

John's Recovery

Step One

AA Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol-that our lives had become unmanageable.

My Step 1: Came to the realization that alcohol consumption had severely impeded my ability to accomplish every one of my life's aspirations.

Step one combines simplicity with unadorned honesty. To begin the recovery journey all I had to do was make a decision; admit something. It was now an undeniable fact that I had reached a point where the ability to resist the compulsion to take a drink had been destroyed. Quantity and frequency choices were no longer mine.

Here's how most of my days would start. We owned and I operated a restaurant and bar in rural Indiana. I mean rural – corn, soybeans, hogs, and dairy cows rural. As experienced drinkers know, the standard shot glass is 2 oz. with a white line at the 1 oz. level. At six o'clock in the morning I filled the glass up to the line with whiskey, added a blurb of peppermint schnapps, dribbled in several drops of bitters, tossed it down the hatch and chased it with black coffee. Three of these little beauties in the space of five minutes eliminated those pesky hangovers.

Needless to say, my life needed new management. I suffered from what I call alcoholic usurpation, a form of thievery that robbed me of the ability to apply reasoned judgment to the reality of my daily life. Alcohol played the role of a skilled embezzler and I, the alcoholic, played the role of co-conspirator using denial, blaming, feigned ignorance, and other concealment tactics to cover the losses. Inevitably, bankruptcy occurred. The cover up was exposed. Confession time had arrived.

In one sense, my admission of powerlessness over alcohol was motivated by a feeling of guilt associated with and derived from the consequences of my drinking. But more importantly, the admission signified my unconditional surrender. Life looked bleak.

My first experience with AA was part of a treatment program in 1980. By 1984, reliance on willpower had led to perpetual relapses; helplessness and hopelessness saturated my entire being. These two feelings combined with self-loathing drove me back into the rooms of AA where I was met with empathy and camaraderie, and surprisingly, the realization that I had already done Step 1.

Four years of intermittent AA attendance had not resulted in sustained sobriety but it had not been a complete waste. I had seen the joy and heard the laughter; I had enjoyed the self-

deprecating humor, and had learned from the stories of success and the agony of failure. I wanted what those people had, I wanted sobriety.

At first glance, Step One may appear to be somewhere between formidable and impossible to a still suffering alcoholic who had been beaten down to a near zero sense of self-worth. Here is where reason and common sense finally came into play for me. Every AA meeting I attended presented evidence of successful recovery. All I needed to do was open my mind to the possibility that I too could succeed. As distasteful as the concept of powerlessness may be, Step One restricts it to one thing, powerlessness over alcohol. Completion of this part of the step requires only one concession – a commitment to abstinence.

As the third tradition of AA states “...the only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.” Pure simplicity! Well, maybe not so simple. One might ask, does doing step one actually require a commitment to abstinence? Based on the wording of the third tradition, I think it does. If I state a desire to achieve something, the statement itself carries with it the implicit necessity for commitment. My stated desire to stop drinking carries with it a commitment to abstinence. In this context what else could the word stop mean?

The second suggestion in Step 1 is also a limited request. It does not say that we alcoholics have always lacked the competence to manage our lives. The implication is clear, my powerlessness over the mind altering effects of alcohol created the unmanageability. More simplicity – remove the cause, then rebuild a lifestyle based on reason and common sense. I was told repeatedly that compared to a life based on alcoholic fiction, reality isn’t that bad. Beyond any doubt, I now know that to be true. In retrospect, I now understand that the intense pain created by my addiction motivated two significant changes in attitude. Four years of ambivalence toward the seriousness of my addiction had been replaced with the belief that sobriety was both necessary and doable. Today, those two principles, necessity and doability, are tools I apply to important decisions on a regular basis.

The completion of Step One primarily required honesty, but it also suggested the immediate need for some humility and gratitude. Four years of failure to stay sober had taught me that reliance on my own volition was not a winning strategy. Powerlessness and unmanageability needed to be reversed. I had finally realized the necessity for outside help, and I already owed a debt of gratitude for the “welcome back” support I had received. Help was staring directly at me; all I needed was enough humility to accept it.

Step Two

AA Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

My Step 2: Came to the realization I needed to accept guidance from others in order for me to re-focus on the pursuit of my aspirations.

The completion of Step 1 afforded me a temporary sense of comfort because I had finally gotten honest with myself. I had engaged in the rational assessment of evidence and accepted reality; in my case the acceptance of the necessity to quit drinking. How this newfound honesty came to prevail over my previous denial of truth was due to the persistent mentoring of two sober alcoholics, friends in the fellowship who themselves had wrestled with the uncertainty of recovery, and who now were exhibiting the rewards of sober living.

The literal structure of Step 2 posed a problem for a secular thinker like me because Wilson had chosen to capitalize the word Power, and the message I kept hearing in meetings was that I must find God, a God as defined by revelatory religion. If this was to be my only option I knew it would be virtually impossible for me to integrate myself into the AA community.

Various terms are used to describe folks like me: skeptic, agnostic, secular humanist, even atheist. I choose to call myself non-religious. Somewhat stymied, it seemed to me that without special dispensation, or the discovery of an alternate route, my ship of recovery was facing some strong headwinds. Like all good sponsors in 1984, my sponsor suggested I closely study Chapter 5, How It Works, in the Big Book. I did!

What that chapter did for me was to create doubt. I kept looking for something that fit with the title, but found little. The chapter begins with Wilson's description of those people who he thinks will probably never be able to get sober, a listing of the twelve steps, followed by this proclamation "Being convinced, we were at Step 3, which is that we decided to turn our will and our life over to God as we understood Him." (p. 60)

Convinced of what? The rest of the chapter offers a reasonably accurate description of the attributes exhibited by those controlled by untreated alcoholism. Not to worry! At the end of the chapter Mr. Wilson has an offer of salvation: "We hope you are convinced now that God can remove whatever self-will has blocked you off from Him." (p. 71) My take-away from Chapter 5 was twofold: a good description of untreated alcoholism which I did not need, along with repetitious claims that God will fix me if I can find Him, which I did not want. How It Works was not going to work for this alcoholic. This left me stranded, but I still was feeling good about staying sober one day at a time, and the support of sober friends was helping to keep my commitment to sobriety intact.

As an aside, I can't help but wonder about those that claim and actually believe that God got them sober and keeps them sober. I hear some variation of this in my home group a majority of

the time when someone steps up to receive a sobriety birthday token. If they actually believe these two things, why is it necessary to do anything but pray and wait for sobriety to happen?

Early in recovery I struggled with a dual reality. On the one hand, the support I was getting from my sponsor and a handful of other sober alcoholics was keeping me on track. On the other hand, my skepticism concerning the standard definition of a higher power was unacceptable. The duality wasn't as strong as a love/hate relationship; more accurately it was a simple confrontation between attraction (the comfort of camaraderie) and repulsion (all the God talk).

Surprisingly, the special dispensation I needed came from Bill Wilson himself. Wilson's gradual move away from his early rigidity towards a more liberal definition of "higher power" has been well documented on AA Agnostica over the past several months. I first noticed some of that movement on page twenty-seven in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, published in 1953, fourteen years after the Big Book was printed. Despite some hints in the Big Book where Wilson appears to be allowing some personal autonomy in defining one's own higher power, and even though he uses several creative, non-religious terms to describe God, his fall-back position in the Big Book is always the God of revelatory religion. For instance, by my count, the word God is used 28 times in the chapter We Agnostics, not counting the capitalized male gender pronouns. I wonder how much agnostic input went into this chapter. Without equivocation Wilson moves away from his rigidity in the 12 and 12. In the chapter on Step 2 he has a hypothetical sponsor tell a hypothetical sponsee "...you can if you wish make AA itself your 'higher power'". (p. 27) I bought into this reasoning without reservation in August 1984. Thirty-five years later I am still sober and still active in AA. The friendship and mentorship given to me freely by sober alcoholics filled the role of a power greater than myself.

