

PUT DOWN YOUR SHOVEL

MY FIRST SPONSOR ALWAYS USED TO SAY, "WE'LL HELP YOU OUT OF YOUR hole, but first you have to put down your shovel." Things immediately got better for me when I stopped shoveling crystal and other drugs into my system. But things became amazing once I got to work on the Steps. That's when I started climbing out of the hole.

I have done formal Step work at a relatively slow pace, and I'm glad I took my time. It allowed the deeper meaning of each Step in my life really to settle into my soul. At times, I dawdled unnecessarily; I'm a born procrastinator (literally, I was born three weeks late). And I'm terrified of change, of success, of failure, of being vulnerable, blah, blah, blah. Sometimes, I've done the work "at gunpoint" to prod myself out of some particular malaise or despair. When I decide I'm not too scared to reach for real spiritual growth—when I'm ready for action—the Steps are there, simply worded, and in just the right order.

Some of the Steps have come to me on their own, gifts of my psychic circumstances or just plain time. I came in to recovery on Step Three. I'd been trying to control my crystal habit for years with the help of concerned friends, a psychiatrist, and a harm-reduction therapist. But when the rationalizations and denial finally collapsed and I found myself in an ER—when I finally hit bottom—in that moment of total surrender, I stopped. And I've never gone back to crystal or any other drug. Something magical

happened for me. The crying and shaking stopped. I calmly lay back on my thin little hospital mattress and thought: I can't do this anymore. I give up.

It would be a few weeks before I was ready to admit the whole powerless and unmanageable shtick, though I had known in my heart for years that I was a mess, a drug whore, a lush, a junkie. From the hospital, I was transferred to a rehab in Pennsylvania (the name made it sound like a golf course, but it was a pretty hardscrabble state-run facility). It was there that I “got” Step Two. I was coasting happily along on the strength of my surrender, writing notes for a First Step, and having daily epiphanies in group therapy. I made it all the way to the night before I was supposed to return to New York before I even had a craving for meth. But, that last night, all my anxiety about my new life exploded, and I found myself fantasizing about a pipe and a stranger....

The counselors and other addicts had told me to pray, told me there was another option besides chaos and insanity, told me all I needed was the faith that some other way was out there. So, late that night, in a pounding thunderstorm—it was just like a Brontë novel or some noir film—I crawled out onto the smoking porch of my dorm, got down on my knees, and started saying the Our Father (I'm a lapsed Catholic; it was the only prayer I knew). I said it over and over and over and cried my eyes out. And when the rainstorm passed and I had calmed down, after the craving had passed, I heard a train whistle somewhere off in the valley. I was going to be okay.

Now, as I said, the Steps are supposed to come in order. And when I got home, I got to work. I started writing a novel of loss and abandonment and made Excel graphs to chart my rapid descent into hard drugs and to tally my financial losses. When I finally got around to showing my labors to my sponsor (I think I was about four months sober), he was wonderful. “I want you to go get some workbooks, the *Keep It Simple* Series.” Keep it simple, indeed.

John showed me then (and again, at Step Four) that it's Twelve Steps, not 12 miles. The workbooks were great for me because I was always in my head, always eager to intellectualize, always ready to cite William James and Carl Jung. I hadn't settled back into my own body yet. Over that first year, we calmly went through the workbooks for One, Two, and

Three; it gave me a humble but sturdy foundation, stripped away my grand ideas of myself to find a real honest picture of powerlessness and unmanageability. To this day, I have a very simple tape to play through should I ever get crazy or have an urge to return to crystal. He helped me make sense of what I had gone through in the rainstorm in Pennsylvania, helped me see that I actually could choose between sanity and insanity if I just had a little faith. At the same time, he calmed my fears that the program was too religious, helped me trust my own amorphous God—my universe that I can't name or describe (he was a Buddhist, for God's sake!). And on Three, he said I indeed was blessed to have hit my bottom that day in the psych ward, to have surrendered without even knowing what I was doing. But he urged me to reach for that serenity consciously, with simple prayers, simple attitude adjustments. I learned to really breathe for the first time in my life.

The Steps are not grand abstractions, but simple actions—straightforward, common sense kind of stuff that I sometimes have no idea how to do. Take Step Four: I agonized over this for about a year before I finally showed John my list of resentments. (I worked it the way it's described in the "Big Book" of AA.) He glanced at the ream of paper and dryly said, "Oh, you're one of those." I'd pretty much written a list of everyone I had ever known and had any feelings about. John encouraged me to cut my list way down. A resentment is "a feeling I feel again," not any old memory I want to dredge up. What hurt feelings still hurt today? That was much simpler.

