

## LEARNING TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

THERE NEVER WAS DOUBT IN MY MIND THAT I WAS AN ADDICT. I TRIED everything imaginable to limit my using or to stop completely and had failed repeatedly. Every time I quit for a while, the crushing, unrelenting need to use overwhelmed me. I had to make it stop, and there were only two things I could think of to do: Kill myself or use again. I decided to keep using, but knew that one day I would have to make the other choice.

After a successful intervention by my employers, I was sent to treatment, where I worked Step Three a little out of order. I figured I had two choices: Play along until they let me go home, then go back to trying things my way; or just stop fighting and go with the flow. For reasons that still aren't clear to me, I chose the latter, even though I really didn't believe that they could offer me anything that would help. I figured once I tried things their way for a while and proved that it didn't work, I would be able to say, "See—I tried everything," then kill myself without any guilt. However, I knew that I would have to follow their directions exactly if I wanted to prove them wrong, so I made the decision to do, to the best of my ability, what they told me to do. Unfortunately for my plan, I felt better almost instantly. I have not used again.

A week later, I met my first recovered crystal meth addict. He told me that he had shot up crystal for nineteen years before he quit and was three years sober at that time. He was calm and collected, a professional,

and wasn't suicidal as far as I could tell, so I didn't think there was any way he used the same way I did. As we talked, though, it became clear that he was the same kind of addict as me: bare mattresses with a single lightbulb overhead, paranoia, voices and helicopters, and above all, the unstoppable obsession to use. I didn't believe in God, but I didn't need to: Here was an addict just like me, and if the program worked for him, it could work for me, too. That was all I needed to be convinced of Step Two.

Once I left treatment, I immediately found a home group and a sponsor. I chose him because although he shared infrequently at meetings, every time he did he referenced the literature, and since I knew that I would die if I didn't get help soon, I didn't want to mess around with other people's opinions of what I should do. I needed a proven method, and that's what that book provided—a time-tested method that removes the obsession to use when practiced as a way of life. (Who knew?)

I started on Step Four, with pages and pages of resentments and fears. When it came to my sexual inventory, I balked. I couldn't imagine writing all that down—it seemed like forests would have to be clear-cut to provide the paper. A few months later, though, when my sex life was still driving me crazy, I relented and started writing. After that, things began to get better.

After talking through my inventory in Step Five, I must admit that I did not feel any overwhelming sense of relief—just an overwhelming sense of fatigue. A few things that I had been holding on to for a long time did go away right after that, but for the most part, I think the real use of Step Four for me was in learning how to do an inventory. A few months after I finished it, I ran up against a professional licensing board. As it turns out, their purpose in the world is to protect the public from people like me, and they really weren't too impressed that I had been sober for a whole year. They were leaving several restrictions on my practice in place. Furious, I complained about the “injustice” to everyone who would sit still long enough to listen.

When someone finally told me, “God help us all if we get what we really deserve,” I ran to my sponsor, and he handed me a piece of paper and a pencil. “Make some columns,” he said. I listed my resentments and

my part in the situation, and for the first time in my life I was able to see clearly how my decisions had led me to my current predicament. Even more important, I saw the anger that was tormenting me in that moment was driven by my need to “fix” things to suit me. As I talked through my inventory, I gradually started to see that things were exactly the way they were supposed to be and was able to let go of my anger. My need to “fix” things was my refusal to work Step Six: “Became entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” I don’t do the removing—I just have to let go, and that requires a willingness to change. Asking my Higher Power to remove the defect in Step Seven is the easy part.

I made a list of people whom I had injured in Step Eight and began to work Step Nine immediately. I made my first amends to those people who were easiest, mostly those to whom I just wanted to say, “Look how good I’m doing.” I put off the harder ones until I couldn’t stand it anymore. (As a friend once told me, eventually the pain will get so bad you have to work the next Step.) One in particular is worth mentioning. Several of my amends were financial, and I was paying them off as I could. At one point during the height of my using, a friend had gotten me a job at his employer, and instead of showing up to work, I stayed home, shot up crystal, and faked a timesheet (saying I was “working from home”). This was my last significant financial amends, and I had the money to make good on my debt. After talking to my sponsor, I called up the company’s human resources director and explained the situation, asking how they wanted me to handle it. At their instruction, I sent them a check for the money I owed them, and then waited for it to clear my account. Once it cleared, I had this sudden spinning feeling, as if the universe had just turned 180 degrees. I was no longer trapped in my past and could finally have a future.

As soon as I had done my first inventory, my sponsor told me I needed to keep doing them (Step Ten). At the end of the day, I review my behavior and try to consider what I might have done better, trying to avoid judging whether it was “right” or “wrong”—that is not for me to decide. I have several defects that keep popping up over and over, usually causing me some sort of discomfort in the process. I inventory them and see my part, but my natural reaction is to try to “fix”

it on my own. “I need to be more humble.” “I need to be nicer to my coworkers.” The list goes on and on, but the result always is frustration. I only change when I become willing to change, and I only become willing after I have inventoried my behavior enough to see how my anger and fear always are the result of my own desire to “fix” the world to suit my needs, instead of suiting myself to be of service to my Higher Power and others about me.

I began meditating as a daily Eleventh Step practice during my first month sober and continue to do it every morning, right after I grab my coffee. It really is a “practice,” because I use it throughout the day when I’m troubled so that I can quiet my mind and observe myself. There always are three things going on: What I think I’m doing, what I think I should be doing, and what I’m actually doing. It is only what I’m actually doing that matters—the rest is a distraction. I have come to learn that my behavior speaks the truth about what I really think and feel and these are the things I need to be willing to change.

Prayer was more difficult. When I came to my first meeting, I did not believe in God and really had no interest in hearing anything about that subject. That began to change, though, when I saw my life undergo a drastic transformation as I began to practice the Steps as a way of life. One day, I became overwhelmed with gratitude for what I had been given, and I realized the true horror for me in being an atheist was not that I had no one to ask for help when I am in trouble, but that I had no one to thank for the great gifts I had been given—gifts that clearly did not come directly from any action on my part. I sneaked into my bedroom, got down on my knees, and said “Thank you” to no one in particular. (I’m so grateful we get to “come to believe.”)

Prayer has been easy after that. I used to wonder where I was going to get “spirituality” from as an atheist, and the answer is in Step Twelve: “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these Steps...” That definitely was my experience. It never has been important to me who or what my Higher Power is exactly, only that I remember that it is not me. My prayer and meditation practice is my way of reminding myself each day of that fact.

Without a doubt, however, working with other crystal meth addicts as part of my Twelfth Step work is the most potent tool I have in staying sober. I've learned a few hard lessons, primarily that I'm not only powerless over my own addiction, but over others' addiction as well. I cannot help anyone who does not want to get sober, and I cannot provide that willingness to anyone who doesn't have it. The other lesson I have learned is to share my mistakes. In meetings, I learn from people who share what they did, as opposed to what they think or believe. That includes sharing their imperfections—maybe even especially those.

I have not worked a perfect program by any estimation and have made numerous mistakes along the way. Fortunately, I have surrounded myself with others in the fellowship who, like me, aim for spiritual progress, and we are able to guide each other along the path. In the process, I have made lifelong friends in every corner of the country and have witnessed many lives changed dramatically through the Steps, not the least of which is my own.