I made this decision without much thought; I just knew it was working. How this group affiliation stuff works for an alcoholic is explained by Ernest Kurtz in his book, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* when he talks about "...the healing potency of the shared honesty of mutual vulnerability openly acknowledged," which is exactly what happens within the fellowship of AA. (p. 61) Fortunately for me, a substantial amount of support also flowed my way from people outside the recovery community. The quality of my relationships – my connections – superseded any need to seek a source of power outside the human community.

I have come to realize that there are many powers that exist outside the realm of human control, even outside the limits of human understanding, that have a direct impact on the quality of my life. Reason and common sense have taught me that my only viable option is to conform to the dictates of those powers. AA helped me to come to that conclusion. Early on I heard the acronym HALT – if you expect to stay sober, don't let yourself get too hungry, too angry, too lonely, or too tired. This simple statement reminded me in understandable terms of four areas of the human existence that demand reasoned attention. In other words, I need to ingest proper nutrients, engage in emotional self-control, invest in quality personal relationships, and after fighting the law of gravity all day get some rest. I don't need a degree in nutrition science, a degree in psychology, or a need to understand how Isaac Newton was able to figure out how particles in the universe are attracted to one another. For anyone to ignore

these dictates is to invite a lower quality of life. For an alcoholic the risks are magnified exponentially. The camaraderie of AA was enabling me to do what I had not been able to accomplish on my own. Mr. Kurtz explained it perfectly.

A reordering and refocusing of my personal aspirations was in the embryonic stage. A new life was about to begin.

Step Three

AA Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understood Him.

My Step 3: Made a commitment to seek, seriously consider, and when appropriate, act upon suggestions from others who were committed to living a sober lifestyle.

Newly emergent honesty and the beginnings of humility were strengthening my commitment to not drink. In both cases the necessary self-appraisal was enhanced by suggestions and helpful self-disclosures from my two sponsors. The real life example of sobriety that they portrayed was the evidence I needed to shove aside doubt and uncertainty concerning the possibility of my own success. Neither of the first two steps required me to add anything new to my value system. I didn't need to re-invent honesty; I just needed to let it re-emerge. After decades of playing and coaching basketball I had a clear understanding of humility – superior opponents and the game itself frequently taught me that lesson. Honesty and humility were now trending upward and the desire to drink had never been weaker.

Retrospectively, after 35 years of sober living without any divine intervention, I am amazed that the wording of Step 3 didn't motivate me to turn and run like hell away from AA back there in 1980. Here it was in 1984, and again looking back, a clear answer emerged. The wording of the steps and AA literature in general had little to do with my constant returns to the rooms of AA after each binge. The power that drew me back was the understanding friendship and camaraderie that AA involvement provided. At that point in time the only thing I knew about alcoholism I had learned in a 15 day, 12 step oriented treatment episode in 1980, and from my intermittent AA attendance. The only sober alcoholics I knew got sober in AA. Turn and run? Run to where?

Let me digress. The reader should keep in mind I am speaking of the year 1984 (forget about George Orwell). It would be false to say treatment for alcoholism was not available in the 1980's. Just the opposite was true. Franchise like treatment programs boomed throughout the country. You can get a detailed picture of some of these businesses in William White's book, *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*. My point is that nearly every one of them was joined at the hip with AA. The 15 day program that I attended in N.E. Indiana brought in two AA speakers each week, AA volunteers drove us to local AA meetings in the evenings, there were in-house meetings two nights a week, and the main qualification possessed by the program manager was that he was AA sober. In those days, with rare exception, the road to recovery was routed through AA. In 1984, I and those like me were faced with the challenge of how to make AA work for us (friendship, support, camaraderie) not by conforming to the literal dictates of the steps, but in spite of those dictates. Here at step three was more direct confrontation with the God of AA.

Some progress had been made at this stage of my recovery. I could feel it and others could see it. Nevertheless, an alcoholic of my type still has to deal with egotism, arrogance, selfishness,

and the tendency to let self-will dominate. Entrenched propensities this powerful won't dissipate on their own, and left unaddressed would destroy any chance for sustained sobriety. How was I to acclimate myself to the AA community, find my own comfortable niche, and let the God of AA wander about on his own? The path I took, a path that served me well and led to long term sobriety, was to use the words of Bill Wilson himself to validate my godless approach to 12 step recovery along with seeking information from literature outside the inventory of AA publications.

I am keenly aware that the word God with a capital "G" is ubiquitous throughout AA literature and a majority of the sober alcoholics I know believe the word refers to a supra-human entity that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Obviously AA literature can be used to support this line of thinking. What far too many "elders" in AA fail to realize or in many cases choose to ignore, is that the same body of literature grants significant latitude to skeptics like me to define God "as I understand it", which is my interpretation of the AA phrase, "as we understood Him."

One of my two sponsors recommended that I study the chapter, We Agnostics, in the Big Book. I found the chapter to be just plain goofy – the equivalent of what I had heard as a youth coming from the mouth of a traveling tent revivalist. Wilson assures the reader that through diligent searching, "The consciousness of your belief is sure to come to you." (Big Book, p. 55) Sure enough, it did come to me. No need for God.

Personally, I came to understand and connect with a spiritually grounded higher power based on quality personal relationships. This humanistic power served me effectively then and is now stronger than ever. Regarding Humanism, I would recommend to anyone in recovery to read "The Affirmation of Humanism: A Statement of Principles", compiled by Paul Kurtz. This constitutes a great outline for becoming fully human.

The recovery landscape in 2019 has definitely changed for the better. Let's pretend my recovery began in August of 2019, rather than August of 1980 with that 15 day treatment episode. What could evolve differently from August of 2019 onward compared to the options that occurred to me beginning in the summer of 1980? It is a logical assumption that I would continue to develop more sophisticated internet skills and would learn about web sites like AA Agnostica, AA Beyond Belief, and others. These powerful mediums will assure me that I am not alone in my minority viewpoint world. Today (August 8, 2019) AA Agnostica shows an enrollment of 2,030 and I'm sure AA Beyond Belief equals or exceeds that number.

No such thing existed in the 1980s.

The only book of daily meditations I was acquainted with in early recovery was *The Twenty-Four Hours a Day* book – about the equivalent of reading the Bible. In 1986, Hazelden published *Touchstones*, a book of meditations for men. It was a slight improvement over the 24 hour book, but still way too godly – the reading for August 4, the day of my last drink tells me "...to

be open to the healing powers of God.” Around 1990, AA saw dollar signs and entered the meditation business and published *Daily Reflections* – more God.

Those of us entering recovery in 2019 were given the opportunity to escape stuff like this. My copy of Joe C’s *Beyond Belief* musings was getting a bit tattered and marked up. When I told my sponsor I was less than enthralled with the wording of Step 3, he told me not to worry about it and referred me to *The Little Book*, by some guy named Roger C, where all the steps were reworded by some sophisticated, yet practical thinkers. Amazing! Hell, maybe I’ll do my own rewrite.

Better yet, one of those web sites mentioned a new book by some counselor entitled, *Staying Sober Without God*, a book loaded with suggestions about how to change thinking and behaviors in order to combat addiction. Apparently, he is a counselor who does more than take the money and then tells the client to go to AA. I was learning more and more about sober living from non-AA sources, and the more I learned the more I looked upon Mr. Wilson’s Big Book as a collection of anachronisms.

