

The Beast, the Angel, and the Madman

Lessons from Seven Months in Rehab

Linville M. Meadows, M.D.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Part 1 The Problem Is Addiction	12
Addiction Is Just Another Disease	13
The Beast, the Angel, and the Madman	38
The Addictive Temperament	47
Part 2 The Answer Is Recovery.....	118
I have a long way to go.....	119
Krishna to Christ	141
Spiritual Principles.....	160
Principle 1 Life is easy	160
Principle 2 There is a God, and it ain't you.....	171
Principle 3 God is approachable.....	179
Principle 4 No matter what the question, the answer is love	205
Principle 5 You are a child of God.....	221
Principle 6 The natural state of the universe is harmony	235
Principle 7 New thinking will replace old thinking	259
Principle 8 Honesty is the essential virtue.....	277
Principle 9 Forgiveness is available to all	286
Principle 10 I discover new priorities and honor all relationships as sacred	299
Principle 11 I will practice these principles in all my affairs	316
Principle 12 Serenity is the reward.....	326
Epilogue	342

*“I hold a beast, an angel and a madman in me,
and my enquiry is as to their working,
my problem is their subjugation and victory,
downthrow and upheaval,
and my effort is their self-expression.”*

—Dylan Thomas

Introduction

*"If thou but settest foot on this Path,
Thou shalt see it everywhere."*

—Hermes Trismegistus

The Spiritual Principles

This book is a collection of conversations among men and women trying to get clean and sober at a rehab center for drugs and alcohol in Atlanta in 1997. We worked hard to succeed, for we knew we would lose our medical licenses if we failed. Each small episode presented here contains a nugget of wisdom that helped us understand our disease and how to treat it. But just quitting drugs and alcohol was not enough. We were faced with the task of changing our entire way of thinking about life. We were told that a life based on spiritual principles was the only answer to our problem—new thinking would lead to new behavior and thus to a new life: free of fear, pain, and addiction. And we desperately wanted such a change, for we had reached a turning point in our lives and our choice was this—quit drinking and using, or die!

I once had a physics professor who would shout, “First Principles! Go back to First Principles and reason your way out!!” During my time in sobriety, I have been given a number of spiritual principles: pearls of insight that can form the basis for living a sober life in the material world. Not chakras, crystals, or New Age narcissism, but ideas that can be applied directly and successfully to everyday life. If this book works, it will be because you, the reader, can find your own First Principles and use them to modify your thinking and behavior to live a

more useful life in a complicated and seemingly insane world. Each principle is covered separately in part 2.

The Principles are:

Life is easy.

There is a God, and it ain't you.

God is approachable.

No matter what the question, the answer is love.

You are a child of God.

The natural state of the universe is harmony.

New recovery thinking will replace old addictive thinking.

Honesty is the essential virtue.

Forgiveness is available to all.

I will discover new priorities.

I will practice these principles in all my affairs.

Serenity is the goal and the reward.

Who stands to benefit from reading this book?

Anyone who is struggling with addiction, trying to understand the nature of their disease, or attempting to find recovery is likely to benefit. People whose lives are touched by an alcoholic or addict may derive benefit by enlarging their understanding of the process of addiction and the method of its treatment. Practitioners in the field of addictionology and professionals who treat addicted patients should also benefit.

If you are asking yourself *Am I an addict or alcoholic?* this book may help you decide.

Here is a list of questions that may be useful. If any of these ring true, then you may be one of us.

Are you ...?

Chained to the circumstances of your life with no possibility of parole?

Unhappy, unfulfilled, or adrift in the current?

Full of pain and sorrow?

Overcome by guilt or shame?

Unable to control the world around you?

Full of fear?

Racked with constant irritability which explodes into anger?

Filled with thoughts racing out of control?

Unable to please anyone?

Abused, neglected or abandoned?

Constantly fighting, no matter which way you turn?

Always running from the past and fearing the future?

Driven by your emotions or by uncontrollable compulsive behavior?

If these chains are shackling your life, be of good cheer, for such chains can be broken.

