

Step Twelve

“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.”

THE joy of living is the theme of A.A.’s Twelfth Step, and action is its key word. Here we turn outward toward our fellow alcoholics who are still in distress. Here we experience the kind of giving that asks no rewards. Here we begin to practice all Twelve Steps of the program in our daily lives so that we and those about us may find emotional sobriety. When the Twelfth Step is seen in its full implication, it is really talking about the kind of love that has no price tag on it.

Our Twelfth Step also says that as a result of practicing all the Steps, we have each found something called a spiritual awakening. To new A.A.’s, this often seems like a very dubious and improbable state of affairs. “What do you mean when you talk about a ‘spiritual awakening?’” they ask.

Maybe there are as many definitions of spiritual awakening as there are people who have had them. But certainly each genuine one has something in common with all the others. And these things which they have in common are not too hard to understand. When a man or a woman has a spiritual awakening, the most important meaning of it is that he has now become able to do, feel, and believe that

which he could not do before on his unaided strength and resources alone. He has been granted a gift which amounts to a new state of consciousness and being. He has been set on a path which tells him he is really going somewhere, that life is not a dead end, not something to be endured or mastered. In a very real sense he has been transformed, because he has laid hold of a source of strength which, in one way or another, he had hitherto denied himself. He finds himself in possession of a degree of honesty, tolerance, unselfishness, peace of mind, and love of which he had thought himself quite incapable. What he has received is a free gift, and yet usually, at least in some small part, he has made himself ready to receive it.

A.A.'s manner of making ready to receive this gift lies in the practice of the Twelve Steps in our program. So let's consider briefly what we have been trying to do up to this point:

Step One showed us an amazing paradox: We found that we were totally unable to be rid of the alcohol obsession until we first admitted that we were powerless over it. In Step Two we saw that since we could not restore ourselves to sanity, some Higher Power must necessarily do so if we were to survive. Consequently, in Step Three we turned our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. For the time being, we who were atheist or agnostic discovered that our own group, or A.A. as a whole, would suffice as a higher power. Beginning with Step Four, we commenced to search out the things in ourselves which had brought us to physical, moral, and spiritual bankruptcy. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory. Looking

at Step Five, we decided that an inventory, taken alone, wouldn't be enough. We knew we would have to quit the deadly business of living alone with our conflicts, and in honesty confide these to God and another human being. At Step Six, many of us balked—for the practical reason that we did not wish to have all our defects of character removed, because we still loved some of them too much. Yet we knew we had to make a settlement with the fundamental principle of Step Six. So we decided that while we still had some flaws of character that we could not yet relinquish, we ought nevertheless to quit our stubborn, rebellious hanging on to them. We said to ourselves, "This I cannot do today, perhaps, but I can stop crying out 'No, never!'" Then, in Step Seven, we humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings such as He could or would under the conditions of the day we asked. In Step Eight, we continued our house-cleaning, for we saw that we were not only in conflict with ourselves, but also with people and situations in the world in which we lived. We had to begin to make our peace, and so we listed the people we had harmed and became willing to set things right. We followed this up in Step Nine by making direct amends to those concerned, except when it would injure them or other people. By this time, at Step Ten, we had begun to get a basis for daily living, and we keenly realized that we would need to continue taking personal inventory, and that when we were in the wrong we ought to admit it promptly. In Step Eleven we saw that if a Higher Power had restored us to sanity and had enabled us to live with some peace of mind in a sorely troubled world, then such a Higher Power was worth knowing better, by as

direct contact as possible. The persistent use of meditation and prayer, we found, did open the channel so that where there had been a trickle, there now was a river which led to sure power and safe guidance from God as we were increasingly better able to understand Him.

So, practicing these Steps, we had a spiritual awakening about which finally there was no question. Looking at those who were only beginning and still doubted themselves, the rest of us were able to see the change setting in. From great numbers of such experiences, we could predict that the doubter who still claimed that he hadn't got the "spiritual angle," and who still considered his well-loved A.A. group the higher power, would presently love God and call Him by name.