Yes, the landscape has changed and I’ll take advantage of the new views. BUT – I have the feeling it would not be healthy for me to disengage from AA. I need the camaraderie.

Step Four

AA Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

My Step 4: Conduct an honest evaluation of my past life in order to identify harms done, personal faults that need to be addressed, and personal strengths to be utilized.

Completion of the first three steps had allowed me to carve out my own God-free niche in AA. I now felt like a bona fide member of AA minus any divine intervention. I was aware of progress and I was getting pats on the back and favorable actions from others. I now look back on this early period of optimism with gratitude for the reality based mentorship I received. Of my two sponsors, one was a bit more assertive than the other, and his idea of a compliment was to casually suggest I should listen more and talk less at the meeting where we regularly met. He was fully aware of my four year history of perpetual relapses. We knew we had been at this intersection before and we both knew this was where I had veered off course and got drunk. Pink cloud euphoria needed to be avoided but I could rightfully claim some credit for my trending toward reasoned thought and for incorporating the opinions of others into the evaluation of my judgment. My sponsor's firm but respectful insistence on honesty had set the stage for me to take on this next task that would demand sober introspection. It didn't look easy.

It didn't look easy, but the idea of taking an inventory of my life actually made sense to me as I approached my fifth decade.

Here at age forty-eight I could look back on a life where I had never maximized any of the opportunities that had been presented to me, I had been given my fair share, and my current life was a disaster zone. The threat of losing my marriage, looming financial problems, and self-loathing had brought me back to AA. For the first time, I was giving serious consideration to the possibility that my judgment was flawed. I had arrived at a dark place and AA was challenging me to look for and record the evidence that had brought on the darkness. The need for some sober introspection was long overdue.

In accordance with standard AA sponsorship in 1984, I was directed to the chapter "How It Works" in the Big Book. Some of it made sense to me, much of it did not. The chapter does contain some common sense suggestions for behavioral change, but I had to reject Wilson's claim that the necessary changes would always occur as the result of faith in God. He also, in my judgment, seemed to be overly concerned with the topic of sex. More recent writings by Lance Dodes, *The Sober Truth*, Francis Hartigan, *Bill W.*, and Susan Cheever, *My Name Is Bill*, clear that up for us. The old boy was a serial womanizer.

Early in the chapter, Wilson asserts that, "Half measures availed us nothing." (p. 59). True, my four years of paying lip service to the idea I needed to quit drinking had not rewarded me with sustained sobriety, but my AA involvement did not add up to "nothing". I had a home group, I

had two sponsors, and most importantly, I had somehow developed enough willpower to keep trying. I was back!

A major point of contention for me is Wilson's claim that resentment "destroys more alcoholics than anything else." (p. 64) The stress this statement gets in the meetings I attend ranks right up there with God in the minds of most Big Book worshipers. Wilson instructs us to compile a resentment list of "people, institutions, or principles with whom we are angry." (p. 64)

Here are the highlights for why I saw this suggestion to no longer be relevant for me.

1. I was past denial. The last four years of periodic binges had left me saturated with guilt, remorse, and excruciating emotional pain. I knew I had to quit. No resentment here with the principles of powerlessness and unmanageability.
2. Every sober friend I had, had done a Step 4. No resentment here with the principle of necessity. Case closed – Do it.
3. I had taught and coached at four different school systems and never been treated unfairly. No resentment there.
4. I had received threats from bank loan officers, the IRS, and the Indiana Department of Revenue. All deserved, no resentments there.
5. My first wife (5 years) divorced me. I deserved it. No resentment there. My current wife (now 53 years) four years active in Al-Anon. She was coping much better with life than I was. I was envious, not resentful. I could go on but you get the point.

From the outset my sponsor had been blunt. No blaming other people, or circumstances. I was instructed to spell out my thoughts, beliefs, values and behaviors. I was told how my thinking, my interpretation of reality, combined with how I had lived my life all added up to me being qualified to be a member of AA. This was an achievement I could take full credit for. The end result of this inventory process is to point the way toward self-improvement, positive change. Basically, all I was being asked to do was to be as honest as I could, and as thorough as I thought necessary.

One of the popular AA aphorisms heard frequently in meetings had a hard-assed sponsor telling an upstart... "I'll tell you what needs to be changed about you, everything, every damned thing. If you're thinking it, it's automatically wrong." I try not to think in absolutes, but to me, this sounded absolutely stupid. Wilson himself thought so too, he conceded that newcomers did have assets that could be listed along with their liabilities. (12 and 12, p. 46) He obviously did not think any of us needed to change everything. It would have been nice of him to have told the folks that back in 1939 in the Big Book, instead of waiting until 1952. Anyway, just in case I should uncover one or two positive attributes in my fearless search, I'll have the guy who wrote The Big Book on my side.

For all my skepticism about what I was reading in the Big Book, Bill Wilson had me clearly in his sights when he started talking about fear. Overdue bank loans, overdue tax deposits, overdue utility bills, all contributed to daily fear. The marriage was troubled, would a sheriff's deputy

come through the door with divorce papers? And the worst fear of all, would I drink again? And now I'm charged with coming up with a fearless moral inventory? According to The Big Book, if only I would trust in God I would be blessed with serenity. I chose a different path.

One of the positive attributes I was able to excavate from my troubled past was a fierce competitive spirit that had served me well as I strove to achieve excellence as a basketball player. Competitive basketball was in the past, but the competitive spirit was alive and well. My problem had been that I was trying to out-compete the effects of alcohol, trying to prove I could control my drinking. What I needed to do was change opponents – I needed to start competing with myself. I knew that I had a long history of pushing myself to extreme limits both mentally and physically in that pursuit of excellence. Now I needed to harness that same will and focus it on resisting the urge to take that first drink, one day at a time. Willful commitment on my part, fortified by the support of sober friends, combined with the rewards of right living, gradually lessened the power of fear in my life. The inventory I came up with would not have won any awards for length, but I did make an honest effort to be honest and thorough. One thing I did not do that many therapists emphasize was I did not delve deeply into my childhood. I was a forty-eight year old drunk who was totally responsible for his predicament. Everything I needed was within reach. I just needed to do the reaching.

My sobriety has not led to an anxiety free life. I don't think "the human condition" is designed for such a life anyway. One of my favorite books is *Man's Search For Meaning*, by Viktor Frankl. Here's what he has to say about that: "What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task."(p. 110) Every morning I get up my freely chosen task is to do what is necessary to not drink, and to take care of my responsibilities for the day to the best of my ability. The only justification I have for this simplistic approach is that I have been sober for 35 years.

Step Five

AA Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our
wrongs.

My Step 5: To maintain my commitment to honesty and humility I'll share my inventory with
my sponsor.

I now had at my fingertips a vivid outline of my alcohol saturated life. It was not pretty. I now view Step 5 as the strongest indicator of how serious I was about getting sober. Some might view this step as a confession, maybe even a plea for salvation. Not me. Along with the first four steps, it completed the foundation upon which to build a durable recovery.

The word foundation gets a lot of metaphorical use and almost always the metaphor implies strength and long term viability. I was confident that was the type of foundation we had built. Yet to be determined was what form of recovery would rise from this base. I fully intended to win the competition with myself which I alluded to in last month's posting on Step 4, and I had a clear vision of what that victory would provide: without equivocation, I would come to the realization that alcohol induced powerlessness and unmanageability would be totally removed from my life. Admission would lead to elimination.

We were trending in a positive direction and moving towards what I can now describe as "self-leadership." Not a prideful leadership nor a leadership with the spotlight on self. A key variable in being an effective leader is to have enough humility to admit you don't know everything – admitting that you need help to get the job done – the polar opposite of the arrogant alcoholic I was trying to defeat.