The process is not complicated and can work for anyone. Religious creed makes absolutely no difference: vegans, vegetarians and omnivores are all welcome. But the process does require a

firm commitment and a lot of hard work; its foundation is a change in the compass by which our ship is guided, for we must sail in a totally new direction.

How the book is organized

The book is divided into two sections—part 1, The Problem Is Addiction, and part 2, The Answer Is Recovery.

In part 1, the concept of addiction is presented as a medical and psychiatric disease that includes not only alcohol, drugs, and pills, but also compulsive gambling, sex and relationships, hyper-religiosity, shoplifting, and other forms. Included are sections on the nature of addiction (“Addiction Is Just Another Disease”) and on Dylan Thomas’s personal description of his struggle with alcoholism (“The Beast, the Angel and the Madman”) and an in-depth examination of “The Alcoholic Temperament,” with subsections on fear, selfishness, denial, powerlessness, and reaching the point of no return.

In part 2, the process of recovery is described; a total turnaround in how we viewed myself and our world, a spiritual and emotional upheaval so complete that the direction of our life became forever changed. The essential requirements needed to begin the process—willingness, honesty, and openness—are described. My personal search for spiritual truth—by reexamining the major religions of the world—is described. The book concludes with an in-depth examination of each of twelve Spiritual Principles and their relationship to life in the real world.

In reality, both learning about the problem and beginning the answer occur simultaneously. For clarity, the problem (addiction) and the answer (recovery) are presented in the two different sections. Thus part 2 returns to the first days of rehab as it introduces new material.

We were a friendly, easy-going group of physicians (and nurses, lawyers, and others) accompanying each other through challenging and often scary changes. Some of the conversations are related exactly as they occurred, but others are reconstructed from bits and

pieces. Often my words and thoughts appear in the mouths of my colleagues. The individuals named are, of course, fictitious; however, their characters are composites of very real people. No attempt has been made to hide either the ugliness or the darkness of the world of addiction. Only as much art as necessary has been used to emphasize a point. As Pablo Picasso said, “Art is the lie which tells the truth.” So it is here.

An epilogue brings the reader up to date on our lives after rehab.

The last a section lists the books and other resources used in writing this book.

About the author

I am just another bozo on the bus. My life and my story are of no real importance. My significance, if any, is that I am just like every other alcoholic and addict who ever lived. The disease we share overshadows everything else about us. If I am different, it is only in that I have been given the job of telling our story—that is, the story shared by all addicts and alcoholics—and of telling how we recovered.

I am not a guru, a spiritual teacher, or an expert on anything, but I have been through the dark night of the soul and lived to tell of it. My experiences are offered as just that—the experiences of a man who found a way back. As Deepak Chopra said, “I am one man singing in the shower,” however badly or out of tune. If a chord strikes you, please sing along. Singing is always a form of praise.

I have tried to stay close to my own experience in writing this book. It is *not* a rehash of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. You will not find a treatise on the medical or psychiatric issues associated with addiction nor on alternative methods of treatment. Nor will you find descriptions of DT’s, cirrhosis, or narcotic withdrawal. All of the stories and

conversations related here are true, though few are recorded exactly as they happened. These are the experiences of myself and others in the days of our using and the results of our personal searching for principles that would change our way of living.

A Note on “The Serenity Prayer”

God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,

Courage to change the things which should be changed,

and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,

Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,

Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it,

Trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will,

So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,

And supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Amen.

What is known as “The Serenity Prayer” was written by Reinhold Niebuhr around 1943.

The first few lines are commonly used as an opening prayer at meetings of Alcoholics

Anonymous. In AA, the prayer becomes,

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

the courage to change the things I can

and the wisdom to know the difference.

For the alcoholic/addict, “The Serenity Prayer” is a practical tool that helps organize every day. Each morning begins with a list of items, issues, and situations on our plate that

require our attention. The list is always too long, too difficult, and too unpleasant for us to tackle by ourselves. The prayer tells us to separate those items that are our work from those that we must leave to God. We must have the courage to tackle those tasks that are ours; we must do my own footwork. We must accept those problems in life which we cannot change and leave them to God. To tell one from the other requires wisdom, a gift from our Higher Power. Thus the prayer is not only a spiritual ideal but also a pragmatic tool to be used in everyday life.