Now, what about the rest of the Twelfth Step? The wonderful energy it releases and the eager action by which it carries our message to the next suffering alcoholic and which finally translates the Twelve Steps into action upon all our affairs is the payoff, the magnificent reality, of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Even the newest of newcomers finds undreamed rewards as he tries to help his brother alcoholic, the one who is even blinder than he. This is indeed the kind of giving that actually demands nothing. He does not expect his brother sufferer to pay him, or even to love him. And then he discovers that by the divine paradox of this kind of giving he has found his own reward, whether his brother has yet received anything or not. His own character may still be gravely defective, but he somehow knows that God has enabled him to make a mighty beginning, and he senses that

he stands at the edge of new mysteries, joys, and experiences of which he had never even dreamed.

Practically every A.A. member declares that no satisfaction has been deeper and no joy greater than in a Twelfth Step job well done. To watch the eyes of men and women open with wonder as they move from darkness into light, to see their lives quickly fill with new purpose and meaning, to see whole families reassembled, to see the alcoholic outcast received back into his community in full citizenship, and above all to watch these people awaken to the presence of a loving God in their lives—these things are the substance of what we receive as we carry A.A.'s message to the next alcoholic.

Nor is this the only kind of Twelfth Step work. We sit in A.A. meetings and listen, not only to receive something ourselves, but to give the reassurance and support which our presence can bring. If our turn comes to speak at a meeting, we again try to carry A.A.'s message. Whether our audience is one or many, it is still Twelfth Step work. There are many opportunities even for those of us who feel unable to speak at meetings or who are so situated that we cannot do much face-to-face Twelfth Step work. We can be the ones who take on the unspectacular but important tasks that make good Twelfth Step work possible, perhaps arranging for the coffee and cake after the meetings, where so many skeptical, suspicious newcomers have found confidence and comfort in the laughter and talk. This is Twelfth Step work in the very best sense of the word. "Freely ye have received; freely give..." is the core of this part of Step Twelve.

We may often pass through Twelfth Step experiences where we will seem to be temporarily off the beam. These will appear as big setbacks at the time, but will be seen later as stepping-stones to better things. For example, we may set our hearts on getting a particular person sobered up, and after doing all we can for months, we see him relapse. Perhaps this will happen in a succession of cases, and we may be deeply discouraged as to our ability to carry A.A.'s message. Or we may encounter the reverse situation, in which we are highly elated because we seem to have been successful. Here the temptation is to become rather possessive of these newcomers. Perhaps we try to give them advice about their affairs which we aren't really competent to give or ought not give at all. Then we are hurt and confused when the advice is rejected, or when it is accepted and brings still greater confusion. By a great deal of ardent Twelfth Step work we sometimes carry the message to so many alcoholics that they place us in a position of trust. They make us, let us say, the group's chairman. Here again we are presented with the temptation to overmanage things, and sometimes this results in rebuffs and other consequences which are hard to take.

But in the longer run we clearly realize that these are only the pains of growing up, and nothing but good can come from them if we turn more and more to the entire Twelve Steps for the answers.

Now comes the biggest question yet. What about the practice of these principles in *all* our affairs? Can we love the whole pattern of living as eagerly as we do the small segment of it we discover when we try to help other alco-

holics achieve sobriety? Can we bring the same spirit of love and tolerance into our sometimes deranged family lives that we bring to our A.A. group? Can we have the same kind of confidence and faith in these people who have been infected and sometimes crippled by our own illness that we have in our sponsors? Can we actually carry the A.A. spirit into our daily work? Can we meet our newly recognized responsibilities to the world at large? And can we bring new purpose and devotion to the religion of our choice? Can we find a new joy of living in trying to do something about all these things?

Furthermore, how shall we come to terms with seeming failure or success? Can we now accept and adjust to either without despair or pride? Can we accept poverty, sickness, loneliness, and bereavement with courage and serenity? Can we steadfastly content ourselves with the humbler, yet sometimes more durable, satisfactions when the brighter, more glittering achievements are denied us?

The A.A. answer to these questions about living is "Yes, all of these things are possible." We know this because we see monotony, pain, and even calamity turned to good use by those who keep on trying to practice A.A.'s Twelve Steps. And if these are facts of life for the many alcoholics who have recovered in A.A., they can become the facts of life for many more.