A sense of faith based on fact was developing. The process was working. The printed word (all AA suggestions aren't loaded up with God), human based support, and a patient one-day-at-a-time attitude all strengthened my resolve. In the wake of four years of relapse fueled hopelessness, confidence was slowly building.

Thus far honesty had been the order of the day and I thought of it this way. If at this stage of my recovery I cannot share Step 5 honestly, I either have to go back to Step 1 and start over or find some way other than AA to find sobriety. I sure as hell had my fill of start-overs and any alternative to AA was nowhere in sight. Honesty was my best option. Transferring my inventory from thought to paper had required a measurable dose of humility; to share these personal flaws and the related negligences with another person will demand significantly more. I also need unreserved confidence in my sponsor. No problem there, he had earned it.

A fortunate few non-God thinkers like myself figure out a way to function within AA without ceding control over our lives to an unseen, unknown, unmet deity. My personal understanding of a power greater than self was working effectively and my sponsor was waiting patiently for

me to set a date to share the content of my Step 4. Since one of the admissions in Step 5 is to God, let me explain how the term “higher power” and the phrase, “God as we understood him”, ended up in the 12 steps.

I know this is old stuff to AA history gurus, but it’s quite possible that all the 2,050 (as of Sep. 14, 2019) subscribers on AA Agnostics are not as informed about the history of AA as you are. Most people know that Bill Wilson wrote the Big Book. Less known is that Bill regularly solicited feedback from the early AA’s in New York and from Dr. Bob and the early AA’s in Akron and Cleveland, a collection of derelicts usually referred to as the original 100, although that number has been subjected to question. Regardless of the number, try to imagine a roomful of recently dried out alcoholics trying to act as proofreaders, editors, and literary critics. That may have been where the rule against cross talk originated. Some of the feedback was intense, some of it in support of reliance on a deity some of it opposed.

In the book, *Language of the Heart*, Bill shares a heated response because, “In one of the steps I had even suggested that the newcomer get down on his knees.” (p. 201) The howling began immediately... “when this document was shown to our New York meeting, the protests were many and loud.” (p. 201) Similar protests are noted in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of AA*, where Wilson was told, “You’ve got too much God in these steps, you will scare people away” and then a comment still heard today, “Who wants all their shortcomings removed anyhow.” (*AA Comes of Age*, p. 162) Clearly Bill was told by some of the early AA’s that AA had no business advocating for theistic principles.

Further frustrating his quest for consensus was a group that was unabashedly Christian who thought the Big Book should be clearly based on Christian dogma, and urge the use of biblical scripture to remove any doubt. (*AA Comes of Age*, p.162) Ultimately Bill was given the power of final judgment on content and that’s how we ended up with what I call the “Agnostic Loophole”. The agnostic contingent... “finally convinced us that we must make it easier for people like themselves by using such terms as ‘a higher power’ or God as we understand him.” Those expressions as we know so well today, have proved lifesavers for many an alcoholic.” (*Language of the Heart*, (p. 201)

My reasoned approach to the first part of Step 5 was simple. If there is a supra-human entity known as God that is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, he, she, or it already knows what I have committed to paper and I have no control over what this theistic authority may conclude. To the best of my understanding any verdict from on high is still pending. What is not pending is my development of a faith based on fact. My involvement with these sober alcoholics in AA has provided impetus to a transformational process that has changed how I think and how I act. I now had a sense of necessity for conforming to some of the fundamental suggestions of AA: those that recommend the use of personal will and those that emphasize the need for personal improvement.

I never questioned the value of doing Step 5, but my sense of necessity didn’t coincide with Wilson’s. Even though I’ll be sharing my inventory which had been compiled by me, I’m

designated as the least important participant. Wilson makes that clear when early in the chapter, "Into Action", he says... "we usually find a solitary self-appraisal is insufficient." (Big Book, p. 72) He supports this position in later years when he wrote this in the 12 and 12... "what comes to us alone may be garbled by our own rationalization and wishful thinking." (12 and 12, p. 60) I had no problem accepting those observations; I had just done an honest inventory, and it was loaded with past prevarications, rationalizations, and denial.

I knew this was an honest effort. What I could not accept was what Wilson says is the intent of Step 5 and what the result of the step will be. The intent of the step ... "is to get a new relationship with our creator, and to discover the obstacles in our path." (Big Book, p. 72) Also unacceptable is his prediction of the end result. "We begin to feel the nearness of our creator." (Big Book, p.75) And, "We feel we are on the Broad Highway, walking hand in hand with the Spirit of the Universe." (Big Book, p. 75) The inventory was the right thing to do – the AA way was to do it for the wrong reason designed to achieve the wrong outcome.

My sponsor, Louie C., was a mild mannered retiree who went to mass two or three times a week. As my sponsor he never brought up the topic of religion. He was a retired railroad engineer, the guy who drove the train. For decades he drank a quart of bourbon a day and never had a mishap. About a year after he got sober his train hit a pick-up truck and killed the driver. The guy had ignored the flashing lights and the striped gate. When the first sheriff's deputy arrived on the scene Louie asked for an immediate breathalyzer and arranged for a urine screen and a blood analysis. He knew his reputation as a drunk was still alive among the railroad community.

We both lived in rural Indiana and as I drove the 12 miles of county blacktop to his place; I was a bit apprehensive about how some of my "stuff" would be viewed by this gentle old man. My fourth step was comprised of standard alcoholic screw-ups, a mix of guilt by omission and some guilt by commission. No warrants out for my arrest; no concern about any statute of limitations. Going through the inventory line by line with Louie made it painfully clear that I had not been leading a rationally defensive lifestyle. Louie listened and Louie added value. Throughout the session he did an excellent job of asking questions which demanded more in depth clarification on my part, and he offered meaningful self-disclosure which helped move me forward on the issue of self-forgiveness. It took about two hours. We agreed we had done a good job of identifying "the nature" of several wrongs. Louie had already accepted my version of a higher power, so the first part of the step was considered done. He stated that he was satisfied that I had assumed ownership of my wrongs so part two was done. We both agreed that he was in fact a human being so part three was done.

I drove home quietly grateful that I was in the midst of people who understood the nature of my problem and the pain it created, people who knew there was a solution, knew I could find it, and who were willing to lend me the support needed to stay on course.

Steps Six and Seven

AA Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

My Step 6: Commit to a process of self-improvement designed to make me a net contributor to society instead of a net extractor.

AA Step 7: Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.

My Step 7: Continue to focus on self-improvement with the intent to be of service to others.

One of the most common AA clichés is... “AA is a simple program for complicated people.” Usually this statement is made to a befuddled beginner by a sober alcoholic who is already enjoying the fruits of sober living. Early in recovery I failed to grasp its validity because my alcoholic brain was incapable of connecting the concept of simplicity with the goal of quitting drinking.

As we approached Steps 6 and 7, this cognitive impossibility no longer prevailed.

I saw these two steps as a logical extension of the “over to the care of” decision made at Step 3. Reading, listening, fellowship, service work and mentoring by sober alcoholics were all contributing to the development of a strength of will which enabled me to direct my thinking away from taking a drink. From the outset I never liked the term “character defects”, thus I viewed the main objective at this stage of recovery was simply to alter the old alcoholic self into a new and improved version possessed with the will to measure up to my own values and the willingness to help others.

