

us ever have to do is ask. The help surrounds us. One of the most profound spiritual lessons I have learned on my journey is that we are never meant to do any of “this thing called life” alone. My solution is to continue to have the willingness to put my hand up, swallow my ego, and ask for help. We can all be pros while remaining in service to each other. —*Bill B.*

## Service

Service was a great way to shore up my self-esteem, especially when I was first rebuilding my life in sobriety. Setting up chairs, arranging literature, and maintaining meeting contact lists led me to elected service positions. I felt connected as a member of and contributor to our fellowship. But somewhere along the way, my ego and indomitable self-will stepped in. The home group I was secretary of became *my* meeting—a meeting that belonged to me and depended on me to function. I began to question the catchphrase we use in the program: “Service keeps you sober.” After three years in CMA, in which I’ve done lots of service as a meeting secretary, chair, GSR, committee member, etc., how can I explain why I’m counting days again? Is it possible to do too much service, especially if the service is motivated by ego and accompanied by resentments?

At my sponsor’s suggestion, I looked up the definitions of the words *trusted* and *servant*. A trusted servant is a person relied upon to be of assistance to, or to promote the interests of, another—in this case, the group. This is in contrast to being a *leader*, or one who directs. Because I’ve been a leader in my professional life for many years, the concept of trusted servant can be tricky for me. What I’ve discovered through my relapse is that doing service doesn’t mean “leading.” It can be as simple as showing up to a meeting and sharing authentically how difficult it is to come back from a slip. If one person hears the experience I’ve shared, and it helps keep him sober today, then I’ve done service.

Going forward, I hope to be a “worker among workers,” focusing on service that I can do behind the scenes that both serves the group and is meaningful to me. Not holding an elected position, yet still contributing by preparing materials, taking notes, and helping to set up meetings, helps me to build humility while remaining engaged and a part of the group. And learning to focus on the principles of the program, rather

than the personalities in the rooms, frees me of resentments. I contribute what I can, and trust the group to make decisions, not me. So I'll keep doing service, as a way to give back to this program I love, which keeps me sober, one day a time. —*Jeff S.*

## **The shelf**

When I first came into program and began the process of getting sober, I was overwhelmed by the awareness of all the problems I was running away from by escaping with meth. Credit card debt, broken relationships, inappropriate sexual behavior, unfinished projects, unrealized dreams, no sense of spirituality, lack of direction in my life, difficulty forming healthy romantic relationships—those were just the tip of the iceberg. In typical addict fashion, I wanted to solve all these problems at once and change my whole life immediately. I didn't like the person I'd become and I wanted out.

At meetings I kept hearing people say “I'm putting it on the shelf...” when talking about issues that were troubling them. As an addict I had no clue how to slow down, focus on the most important thing first—staying clean—and worry about other problems later. I began to adopt this slogan early on and found it to be one of the most comforting tools of the program. For some issues, you can actually wrap things up, like bills, to-do lists, or certain amends, put them in a shoe box, and set it on a shelf in your apartment until you are ready to deal with them. Other difficulties were harder for me to grasp, though, so I visualized myself putting these problems in a box and placing them on the shelf. This really helped to simplify things for me and put my mind at ease. There will always be time later to deal with the wreckage of my past, as long as I stay sober one day at a time. Keeping certain things on the shelf helps me do this, and puts the seeming urgency of my issues in true perspective. I have taken things down a few times only to find that I was still not ready to deal—so I put them back up. It's nice to know I can do that today, be gentle on myself, and have patience that my Higher Power will further prepare me to handle life's challenges. —*Bike Mike*

## Slogans

“Easy does it.” “Progress, not perfection.” “One day at a time.” You don’t have to spend much time in CMA before you become acquainted with slogans such as these. Speakers often refer to them; they are commonly bandied about in individual shares; and you can find them everywhere you turn in the literature. Sometimes they’re even plastered to the wall or otherwise visible in meeting spaces. So what do you make of all of these sayings? What should they mean for you?

The first thing to understand is that slogans are nothing more than distilled bits of wisdom and experience that have survived over time because they reflect common thoughts and feelings that addicts often share as they go through recovery. The meanings of some of these sayings are pretty self-evident. Many can refer to various things. Take “One day at a time,” for example, which is one of the most commonly used phrases in all the Twelve Step fellowships. At the most basic level, it reminds me that all I need to focus on is staying sober this one day. That was especially important when I was starting out and the thought of staying away from drugs for weeks or months, let alone years, just seemed too daunting. But beyond that meaning, “One day at a time” also reminds me of the need to work on my recovery every day one way or another, through meetings, journaling, calls to my sponsor or other fellows, you name it. Even more generally, the same saying can help me focus on living as fully in the present as I’m able, rather than rehashing the past or projecting my fears into the future.

Slogans help me when they act as touchstones that remind me of why I’m in recovery, of the things I need to avoid along the way, and of the things I hope to find. Each person can identify the sayings that are most meaningful for him or her, based on his or her own experience. I try not to think of them as instructions that are handed down from on high, but rather as individual tools that I select—if I wish. They’re not empty catchphrases that substitute for real thought and reflection. You might even come up with some personal slogans of your own. Remember, this is your recovery, no one else’s, and you can always fall back on yet another favorite slogan: “Take what you need and leave the rest behind.” —*John R.*

## Smart feet

When I first came around, especially when I *first* came around, before any relapse, getting to the door of a meeting was much easier than walking through it. Many times, I got to the door and froze. Sometimes I'd walk around the block or even just go past the meeting. Walking through those doors was one of the first simple actions I took on my journey toward surrender. Every time I walked into a Twelve Step meeting, I took an action that acknowledged my powerlessness over the substance, and in early sobriety, that was demoralizing. But each time I walked through the door, I also found a little bit more courage and freedom. It got easier to do the next time, and after a while, I saw that walking through the door was an act of self-love. That took a while! But it was the start of "smart feet," which in any given situation have the power to take me away from the substance and toward recovery.

Which door my feet took me to often become my point of resistance. So many meetings: CMA, AA, NA, CA, gay, straight, men's, women's, beginner's, book study, topic. I was comparing and trying to figure out rather than just letting my feet do the walking. If I went to a meeting that didn't work for me, regardless of the reason, all I had to do was "go where it's warm," and find one that did work. Go to the meeting that's easiest to get to and most comfortable to sit in. Just walk through that door! That is training smart feet. When I had about two years, I'd gotten a little fat and had lost seven teeth. I didn't feel comfortable in what seemed at that time to be fabulous Chelsea CMA. The problem was my ego more than the CMA meetings, but the solution was to decompress in AA, where I didn't have to confront my ego problem. It was the warm place to go. Eventually, identification with CMA stories and the warmth of the fellowship brought me back. (And yes, I got some dental implants!)

