

A LIFELONG PROCESS

AT THE BEGINNING OF MY RECOVERY, MY PROGRAM CONSISTED OF meetings, fellowship, phone calls to my sponsor and other addicts, and spending most of my free time with other day-counters. I was so happy and excited to have found a possible solution to my hopeless and endless misery that the support of other addicts was all I needed to get me through my first months of sobriety. My early Step experiences were just looking at the Steps hanging on the walls of meeting rooms and hearing them read and discussed at a weekly Crystal Meth Anonymous Step meeting I attended. I considered the Steps optional, something I might do later.

When I got past ninety days, my sponsor asked me if I wanted to start “working the Steps.” I thought, Sure, why not? For Steps One, Two, and Three, we began by reading the corresponding chapter from AA’s *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (the “Twelve and Twelve”). Then I would have a “homework” assignment that consisted of writing out the meaning of each word in the Step in my own words and answering some questions. The questions helped me understand such concepts as “powerlessness,” “unmanageability,” “consequences,” “Higher Power,” “turning it over,” and “being restored to sanity.”

When I finished the writing, I’d sit with my sponsor to go through it. He’d ask me more questions that pushed me to go deeper. At some point,

I'd read the Step again and he would ask if I'd done what it said. If I said yes, he'd say that we could move on to the next Step.

These first three Steps helped me get comfortable in CMA and accept that I was an addict. Working Step One, I came to see how I was powerless over crystal meth, and how my life had become unmanageable. I came to understand what addiction means in a Twelve Step program: It's a spiritual condition. As we reviewed my past behavior, I decided that I was an addict and, to my surprise, an alcoholic, too.

In Step Two, I learned that my Higher Power didn't have to match a traditional idea of God. I was told that my Higher Power could be anything other than me. I wasn't sure what my Higher Power was, but I could accept that other people's help, the meetings, and the support I got in the program were all forces stronger than myself—and maybe stronger than my addiction.

Step Three was hard. I didn't really know what it meant to turn my will and my life over to the care of a God of my understanding. I was suspicious and resistant. I went through the process of reading from the "Big Book" and the "Twelve and Twelve," defining the words of the Step, answering some questions, and talking to my sponsor. I said the Third Step Prayer. But that didn't seem to be enough for me. I went to a recovery bookstore and got a Step workbook and another book about working the Steps. I read those and did the exercises offered, but it still didn't feel like it was enough.

I didn't understand that the "letting go" essential to this Step can be, and usually is, a process. I *was* changing, however, and slowly I began to notice this. I stopped getting so mad if I missed a subway train or if there was a long line at the grocery store. I would say the Serenity Prayer and realize I wasn't in a hurry anyway. In addition to the Serenity Prayer, I kept saying the Third Step Prayer and other simple prayers. Sometimes, it was just "Help me" or "Thank you." I didn't even know what I was praying to, but I didn't worry about that. Step Three gave me new strategies to actually deal with everyday life situations. As the "pink cloud" of early sobriety lifted, I needed more than the social support that had gotten me through the earliest days. The first three Steps gave me acceptance of my problem,

hope that I might get better, and a suggestion for coping with life: Let go and try to live in harmony with the world.

For Step Four, I used the process of writing out my resentments, my fears, my sexual harms, and my sexual ideal as it is explained in the “Big Book.” Someone in the fellowship had created charts with the columns described in the book. I worked on those pretty steadily, keeping it in my backpack, so I could pull them out all the time. Before I got a chance to go over my work with my sponsor, I got caught in a rainstorm. The backpack wasn’t waterproof and most of the writing turned into a big purple blur. I was upset for a minute, but then I figured that maybe my Higher Power thought I needed to start over from scratch. So I wrote out a more thoughtful and thorough Fourth Step.

For my Fifth Step, I reviewed my new charts with my sponsor. A few patterns emerged that pointed to my character defects. I had suspected one of them, but another was a complete surprise. The process the “Big Book” suggests for Steps Four and Five really worked for me. In the first columns, I got to rail against the world. I got to write about what everybody else did that was so wrong. And then, with no debate or discussion, column four asked me to look at my part in it all. What had I done to create the situations or make them worse? Why was I holding on to this resentment? That was the hard part, but it was through the feelings of humility and honesty that I was transformed.

Step Four taught me I have flaws, but that these parts of me—which had been causing me so much trouble—were not my essential self. In Steps Six and Seven, I get to make use of this new awareness. A mentor in the program gave me some exercises to do in which I could practice taking “contrary actions” instead of acting on my character defects. This moved me closer to becoming entirely ready to have the defects removed. When I felt it was time, I got down on my knees and asked the Universe to take these defects away. I said the Seventh Step Prayer.

For Step Eight, I made of list of harms I had done to others. For Step Nine, I went through the list with my sponsor. He told me I didn’t have to make all the amends right away. We divided my amends into three groups: those I could do immediately, those I would do later, and the ones that

I wasn't sure I could ever do. Now that some years have gone by, there is nothing left in that last group. I believe I can make all these amends at some point, and I have done the work on most. Some were to sit down with someone and talk. A couple were to pay money back. Some are living amends. There's one simple amends I have avoided for years; I keep saying I'll do it, but I keep putting it off.

Step Ten provides a practical way to deal with my anger and spite. I still use this one when I need it. Sometimes I forget about this tool or think that I don't really need to write a resentment out. But program friends are good about suggesting putting pen to paper. It always helps.

I don't remember much about working the Eleventh Step with my sponsor. My work on this Step has been more about my everyday practice. I also go to a lot of Eleventh Step meetings where they read from the pages of the "Big Book" or the "Twelve and Twelve" discussing this Step. The program literature has helped me understand the purpose of prayer and meditation—which I believe is to help me to do the next right thing. Prayer and meditation don't come easily to me. A lot of my praying is informal—just asking for help and saying "thank you." Meditation in which I sit in silence is hard for me. I can do it, but it's not easy, so I have found other ways. One way is cooking. When I cook, my hands are busy and I am focused in a way, but my mind can relax and stop its spinning. Thus, I can cook and meditate at the same time.

Step Twelve brought it all together and it still keeps me going. I had a spiritual awakening—which means I have changed. The Steps have let me keep the good parts of who I am while getting rid of self-sabotaging behaviors, beliefs, and feelings that I thought were part of my character. I now see that they were not the essential "me."

This transformation keeps happening as I apply the Steps to all aspects of my life, and especially as I work with others. This is where the Steps keep giving. Every time I go through the First Step, or any Step, with a sponsee, I understand it in a new and deeper way. With every change in me, there is a chance for new application of the Twelve Steps. I have become a different man with a bigger, better life, and that has brought new situations that demand all the tools I can

muster to keep going. The Steps—and the Traditions, too—are the most useful tools I have.

I remember my first trip through the Steps. I was in a hurry. I wanted to be *done*. I don't see the Steps—or life—that way now. I now believe that the Twelve Steps are a lifelong, never-disappointing process.