Here’s what Bill Wilson has to say about the role of willpower for an alcoholic like me: “When he acquires willingness, he is the only one who can make the decision to exert himself. Trying to do this is an act of his own will. All of the Twelve Steps require sustained and personal exertion to conform to their principles and so, we trust to God’s will.” (12 and 12, p. 40) I certainly was not engaging in this recovery process in order to qualify for divine approval but apparently Wilson thinks I’ll automatically qualify. Why he had to clutter up a clear description of the role of personal will with a blob of God gook is beyond me.

The emphasis on self-will in the above quote was comforting because it coincided nicely with my established beliefs, but other Wilsonian positions did not fit neatly. For instance, the first paragraphs at the top of page 76 in the Big Book sounded to me like an invitation to join the men’s prayer group at the local Baptist church. I declined. Then Wilson chooses to begin the chapter ‘Step Six’, in the Twelve and Twelve, with a quote from some unidentified clergyman who states, “This is the step that separates the men from the boys.” (p. 63) I was not willing (a negative application of personal will) to accept the implication that my recovery would be determined by the effects of a purely theistic prayer or that the opinion of an anonymous preacher was worthy of consideration. I went to my sponsor.

As previously noted Louie was a devout Catholic. His version of a higher power was God as taught by the Catholic Church, but he never challenged my choice to use AA and sober alcoholics as my higher power in recovery. As a matter of fact, since he was one of the major contributors to this power source, he was predictably ready with a quip if he thought I needed help with a little ego deflation. His favorite line was, "John, when did you ever learn anything new when you were doing the talking"? Years later I heard the same principle stated differently, "new ideas enter through an open mind, not an open mouth." Point made, listen more, talk less.

In response to my concerns about Steps 6 and 7, Louie just said, "let's just keep operating like we did on Step 3, and see where that takes us." No need to change course. Read the literature with a critical eye, stay connected with my sponsor, stay integrated into the camaraderie, maintain my commitment to step work and refrain from drinking one day at a time.

Further on in the 12 and 12, Wilson eases up a bit on the "entirely ready" part of Step 6. He says this about being entirely ready: "In an absolute sense practically nobody has it. The best we can do, with all the honesty we can summon, is to try to have it." (p. 66) He may have been thinking about the earlier decision to remove the word "honest" from the term "honest desire" which was the initial requirement for membership in AA. Contrary to what he had been exposed to through his involvement in the Oxford Group, Wilson seemed to be distancing himself from their insistence on absolutes; absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute love, and absolute purity. To illustrate how Oxford Group dogma is kept alive in AA, the Cleveland, Ohio, Central Committee prints and publishes a Four Absolutes pamphlet. In the forward to the pamphlet they point out that the absolutes are "discernible" throughout the twelve steps, but never mention they come directly from the Oxford Group teachings. I wouldn't question the worthiness of any of these four concepts, maybe purity needs some clarification, but absolutism just doesn't fit into my quest for and maintenance of sobriety – I much prefer the idea of progress rather than perfection as the most effective way to confront life's challenges. Self-improvement is one of those challenges.

As we addressed these two steps, two obvious needs were strikingly clear, a fragile beginner like myself needed mentoring, and it would be necessary for me to view the overall process as a series of incremental gains not a linear progression with a clearly defined ending. Incremental and non-linear, those two concepts remind me of something I heard Garrison Keillor say decades ago on the radio show, *Prairie Home Companion*... "The shortest distance between two points is always under construction." This revision of the principle of Geometry learned as a sophomore in high school described how I needed to address these two steps.

Self-improvement will be achieved incrementally, and the project as a whole will be under construction for an indeterminate time. I made a commitment to myself and to my sponsor to engage in some intense self-monitoring, and he promised to keep an eye out for any backsliding or complacency. I was now under the gun to demonstrate the stated intention to change with observable behavior. The 12 and 12 does offer some common sense advice: "The only urgent thing is that we make a beginning, and keep trying." (p. 68)

The first word of Step 7, clearly states it is all about humility. A normal person might ask, “what’s the big deal, just decide to exercise more humility, and do it, be more humble.” For a chronic alcoholic it is a big deal. Humility is the antithesis of three of the most common attributes of an alcoholic: selfishness, arrogance, and false pride, all three of which had been documented in my inventory. It seems to me there is some logic behind the placement of this step at number seven. It allows some time for the newcomer to tap into the camaraderie of AA and to select a sponsor. Equally significant, completion of the early steps produced a series of personal commitments and a body of shared facts that make any further use of denial absurd. A large body of evidence supported two conclusions; major changes were necessary and I needed help to implement those changes.

One of the hardest realities for me to accept was that I alone am responsible for my own happiness. I quoted from Viktor Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, back at Step 4, about striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal. Frankl developed his theories about the nature of life’s meaning while he spent the bulk of World War II in Nazi internment camps. His wife and parents perished in the camps; he and his sister survived. His story is a powerful portrayal of one of life’s most significant narratives – how to find meaning in suffering. Here’s what he has to say about happiness. “Happiness cannot be pursued, it must ensue.” (*Man’s Search for Meaning*, p.140) Ensur from what? The AA answer to that in the 1980’s would have been “right living”, “do the next right thing.” Dr. Frankl offers us a concise description of what this right living should look like: “The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.” (p. 115) Commitment to help others makes me a happier and more worthy person – pretty good rule to live by.

Keep it simple!

Step Eight

AA Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

My Step 8: Be mindful of my past transgressions and accept the necessity to make appropriate amends.

I don't remember how long I had been sober when we approached Step 8.

Neither of my sponsors was pushy about the passage of time – staying alcohol free one day at a time defined success – as long as I was making an honest effort to fulfill the commitments I had made. As I began to focus on Step 8 exasperation immediately arose.

First of all, my main goal in recovery was to change me, to re-make myself into a responsible, dependable adult. This meant focusing on the present, with the ultimate goal of discarding flawed beliefs and behaviors and replacing them with rational life-style choices. This style of thinking did not have a reverse gear – why focus on the past now? Although I didn't totally discount the value of making some amends, I was a reluctant participant in the Wilsonian prescribed amendment process. I believed then, and I still believe today, that the demonstration of responsible behavior in the present far exceeds the importance of trying to clear up the lingering results of past screw-ups.

The value of sober mentoring in recovery cannot be overstated. Here at the amends steps the knowledge, empathy, and steady support from my sponsors helped to dissipate confusion, create clarity, and to develop a doable strategy. Some of what I read in the chapter "Into Action", didn't make any sense to me, and I questioned whether some of it was even doable. Although Wilson acknowledged that what was done at Step 4 was commendable, here at Step 8 he asks for more by telling us every alcoholic needs to revisit their past and construct..."an accurate and unsparing survey of the human wreckage he has left in his wake." (12 and 12 p. 77)

I wondered about this because it seemed absolutely clear to me that the "fearless and moral" part of Step 4 more than adequately covered the newly required "accurate and unsparing". What I perceived to be overwhelming was the specific action now stipulated..."Now we go out to our fellows and repair the damage done in the past." (Big Book, p. 76) I was 48 years old and had drunk alcoholically for 30 years. Quite a lot to remember, let alone repair.

To emphasize the need for more action on our part, Mr. Wilson chose to fortify the Big Book with a paraphrase from the Book of James out of the Good Book..."Faith without works is dead." What on earth necessitated that? But, it's just a paraphrase, so I suppose the official claim of being a non-religious outfit is still intact.

Thus far my journey through the steps had been satisfying, enlightening, challenging, sometimes even exciting. Nothing builds confidence and satisfaction like success, and for the first time in 30 years I was living one day at a time without ingesting alcohol and not even thinking about taking a drink.