Today my smart feet keep me from walking down the block where the dealer lives, or the ex-boyfriend, or past the bathhouse, the bar, or the bookstore. Today my smart feet take me to responsibilities and frivolities well-lived and well-loved. Today my smart feet give me freedom beyond my wildest dreams. They help me show up for friendships, for dates, for job interviews, for doctor's appointments, for myself, for sponsees, and for others in the kind of giving that expects no reward and receives so much in return. —*John U.*

## Spirituality

I've always had faith that some sort of Greater Power was out there, watching over me. Spirituality to me is the connection to that Power through day-to-day living. I come from a deeply religious and spiritual background, so it's something that has always been important to me, but at the same time it's been very painful. There were times when I felt abandoned and alone, especially when I reached my bottom. I was spiritually bankrupt. At these times, I grew spiritually, learning again to put my trust in something greater than me.

My views of a Higher Power were constantly changing when I first came in to the program. I was trying to connect with a power that everyone liked and had respect for, which was impossible. Gladly, I've learned that it isn't about what anybody else likes or disapproves of—in order for it to work for me, it has to be something I have faith in. I've also learned not to judge other people's spiritual lives that I may not agree with. That lesson in acceptance has been great for the growth of my spiritual life.

Recently, my spirituality helped me get through the drama of losing my apartment while I was barely working and trying to obtain rental assistance. This brought on a lot of fear that made me want to give up on life and to pick up. Because using wasn't an option, I remember saying the Serenity Prayer often, especially after things would go wrong, which they continually did. The prayer calmed my fears, and helped me have faith that I would be taken care of. This experience was extremely rough for me—I realized how powerless I was and had to turn my will over. Through prayer, I began to see the situation with a different mind-set; and even though the things I had tried to make happen fell through, I was ultimately taken care of and my spiritual connection to life has grown stronger. —*W.M.*

## Sponsors

I walked into my first CMA meeting having had no experience with recovery or rehab and was confused about many things I heard, including the word *sponsor*. Who was this person, and why did some people have them? Was it like a patron of the arts or something along those lines? Going to more meetings, I soon learned that a sponsor is another addict in recovery, that sponsorship is two addicts working their program together,

and that a sponsor could help me through the “Steps” of the program.

Everyone’s experience of finding a sponsor is different. It took me about sixty days to have the nerve to ask somebody. He was the person who introduced me to CMA and the person I had become the most connected to...but that wasn’t saying much! In my early days of sobriety I was shy and quiet. I felt fearful, confused, and sad, and my self-esteem was very low. It was not easy to open up to people, although I tried to take suggestions, including sharing at meetings. Somewhere deep inside was the willingness to open up to people and come out of my shell. I feared rejection, so asking Mark to be my sponsor felt like a huge risk. I was drawn to his confidence, his happiness and sense of humor, his serenity, and the ease with which he seemed to handle himself (these were things I wanted!). And his one year of clean time, which seemed like an eternity. I was relieved that he said yes! We began talking on the phone each night and I gradually opened up to Mark more and more. I shared what I was feeling. This included some doubts that I was really an addict, and that I felt phony for having one foot in the door and one foot out the door. He helped me through this period.

He guided me through my First Step, in which I gained greater acceptance of my addiction, and my Second Step, in which I came to believe more firmly that the program could help me. Over the next year we went on to work Steps Three, Four, and Five—all part of my journey in recovery.

Geographical circumstances created the need to change sponsors, and I’ve had several since Mark. But my first year of sobriety was the true turning point of my life, and working with Mark was a huge part of that. I learned to trust him, to share, and to ask for help. This was a whole new way of having a relationship with another person. I learned how to let many qualities into my life that hadn’t been there in years: gratitude, open-mindedness, and acceptance, just to name a few. None of this felt like a “white light experience” at the time it was happening. But I realize now that through the tool of sponsorship I really did experience a spiritual awakening! —*Mike L.*

## Suggestions

When I was asked to write about suggestions, my first thought was, *Don’t tell me what to write about!* This has been my knee-jerk response

to suggestions 90 percent of the time since beginning my sober journey (seven years, eleven months ago, and still counting, to give you an idea of how fast I change). When I came in, I was thrilled the only requirement for membership in CMA was a desire not to use. I interpreted this as not having to do anything except bitch that I couldn't use anymore. Finally, people who understood my pain!

And pain it was. The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions are suggested tools of recovery. Without taking these Steps, I was going to stay in pain. So when it was suggested to me to do some "work," I did, but only out of spite—to prove that it wouldn't work for me. I guess I didn't hear "work it, it works" at the end of every meeting. By taking suggestions, I got out of my way and out of pain.

When my actions changed, my feelings changed. Suggestions are vital to my recovery and spiritual condition. Some suggestions are more powerful than others; I had to find the ones that worked for me.

I once heard in a meeting, "Everything we need to know to stay sober we learn in the first thirty days: Get a sponsor and call them, go to meetings, do the Steps, fellowship, get numbers, do service..." These are suggestions, but they are the big ones; they saved my life. I thought the sayings around the rooms were corny at first, then I found them comforting. Many come from the "Big Book." These suggestions and the readings at meetings are the things that have the most impact on my life and sobriety. If am open, I can hear them. —*Amy H.*

## Surrender

My understanding of what it has meant to surrender in the program has certainly evolved over the years, as I have evolved in sobriety. In my first week in CMA, a little over five years ago, I made what I thought was my formal surrender to the program. This was a crucial commitment to the process, but little was I aware that the action of walking through the doors into that first meeting had been my first big surrender. I had the gift of desperation and was willing to do what it took to end the chaos of drugs and alcohol. I was able to make it to four months without using or drinking, but couldn't let go of the fantasy of getting high and slipped. I am grateful for that nine-day relapse—it showed me the party was

really over. I walked into the Monday night Relapse Prevention meeting with one day back and again had the gift of desperation. But this time, I understood more and found myself more committed. Fortunately, I haven't used since.

As the years went on, I learned that surrendering is not a one-time event. I can practice surrendering to whatever my obstacle may be whenever I have awareness and am willing to take action. Two and a half years into sobriety, I realized I needed to readdress my definition of my Higher Power—the God issue. All my adult life I had refused to believe in God because I had issues with organized religion. But I was not happy in sobriety and realized that it had a lot to do with my struggling spiritual program. I needed to set aside my hardheaded know-it-all thinking, essentially my will. Again I found myself with that gift of desperation and wanted relief. I told my sponsor that I saw the importance of believing in God and wanted to—but didn't know how to believe in something I didn't know if I believed in. He suggested that maybe I should start “developing a relationship” with my Higher Power. I said to myself, “A relationship? Hmm...well, I have talked to myself all my life. Why don't I just say I'm talking to God?” And that was the beginning of that.

My entire life I'd been needing to surrender to the “God issue,” and life in sobriety since has done nothing but get better and better. The greatest liberation I experience is when I practice surrendering to something greater than myself. Today when I notice that gift of desperation for change I know what action to do next: Turn it over. I can tell you from my experience, it works. —*Jamie M.*

## **The Twelve Steps**

In almost nine years as a member of CMA, I've been given the gift of having two sponsors who believed the solution was practicing the Steps and living by their principles. I came in to get away from using drugs and wasting my life, and found a program of recovery that changed my world. The Steps lay the foundation for a new way of thinking and acting.

