

The Path That Breathes



A secular reflection on higher power, spirit, and recovery

By Bradley A.

For most of my life, I believed I could solve any problem.

I was a planner, an explainer, a rationalizer. If something was broken, I would analyze it, reframe it, push harder, or talk my way around it. I believed competence meant control. I believed insight meant mastery. I believed effort alone should be enough.

Alcohol fit neatly into that belief system. I drank for forty years without ever truly considering stopping. Sometimes I cut back. Sometimes I justified. Sometimes I lived in places where alcohol wasn't readily available, and I managed just fine – until it returned. When it did, I followed it like a bloodhound.

I didn't stop drinking because I wanted spiritual growth. I stopped because I reached a moment where living or not living became the only real choice left. In a hospital room, stripped of illusion, I realized that if I wanted to live at all, alcohol could not be part of my life.

That realization came before AA. It came before steps, meetings, or language. It was simply the first truth I could not argue with.

Step One: Limits, Not Failure

When I eventually found AA – specifically secular and agnostic meetings – I encountered Step One in a way that finally made sense to me.

I am not powerless because I am weak.

I am powerless because I am human.

Step One, for me, is not about alcohol alone. It is about acknowledging the simple, humbling reality that there are things I cannot control: my brain chemistry, my emotional wiring, other people's reactions, the past, the future, fear, illness, loss.

This wasn't defeat. It was orientation.

For the first time, I stopped trying to overpower reality and began to listen to it.

Step Two: Spirit as Breath

Like many secular members, I struggled with the idea of a higher power. I was raised Jewish, have lived half my life outside the United States, and have never believed in a personal god. Religious language often felt alien or coercive to me.

What changed everything was redefining *spirit*.

Spirit, at its root, simply means **breath** – the breath of life. Not doctrine. Not divinity. Breath.

In the hospital, when I chose to live, that was my spiritual awakening. Life itself became my higher power – not life as an ideal, but life as a daily practice. Staying alive. Staying present. Staying responsive rather than reactive.

I don't ask my higher power to fix me.

I ask it to remind me I am here.

Step Three: Trusting the Path

For a long time, I said my higher power was “a group of drunks.” And honestly, that worked – until it didn't.

AA is not my higher power. AA is my **spiritual resource**.

Step Three, for me, is not surrendering to something mystical. It is choosing—again and again – to trust the people and practices that help me stay oriented to life: meetings, sponsors, doctors, friends, honesty, listening.

The path itself is my higher power.

AA helps me stay on it.

Self-Esteem Grows Where Control Falls Away

As I practiced these steps – not perfectly, not linearly – something unexpected happened: I began to develop self-esteem.

Not confidence. Not bravado.

Self-esteem.

I learned that self-esteem doesn't come from being right. It comes from staying present. From not disappearing when I'm ashamed. From returning after missteps. From letting myself be seen honestly without collapsing or defending.

I used to think progress meant fewer mistakes.

Now I think it means fewer disappearances.

As my self-esteem has grown, my relationship with my higher power has deepened – not because I believed more, but because I resisted less.

The Snowman

Last year during a long stretch of winter weather, school was canceled for days. Roads were bad. The world slowed down.

So I went outside and built a snowman.

I hadn't built one since I was a child. Last year I named him *Sam the Serenity Snowman*. This year, he returned. Same name. Same purpose.

Building him wasn't symbolic when I started. It was just living – cold fingers, packed snow, silly laughter, breath visible in the air. But afterward, I realized that *this* is what my higher power looks like:

Engagement with life as it is.



Presence without performance.

Joy without intoxication.

I didn't need to explain it. I didn't need to prove anything. I just needed to stay there.

My Religion, If I Have One

I never set out to find a religion. But one day, while sharing in a meeting, I realized something that surprised me:

This *is* my religion.

Not belief. Not worship.

Practice.

Step One: knowing my limits.

Step Two: choosing life.

Step Three: trusting the path and the people who help me walk it.

That realization didn't come from study. It came from living.

Bradley had his last drink on November 22, 2021. After forty years of drinking, he entered recovery not through belief, but through necessity: if he wanted to live, alcohol could no longer be part of his life. He found his home in secular and agnostic AA, where he learned to understand higher power as life itself and recovery as daily practice. Bradley is an English teacher, writer, and lifelong learner, exploring the world, recovery, mental health, and honesty — one day at a time.