As I tiptoed into the land of amends this confidence was being challenged and I felt somewhat stymied. I needed help and knew who to ask. Louie answered the phone, quickly interrupted me, and said, "I'll see you at the meeting tonight, and we'll talk about it then." My fear and anxiety must have been palpable because that was the first thing he addressed, and would you believe it, he even pointed out the probable cause for my unsettled state. One of my flawed attributes that by now had been uncovered was my propensity toward perfectionism.

It had been kept in restraint but now looked to be a serious impediment.

In some ways perfectionism is perfect in itself – it's a perfect path to failure, and it's the perfect excuse to walk away from any challenging situation using a perverted interpretation of... "anything worth doing is worth doing right." My alcoholic interpretation was... "There is no way this crap is even possible, so why even start." Initially how my sponsor addressed my state of unrest was somewhat irritating because he was so damned calm about it. Those with superior wisdom are sometimes a real pain in the posterior. Ultimately, his calm input proved to be far more helpful than anything "approved" literature had to offer. Person to person was more powerful than print.

When I wrote the words "probable cause" above it reminded me of an incident that occurred several years ago when I was the office manager for an AA intergroup.

One day a guy came in and bought a large amount of literature, told me about a new group he and some others had started in a neighboring town, and asked to be put on the area schedule. I told him we could do that and asked him the name of the group. His answer was The Probable Cause Group. Here's why they chose that name. One nice day prior to choosing a name for the group, they decided to get out of the church basement and hold the meeting outside. Six or seven of them were sitting around a picnic table in the church yard when the town constable drove by slowly, turned around and drove by slowly in the opposite direction. This is a town of twelve or fifteen hundred residents. None of these guys have ever been pillars of the community, the cop probably knew every one of them by their first name. They all had a good chuckle and decided that anytime this group was seen in the same place at the same time it constituted probable cause for the cops to take a closer look. The check for the literature did not bounce.

Now, back to business. I don't remember all we discussed in this "counseling" session with my sponsor, but I do recall that my fear and anxiety began to recede in response to his calmness. Over the years I have never forgotten this lesson and I still try to convey that same message when dealing with the mini-panics of newcomers I'm trying to help.

Together, we came up with a strategy we thought was sensible: 1) Slow down and focus on what is imminently necessary and reasonably possible; for now he left that up to me; 2) He then dialed up his seriousness, and it went something like this, “Now, pay close attention, if you are ever contemplating an amend that has any potential to cause harm to anyone, including you, come to me first and we’ll discuss it. The most important thing in all this step work is your own sobriety, nothing trumps the maintenance of your sobriety. Don’t forget that.” I consulted my 4th step inventory, saw no need to revise the list of “wrongs” admitted to in the Step 5 sharing, and committed to both my sponsors my willingness to make appropriate amends.

Step Eight – Done!

Step Nine

By John B.

AA Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

My Step 9: Make appropriate amends based on a sense of calculated fairness, common sense, and the well being of all concerned.

As I stated in Step 8, I was a reluctant participant in the Wilsonian amendment process. I was staying sober one day at a time, attending two or three meetings a week, and had developed some authentic, sober, personal relationships. The combination of these three lifestyle changes constituted the making of amends to myself and I felt good about the early results. Hopelessness was being replaced by a confident optimism that I could actually stay sober; fear of failure was the weakest it had ever been. Up to this point I had been relying on what most people in recovery call “living amends” and my commitment to change for the better was helping to repair almost every meaningful personal relationship in my life. Notice the use of the word “almost” – I made one critical error and I want to address that before I explain why I thought Mr. Wilson’s approach to Step 9 was useless.

From the beginning my marriage to Helen was periodically harmed by my immature selfishness and an arrogant disregard for her judgement concerning decisions that would have significant impact on our lives. In 1978, after several years of teaching and coaching, I browbeat her into conceding that a sensible career change for me was to buy a restaurant and bar in rural Indiana. Less than two years later I was in treatment for alcoholism. Helen kept teaching and suffered through four more years of periodic binges. I was an insufferable drunk and the business might as well have been listed as a non-profit charity, but I was able to plea bargain one more chance after my last binge which ended on August 4, 1984.

That began my stream of continuous sobriety, but did not lead to a consistently amicable marriage. We separated after I had been sober for seven years, engaged in some marriage counseling, and I moved back in. Our marriage began to get smoother after the bar was sold and I became a certified addictions counselor with a reliable income. We have now been married 53 years. I actually discussed this part of our lives with Helen when I was trying to figure out what to write for Step 9. Wow! Was I really that bad? Then she added, “You have never been more supportive than you’ve been since we’ve moved to Georgia.” As we say, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

Now – What was it that pushed me away from Wilson’s explanation of how to address amends? First of all the the wording of the step itself is ambiguous. Make direct amends wherever possible. Who decides that? Don’t make any amends if someone will be harmed. Who decides

that? You may not see much difference in my wording of this step, but I think the terms “calculated fairness” and “common sense” add an element of rationality to the process.

The examples spelled out in the Big Book chapter, “Into action” were of no use to me, and I would think to no one with blood flowing to their brain. One of the examples was a direct contradiction to the last part of the step, “except when to do so would injure them or others.” On page 79, Wilson writes this, “We may lose our position or reputation or face jail, but we are willing. We have to be. We must not shrink at anything.” Here’s where fairness and common sense can come into play. Would it not make more sense to use our recovery to strengthen our position, rebuild our reputation, and put together long term right living to reduce or possibly eliminate incarceration? My judgement is that it was easy for Wilson to write this hard-ass statement; he had no job to lose and he was not facing any criminal charges.

In later years he engages in some self-correction on this very position. In the 12 and 12, he issues this cautionary statement, “Are we going to be so rigidly righteous about making amends that we don’t care what happens to the family and home.” In the Big Book (1939), we had been told that it would be necessary to risk everything. In the 12 and 12 (1953), we are told there may be some need for caution. Most of us would opt for caution. Fourteen years of experience obviously pushed Wilson in that direction also.

A blatantly self-serving example posing as an amend is found on page eighty of the Big Book. Tortured by his conscience, a man restarts church attendance and on his first Sunday back stood before the congregation and confessed how years before his dishonesty had publicly shamed and ultimately ruined a business competitor. His confession was widely accepted by the congregation and he went on to be a highly respected member of the community. There was no mention of any attempt to make an amend or make any effort at restitution to the man who had been ruined. Sounds self-serving to me.

More bafflement was to follow. Further on in this same chapter Wilson addresses how one might handle infidelity if necessary to admit lack of faithfulness. He offers this weird description of the possible amend: “Our design for living is not a one way street. It is as good for the wife as it is for the husband. If we can forget [the infidelity] so can she.” (Big Book, p. 81). Let me offer a hypothetical reverse of this suggestion. Imagine if you can, how most men would react to this comment from his wife; “Yes dear, it is true. I have been sleeping around a little bit, but only with one or two guys. It’s over so I don’t see why we can’t jointly forget about it.” How this absurd example survived the final reading prior to going to print is beyond my understanding.

Here’s one more example that illustrates why the Big Book doesn’t deserve to be elevated to the level of “the source of all wisdom” like many AA elders claim. In an essay in *The Language of the Heart*, dated June, 1958, Wilson describes his progress with Step 11 as a case of “arrested development” and then admits that Step 9 “has fallen into much the same bracket.” In 1938 he wrote, “We must not shrink at anything” when making amends. Twenty years later he was still trying to figure out how to do it himself.

Here's how I gradually came to view Step 9. I stayed committed to a course of action I hoped would prove I was serious about staying sober. This meant behaving in ways that rarely required the use of the words, I'm sorry. In my case, any use of those words would probably be met with disbelief and a hearty scoff anyway. I made amends based on what was necessary relative to my own circumstances. Nothing more, nothing less, and always with the advice my sponsor had previously gave me firmly in mind: The primary purpose of all this step work was for me to stay sober.