Of course all A.A.'s, even the best, fall far short of such achievements as a consistent thing. Without necessarily taking that first drink, we often get quite far off the beam. Our troubles sometimes begin with indifference. We are sober and happy in our A.A. work. Things go well at home

and office. We naturally congratulate ourselves on what later proves to be a far too easy and superficial point of view. We temporarily cease to grow because we feel satisfied that there is no need for *all* of A.A.'s Twelve Steps for us. We are doing fine on a few of them. Maybe we are doing fine on only two of them, the First Step and that part of the Twelfth where we "carry the message." In A.A. slang, that blissful state is known as "two-stepping." And it can go on for years.

The best-intentioned of us can fall for the "two-step" illusion. Sooner or later the pink cloud stage wears off and things go disappointingly dull. We begin to think that A.A. doesn't pay off after all. We become puzzled and discouraged.

Then perhaps life, as it has a way of doing, suddenly hands us a great big lump that we can't begin to swallow, let alone digest. We fail to get a worked-for promotion. We lose that good job. Maybe there are serious domestic or romantic difficulties, or perhaps that boy we thought God was looking after becomes a military casualty.

What then? Have we alcoholics in A.A. got, or can we get, the resources to meet these calamities which come to so many? These were problems of life which we could never face up to. Can we now, with the help of God as we understand Him, handle them as well and as bravely as our nonalcoholic friends often do? Can we transform these calamities into assets, sources of growth and comfort to ourselves and those about us? Well, we surely have a chance if we switch from "two-stepping" to "twelve-stepping," if we are willing to receive that grace of God which can sustain

and strengthen us in any catastrophe.

Our basic troubles are the same as everyone else's, but when an honest effort is made "to practice these principles in all our affairs," well-grounded A.A.'s seem to have the ability, by God's grace, to take these troubles in stride and turn them into demonstrations of faith. We have seen A.A.'s suffer lingering and fatal illness with little complaint, and often in good cheer. We have sometimes seen families broken apart by misunderstanding, tensions, or actual infidelity, who are reunited by the A.A. way of life.

Though the earning power of most A.A.'s is relatively high, we have some members who never seem to get on their feet moneywise, and still others who encounter heavy financial reverses. Ordinarily we see these situations met with fortitude and faith.

Like most people, we have found that we can take our big lumps as they come. But also like others, we often discover a greater challenge in the lesser and more continuous problems of life. Our answer is in still more spiritual development. Only by this means can we improve our chances for really happy and useful living. And as we grow spiritually, we find that our old attitudes toward our instincts need to undergo drastic revisions. Our desires for emotional security and wealth, for personal prestige and power, for romance, and for family satisfactions—all these have to be tempered and redirected. We have learned that the satisfaction of instincts cannot be the sole end and aim of our lives. If we place instincts first, we have got the cart before the horse; we shall be pulled backward into disillusionment. But when we are willing to place spiritual growth

first—then and only then do we have a real chance.

After we come into A.A., if we go on growing, our attitudes and actions toward security—emotional security and financial security—commence to change profoundly. Our demand for emotional security, for our own way, had constantly thrown us into unworkable relations with other people. Though we were sometimes quite unconscious of this, the result always had been the same. Either we had tried to play God and dominate those about us, or we had insisted on being overdependent upon them. Where people had temporarily let us run their lives as though they were still children, we had felt very happy and secure ourselves. But when they finally resisted or ran away, we were bitterly hurt and disappointed. We blamed them, being quite unable to see that our unreasonable demands had been the cause.

When we had taken the opposite tack and had insisted, like infants ourselves, that people protect and take care of us or that the world owed us a living, then the result had been equally unfortunate. This often caused the people we had loved most to push us aside or perhaps desert us entirely. Our disillusionment had been hard to bear. We couldn't imagine people acting that way toward us. We had failed to see that though adult in years we were still behaving childishly, trying to turn everybody—friends, wives, husbands, even the world itself—into protective parents. We had refused to learn the very hard lesson that overdependence upon people is unsuccessful because all people are fallible, and even the best of them will sometimes let us down, especially when our demands for attention become unreasonable.