In the very beginning, like most of us, I didn't understand what the Steps meant—or really care—I just went along so I wouldn't have to use anymore. But as time went by, and with the help of my sponsor, that new

design for living which is mentioned in the “Big Book” started to take shape, without me even noticing. The Steps are very clear and simple, and our sponsors’ directions are usually clear, too, so why do so many of us find them difficult? The problem for me didn’t lie with the Step work, but with my resistance to do it. The first three Steps were easy. At the beginning, I was done, I needed to let go. But the rest of them required a little more work and a hard look at what I had done to myself and others. The last three describe a whole new way of facing life on life’s terms.

In the literature, I found a list of the principles behind each Step, and it has been a great help for me to know them. Step One corresponds to honesty; Two, hope; Three, faith; Four, courage; Five, integrity; Six, willingness; Seven, humility; Eight, brotherly love; Nine, justice; Ten, perseverance; Eleven, spiritual awareness; and Twelve, service. When I’m in pain, it is without a doubt because I am not practicing these principles in all of my affairs. How many times a day do I do the exact opposite? And how much pain and discomfort does it cause me? I believe there’s more to this than carrying the message of recovery and remaining sober myself: Living these principles to the best of my ability is what makes the difference between just being dry or being a new man. —*Fernan R.*

## The Twelve Traditions

When I first came into CMA and all the other As, I could just barely comprehend the Steps. As for the Traditions—who cared!? In reality, the most valuable tool I had as a newcomer was the Third Tradition: “The only requirement for CMA membership is a desire to stop using.” I worried a lot at the beginning that I hadn’t sunk low enough, hadn’t lost enough, hadn’t been in jail yet—that my story wasn’t sad enough to make me a real addict. Someone explained this simple principle to me in the plainest words imaginable, asking, “Was it bad enough for *you*? Do you really want to stop?” The answers were yes and yes.

Another important tool throughout my recovery has been Tradition Twelve: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.” Addicts everywhere mouth along to this one long before they know where it comes from. I have to use it all the time, because, hard as it may be to believe, I don’t always like

all of my fellows. Sometimes you bug the shit out of me! (And I'm sure I bug some of you.) A few people—including a couple of my sponsors—have even let me down. But I have never doubted the Steps. And I've learned that even someone who works my last nerve, if he sincerely has a desire to stop using, probably has something to teach me. —*Mark L.*

# LIVING SOBER



## ABLE TO CONNECT

*INTIMACY* WAS A WORD I DIDN'T USE MUCH WHEN I came to the program eight years ago. But as I've stayed sober, I have realized it's one of the things I'd been searching for since I came to my first meeting. My first sponsor told me I could do anything I used to do using—I just couldn't use. If I wanted to be a sober "whore," as he called it, I could. That's what I did: I slept with many, many people. It worked for me for a while. Then I realized I was still having sex with no emotional connection, and that no longer worked for me.

What I learned by starting the Steps was that my sobriety was an inside job; so finding true intimacy had to begin inside me as well (no pun intended). I had to start by finding love for myself and my body at a healthy weight. I'm 5 foot 10 and weighed between 135 and 140 pounds when I came in, and I thought I looked amazing. I was mistaken.

I started to put on weight in sobriety. I did my Fourth and Fifth Steps and decided to avail myself of the tools in and out of the rooms to help me fall in love with myself and my body. Over the next few years, I took body-acceptance seminars, culminating in a retreat where I got to run naked through the woods, beat on a drum, and find my spirit—all with my belly hanging out.

I was finally able to connect with others without worrying strictly about the physical. I found myself looking into the eyes of the person I was with. I didn't worry so much about performance. I still didn't know if I wanted a monogamous relationship, so I tried an open one. I found it didn't work for me. I'm now in a monogamous relationship and will be getting married in the spring. Coming into the program and working it and letting it work for me has helped me not only survive in sobriety, but at times thrive. —*Andre' W.*

## LOOKING FOR LOVE

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS ABOUT BEING IN A TWELVE Step program is that we can learn from the experience of others. Which helps, but it doesn't change the simple fact that, being sober, we now have the undeniable opportunity to live life, learn from our own mistakes, and experience the trials and tribulations that come naturally.

One of the things I know is that my Higher Power is full of surprises. Just when I think there's no one out there for me, for my tastes, for my life, someone opens the door. How to give and receive love, dating, and romance are things that my HP has set as a course full of rich teachings and, ultimately, an opportunity for growth in my life. Note: When talking about opportunities for growth, get your spiritual tools ready, cause it's gonna get bumpy.

When I was using crystal meth, I was too beaten down and destroyed to think I deserved anyone's love. When someone did show more than a passing interest in me, I didn't have the capacity, or even the motivation, to make something more out of it. Years of putting all my energy into maintaining my daily habit had exhausted me, and the energy and faith necessary for a relationship were well beyond my reach. Crystal meth dulled my emotions, making it impossible for me to care about another person, to care about being rejected by another person, and especially to hope for a future with another person. Today I cannot be indifferent to the slings and arrows of love, or even to the promise of love. This story is not the "pink cloud" of someone who has just found love in sobriety. It's a tale of how I have applied the spiritual tools of this program to take risks and, ultimately, walk through the pain associated with the attempt.

Fear can be a killer. Fear of rejection, fear of being alone, and fear of being judged forced me into solitude and addiction. Today I have the means to deal with that fear. I have faith in a Higher Power that will get me through the fear. This faith exists because I have taken time to work the program laid out in the Twelve Steps. I've seen the effect directly in my life and in the lives of others. Step Three tells me to turn my will and my life over to my Higher Power. When I initially worked this Step, I took a leap of faith. Today I know from my experience that everything will be all right.

Faith has turned into fact. If I hurt, if I am in a tough spot or, ultimately, if the love gambit does not net out in my favor, I know I'll be all right.

In sobriety, I've taken a leap of faith toward love three times, I've dated more than that, but three times in the last two-and-a-half years I really opened myself up to the possibility of something significant. Three times it did not work out. Even though it is disappointing and discouraging, each relationship has provided me with an opportunity for growth. An opportunity to take a look at my character defects and work Steps Six and Seven around them. An opportunity to practice prayer and meditation to right-size feelings. An opportunity to be open to the love, compassion, and support of friends in the fellowship who understand the pain and disappointment that can come when you decide to live your life, take a chance, and walk through the feelings that are intrinsic to the experience of finding love.

Today I am grateful that I have listened to the experience of others and related enough to ask for the solution that is the Twelve Steps. Today I am grateful that I have tools that give me an alternative to the heart-numbing effects of daily crystal meth usage. Today I am grateful that when I let go of something I had hoped would be something special, I can rest assured that it was a divine lesson and an opportunity for me to "grow in understanding and effectiveness." Today I have an opportunity to look for love because I am sober. I have an opportunity to fail, and I have an opportunity to succeed. The simple point is today I have the opportunity. —*Corey M.*

## SLEEPING SINGLE IN A DOUBLE BED

I HAD NO SEX FOR ONE YEAR. IT DIDN'T KILL ME. MY PENIS didn't fall off. I didn't go crazy. I didn't slash my wrists. I didn't lock myself in my room. No nasty diseases came my way. No stern nurse shook her finger in my face, asking me if I had used a condom *every time*. None of that happened. I just stopped. Then a year went by.

