

SWEETLY REASONABLE

MY EARLY DRUG LIFE WAS LIKE A RACE. THERE WASN'T A DAY THAT went by I didn't want to improve by getting loaded. And we're not talking just a little buzzed—when I say I got loaded, well, that means I did everything to the extreme. My philosophy was that if there was a substance that you seemed to covet, then I wanted some—it didn't matter what it was. As long as I didn't have to feel sober, I was game. The safety of being loaded and not having to embrace true feelings was where I wanted to be.

Weed was my mainstay for a decade or more, but I graduated to speed when it became plentiful in the early '90s. Speed made my body soar. I never once considered the dangers of switching my drug of choice from pot to meth. I never once thought about the consequences of my actions. Speed made me feel so good that consequences weren't important. That was how much I loved this drug.

The end for me was a three-year binge in which I didn't really care about anything. I was heading for a precipitous fall, but I didn't care. I was cooking dope and had unlimited amounts of speed but found myself very sad most of the time. I made a decision to ask for help and took my last hit. I picked up my sister at the airport later that day and blurted out that I had a problem and I needed help. (“Oh, and by the way,” I told her, “I have a lab in my kitchen.”) She was a trooper and called a bunch of recovery places and tried to clean up my place. I went to my first meeting that night. I

remember being blown away that these people had the exact same problems I had; I knew I had found a home. The police kicked in my door about three hours later. God has a very funny way of making His point, and there is nothing like a little fear to seal the deal.

So when I entered the rooms of recovery I was truly beaten. I got loaded for twenty-two years, culminating in my being arrested for manufacturing methamphetamine. The last few months before my arrest were emotionally painful even though I had unlimited amounts of speed. I'd lost contact with all the things I felt were important and I didn't seem to care. I had played the dope game as long as I could, and the only thing I truly could count on was more pain. I was ready for recovery.

For me, Step One was part of my long fall. By the time I was arrested, I knew I was powerless and my life was unmanageable. My philosophy of keeping the exterior clean kept me in my disease for a very long time. I knew several years before I was forced to stop that the speed was killing me; I just didn't see any way I could quit.

I met happy people in recovery. I saw they had found a way out of the dilemma. I saw no reason why I couldn't take the same path to health. I was eager to start on my new life and motivated to excel in the process. I treated recovery as my job and worked ten to twelve hours a day on it. I always was ready to volunteer, sat in the front row for speakers, and hung around the meeting place.

For Step Two, a wonderful woman gave me my first "Big Book." I remember reading it while moving my stuff into storage so I could live in a recovery home. I had to read by candlelight because the electricity had been shut off. I remember reading about spirituality and thinking, No way. I wasn't a person who believed. I wasn't raised with any religion and considered myself an atheist—I made fun of organized religion. Thankfully, the road of recovery is roomy and wide. The program had anticipated someone just like me and made it easy to start my spiritual journey. There was no pressure: I only had to keep an open mind. It was suggested to me I should "always be willing to be willing."

When I had trouble with the concept of a Higher Power, I recalled a meeting at which the speaker asked the group to help him write a list of the

attributes we'd want in our father. The group called out things like kind, funny, unconditionally loving, generous, and smart. He said that we could use the list to make a Higher Power of our own understanding (which is exactly what the "Big Book" calls it—a God of our understanding). Suddenly, I felt included, part of something powerful, and I knew then that my own brand of spirituality would serve me just fine. As long as the Power greater than me isn't me, then I'm okay. I remember being at a meeting on the beach and feeling an overwhelming rush of warmth when I opened my heart to the idea of something greater than myself. Step Two was a challenge, but once I became willing, it laid the groundwork for the rest of my life. My connection with God is the thing that makes life work even when everything seems to go wrong.

That brought me to Step Three. I call this the compassion step. I made a decision to turn my life over to God so I could do His will. To me, His will means compassion for my fellow man. This means I have to love the addict coming into the rooms just as I was loved. After so many long years of caring only about myself and the amount of dope I had—or needed, or could cook, or how a big bag bought all the things, and people, I thought were important—seeing that my life's mission was to be selfless was a relief. Service: That was the key. I also embraced the idea of service because I listened in the meetings, and the point of being selfless had been hammered home. I distilled the Third Step Prayer down to "May I do Thy will always."