As we made spiritual progress, we saw through these fallacies. It became clear that if we ever were to feel emotionally secure among grown-up people, we would have to put our lives on a give-and-take basis; we would have to develop the sense of being in partnership or brotherhood with all those around us. We saw that we would need to give constantly of ourselves without demands for repayment. When we persistently did this we gradually found that people were attracted to us as never before. And even if they failed us, we could be understanding and not too seriously affected.

When we developed still more, we discovered the best possible source of emotional stability to be God Himself. We found that dependence upon His perfect justice, forgiveness, and love was healthy, and that it would work where nothing else would. If we really depended upon God, we couldn't very well play God to our fellows nor would we feel the urge wholly to rely on human protection and care. These were the new attitudes that finally brought many of us an inner strength and peace that could not be deeply shaken by the shortcomings of others or by any calamity not of our own making.

This new outlook was, we learned, something especially necessary to us alcoholics. For alcoholism had been a lonely business, even though we had been surrounded by people who loved us. But when self-will had driven everybody away and our isolation had become complete, it caused us to play the big shot in cheap barrooms and then fare forth alone on the street to depend upon the charity of passersby. We were still trying to find emotional security by being dominating or dependent upon others. Even when

our fortunes had not ebbed that much and we nevertheless found ourselves alone in the world, we still vainly tried to be secure by some unhealthy kind of domination or dependence. For those of us who were like that, A.A. had a very special meaning. Through it we begin to learn right relations with people who understand us; we don't have to be alone any more.

Most married folks in A.A. have very happy homes. To a surprising extent, A.A. has offset the damage to family life brought about by years of alcoholism. But just like all other societies, we do have sex and marital problems, and sometimes they are distressingly acute. Permanent marriage breakups and separations, however, are unusual in A.A. Our main problem is not how we are to stay married; it is how to be more happily married by eliminating the severe emotional twists that have so often stemmed from alcoholism.

Nearly every sound human being experiences, at some time in life, a compelling desire to find a partner with whom the fullest possible union can be made—spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical.* This mighty urge is the root of great human accomplishments, a creative energy that deeply influences our lives. God fashioned us that way. So our question will be this: How, by ignorance, compulsion, and self-will, do we misuse this gift for our own destruction? We A.A.'s cannot pretend to offer full answers to age-old perplexities, but our own experience does provide certain answers that work for us.

*This sentence has been updated from the original text to reflect the inclusivity of the Fellowship.

When alcoholism strikes, very unnatural situations may develop which work against marriage partnership and compatible union. If the man is affected, the wife must become the head of the house, often the breadwinner. As matters get worse, the husband becomes a sick and irresponsible child who needs to be looked after and extricated from endless scrapes and impasses. Very gradually, and usually without any realization of the fact, the wife is forced to become the mother of an erring boy. And if she had a strong maternal instinct to begin with, the situation is aggravated. Obviously not much partnership can exist under these conditions. The wife usually goes on doing the best she knows how, but meanwhile the alcoholic alternately loves and hates her maternal care. A pattern is thereby established that may take a lot of undoing later on. Nevertheless, under the influence of A.A.'s Twelve Steps, these situations are often set right.*

When the distortion has been great, however, a long period of patient striving may be necessary. After the husband joins A.A., the wife may become discontented, even highly resentful that Alcoholics Anonymous has done the very thing that all her years of devotion had failed to do. Her husband may become so wrapped up in A.A. and his new friends that he is inconsiderately away from home more than when he drank. Seeing her unhappiness, he recommends A.A.'s Twelve Steps and tries to teach her how to live. She naturally feels that

*In adapted form, the Steps are also used by Al-Anon Family Groups. Not a part of A.A., this worldwide fellowship consists of spouses and other relatives or friends of alcoholics (in A.A. or still drinking). Its headquarters address is 1600 Corporate Landing Pkwy., Virginia Beach, VA 23454-5617. Website: www.al-anon.org.

for years she has made a far better job of living than he has. Both of them blame each other and ask when their marriage is ever going to be happy again. They may even begin to suspect it had never been any good in the first place.