When it came time to work Step Five, I had to change sponsors. As there weren't too many options in CMA in New York at the time, I asked my friend Joe from Cocaine Anonymous. He was more than happy to help. Joe is almost my dad's age, and a father himself, so the tone of our relationship from the start was much more serious. I think I needed that—I was in a grandiose phase at that point, and Joe was great at calling me on my shit. That being said, when it came time to go over my inventory, Joe was patient, loving, generous. We sat at his dining table for three hours probably four weeks in a row, and he never once seemed judgmental or dismissive, or even bored.

About this time, I moved to Las Vegas to perform in a show. Largely cut off from my support network and reimmersed in show business, a career that had disappointed me gravely years before, my character defects ran amok. The timing was perfect to work Step Six. When Joe and I talked, he encouraged me to take note of the gossiping, the fit-throwing, the sexual acting out, the hurt pride, and calmly ask: How does this serve me? Slowly, I woke up to the fact that I was a spoiled, self-pitying brat. My commitment to Step Six, my general willingness to be a better man, is the best barometer of my sobriety.

Joe came to visit me in Vegas that winter, and we went to a church together to work Step Seven. We read St. Francis's prayer and then went inside and knelt together in prayer. I am still not a practicing Catholic; I still don't go to any church or even call my god "God." Yet that afternoon was probably the most moving experience I've had in sobriety. Churches, canyons, beaches, temples, museums—these are places of the deepest humility, places many have gone to reconnect with something greater than themselves. When we were done at the church, we went to Joe's hotel and lay out by the pool drinking lemonade.

I returned to New York and Steps Eight and Nine. My list was not nearly so long as I feared it would be. At the end of my using, I became such an isolated, secretive person that the main person I injured was me—lost paychecks, lost opportunities, lost friendships, lost time, lost spirit. Almost everyone I needed to apologize to was long since aware of the great change in my life. (This is another benefit of not rushing too quickly through the Steps.) Today, I show up for employers, coworkers, friends, and family, and I think they appreciate it. I've been lucky with my financial amends, in that I didn't have many to speak of. Most of my amends were what my sponsors called "living amends." I try today not to act out of selfishness. I treat guys I'm dating respectfully. I take care to really listen to other people. I really honor my parents and let them in on my life instead of shutting them out. It has been impressed on me that we should reach out and apologize only to people we've hurt if we are pretty certain we aren't going to do it again. For that reason, there still are a few people I haven't approached formally—my brother and one ex-boyfriend. This is a process. I'll get there some day.

Step Ten is not my best one. I am good at promptly admitting when I am wrong—I am wrong so often, I have to be. But I rarely, rarely write out quick Fourth Steps. Step Eleven also has been a challenge, though of course, we get a great head start on it with Steps Two, Three, Five and Seven. I don't have much trouble praying, though I have no formal time or place in my day for it. I try to pray as others pray, using old, old prayers and sometimes getting down on my knees, to preserve an attitude of humble submission in my body. My meditation practice has been informal. In the first few years of sobriety, I started a garden and spent hours down in the dirt, digging, weeding, breathing, listening. Now I have a dog, and I find "fetch" pretty much the most satisfying part of my day. I've tried group practice, as well: I attend a meditation meeting fairly often, do yoga, and go on spiritual retreats when my schedule permits. I'm never going to be a swami, but I hope, as I get older, that I can be a better listener. Once, I wanted to win an Oscar or a Nobel Prize. Today, I want to ace breathing.

I was a fervent "Two-Stepper" early on. In my second and third year (that grandiose phase I mentioned), before I'd muddled my way through my first inventory, I was Mr. CMA: I started half a dozen new meetings and cofounded the area Intergroup, and I sponsored dozens of guys. As good as that work was, my motives were suspect. Today, I try to focus on doing what I am asked. I have just a few sponsees, I speak at meetings and hospitals occasionally, and I do sporadic work on the literature committee. Thanks to sobriety—to these Twelve Steps—I have a very full professional and personal life today. I'd never have time to be Mr. CMA, too. Being myself, sober and reasonably successful at life, is more than enough. And probably a kind of service in itself to the people I meet.