Step Ten

AA Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when wrong promptly admitted it.

My Step 10: Live each day based on the commitment to strengthen each personal relationship relevant to that day's events.

What had kept me from drinking for the few months leading up to Step 10 were the examples of sober living and sober thinking demonstrated by my AA friends. What the wording of Step 10 suggested to me was that I had to do my part on a regular basis to keep those relationships healthy and thriving. They were living proof that the 'average Joe' could deal with the vagaries of daily living without chemical enhancement. By now I had sharpened my ability to filter out Wilson's incessant insistence for giving God credit for all recovery successes and here at Step 10 I needed it. First of all, at the end of those Step 9 promises, he leads us into Step 10 with the assertion, "We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves."

Very quickly though, Wilson offers us flawed humans the opportunity to partner up with God by saying "They [the the promises] will always come true if we work for them." (Big Book, p. 84) What a deal, God will reward me if I do the necessary work. In regards to this necessary work we are cautioned to be specifically concerned about any resurgence of "selfishness, dishonesty, resentment and fear", and if they do show up we are instructed to ask God to remove them. Again, Wilson quickly enters the use of personal will and human power into the equation by telling us to discuss this with someone, make any appropriate amend, and finally, "resolutely turn our thoughts to someone we can help." One more time, God is asked to perform a task but we humans have to harness up and perform the labor. At this time in my recovery the one thing I understood perfectly, with absolutely no equivocation was this: a handful of men had turned their thoughts and gave their support to someone [me] that was seeking help. Not one of them ever told me they had been directed by God to help this newly arrived clueless drunk.

In his letter of support for AA, "The Doctor's Opinion" (Big Book, p. xxvi), Dr. Silkworth gives us what amounts to a humanistic explanation for this willingness to help. "We feel after years of experience, that we have found nothing that has contributed more to the rehabilitation of these men than the altruistic movement now growing among them." It's important to point out that Dr. Silkworth wrote this five page opinion in support for AA without using the word God even one time.

One of the things I like to emphasize about my recovery is how, as the years rolled on, I found support for the secular approach to recovery in sources far afield from the Big Book. In the book, *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are* (1995), Robert Wright says this: "Friendship, affection, trust – these are the things that, long before people signed contracts, long before they wrote down laws, held human societies together." (p. 198) Friendship, affection, trust – a perfect description of the relationships between me and those sober

alcoholics who had led me into sobriety. No need for input from outside the human community. Wright also stresses the effects (rewards) of reciprocal altruism, another human proclivity that fits neatly with the concept of one drunk helping another.

On page eighty-three of the Big Book we are told, “ We will be amazed before we are half-way through.” I had sensed some amazement earlier, going one day without drinking had been amazing to me, but I was now beyond that. No longer simply amazed, I was now infused with a sense of faith based on fact. This thing called sobriety was now delivering tangible results. Others were offering favorable comments about the new me, but most importantly, I honestly felt different. I knew I was headed in the right direction, and confidence in my ability to succeed was holding sway over fear of failure.

Step 10 came across to me as the “reminder step”. The first five words, “ continued to take personal inventory” served as a reminder to start each day with a focus on the commitments made as the result of all the previous step work. To help with that I was fortunate to have sponsors who were keeping a sharp eye out for any backsliding. Elements of honesty and humility were in play here – even I knew I could not be completely trusted. Focus on the inventory aspect of the step helped me understand the value of the second part. Consciously working on self-improvement was one of those earlier commitments and Step 10 obviously offers the opportunity to do that. Step 10 kept me firmly anchored in the present and set me on course to build a “new past”. Building that new past has been a one day at a time project and I intend to keep it that way. I have come to view one day at a time living as a three for one deal. If I take care of what is on my plate today to the best of my ability, it eases the transition into tomorrow and enables me to glance back at yesterday and see the results of an honest effort. Serenity comes my way if I avoid perfectionism and excessive expectations.

Of all the damaging effects alcoholism had on me, the worst was it generated behavior that violated my own value structure. I knew I was a better person than my behavior indicated. These irresponsible episodes began as an 18 year old college Freshman and continued for 30 years so at age 48 my sense of self-worth was buried in a morass of guilt. Not drinking one day at a time plus active AA involvement was helping to restore self-esteem and Step 10 was a tool that could add impetus to that trend. I also saw this step as a continual reinforcement of Step 1. It serves as a reminder that my previous refusal to accept my vulnerabilities and fallibilities had led to disastrous results. And to make it much easier the required concession here is minor compared to Step 1. All I have to do is admit I am not right all the time and show some respect for the opinions of others. Acting this way over time enabled me to build credibility with those who play important roles in my life and rewarded me with the legitimacy to “call out” the bozos who act like I used to act. That is an enjoyable pay-off. Over time this creates dual rewards: the stronger we become, the more capable we are of helping others. I know I’m right about that!

Step Eleven

AA Step 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.

My Step 11: Stay in close contact with my sober support network and willingly ask for input when faced with a troubling decision.

Even though confidence in my ability to stay sober was higher than ever, I also accepted the maxim that my sobriety was a daily reprieve based on my commitment to not drink. My initial commitment was nothing more than a statement of intent and as you all know, we active alcoholics all wanted to be judged by our noble intentions, not by our behaviors. After four years of perpetual relapse, this time it was different for me. The commitment that I had made to my sponsors and the will to maintain that promise now flowed from a faith based on fact: sustained sobriety was now transforming me into a more worthy person and I didn't want to interrupt that trend.

I was beginning to like me again.

My sponsors and those other alcoholics were functioning as mentors and monitors, leading to progress and the prevention of regression. Self-acceptance and the development of quality personal relationships had shoved alcohol out of its previous position of dominance. In short, the key aspects of my human based support were functioning admirably and my will was being strengthened by the tangible results of not drinking one-day-at-a-time.

Bill Wilson could have made Step 11 a bit easier for a secular thinker like me if he had written "prayer or meditation" instead of "prayer and meditation". By now though I had concluded that any concern Wilson had expressed for "we agnostics" was superficial at best and probably just a bait and switch designed to expand enrollment, or maybe to sell more books. Prayer was of no value to me, and I had no in depth understanding of meditation, although quiet contemplation was occasionally helpful for keeping me focused on the fundamentals of responsible living. I do chuckle to myself sometimes about what folks share in meetings about what they pray for. Some people seem to question how God allocates his resources and apparently they are not getting their fair share.

Step 11 motivated me to review the basis for my earlier choice of a higher power. The purpose of the Big Book is clearly stated on page 45, "It's main object is to enable you to find a power greater than yourself which will solve your problem." Throughout his writings Wilson uses several descriptions concerning what form this power may take. His example that suited me best at the time (autumn of 1984), is found on page 27, of the 12 and 12. Wilson has a hypothetical sponsor tell his hypothetical sponsee... "You can if you wish make AA itself your higher power. Here's a very large group of people who have solved their alcohol problem. In

this respect they are certainly a power greater than you, who has not even come close to a solution. Surely you can have faith in them.” After four years of perpetual relapses, I certainly qualified as one who had not “come close to a solution”, so it was an easy choice for me to give “them” a try. That decision has served me well.

My lack of belief in the efficacy of prayer does not negate the fact that it does have value to others. I was curious about that so I decided to look at some of the common prayers used in AA through the lens of rationality. Curiosity was part of my motivation, but I was also trying to avoid being accused of “contempt prior to investigation.”

