

Step Experience Essay 4

ON A WING AND A PRAYER

WHEN I CAME INTO CMA, I WAS STRUGGLING WITH RECOVERY FROM A DAILY habit of crystal meth use. I used crystal like some people breathe. It was my coffee in the morning and my entertainment at night. I had isolated myself from my family; I was angry and resentful; I honestly thought I'd somehow been missed when they were handing out rule books to life.

In the summer before I found recovery, I ran into a friend who had used like I used. He had been sober for thirty days in something called CMA, in New York City. I continued to use crystal for about six months after that—but the seed had been planted that day. After losing another job, I made a decision and sold everything I owned: On a prayer and with a little bit of hope, I moved to New York from San Francisco because I'd heard there was something called Crystal Meth Anonymous there.

When I finally got to New York, I had no idea how to find my friend who had gotten sober in CMA or even how to find a CMA meeting. Then, just two days after arriving, I got an unexpected phone call that brought me to my first meeting. You see, when I left San Francisco I'd told only one person I was leaving. As it turned out, that one person just so happened to be on a flight, sitting in the same row, heading from New York to San Francisco, with the other friend I'd met the summer before, who had found recovery in CMA. Their only connection to each other was me. They exchanged information about me and helped me get to my first meeting.

This, I believe, was unquestionably divine intervention. God did for me what I could not do for myself. Faith presented itself in my life in a way that made me willing to move forward in this program.

I came to CMA and worked the Twelve Step program that came from the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous, having faith that the Universe was going to take care of me. The Twelve Steps I saw on the wall at my first meeting promised to change my life and I’m here today to tell you: They did. In the rooms of CMA, I heard people who had used crystal like I used crystal share their stories. So I did what they did to get sober. For me, it was a problem-solution scenario—a very simple equation. I participated in fellowship and began taking small actions to change my life. I made my bed every day; I called my sponsor every day; I attended ninety meetings in ninety days. I began to see God in my life through subtle changes and little coincidences that I came to believe represented the effectiveness of this program.

Even though it was painfully clear I was a hopeless drug addict, I worked Step One by admitting to my sponsor I was powerless over crystal meth and that my life had become unmanageable. My addiction to crystal meth, my powerlessness, was obvious. My sponsor asked me to outline my “using experience” and identify those points in time that marked my using progression, from the first time I tried acid on the night of the homecoming dance to the last sniff of crystal in the Las Vegas airport on my way to New York from San Francisco. I made a time line, complete with pictures and doodles. The absurdity of my powerlessness was clear—I had never been able to leave my best friend and lover, Tina (crystal). My sponsor asked the question, “If I put a bag right here in front of you and left the room, what would you do?” I told him I would pull a shard out of the bag and put it in my pocket, leaving the rest. I knew I wouldn’t be able to control myself. I knew I was powerless. Unmanageability also came out in my writing. I tracked my usage and the associated drama, including drug overdoses on GHB, hiding from the police, losing three jobs, being massively in debt, losing relationships, and, ultimately, not being able to make my own life work. I wasn’t an effective and useful part of society.

Then I moved on to Step Two. I came to believe a Power greater than myself would restore me to sanity. Well, there was nothing about my life that was remotely sane. My decision-making ability was suspect and my choices were ridiculous. Nothing worked for me and I blamed everyone but myself. You know, some people say Twelve Step programs are brainwashing. Well, my brain was dirty; it needed washing. For me, this Step was all about looking at the people around me and trusting that this program worked for them. Step One was about identifying the problem and Step Two was recognizing the solution. This Step led to a restoration of faith in my life: I made a decision to begin to believe in a Power greater than me and to believe that it could, maybe, possibly, “restore me to sanity.” Today, I know that meant it would make me a grown-up, make me accountable and responsible, and ultimately help me build a relationship with my Higher Power.

The next move, Step Three, was for me to make a decision to turn my life and will over to the care of that “Power”—to turn my life over to God. Yikes! Fortunately, it was a God of my making, of my understanding. I could make it up completely. In Step Two, my sponsor had set me up for this open understanding by asking me to find out from other people what a God of their understanding was. I realized then how different everyone’s concept of a Higher Power could be. To work Step Three, he taught me about active and daily prayer—he asked me to memorize a prayer out of the “Big Book” of AA. I offered myself to God (to *my* God) to make me into the man I need to be. I asked to be relieved of self-centeredness so that it might help me serve others. I asked my Higher Power to take away my difficulties, the challenges I have in my life, so that the example of my life could be helpful to others. My sponsor asked me to memorize this prayer from the “Big Book” word for word, to internalize it and make it my own. I did that, and it worked. It was sort of magical, but the truth was that it helped me accept life on life’s terms. I also added another mantra to that: “God, keep me out of your way.” Accepting God’s will is tough for me every day, but it is an active part of my program when I first wake up in the morning and when I finally put myself to bed at night.

