictions because we have all agreed to be
compulsive about the same things and blind to the same problems. The Gospel exposes those
lies in every culture: The American addiction to oil, war, and empire; the church’s addiction to its
own absolute exceptionalism; the poor person’s addiction to powerlessness and victimhood; the
white person’s addiction to superiority; the wealthy person’s addiction to entitlement.
Some form of alternative consciousness is the only freedom from this self and from cultural lies. If the universal addiction is to our own pattern of thinking, which is invariably dualistic, the primary spiritual path must be some form of contemplative practice, once just called “prayer”, to break down this unhelpful binary system of either-or thinking and superiority thinking. “Praying” is changing your operating system! This was well recognised in Step 11 of the Twelve Steps.

Richard Rohr goes on to explain why he believes Jesus and the Twelve Steps are saying the same thing but with different vocabulary:

“We suffer to get well
We surrender to win
We die to live
We give it away to keep it

This counterintuitive wisdom will forever be resisted as true, denied, and avoided, until it is forced upon us- by some reality over which we are powerless-and if we are honest, we are all powerless in the presence of full Reality.”

Richard Rohr concludes:

“Let me end by pointing out that addiction has been described as a moral weakness, as a simple lack of willpower, a cowardly inability to face life, and also a spiritual illness or disease. I, of course, strongly believe it is the latter. Addiction is a spiritual disease, a disease of the soul, an illness resulting from longing, frustrated desire, and deep dissatisfaction – which is ironically the necessary beginning of any spiritual path.

The reason that AA has been more successful than most churches in actually changing people and helping people is that it treats addiction both spiritually and as an illness, rather than as a moral failure or an issue of mere willpower. We in the churches tend to treat everything in terms of personal culpability, which only elicits immense push-back and the passive – aggressive response that I mentioned earlier. AA says, in its own inspired way, that addicts are souls searching for love in all the wrong places, but still searching for love. Alcoholism is deeply frustrated desire, as are all addictions. The Twelve Step Program has learned over time that addiction emerges out of a lack of inner experience of intimacy with oneself, with God, with life, and with the moment. I would drink myself to oblivion too, or look for some way to connect with solid reality, if I felt that bereft of love, esteem, joy or communion.”
CONCLUSION

In creating Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, with typical American pragmatism, designed a truly practical program that really worked to change lives. When asked what he thought was the greatest accomplishment of the 20th century, Henry Kissenger replied, "Alcoholics Anonymous." Twelve-Step spirituality rediscovered the real transformative power that is the core of the Gospel. It is the spirituality of imperfection that Jesus taught, Paul clarified, Francis and Clare lived, and Thérèse of Lisieux brought to light for the modern world. Transformation has little to do with intelligence, willpower, or perfection. It has everything to do with honest humility, willingness and surrender.

On the practical (read "transformational") level, the Gospel message of Jesus and the Twelve-Step message of Bill Wilson are largely the same. The first foundational connection is that addiction can be a metaphor for what the biblical tradition called sin. It is quite helpful to see sin, like addiction, as a very destructive disease, instead of merely something that is culpable, punishable, and "makes God unhappy." If sin indeed makes God unhappy, it is because God loves us, desires nothing more than our happiness, and wills the healing of our disease. The Twelve Steps reconnect the essential ties between vulnerability, healing, and love.

Pope Francis clearly understands sin in this way. Shortly after he proclaimed the Holy Year of Mercy, he was asked why humanity is so in need of mercy. He replied that in part it's due to "considering our illness, our sins, to be incurable, things that cannot be healed or forgiven. We lack the actual concrete experience of mercy. The fragility of our era is this, too: we don't believe that there is a chance for redemption; for a hand to raise you up; for an embrace to save you, forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love; to put you back on your feet. We need mercy."

The healing ministry of Jesus should have made this crystal clear; the majority of Jesus' work was healing, with many of his teachings illustrating the healings. Nine of Jesus' healing stories are actually exorcisms. Although we may think we are too sophisticated for such stories, the fact that there are so many speaks to their importance. "Possession by devils" may be a primitive but truthful way of referring to what we now call addiction. In each case, the person is in some sense trapped by a larger force, and is powerless to do anything about it. The only cure for possession is "repossession." You have to be repossessed by something greater than the disease. This is why Bill Wilson says a "vital spiritual experience" is absolutely essential for full recovery.

When the great medieval spiritual teachers talked so much about attachment, perhaps they were talking about what we call addiction. We are all attached and addicted in some way. At the very least, we are addicted to our compulsive dualistic patterns of thinking, to our preferred self-image, and to the unworkable programs for happiness we first developed in childhood. In short, each of us is addicted to our way of thinking. This is perfectly obvious once we consider it, but we do not tend to think about the way we think!

REFERENCES


A 12-step program is a set of guiding principles outlining a course of action for addiction recovery. Learn about the many different 12 step programs. Although the 12 Steps are heavy on spirituality, many nonreligious people have found the program immensely helpful. The language emphasizes the presence of God as each participant understands him, allowing for different interpretations and religious beliefs. Get started on the road to recovery. Find Out How. The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Because recovery is a lifelong process, there’s no wrong way to approach the 12 Steps as the participant tries to figure out what works best for their individual needs. In fact, most participants find that they will need to revisit some steps or even the 12-step program is the most widely recognized tool used in rehabilitating people with addictions. A lot of the steps in the 12-step program are distinctly spiritual – they involve submitting yourself to God, humbling yourself, and accepting that God in all His glory will solely be responsible for curing your addictions. That’s great – the 12-step approach has worked for countless individuals who are looking for a light in the darkness. The good news is that your higher power can be whatever you want.

How Can an Atheist Approach a 12-Step Rehabilitation Program?

A lot of Alcoholics or Narc