As I celebrate a year of sobriety this week, I also mark one full year

without sex. A year ago, I had been up for six days in a row without food or water. I thought I looked hot. During that interminable time, my primary activity had not been cleaning my apartment or writing poetry or listening to music or watering plants. Six days of doing just one thing: *that*. Right before I collapsed on my bathroom floor on Day 6, it occurred to me that what I was doing was pretty strange. And probably not such a good thing. My last conscious thought was: *I'm not really having fun.*

I walked away from sex like one walks away from a plane crash. I didn't make a conscious decision to abstain. What had just happened to me terrified me so much that I couldn't face the prospect of anything remotely sexual. I had nearly died in some insane pursuit of a good time.

A year without sex taught me a few things. I learned that sex is meant to be a part of life and not a game of Russian roulette. I learned that bringing harm to myself, jeopardizing my health, could not be a sane person's idea of fun. I learned that I was not a sane person. I learned that life is full of beautiful things and beautiful people and that you can feel voluptuous pleasure from people and things without any sex involved. I learned that sexual desire can be a kind of enslavement, especially for an addict. When I was high and having sex, I was condemned to repeat the same gestures and the same everything. Nothing was new. I wasn't free. I was always left with blurred memories of the same frenzied insanities. There was no grace. I don't know why people talk about sex parties. Parties are for children. With balloons and cake. And they only last a couple hours.

When I was high and having sex, I never really looked at anybody; people just whizzed by. We were like walking zombies, our eyes were dead. I took people for granted. In sobriety I learned that you never take anyone for granted.

Today I look at people and know that in every body there is a soul that is unique and irreplaceable. I look at people and learn to have great compassion for them because I can see their suffering and their fear. I learned that often sex is something people do when they don't have anything more interesting to do. So many people I would meet had no jobs or friends or money, and they would turn to drug-fueled sex just to make something happen in their lives. I didn't see lust. I saw desperation.

People sometimes ask me if I fantasize about crystal and sex. I tell them that I make myself snap out of it if the fantasy lasts more than three

minutes. I just walk away. A great fashion editor once said that elegance was refusal. Nothing is sexier than saying no. Fantasies can be a trap: They can make what doesn't exist seem exciting and alluring, inviting you to a Nowhere Land that will never deliver on its promise of beauty and fulfillment. In fantasy there is no puking or passing out. Fantasies lie, and sobriety is all about the truth.

Having a lot of sex can be amusing, but it's not exactly something you can put on your résumé. Intense pleasure can pierce and overwhelm you, but it leaves nothing in its wake. You can't archive the experience. It's not a work of art. Sex is sensation, and sensation is impermanent. There is a beauty to sex, but it's not the kind of beauty you can hold on to and keep; you kind of have to let it go and move on. I didn't know how to let go—in sobriety we learn how.

I think the most important thing I learned in a year without sex is that our bodies are not some kind of toy that we can throw around carelessly and disrespectfully. Our bodies are given to us to keep and watch over in the short period that we're on this earth. Our bodies are our house, and when we set our house on fire, we're dead. —*Alfredo M.*

## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

“GETTING TO KNOW YOU, GETTING TO KNOW ALL ABOUT you...” are lyrics from the great Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*. When I think about intimacy and relationships in sobriety, this melody starts to play in my head. One has to get to truly know himself before getting to know another person. For the first time in my life, I am taking the time to get to know myself. I am starting with the main person in my life and then moving on. Always satisfying others and wanting proper approval—being a true people pleaser—has made me put myself in a dim light. I have never let myself totally out of the light, but I never put myself truly in the spotlight with all attention on just me. The time has come. I need to take center stage and work on my own inner happiness.

The last relationship I was in was not a sober one by any means. My use of crystal meth became more serious while we were together, and I totally let the other person take over. I lost a part of myself. The only thing I gained out of the relationship was the true kiss of death: addiction. Now I am taking my life back into my own hands and marching to a different beat. I am looking at myself in the mirror for the first time and truly seeing who I am. I am admitting my defects, as well as the attributes I possess. I am working every day to stay sober, feeling every emotion that passes through my soul and embracing it with open arms. I am no longer running from myself. I am for the first time in a relationship with myself.

From this I can mend the relationships that I almost lost because of my usage. My family is strongly back in my life. I can hear in their voices and see in their eyes that they know the new road I am traveling down day by day. I feel like I am a snake shedding its skin and starting anew. The only person that can truly help me change my life is me. I am building this strong foundation within myself so someday I will be ready to give myself to another person and sing those lyrics to them. I want to know I am fully present and ready to get to know all about someone else. —*Matthew M.*

## SEX IS NOT A WEAPON

EARLY IN LIFE, I LEARNED THAT SEX AND SEXUALITY were tools. I flirted to make friends and offered myself sexually to get what I wanted: jobs, money, and especially drugs. Very few of my relationships were based on a mutual interest or even respect for each other—they were contracts: *What can I get from you? What can you get from me?* And my few friendships that did become lasting and substantial originally started out in bed!

Of course my drug use perpetuated this. For me, sex was intrinsically tied into my drug and alcohol use. By the time I got sober, it had been over ten years since I had had sex without drugs or alcohol. Any sober reference I had was a distant memory.

As terrified as I was of sober sex, when I heard the suggestion to wait ninety days before having sex I thought, *No way*. No one was going to tell me when and how I could use this tool! Even though I readily took all the other suggestions—meetings, service, phone calls, etc.—I was stubborn on this one.

I stopped, remembered to be open-minded, and thought about it. These suggestions are not made arbitrarily. So I sought out the principle behind the suggestion. *Why should I wait?* And that's when I realized the suggestion was meant to protect me. Not just because sex could be triggering, but because I had been using this tool of sex as a weapon my entire adult life! No wonder drugs and alcohol had gone hand in hand with sex for me. I wanted to be far removed from the physical act—which should have been a wonderful and connected experience—but instead it had become a vehicle for shame and shallow validation. I needed some time to figure out how I was going to repair the damage from years of unhealthy sex.

At first this pained me. However, I took another suggestion: Make a sex plan! With a plan, I was able to lay out some goals and describe the feelings I wanted to experience around sex, relationships I wanted to develop, and ways I wanted to feel about myself and my partners. Then I was able to set some boundaries. I had never had any boundaries around sex, and therefore, I had no respect for myself sexually. These new delineations weren't restrictions to my sex life (because no one was going to restrict me!) but rather guidelines to help me meet my sexual goals. Rather than saying "I cannot," I was saying "I don't want to!" For example, I don't want to have sex with someone using drugs or alcohol, and I don't want to have sex with someone unless I know his first and last name. It sounds silly, but these were small steps on the road to repairing sex for me, to regaining a respect for myself I had lost long ago.

Today, as I plunge into a new kind of relationship—dating—I've already established a healthy practice of sex in my sobriety. No longer does sex leave me feeling ashamed or momentarily validated. And with a newfound self-respect, I realize that I am more than a sexual object. I'm a beautiful human being with so much more to offer in all of my relationships. —*Stephen F*

## HIV, CRYSTAL METH, AND ME

ABOUT TWO YEARS AFTER MY FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH crystal meth, my HIV test came back positive. This was after having tested negative for many years. My using was closely associated with unsafe sex. Although it wasn't a total surprise given my behavior, I went into an emotional tailspin. I covered it up with more drugs and crystal-fueled sex.