My willingness to do everything necessary to write a complete Fourth Step came as a result of being convinced that recovery could work for me. I didn't have to take it on faith that the process worked. I saw it with my own eyes. I saw happy and successful people who suggested that I "get a sponsor and work the Steps." I met lots of people who told me, "Smart people don't recover, because they try to think themselves out of following the path." I thought then, Who was I to try to outthink this divinely inspired program? I think *smart* means embracing the truth before your eyes and acting on it.

After a few months in recovery, I began to see people falling away, people relapsing, people making some money and leaving, people leaving because they got angry at some trivial rule of the recovery home. I watched

them go in heartbreaking numbers—and I saw some of the lucky ones return to try to start anew. It was obvious their ego had resurfaced and made them unafraid of the consequences of going out. Could my ego survive while I rebuilt my life?

I wondered about that when another harsh truth came to me: If I had real answers on how to run my life, I wouldn't be in this situation in the first place. Wow! How brutal the truth can be. If there ever was a reason to push ego into the background, this was it. It also brought home how cunning this disease is. The truth is, I might not even understand I'm sick. I might make decisions based upon self that could lead me to relapse. I was terrified of the consequences of failure. You must understand that I was afraid not just of criminal penalties, but also of losing more of my life to getting high. I saw what a waste my drug years were and I was determined to make the rest of my life something great. This kept me "sweetly reasonable."

This was my mind-set for the Fourth Step. I had a healthy dose of fear to spur me on. I thought if this was the way I was going to get well, I should give it a 100-percent effort. I also didn't want to miss anything that would be useful to me. When it came time to write out my Fourth Step, I had no problem finishing. Since getting clean, many of my sponsees have had difficulty writing their Fourth Step. Not me. Putting my thoughts down on paper wasn't easy, but, as I said, this was my ticket to a new life and I was willing to do what the program suggests I do.

Because I paid attention during meetings and listened to speakers who knew the Steps, by the time I worked with my sponsor, I had a framework to accept the idea of personal responsibility. Nothing bursts an addict's bubble—his ability to blame everyone around him—better than embracing personal responsibility. My life began to improve each time I accepted responsibility for the pains of my past. Understand that I wasn't thinking that way all the time yet, but because of the exposure I had so far, I was willing to learn and be teachable.

When I wrote my Fourth Step, I found that the fourth column (my role in the resentment) came to me pretty easily. When I read my Fourth Step with my sponsor, most of that column was done, and those that I

couldn't figure out my sponsor helped me to understand. When I asked him about those resentments I'd had as a child, he let me know that I was an adult now, and if I kept in spiritually fit condition, I had the power to let go of the things that bothered me. This awareness was very powerful and I continue to use it today.

Step Five and beyond is where the change in thinking began to affect my life in a profound way. I'm not sure why, but sharing your deepest thoughts with another person is life-changing. All in all, my Fifth Step experience was liberating. I saw—by learning a new way to look at my feelings—that much of what had made me unhappy could be removed and left out of my daily life. The change in thinking didn't come easily or right away. The process of understanding the anger and fear that created and nurtured my resentments took a while to filter through me. Early on, I forgot that I had a tool to make life easier more often than I care to remember. I think pain was my great motivator. It took only a few unchecked resentments running around in my head to push home the point that the only person to be damaged was me. That was very enlightening. The idea of accepting what I can't change is pivotal in gaining peace. I decided to use the tools of recovery to my maximum advantage.

My earlier work made Step Six fairly straightforward. I was willing and ready to have defects removed because I saw what they were as a result of my Fourth and Fifth Steps and saw no profit in holding on to ideas that had caused me so much pain. Also, I bought into the program—I did what it suggested I do. Because I saw the program work in others, I had faith it would work for me if I was open-minded, honest, and willing. Again, the pain of my earlier life was a great motivator. I was more than ready, but I also understood that the removal of defects was a process. My sponsor told me some of my defects would vanish immediately and some would come back to be removed with further work. I looked forward to seeing the process work in my life.