Compatibility, of course, can be so impossibly damaged that a separation may be necessary. But those cases are the unusual ones. The alcoholic, realizing what his wife has endured, and now fully understanding how much he himself did to damage her and his children, nearly always takes up his marriage responsibilities with a willingness to repair what he can and to accept what he can't. He persistently tries all of A.A.'s Twelve Steps in his home, often with fine results. At this point he firmly but lovingly commences to behave like a partner instead of like a bad boy. And above all he is finally convinced that reckless romancing is not a way of life for him.

A.A. has many single alcoholics who wish to marry and are in a position to do so. Some marry fellow A.A.'s. How do they come out? On the whole these marriages are very good ones. Their common suffering as drinkers, their common interest in A.A. and spiritual things, often enhance such unions. It is only where "boy meets girl on A.A. campus," and love follows at first sight, that difficulties may develop. The prospective partners need to be solid A.A.'s and long enough acquainted to know that their compatibility at spiritual, mental, and emotional levels is a fact and not wishful thinking. They need to be as sure as possible that no deep-lying emotional handicap in either will be likely to rise up under later pressures to cripple them. The considerations are equally true and important for the A.A.'s who

marry “outside” A.A. With clear understanding and right, grown-up attitudes, very happy results do follow.

And what can be said of many A.A. members who, for a variety of reasons, cannot have a family life? At first many of these feel lonely, hurt, and left out as they witness so much domestic happiness about them. If they cannot have this kind of happiness, can A.A. offer them satisfactions of similar worth and durability? Yes—whenever they try hard to seek them out. Surrounded by so many A.A. friends, these so-called loners tell us they no longer feel alone. In partnership with others—women and men—they can devote themselves to any number of ideas, people, and constructive projects. Free of marital responsibilities, they can participate in enterprises which would be denied to family men and women. We daily see such members render prodigies of service, and receive great joys in return.

Where the possession of money and material things was concerned, our outlook underwent the same revolutionary change. With a few exceptions, all of us had been spend-thrifts. We threw money about in every direction with the purpose of pleasing ourselves and impressing other people. In our drinking time, we acted as if the money supply was inexhaustible, though between binges we’d sometimes go to the other extreme and become almost miserly. Without realizing it we were just accumulating funds for the next spree. Money was the symbol of pleasure and self-importance. When our drinking had become much worse, money was only an urgent requirement which could supply us with the next drink and the temporary comfort of oblivion it brought.

Upon entering A.A., these attitudes were sharply reversed, often going much too far in the opposite direction. The spectacle of years of waste threw us into panic. There simply wouldn't be time, we thought, to rebuild our shattered fortunes. How could we ever take care of those awful debts, possess a decent home, educate the kids, and set something by for old age? Financial importance was no longer our principal aim; we now clamored for material security. Even when we were well reestablished in our business, these terrible fears often continued to haunt us. This made us misers and penny pinchers all over again. Complete financial security we must have—or else. We forgot that most alcoholics in A.A. have an earning power considerably above average; we forgot the immense goodwill of our brother A.A.'s who were only too eager to help us to better jobs when we deserved them; we forgot the actual or potential financial insecurity of every human being in the world. And, worst of all, we forgot God. In money matters we had faith only in ourselves, and not too much of that.

This all meant, of course, that we were still far off balance. When a job still looked like a mere means of getting money rather than an opportunity for service, when the acquisition of money for financial independence looked more important than a right dependence upon God, we were still the victims of unreasonable fears. And these were fears which would make a serene and useful existence, at any financial level, quite impossible.

But as time passed we found that with the help of A.A.'s Twelve Steps we could lose those fears, no matter what our material prospects were. We could cheerfully perform

humble labor without worrying about tomorrow. If our circumstances happened to be good, we no longer dreaded a change for the worse, for we had learned that these troubles could be turned into great values. It did not matter too much what our material condition was, but it did matter what our spiritual condition was. Money gradually became our servant and not our master. It became a means of exchanging love and service with those about us. When, with God's help, we calmly accepted our lot, then we found we could live at peace with ourselves and show others who still suffered the same fears that they could get over them, too. We found that freedom from fear was more important than freedom from want.