After a few years of that, my T cells dropped below 300 and my viral load soared to more than a million. My doctor said it was time for medications. I was very resentful and resistant about this but finally consented. I had a very hard time tolerating the meds. I had a bad reaction to my first regimen—broke out in hives. As I stood in my bathroom, looking at my rash in the mirror, I passed out. I must have hit my head on something on the way down; I woke up in a small puddle of blood from a cut above my eye. I still have the scar from that. Another combination made me really tired. Sometimes I just couldn't get out of bed, and when I could, I had no energy. Through this, I kept using drugs and having unsafe sex. I regularly got STDs, including syphilis, followed by those infamous penicillin shots. It was all pretty unmanageable, but that was my way of life.

Then I found the rooms of CMA. It was a lucky break or the grace of God. I didn't think I was an addict—I just wanted to cut down a little. I figured I would go to a meeting once a week for a little while, just to get things a little more under control. At that first meeting, I saw something I wanted, so I kept coming back. After about six months clean, I was still having trouble with fatigue. I was frustrated with my doctor's inaction, so I switched to a doctor recommended by someone in CMA. Somebody else in the program offered a suggestion about what the problem might be. I asked my new doctor about it, and we had some extra tests done. Sure enough, that was the problem. My doctor took me off all my meds. We waited a few weeks and did some more blood work. After six months sober, my numbers had rebounded and I was able to stay off medication for a few more years after that. Eventually I needed to start meds again. I was more accepting and even grateful that the drugs existed this time around.

I've been back on HIV meds for about five years now and there have been challenges. I am, in fact, very sensitive to most medications. I have to

work closely with my doctors to stay healthy and keep feeling good. The tools of this program have helped me work through such problems, teaching me how to ask for help and get through whatever life dishes out without getting high.

Sometimes it's still hard for me to connect my health problems with crystal meth. This might seem strange given the evidence: 1. Before I met crystal meth, I practiced safer sex and stayed HIV-negative. 2. When I started using crystal meth, I became less careful about safe sex and contracted HIV. 3. As my using increased, my HIV numbers got worse and I contracted other diseases. 4. When I stopped using and accepted help from my CMA fellows, things got better. 5. I've stayed clean and sober for a while now, and my general health and my HIV numbers are better than they have ever been.

I guess it is all part of the denial that was my way of life during my active addiction. I didn't know how to connect my actions to their consequences. I'm practicing a new way of being. I'm learning to accept life on life's terms and take care of myself. —*Bruce C.*

## RECOVERY, CAREER, AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

WHEN I FIRST OFFERED TO WRITE A PIECE ABOUT recovery and the economic crisis, I felt compelled to share how this unusual "life on life's terms" reality was affecting me and how program would help me weather it. But the eventual outcome would surprise even me.

First, a bit of history: I've been sober in CMA since fall 2002. Much of my early sobriety was dominated not by triggers, but by professional insecurities and nagging underemployment (and, of course, sex). For three years I found myself in a suite of ill-suited, low-paying jobs and ongoing soul-searching, aggravated by fears of economic insecurity in a very expensive city. I did my best through career counseling, therapy, and applying my program tools. All that helped me get through what proved to be an inevitable period of trial and error to recover professionally.

Certainly, staying sober was No. 1, because I understood that without

a base of (relative) sanity, nothing else would be possible. So basic actions—like frequent meetings, sponsorship, Step work, and gobs of fellowship—were essential for staying sober and, I began to realize, for figuring out anything else. I began to see that the very same tools could help me navigate the particulars of life, such as my career search. While I did not sit down and formally work the Steps specifically around a professional recovery (people have done that and I applaud them), I did learn to apply them in the following ways:

Harboring no illusions about my addiction and realizing that unmanageability must somehow extend to my work life, I stayed close to the program (Step One). I had faith that the same Higher Power that got me sober could certainly restore me to professional sanity, and I practiced this faith by praying on it daily (Two). When particular jobs didn't happen—when my faith wavered—I learned to turn it over, repeatedly, trusting that God had better plans for me (Three—and, boy, did I practice that one).

Though not a moral inventory, aspects of Step Four can be seen in all the career development work I did, which involved taking inventory of my past jobs, decisions, strengths, personality traits, and certainly fears. I shared incessantly about all this with my sponsor and with other addicts (Five). Very gradually, the willingness process continued as I begrudgingly let go of character defects and preconceived notions (“my way”) of what my career should be (Six and Seven). Aside from reconnecting with former colleagues and references, my only professional harms were to myself; but I had to continually work to replace my professional guilt and insecurities with positive thinking and confidence with each passing success in a living amends (Eight and Nine).

Of course, this process continues to this day (Ten). I continue to pray and do written meditations daily (Eleven). And I certainly have shared my experience with sponsees and in meetings to carry the message that these principles can work in affairs beyond the task of getting sober (Twelve).

This clarity has only come in retrospect. At the time, I felt awash in confusion and fear, but I continued to apply my tools. Over time I realized that although we do have steps and actions to take, recovery has its own course and cannot be manipulated. In other words, all that trial and error I went through was part of my growing process; I had to just let it happen.

Most important, from it all I learned that I would always be taken care

of (Step 3 again). So when I learned last fall that my best job to date at a Wall Street law firm would be coming to an end due to the financial crisis, I knew that a new and better door must be opening. I still felt all my disappointment at leaving the comfy nest of supportive bosses and colleagues I'd been blessed with, and I shared about that. But I got busy with my résumé, portfolio, and recruiters, and prepared myself for the worst—several months of unemployment during the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. As part of the mental preparation, I got psyched for the time to do volunteer work that would indulge my passions and provide proof points for a happier career choice, and to enjoy the time off for just focusing on myself. I also prayed and affirmed daily: "I have a great job doing what I love to do, with nice people, for great pay." (I had learned from experience not to get too specific because I may not know what's best for me.)

Ironically, I landed an ideal position immediately, even before my official layoff date. I had been spared another protracted transition. I don't expect this will always be my experience; the point is I was pretty ready to accept whatever happened, to keep taking my actions and keep the faith. My earlier disappointment and job insecurity were quickly replaced by anxiety about the upcoming job change and fear of the unknown—after all, I am an addict! And that's a luxury problem. —*Marc S.*

## SAVING MY LIFE IN PRISON

AS I SIT HERE AMONG 125 BUNK BEDS, I AM NOT REALLY sure where to begin. Most of the other inmates are at work. Today is one of my days off, so it's relatively quiet around me right now. Still, the loudspeaker keeps going off.

Let's start here: I am serving a six-year sentence for the intent to distribute crystal meth. Well into my prison term, I sometimes still ask, *How did I end up here? I wasn't really a drug dealer—I never made any money at it.* But then I get honest with myself: If I had not been arrested, I probably would still be using.

