

When Thinking Becomes Resistance



By Bradley A.

Stop filtering advice and start listening

When I first encountered Step Three – “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over...” – I assumed it didn’t apply to me. I had no belief in any sort of god or supernatural being, and I had no intention of developing one. So I translated the step into something that made sense: listen to the people and resources I trust.

That sounded simple. It was not.

For four years I believed I was already doing that. I listened in meetings. I nodded. I even took notes and highlighted passages in my AA ebooks. I could repeat insights back and tell you what they meant – not just superficially, but with depth. If recovery were a written exam, I would have passed with honors.

But I wasn’t changing. I knew the words, but I was not taking the actions.

Eventually someone close to me said something that stopped me cold: “You haven’t completed Step Three yet.”

I would have been offended if I didn’t trust my friend. Of course I was doing it. I was sober. I went to meetings. I read the literature. I talked endlessly about recovery.

But after the sting faded, I realized something unsettling: I was listening selectively. I absorbed what felt comfortable and quietly ignored anything that threatened my self-image or required real change.

In other words, I was not listening.

Selective Listening

My problem was not lack of insight. It was lack of surrender to reality.

People told me: You need help with depression. You are codependent. Your attention issues matter. Your reactions make sense given your history. You cannot fix this alone.

I heard every word – and filtered them.

If advice aligned with what I already believed, I embraced it. If it challenged me, I rationalized it away. I didn't call that resistance. I called it thinking.

Only when something close to disaster struck would I change.

And sometimes that “disaster” was relational. I hurt someone close to me in recovery because I insisted I understood myself better than they did. I defended instead of listened. I explained instead of absorbed. I was articulate – and wrong.

Insight without surrender had consequences.

Fear Disguised as Independence

Underneath the filtering was fear.

Accepting help meant admitting I didn't understand myself nearly as well as I thought. It meant risking medication, new therapy, vulnerability, and change. It meant abandoning the illusion that intelligence alone could solve emotional problems.

For someone who has relied on intellect and achievement for survival, that feels dangerous.

So I stalled by examining and analyzing, producing a never-ending stream of insights and epiphanies explaining why I was the way I was.

Insight became a hiding place.

Logic can explain everything. But explanation is not transformation.

The Cost of Not Listening

Eventually the consequences became impossible to ignore. Relationships strained. Emotional crises intensified. I found myself repeating the same patterns while insisting I was working hard to change.

I felt the world slipping through my fingers like grains of sand – no matter how tightly I tried to hold everything together.

In a world where every mistake once felt like another mark against me, failure meant isolation. And isolation felt like survival.

So I protected myself – even when that protection cost me connection. And friendships.

Step Three stopped being theoretical.

“Turning my will and my life over” meant allowing trusted people, professional guidance, and lived reality to carry weight equal to – or greater than – my own internal narrative.

It meant doing things I did not want to do because people I respected said these things mattered. It meant really listening – and then acting.

I know that I cannot rely solely on my own perceptions, so I must truly trust the people and resources I claim to believe in.

That is a frightening level of trust.

But refusing that trust has already cost me more.

Trusting What Is Real

My Higher Power, if I use that language at all, is reality itself – the network of people, knowledge, experience, and evidence that exists outside my distorted perceptions.

Doctors who understand brain chemistry. Therapists trained to recognize trauma. Friends who see patterns I cannot. A community that has walked this path before.

Step Three has become an act of trust in the real world.

Not blind obedience. Not passivity. Not magical thinking.

Just trust.

It's Taking So Long

This kind of trust requires humility. It requires accepting that good intentions and self-awareness are not enough. It requires action that feels unnatural at first.

For many of us shaped by fear or chaos early in life, trusting anyone can feel like stepping off a cliff.

Recently it became clear that I could continue to suffer while convincing myself I was making progress.

Or I could act – even when acting meant admitting I had been wrong.

What Is Changing

As I stop filtering advice, something unexpected happens: Step Four becomes possible.

I can examine resentments without protecting a fragile identity. I see patterns instead of assigning blame – either to myself or to others. I begin distinguishing responsibility from shame. And as responsibility grows, shame loosens its grip.

Step Three is not a preliminary step. It is part of the foundation.

Without a strong Step Three, everything else wobbles.

Trust as an Ongoing Practice

I do not complete Step Three and move on. I practice it daily.

Every time I choose guidance over isolation. Every time I act on advice instead of arguing internally. Every time I admit I might be wrong.

Trust, for me, is not spiritual surrender. It is disciplined openness to reality.

And it is the difference between being sober and actually recovering.

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.