Let's here take note of our improved outlook upon the problems of personal importance, power, ambition, and leadership. These were reefs upon which many of us came to shipwreck during our drinking careers.

Practically every boy in the United States dreams of becoming our President. He wants to be his country's number one man. As he gets older and sees the impossibility of this, he can smile good-naturedly at his childhood dream. In later life he finds that real happiness is not to be found in just trying to be a number one man, or even a first-rater in the heartbreaking struggle for money, romance, or self-importance. He learns that he can be content as long as he plays well whatever cards life deals him. He's still ambitious, but not absurdly so, because he can now see and accept actual reality. He's willing to stay right size.

But not so with alcoholics. When A.A. was quite young, a number of eminent psychologists and doctors made

an exhaustive study of a good-sized group of so-called problem drinkers. The doctors weren't trying to find how different we were from one another; they sought to find whatever personality traits, if any, this group of alcoholics had in common. They finally came up with a conclusion that shocked the A.A. members of that time. These distinguished men had the nerve to say that most of the alcoholics under investigation were still childish, emotionally sensitive, and grandiose.

How we alcoholics did resent that verdict! We would not believe that our adult dreams were often truly childish. And considering the rough deal life had given us, we felt it perfectly natural that we were sensitive. As to our grandiose behavior, we insisted that we had been possessed of nothing but a high and legitimate ambition to win the battle of life.

In the years since, however, most of us have come to agree with those doctors. We have had a much keener look at ourselves and those about us. We have seen that we were prodded by unreasonable fears or anxieties into making a life business of winning fame, money, and what we thought was leadership. So false pride became the reverse side of that ruinous coin marked "Fear." We simply had to be number one people to cover up our deep-lying inferiorities. In fitful successes we boasted of greater feats to be done; in defeat we were bitter. If we didn't have much of any worldly success we became depressed and cowed. Then people said we were of the "inferior" type. But now we see ourselves as chips off the same old block. At heart we had all been abnormally fearful. It mattered little whether we

had sat on the shore of life drinking ourselves into forgetfulness or had plunged in recklessly and willfully beyond our depth and ability. The result was the same—all of us had nearly perished in a sea of alcohol.

But today, in well-matured A.A.'s, these distorted drives have been restored to something like their true purpose and direction. We no longer strive to dominate or rule those about us in order to gain self-importance. We no longer seek fame and honor in order to be praised. When by devoted service to family, friends, business, or community we attract widespread affection and are sometimes singled out for posts of greater responsibility and trust, we try to be humbly grateful and exert ourselves the more in a spirit of love and service. True leadership, we find, depends upon able example and not upon vain displays of power or glory.

Still more wonderful is the feeling that we do not have to be specially distinguished among our fellows in order to be useful and profoundly happy. Not many of us can be leaders of prominence, nor do we wish to be. Service, gladly rendered, obligations squarely met, troubles well accepted or solved with God's help, the knowledge that at home or in the world outside we are partners in a common effort, the well-understood fact that in God's sight all human beings are important, the proof that love freely given surely brings a full return, the certainty that we are no longer isolated and alone in self-constructed prisons, the surety that we need no longer be square pegs in round holes but can fit and belong in God's scheme of things—these are the permanent and legitimate satisfactions of right living

for which no amount of pomp and circumstance, no heap of material possessions, could possibly be substitutes. True ambition is not what we thought it was. True ambition is the deep desire to live usefully and walk humbly under the grace of God.

These little studies of A.A.'s Twelve Steps now come to a close. We have been considering so many problems that it may appear that A.A. consists mainly of racking dilemmas and troubleshooting. To a certain extent, that is true. We have been talking about problems because we are problem people who have found a way up and out, and who wish to share our knowledge of that way with all who can use it. For it is only by accepting and solving our problems that we can begin to get right with ourselves and with the world about us, and with Him who presides over us all. Understanding is the key to right principles and attitudes, and right action is the key to good living; therefore the joy of good living is the theme of A.A.'s Twelfth Step.

With each passing day of our lives, may every one of us sense more deeply the inner meaning of A.A.'s simple prayer:

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,
Courage to change the things we can,
And wisdom to know the difference.