I started doing drugs at a pretty young age. My first was cocaine. I was probably about 16, and all of my so-called friends were much older than me. As life began to spiral out of control, I traded the coke for ecstasy. I fell in love with it and started going to the clubs every weekend. This lasted a couple of years, until my using got me in trouble—seven days in a county jail, ninety days of house arrest, then two years of probation.

I stopped doing ecstasy, but by this time, I had already tried meth. I was consumed quickly. At first, it was a weekend thing. To that weekend, Thursday was added; then came Wednesday, Tuesday. Monday was a given because I couldn't stop on Sunday.

Once while I was messed up on meth, I took GHB to help me come down, leading me to fall asleep while driving; my car slammed into a tree.

I come from a good family and have two younger brothers. My parents are happily married. They started to notice what was going on with me. I mean, how could they not have? I would be out for four days, then show up at work, where my dad was the boss.

After one New Year's Eve, I said I needed to go to rehab but quickly realized it wasn't for me. I had only gone there because I liked someone and thought that checking in would help our relationship. (I did a lot of things for attention.) My second run at rehab only lasted three days. I *had* to get out. My first weekend after leaving there, I got high. Shortly thereafter, I moved out of my parents' house and ended up with someone who was selling crystal—and who always had plenty to share. That's how I did what I had to do to keep up my habit.

The dealer reintroduced me to someone from my past who had since moved to New York. I packed my VW and moved there, too. My life was already crazy—now it got even worse. I had an endless amount of crystal and never had to come down. I did everything high, or I should say, tried to do things while I was high.

I loved crystal meth. Nonetheless, there were times when I wanted to stop but did not know how. It was not until my second arrest that I kind of woke up. I continued using, though. Even the FBI agents did not scare me enough to put down meth. I just wasn't ready to stop; I did not care. It wasn't until about January 2005, that my pretrial officer (I was on bail at the time) recommended that I go to Crystal Meth Anonymous. I remember my first meeting, the Saturday night meditation group. I was

so nervous, and I felt like I had to share because of the meeting's round-robin format. While there, I ran into a friend I knew from Boston and couldn't believe how much he had changed.

I kind of felt right at home. Now, I am not saying I never relapsed after I began attending meetings—because I did, plenty of times. Even so, I got a chance to experience life in sobriety. Before I got remanded, I had a really long relapse, but with that relapse came a great sponsor who helped me get into detox and who has supported me now for almost twenty-two months. Because of CMA, I have a lot of sober friends who write to me and who also came to my sentencing. It feels really good to know I have a support group and great friends who are waiting for me out there. I got really lucky, because my Higher Power saw something in me and rescued me.

Listen, prison sucks. I mean the food is terrible; you are with hundreds of other guys all the time, sleep in a bunk bed, and live out of a locker. Out of 400 guys, two of us identify ourselves as addicts. There are plenty of people in here for meth-related crimes, but they don't believe they have a problem. Their problem was selling, they say, not using.

I would be lying if I told you I always feel fine. Even in a place like this, I still get strong cravings, experience nasty dreams, and have thoughts that pollute my mind. I wake up every morning and read from my meditation book; I go to bed after reading a meditation. I try to do everything I can to stay focused. I work out, read books I never got around to, and eat well. I have started to have a good relationship with my family. All in all, my life is definitely better than it was when I was out there using.

I have many things to be grateful for, and most of them are the result of finding CMA. I am also not sure what would have happened if I had not been sent to prison. In my sick mind, I might have thought I had gotten away with it again and probably would have started using just like before.

People might think I'm crazy for thinking like this, but I believe that the judge who sentenced me and the pretrial officer who told me to go to CMA saved my life. Now prison is saving my life by allowing me to be with myself and learn things about myself. There are times when I think, *Why do I have to be here for so long?* Then I look back at everything and realize I am right where I am supposed to be. —Dennis K.

## ANGER: WHEN TALKING ISN'T ENOUGH

NEVER GIVE IN TO ANGER! DENY YOU'RE ANGRY! YOU have no right to be angry! Reject anger as weakness! Stuff anger! Right? Wrong. If I'm angry, I'm angry. It's nature's inevitable reaction to fear or hurt, physical or emotional. I will be angry from time to time. I have to acknowledge anger and work through it. Anger is a painful emotion. The "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous predicts that unprocessed anger will cause me to drink or use. Thus I have to process my anger, whether it's fresh anger or a resentment I'm cherishing.

But how do I process anger? My sponsor told me there are three ways to defuse anger: talk about it, talk about it, and talk about it. Talk to my sponsor, talk to my therapist, talk to my friends, talk to anyone who'll listen. I feel better after I tell someone how I was wronged or frightened or hurt. It helps if that person can understand how I feel and validate my feelings. What if talking isn't enough? I can confront the person who made me angry. Perhaps I can't talk with an unsympathetic boss, but I can tell the person who cut in front of me that I was there first.

I can do something about the cause of the anger: take the defective merchandise back to the store, make a decision never to go to that meeting again. However, I need to be careful because I may eventually realize my anger was unjustified (perhaps while telling my sponsor) and need to make amends. I can look at my part in the anger—for instance, my anger can be born of unreasonable expectations. I may be angry because people at a meeting don't like me, but it's unreasonable to expect everyone to like me. My sponsor applies the Rule of 25: In any group I should expect 25 percent of the people to like me, 25 percent of the people to dislike me, and the rest to be largely oblivious of my existence. To expect anything different is to court anger.

I can stop holding on to a resentment—whipping it up by endlessly replaying it and wallowing in the injustice. Let it go when it's time. I can laugh at myself. When I complain that my feelings have been hurt, my sponsor never calls me a big baby, but he might tell me a story about how he can be such a big baby. I can pray for the person who frightened or hurt me (preferably after I've taken other actions).

Anger is not only painful to the body, it is corrosive to the soul. I am the only one hurt by my anger. —Roy Y.

## ESCAPING THE DEFAULT MODE

THE DELUGE LANDED IN SHEETS ON THE ROOF. ITS cascade against the windows came with a rush of peace and relief. Safely inside from that downpour, I feasted on the qualification and shares of my CMA fellows. I was in the right place.

The day before, I had found out that my friend and “running buddy” Rob had died many months earlier, ostensibly from the disease of addiction. He had been found dead, the victim of suicide. Indeed, Rob had been someone I’d always wished to see at a meeting. I had hoped he’d find his way to the program. It was not to be. I dealt with the news in the best way I knew how: creatively and intellectually. I made a collage of images of him that I posted to Facebook and searched for an appropriate poem to accompany it.

Yet spiritually I suffered a disconnect. Talk about self-centeredness—quickly Rob’s tragedy became all about me: *If only I’d said this... If only I’d done that...* In my thoughts I could have somehow altered the trajectory of Rob’s life and prevented his tragedy. I was consumed by regret.

This grandiose and morbid reflection began to get the better of me. I planned to act out sexually with someone I’d previously used with. I was putting myself at risk: Giving in to the tête-à-tête with a past using buddy was like laying on a track and waiting for the meth train to run over me. It would only be a matter of time before it arrived.