Those first three Steps were critical in helping me effectively work through Step Four, writing out my resentments, in a process that took about two months. I didn't think I was angry, but a significant part of this program asked me to clear away the things in my life that were blocking me, to take stock of myself, of my soul. To do that would enable me to heal. So, I began listing the people, institutions, things, and groups that I felt had hurt me. I was as specific as I could be about the cause of each resentment. I learned about "basic instincts" and how, when something or someone affected one of those basic instincts, I developed a resentment. Most important, I listed in a fourth column what "my part" was in the whole affair. How I not only contributed directly to the resentment but what I did to make that resentment live. How I fueled the fire, so to speak. I got all this down on paper and began to learn more and more about myself. I learned about my very self-righteous nature, my *massive* ego, and my fears. I put down on paper how those fears drove me, how my other personality traits negatively affected other people. I also looked at my behavior concerning relationships and sex. I put that down on paper and looked at how my behavior might have harmed others.

In Step Five, I shared all of this with my sponsor, the person who had been guiding me. I was as honest as I could possibly be at that time. He showed me patterns in my resentments and helped me realize that my self-righteousness, jealousy, fear, and judgment had affected my relationships and blocked my connection to a God of my understanding.

In that state of openness, I approached Step Six and became "entirely ready" to have removed all those "defects" or personality traits that were messing with my freedom. The way I became "entirely ready" was to keep a short list of the grosser defects and begin practicing opposite actions.

After getting some practice, I added a new prayer to my regimen of active and daily prayer, and incorporating this prayer into my life was the heart of my Step Seven experience. I asked my Higher Power to accept all of me, both the good and the bad. I began daily asking to have those things removed that blocked me from being of use to my Higher Power. More important, I asked for those things so I could be an instrument of service. Practicing opposite action was key for me with these Steps. I lived in these

two Steps and the prayer associated with them at work, in friendships, with lovers, with my family—they became a practical tool I could use in my life.

I then sat down with a friend who had almost twenty years sober and she helped me take on Step Eight. Like me, she had dealt with financial destruction. I hadn't opened bills for almost seven years, and this friend helped me make a list of all the people I had "wronged" and, more crucial for me, all of my financial debts. Making this list was the first part of this Step for me and it went far to reduce my fears about what I needed to do to fix the damage I had done in my life. This list gave me the knowledge of what was before me. It prepared me to engage those I had harmed. By making the list, I brought myself to a place of willingness. It became realistic for me to make amends to everyone, including addressing the financial reparations that I would need to make.

Step Nine was and is about taking action for me. My biggest damage was financial, so I took one debt at a time. I started with the debts owed to personal friends and people I love. I began paying them back one by one. I also had to look honestly at my conduct in personal relationships and determine what I needed to do and say to make them right. My sponsor asked me to be specific with my apologies, with my amends. He even took a look at my Eighth Step list and crossed out some that he thought were unnecessary. He asked me to remember that we make amends to people except when to do so would injure them or others. For some, I had to wait. I had to wait until I could afford a ticket back to San Francisco and have face-to-face conversations. Others needed to be taken care of immediately. For my grandparents, who had passed away, I went to visit their grave site and made a promise to my mother that I would always be a son of whom she could be proud. Today, I am still dealing with the financial wreckage of my past. I took one debt at a time. I made the best deal I could and was patient with myself and gracious with the bill collectors, debt managers, and people I was paying. After all, it was money I spent, it went for things I purchased, and it was, flat out, money I did owe. I will never forget the joy of being allowed to open my first bank account—it took about a year. It was one of the first few incremental signs that my life was beginning to change.

At this point in my recovery, I learned that Step Ten was a tool to help me grow in “understanding and effectiveness.” In this Step, I practiced writing out resentments I had day to day. I made amends immediately when I knew I had wronged someone and learned that this was something I needed to do to maintain my sobriety. Step Ten is the daily practice of Steps Three through Nine. It’s the practice of the program in action. This daily practice of reviewing my everyday conduct helped me adjust my behavior.

Following on the heels of this daily practice, I sought a closer relationship with my Higher Power in Step Eleven, a Universal “Oneness” that, to me, was about loving the people around me—even if they blocked my path on the sidewalk, even if they didn’t listen to me, even if life didn’t give me what I wanted when I wanted it.

Around that time, I also got my first sponsee and began service work. My objective in Step Twelve was to practice the principles of the program in all my affairs and carry the message, by my actions, to others. I helped organize a service structure in the New York area, began to take other addicts through the Steps, and did what I could do to help make sure the program that was here for me would be here for others in the future. I learned how to be an addict among addicts, a friend among friends, a brother, a son, a “worker among workers,” and a member of society.

I now have an instruction manual to life; I am filled with a sense of purpose; I live in Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve and continue to chip away at the financial devastation my addiction caused.

Today, I live life free from addiction to crystal meth. The more time I have, the less I feel I know. But I do know that when I practice these Steps my life works and I have a relationship with a Higher Power. Because I’ve worked these Steps, I had a spiritual experience. My life has changed, and ultimately, that’s all I ever wanted.