First, the Serenity Prayer. As a free thinker I simply chose to mentally delete the word God and replace it with Please, and use the prayer as a set of instructions to begin thoughtful contemplation; sometimes to get better acquainted with me, and sometimes to search for a solution to the most current conundrum. Even if one does accept the literal meaning of the first three words of the prayer, the call for continual application of rationality and personal will is clearly implied. Acceptance is a rational choice that requires differentiation between what I can or cannot control and having the courage to change will inevitably involve the frequent use of personal will. Ideally then, wisdom will evolve and endow me with a clearer perception of truth, better judgement, and the elevation of my thinking to a higher level of sophistication. Ideally, yes. Guaranteed, not always.

The other two prayers that sponsors frequently recommended to newcomers were the 3rd step prayer (p. 63, Big Book), and the 7th step prayer (p. 76, Big Book). The gist of the 3rd step prayer is contained in this often quoted sentence, “Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do thy will.” Using different words the 7th step prayer makes the same request. From a rational secular viewpoint, all that these prayers represent is a reminder to me of the series of commitments I have signed up for designed to keep me sober. I saw no need to seek support from outside the human community. I repeat, faith based on fact was working quite well then and it still is.

I’ve been reading the posts on AA Agnostica for about a year now and I’m aware that any mention of the word spirituality causes some folks to get their shorts in a knot. But, this is my story so here goes.

Somewhere along this recovery path I came to believe that spirituality and rationality are not mutually exclusive. The probable catalyst for this realization may have been my long trail of failure to stay sober caused by the perverted utilization of personal will and intellectual analysis. Of course there is a proper role for the use of personal will and the power of reason, but like any power tool when used improperly they can cause a lot of damage.

My will takes me in the right direction when I’m operating based on unselfish motives and my reasoning is less likely to cause damage when it is tempered by the opinions of others. The “conscious contact” I was serious about was to maintain all lines of communication with my sober support network, the connections needed to supply the power from outside myself, an

auxiliary power that I still needed. There was a poignancy intertwined in many of these friendships, deeply moving experiences of real substance that resisted explanation. Page after page, Bill Wilson conflated these types of experiences with God. I was being moved by the experiences but I could not accept the official AA explanation. I found what I needed outside AA literature.

In reading outside official AA literature I found a secular definition of spirituality that I could believe in: "Spirituality has to do with the quality of our relationships with whatever or whomever is most important in our lives." (Hazelden pamphlet, Paul Bjorkland). Here was a description of spirituality totally detached from any theological belief. Short on words, far reaching in application. I think of it often.

Here's one more; in the book, *The Search for Meaning*, Dennis Ford offers this: "Spirituality is not fidelity to a transcendent god but living well and attentively in this world... living each day as though it were both the first and the last." (p. 239) Step 11 in a nutshell – don't drink one day at a time and maintain "conscious contact" with my sober support network.

Step Twelve

AA Step 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.

My Step 12: Strive to serve as an example that sobriety is achievable and rewarding and be willing to help others to attain it.

The decision to accept the mentorship of a select few sober alcoholics was challenging and at the same time both enjoyable and rewarding. The wording of Step 12 immediately activated my skepticism (not hard to do) because from a chronological perspective it is illogical. Wilson wrote the book throughout 1938 and it was published in 1939. Whomever the pronoun “we” is alluding to could not “have had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps” because the steps did not exist for them to refer to. Step 12 has three distinct parts and I’ll try to address each one, but first I’ll point out one of AA’s many idiosyncrasies.

Throughout my AA experiences (39+ years), I have noticed that some of AA’s minute details seem to demand pontification, and there has always been a pontificator ready to spring into action. I did refer to my Oxford Language Guide to make sure I wasn’t misusing the word pontificator – does pompous dogmatist ring a bell? The word “the” in Step 12 is one of those tiny details. The group I attend has a self-appointed pontificator ready to pounce if anyone shares that they have had “a” spiritual awakening. OK, maybe the word “the” carries with it a connotation of more specialness, or more explicitness, but so what? An awakening is only the beginning of a process the value of which is yet to be determined in the unforeseen future. There is no need for any demand for mathematical preciseness here.

The time frame encompassed by my step work has escaped me. I don’t recall the number of months I had been alcohol free when we arrived at Step 12, but the word “awakening” is an accurate way to describe some of my newfound perspectives. Most importantly, the admission to myself that I had to enlist the help of someone or something to supplement my own capabilities was special. For four years I had paid lip service to the idea but had never had accepted it as absolutely necessary, and here something that Wilson had written was actually helpful.

In Appendix II of the Big Book, Wilson states, “Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the ‘educational variety’ because they develop slowly over a period of time.” This appendix was added to the second printing of The Book to defuse the opinion that all spiritual experiences had to be of the colossal form previously described by Mr. Wilson – the most prominent of which was the “bright light” experience when he was in the hospital heavily medicated. The James quotation led me to the conclusion that rationality and spirituality are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The term “educational variety” clearly implies the use of our power to reason and the idea that a person’s spirituality develops “slowly over time” implies to me that it can be experiential in nature. This line of thinking negates the

necessity to believe that spirituality comes from some sort of cosmic blast devoid of any explanation except for the commonly applied default position, "God did it."

I hear the word miracle used a lot in AA meetings when people stand up to receive a token for another year of sobriety – their sobriety, they say, is a miracle bestowed upon them by the grace of God. I find that absurd, but I also believe that I have no right to argue the point. What disturbs me the most about that claim is that it is demeaning to all those individuals who I know invested heavily in the person's recovery. Here we are at Step 12 where we are challenged to carry the message of sobriety and when we succeed God gets the credit. Pure nonsense.

Throughout my 35+ years of continuous sobriety it has been comforting to discover support for the humanistic, agnostic, support for some 12 step principles. Here's a recent one: "A humanistic morality rests on the universal bedrock of reason and human interests: it's an inescapable feature of the human condition that we're all better off if we help each other and refrain from hurting each other." (Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, p. 429). I'm sure professor Pinker would see value in Step 12. Here's something more personal, something any one of us might view as a pay-off. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl sees this reward for selflessness: "The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself... In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence." (p. 115). One day at a time I try to be a net contributor to society, not a net extractor.

From a practical standpoint, anyone claiming to have completed the first 11 steps would have already begun to "practice these steps in all our affairs" beginning with the honesty in Step 1. Whether it is spiritual or not can be debated, but the most significant awakening I experienced was somewhat of a paradox. My consistent reliance on the mentorship of others, the concession that my will alone had failed to keep me sober, acted as the catalyst to re-awaken the personal attributes necessary to maintain my commitment to sobriety. Help from the outside created strength on the inside. The foundation of my recovery and the contribution it makes to the consistent serenity that I now enjoy is based on building and maintaining quality personal relationships.

The Author

John is an eighty-three year old sober alcoholic with 35 years of continuous sobriety. Married to Helen for 53 years; three kids in their 50's. Spent 17 years teaching and coaching at the high school level in Indiana and Illinois. Owned and operated a bar and restaurant for 13 years which led to the acceleration of his alcoholism, which led to treatment, and eventually led to a career as an addiction counselor. Retired in 2001 from the Marion, In. V.A. Served as office manager for a major AA intergroup office in N.E. In. for six and a half years. Was an excellent high school and small college basketball player. Still goes to the gym three days a week and shoots 200 three point shots and does some light weight lifting. Passionate about family, recovery, basketball, and the St. Louis Cardinals. Reads 20 to 25 books a year, and three or four quality periodicals on a regular basis; mostly about politics, economics, science, history: about anything going on in the world that strikes his curiosity.

Published on the website AA Agnostica (<https://aaagnostica.org/>) between September 28, 2019 and February 26, 2020.