Because I didn’t want to lose my six-plus months of clean time, I abruptly ended my dangerous liaison. While I wanted to isolate after the departure of my “associate,” I knew that would put me in further danger. Taking contrary action was required; I hurried to an afternoon session of my outpatient program and planned to attend an evening CMA meeting afterward.

At the CMA meeting I took the burning desire to let others know about my precarious situation. But I still felt the urge to escape into a chemically-induced oblivion. Social anxiety is an ever-present issue with me, and the thought of going to fellowship after the meeting was excruciating. Yet, at that moment, I realized I needed it more than ever.

Surrendering to the wet gray afternoon and the program, and acting contrary to my desires, allowed me to stay clean one more day. —*Jon N.*

## **EXTREMELY EXTREME**

DURING MY FIRST YEAR OR SO IN CRYSTAL METH Anonymous, I concentrated on sharpening the saw, readying that tool of recovery. I wanted to know that when the forest of life grew too wild, when it was difficult to see beyond the edge of the woods, I would have a nice, sharp blade to help me cut my way to safety. I read program literature diligently, talked to my sponsor every day, did thorough Step work, and went to as many meetings as I could. Once my saw was sharp enough, I began using it. I sawed and sawed and sawed. I made a lot of program friends and joined them at fellowship, attended sober functions, and accepted service positions.

In fact, I began to think that if I sawed hard and fast enough, I could chop down my entire forest of fears. Then I'd be in the clear forever. After a year or so of endless sawing, I had cleared a good bit of land, but my saw was wearing out and not working so well. I switched my focus back to the sharpening stone. I took on six sponsees, diving into service with great devotion. I sharpened at a maddening pace and was exhausted at day's end. I often patted myself on the back for being so committed. Truth was, though, I was terrified—afraid the forest of active addiction would swallow me again. So I sharpened and sharpened, and as the Taoists say, I sharpened the saw without stopping and ended up worn and tired. Being an addict, I tend toward the extreme. Having used both extreme options, I didn't know what to do: If both sawing and sharpening dulled the blade, then

the tool itself seemed useless. I threw it down. I was angry, frustrated and vindictive. I spent a few months throwing fits and otherwise acting out. I was argumentative with my sponsor. I resented going to meetings.

At my wit's end, I was near relapse. Fearing the pain that comes with using crystal meth, I reluctantly picked up the saw again. I didn't try to use it right away. Instead, I sat with it and pondered the concept of recovery. It took about a year of soul-searching and a lot of talking in the rooms, to my sponsor, and to sober buddies. I wanted a full, well-rounded sober life. I wanted to be joyous, happy, and free—not just from active addiction but from the extremes and the fear.

I needed to find the middle ground. That meant sawing sometimes and sharpening sometimes and sometimes not doing anything with the saw at all. The saw is there for me to use at a moment's notice. When life throws a curve ball or I feel “less than” or triggered, my tool is ready. I've learned to sharpen according to need. When the blade gets dull, I give it an easy pass on the sharpening stone by calling my sponsor or reading literature. Then I put it aside until I need it again. I go to two or three meetings a week. I have one service commitment and am always working one of the Steps at a gentle pace. I live a full life.

I read a lot, go to movies, hang with program and nonprogram friends, attend school, and go on dates. These are just some of the things that now make up my life. For the first time, I'm joyous, happy, and free, and confident I will remain so—as long as I am sober and avoid extremes. —*Colly C.*

## DEAD MAN WALKING

I HAD HEARD IN THE ROOMS BEFORE THAT PICKING UP IS the last stage of relapse. Quite true, but if somebody would have told me that I would use crystal meth again one day, I would have laughed.

With a strong foundation in recovery up until that point—including twenty-eight days of inpatient rehab, nineteen months of outpatient, plus thirty-five months of being active in CMA—I never would have believed

it. So the question after I came back to CMA was: Where did my relapse begin? I didn't stop going to meetings, or calling my sponsor, or sponsoring others or checking in with my psychotherapist. I worked the Twelve Steps. I am a credentialed alcohol and substance abuse counselor and was working in the field. I was comfortable in my own skin. I was days away from commemorating my third year as a sober man. So what went wrong?

On the day of my relapse, I was not horny or craving crystal. The obsession to use had left a long time ago, thanks to my Higher Power and the hard work I had done in the program. Yes, I had bad days like everybody else as I confronted the consequences of long-term use.

So how did I get sober and then abruptly make a left turn, changing my entire life in seconds—once again becoming a dead man walking? The six days I was out took me to the Land of Nowhere. I didn't want to stay there, and I didn't want to come back. I didn't want to use anymore, but I didn't want to be sober again either. These thoughts made me realize that my relapse was real and that I was planning to stay in it a long time. I had a sense of relief because my using had let out the pressure of being sober for so long. This feeling, however, was followed by a mix of sadness and fear because I had left behind a beautiful sober life with friends. Lots of the Promises had come true for me. There was also a sense of how dangerous the path I was on was; that it would not be any different from the path I was on before getting sober—jails, institutions, almost dying. The unmanageability and the consequences were running together side by side. In six days, I had lost so much again, and if I had continued, my life would have been next.

The guys I was using with had no idea what devastation crystal meth can cause. My new vocational career was to help others with the disease of addiction, yet I was completely powerless, brought to my knees again by my drug of choice. It was unreal. I could not help myself—or them. I was spaced out again, alone and high with only my insane thoughts. I was furious, in a rage. *How could my desire to be sober go down the drain?!* I knew what was to come: detox, Day 1, the shame, the guilt. Luckily, I decided to move past all of that and begin to hunt for what went wrong.

First, I needed supervision, so I checked myself into an outpatient program again. Ninety meetings in ninety days. Sponsor. Therapy. Soon, I discovered loneliness was the key to my relapse. I had been unable to

bring the love of friends and the fellowship into my home and my life. I still couldn't trust anybody. I had navigated meetings and fellowship in deep silence. There was isolation, fear, shame. Guilt also played a role. I am the victim of child abuse. From an early age, I had to ignore my own feelings and needs in order to comply with those of my abuser. This led to insecurity, fear, low self-esteem, and isolation. To survive, I created my own little safe world. Even as a sober adult, I sometimes still felt powerless over certain old habits that arose when something was going wrong. I raged in silence, hid my own feelings from everybody. In my "safe" world, sharing with no one, I was okay (or so I thought). I had abused myself to the point that I could not take it anymore.

The lesson I learned was hard, but I am sober today. It is not easy, but I accept, understand, love, and share every feeling I have now. I am happier this way. It's like life has begun for me. I would like to express my gratitude to my fellows/friends for helping me during this difficult time. I'd especially like to thank my Higher Power for another chance at life. —*Sergio S.*

## FELLOW SHOWED ME FAITH AND ACTION

ONE THING I HAVE LEARNED IN MY BRIEF TIME IN recovery is that service can take many forms. Sometimes it means making phone calls or visiting the hospital. Sometimes it just means setting up chairs or making announcements. The most amazing service I have ever seen happened one night when I least expected it, from someone I would never have thought was in a position to be doing service for anyone.