I think the word *humbly* is the most important part of the Seventh Step. I can't ask God to remove my defects of character if I am not humble. I can't be powerful, because only God is powerful and I am only God's servant. But I can be "power filled" as a result of being a humble servant, as

long as my character defects are gone. This is the essence of Step Seven to me. I can do His will only if I am motivated to serve and be truthful and compassionate. It's when my ego resurfaces that I get my character defects back. Humility and service keep God in front.

When my sponsor told me to use my Fourth Step to make a list of the people I needed to make amends to, I thought, What for? They hurt me more than I hurt them. After thinking about it for some time, I found I resented the people I'd hurt. The idea of the amends process is to clean my side of the street. It doesn't matter if I had done only 10 percent of the wrong, I still had to make amends for my part. Letting a resentment rent space in my head wasn't what I needed if I was to go out and be of maximum service to those around me. I had amends to make where I'd really hurt people; I had financial amends; and I had living amends.

I went into action immediately. I made several amends within the first few weeks. I had a script I used when communicating with people. I made financial amends when I was ready. I had a desire to tell people how they'd hurt me, but I followed my sponsor's direction and kept the discussion on what I had done and how I could make the situation better. I didn't understand at the time how powerful that was, but cleaning my side of the street would eventually set me free. In my mind, the process of making amends was something I did to help those people I'd hurt; I didn't look at it as something I could do to make my life better. I always kept that in mind. This goes back to Step Three and having compassion for your fellows (and not just addicts). This was about cleaning the mess I made because of my selfish behavior. Some of my amends I made only after several years, when my attitude and the way I lead my life made the change in me obvious. It was only then that I'd reach out, because actions aren't just louder than words—actions scream.

Step Ten is, to me, the most important in my journey. This is the Step where I become self-aware and accountable for my well-being. I believe that relapse doesn't happen in a vacuum. If I am not self-aware, I am lost. I must take corrective action when I see wrong things in my behavior, otherwise I am embracing relapse. I believe in that firmly.

The concept of taking responsibility for my actions—which I'd learned in my Fourth and Fifth Steps—as a guide to lead the rest of my life didn't come to me until some new resentment made me feel as if I was on the road to relapse. I evaluated my state of mind and took the appropriate action to make me spiritually fit. If I felt bad, it was usually because I didn't admit my role in something. The answer was to use the fellowship to get into service. Service always works. I felt in control of my life because I could, with the program's help, walk any road, take on any challenge, or experience the certain highs and lows life would throw at me. What an epiphany! I can use the same process on anything that bothers me. As long as I clean house and trust in God, I will be okay in any circumstance.

Another tool I use is the Serenity Prayer. I use it as a measure of each day. I review my day: Was I accepting enough to pass on the things I couldn't change? Did I have the courage to work on those things where I had a chance to effect change? This is no easy task. The Serenity Prayer is very powerful. Because I say it so many times in meetings, I can take it for granted if I don't apply it to my daily life.

For Step Eleven, I use prayer and meditation in my daily life for clarity and to renew the connection to my Higher Power. It is almost always as a result of some pain. Most times when I am conflicted, it is because I can't accept something for what it is. I can't always see that, and it takes me being hurt before I remember to use the kit of spiritual tools I always carry with me. When I pray or meditate, I ask for clarity. I don't ask for things. I believe I already have answers to my problems; it is my inability to access those answers that makes for difficult times. Prayer and meditation open doors to truth. I have to do the legwork and embrace that truth as it becomes clear to me. Pain comes only when I see the truth and don't embrace it. Another concept I believe is this: Change is not painful; *resistance to change* causes pain.

Service. Service. Service. I find spiritual growth comes with service. After working the Steps and living in Steps Ten and Eleven, I am left with the task that will occupy my recovery life to my dying days. That is service in all forms. Service keeps me sober. I sponsor, lead panels, write material, volunteer in meetings, and serve on boards. I find the greatest reward in

sponsoring another addict, but I don't choose one thing over another. I always have my hand up to serve. Where it takes me has varied over the years, but the unalterable truth is that service has been and will continue to be a major part of my routine. Compassion toward others is the hallmark of service; it is the ideal with which I try to lead my life.