I was attending my CMA home group after work. The meeting started out pretty much like any other; people were trickling in, saying hello to each other and finding their way to their seats. Then Charlie appeared at the door. He looked frail and was wearing a patch over one eye. I hadn't seen him in weeks but knew where he had been—in the hospital in I.C.U. He had undergone major surgery and was receiving chemotherapy for newly diagnosed cancer.

During the meeting, we read from the “Big Book,” and the speaker talked about his experience with the Eleventh Step. After he finished, we went to a show of hands. Charlie’s hand went up quickly, and the speaker called on him almost right away. “Hi, my name’s Charlie, and I’m an addict,” he announced. After that, Charlie stopped and looked at the floor. He began to shift uncomfortably in his seat, and he had a look of pain and confusion on his face. It was as if he was trying to collect his thoughts but didn’t know where, or how, to begin. Slowly, he sat up and started to speak.

What he said in the next few minutes was the most powerful share I have ever heard. He started by admitting that at that very moment he was living in intense fear. That is something I don’t hear very often at meetings—it isn’t pretty and doesn’t sound good.

Charlie talked about being at home and being consumed by the fear that he would have to return to the hospital. He was in danger of having an infection, and his temperature had begun to rise. He told us he had lain in bed and prayed that he would not have to go back to the hospital later that night. Unfortunately, this had done little to alleviate his anxiety.

While lying in bed, he had realized that he needed to *do* something. “This is a program of action; sometimes just praying isn’t enough,” he said. Then he quoted the “Big Book”: “Faith without works is dead,” he added.

We had just read that line from the text a few minutes earlier, but somehow, coming from him at that moment, it took on new meaning for me. Here he was, in the middle of a health crisis. In a moment of such difficulty, he had chosen to get up and come to a meeting, to stay sober. He had chosen to put his faith into action and to share his experience. I was overwhelmed by his display of absolute faith in his Higher Power and in his program. The hardships I had complained about earlier in the day became trivial. I was reminded that the program that I been given so freely would handle anything I might face myself. It became clear to me that this was an amazing example of service.

I had often heard that we do service just by sharing our experience with others, but I had always thought that meant sharing our accomplishments. This was someone who was just sharing the truth about his life, his fear and his difficulties, and who had given me a magnificent gift in the process. By demonstrating his faith, he reinforced mine. By taking an action that he had not wanted to take, in circumstances he didn’t want to be in, he did

an amazing service for me. He broadened my understanding of why it is important to share and of how sharing about our problems, as well as our joys, can help fellow addicts.

Charlie went on to say that he was trying to make peace with whatever he would need to do that evening. If he needed to return to the hospital, then he would accept that as God's will and take the necessary action. This seemed to give him some comfort as he concluded his share. Simply by listening to him, I came to realize that I also can do whatever I need to do—if I accept whatever outcomes might occur and if I continue to do the next right thing. His demonstration of faith in his Higher Power was an example of how this program works. I also came to realize that sometimes the greatest service we can do for our fellows is to simply live our program to the best of our ability, no matter our current circumstances.

His legacy reminds me that anything is possible, if I have faith in a Higher Power, if I remain willing to take action, and if I am honest with my fellows. I don't think I have ever received a greater gift from anyone.  
—*Rich M.*

## UNEXPECTED MIRACLES

THIS HAS BEEN A YEAR OF MAGIC, FILLED WITH DELIGHT and gratitude for all the love that surrounds me. The Promises have come true. The stars, the moon, and the sun all shine down on me and my family. I take every day I stay clean and alive as a gift. Even the days when dark clouds loom close to the horizon present opportunities to learn and grow and be open to the Source through prayer and meditation. All of this is due to working day by day on my spiritual life and staying sober with the help of the principles of the program: trust in the fellowship, Step work with my sponsor, and my connection to the Creative Spirit of the Universe.

Shortly before my four-year anniversary, I made a decision to stop going to meetings for a multitude of reasons. The main one was pain. Even though I was still praying and meditating and keeping in contact

with a Higher Power of my understanding, I was not living a sober life. I wasn't working all the ingredients of a program of recovery, including relying on the support of the fellowship and doing honest Step work with a sponsor. I soon sought escape through the only other means I knew: drugs and alcohol. Although I didn't pick up crystal or hallucinogens, my drugs of choice, I began drinking and taking painkillers to stop the hurt I was feeling deep inside my soul. I felt relief again from the depression and pain, and the resentments I had were no longer eating me alive.

There came a point during my relapse when I began to notice my life was no longer headed in a forward direction. The relief I had felt was slipping away. I asked G-d for help, for signs of what to do next. One night while I was out dancing, the first sign appeared. Under the flashing lights on the dance floor, Aaron, an ex-boyfriend I had used a lot of drugs with in college—including crystal meth—approached me. Our last encounters had been unpleasant, yet I gave him a big hug when he came up to me. I sensed something different about his demeanor.

Aaron offered to buy me a water. He said he had thought of me earlier in the week, and I said I wasn't surprised, because things like that often happened in my life. As he nodded in agreement, Aaron began to apologize for what had happened in our past. The apology wasn't an ordinary "I'm sorry"—the way he expressed his regret for his behavior years ago sounded like a Step Nine amends. I asked him if he was in a Twelve Step program. People who are in recovery understand immediately the difference between an "I'm sorry" and an amends. In asking for forgiveness during an amends, there is an honest assessment of how we have hurt people in our lives and a willingness to make right those wrongs.

We went outside and talked about G-d, spirituality, and Step work. It felt good to be chatting with someone about the program's principles. Aaron was just like me, torn up and twisted from drugs, and now he had experienced a psychic change due to work he had done in recovery. In sobriety, addicts like Aaron and me are given a chance to heal, opening the door to live and love freely. Underneath the mask of all the drugs we had done was my authentic self, yearning to express itself in this life.

Over the next couple of months, other signs directed me back to CMA. I was deeply grateful—because not everyone gets the chance to come back. Out of an amends, Aaron and I began a committed relationship. I

knew that I needed to be with someone who also had a strong connection with a Higher Power of his understanding. Aaron and I both believe in the Oneness that connects all of us in the universe. Without putting our sobriety first we cannot sustain the wonderful relationship we have today.

During this past year, I have been astonished by unexpected miracles. Aaron and I were married by a rabbi whom I had met during morning prayers on my birthday, as I was asking for a blessed new year in my life and guidance toward taking right actions. When I honestly ask my Higher Power for direction, I am guided in profound ways. Aaron and I were surrounded by loving family and friends while we exchanged vows, and danced the night away in celebration of our sacred union. Our wedding was truly the happiest night of our lives.

As newlyweds, we are expecting our first child together. To feel this life growing inside of me—to even have the opportunity to bring a new life into this world—is humbling and exciting. Having a child was not in my plans for this year, and neither was finding my loving partner. As I have learned, my plans and G-d's plans aren't always the same. Anything G-d sends me, I accept with an open heart. I am open to receive blessings and challenges alike. Recovery work has given me the ability to handle life as it is, not as I demand it should be. As long as I get out of my own way and stay open and willing, my fears (of being a healer, a wife, and a mother) dissipate, and my faith and trust in G-d that life will unfold as it should takes over. Life happens! Love happens! Miracles come to pass! —*Ariel M.*