Part 1 The Problem Is Addiction

Addiction Is Just Another Disease

I arrived at rehab understanding nothing.

“No step is lost upon this path,

And no dangers are found.

And even a little progress is

Freedom from fear.”

—*Bhagavad Gita 2:40*

I stood alone in the Atlanta airport, arms full of baggage, looking for the someone who was supposed to meet me, when suddenly I dropped the bags, collapsed into an empty seat, and began to cry. I had never felt more alone, more vulnerable, nor more frightened. It seemed that everything I had worked for my whole adult life was being washed away. There was no one or no thing I could turn to for help.

Almost imperceptibly, a man about my age filled the seat beside me, caught my attention and began to speak.

“You must be Dr. Linville Meadows,” he said kindly. “What do your friends call you?”

“Lin. People only call me Linville if they’re mad at me.”

He put his hand out. “Name’s Mike. I’m your ride to rehab. C’mon. And I promise not to call you Linville, okay?”

“Deal. What did you say your name was?” I asked, blowing my nose.

“Mike. From New Jersey. Obstetrician. Drug of choice: more.”

“More?”

“More of whatever you’ve got,” he said. I managed a small laugh. In a few minutes we were in his little green convertible with the top down and wheeling out of the airport. The fresh breeze felt good on my face.

“Married?” asked Mike.

“Divorced.”

“Do you like riddles?” Mike asked.

“Sure, riddle me, Joker,” I said.

“What creature is one part wild ravaging beast, one part angel with a heart of gold, and one part suicidal maniac?”

“Hmm, beast, angel and madman—all in one. At the same time?”

“Could be. Could be different times, too.”

“Sounds a Greek myth.”

“Nope,” he said. “Try again.”

“Let me think.”

We arrived at the entrance to rehab where a class had just let out. Over a hundred people were milling about the lawn. I pointed at the crowd.

“There,” I said, “there! The beast. The angel. And the madman. There they are!”

“And only the alcoholic and addict will recognize the creature as himself when he sees it.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“All in good time, my friend,” said Mike. “All in good time.”

I shared my experience.

“Physician, heal thyself.”

—Luke 4:23

Mike dropped me off at the office and I found myself in front of Cameron, one of the family counselors. She would conduct my intake interview.

“Tell me what brought you here,” she said. “And take your time, we’re not in a hurry.”

I began to relate the last few days of the disorder that was called my life.

The nurses I employed in my medical practice had finally discovered my addiction, and they sent me home. I knew my life was surely over, that the Medical Board would be waiting at my office door in the morning to take away my medical license. I went home and smoked all the pot and drank all the wine I could, but nothing would wipe out the pain of my consciousness. I took down my shotgun, filled it with shells, and went outside to do myself in, but found I didn’t have the courage.

The next morning when I arrived at my office, I was met by Paul, a man with a strange, quixotic grin on his face. Paul was not from the Medical Board but from another group that worked to rehabilitate doctors who had become impaired. He asked me if I had a problem. In a moment of clarity, I simply said, *yes*. I knew I was sick, but I had no idea what to do about it. Within minutes, I was on my way to Richmond. Within an hour, I heard the doors of Pleasant Green Mental Health Center slam shut and lock behind me. I was in detox.

"Am I talking too fast?" I asked Cameron. I could feel the pressure of speech upon me.

"No," she said, "you're doing just fine."

I swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and began again.

My first few days in detox in Richmond were frightening. I felt terribly out of place. I was locked up with drunks found under a bush, junkies from off the streets, prostitutes in short skirts, and one little old lady dressed in white doilies who liked to tipple her wine. Not only that but I was craving my cocaine intensely. All I wanted to do was go home and get ripped again.

In my first group session, we sat in a circle and introduced ourselves.

"My name's Joe," said the first. "I'm an alcoholic."

"I'm Elsie," said the second. "A junkie. And I smoke crystal."

It was my turn. I swallowed my pride and for the first time admitted to myself what I had become.

"I'm an addict," I said softly.

"Now I want each of you to share your plans for when you leave detox," said the counselor.

"I'm Billy," said a young pale man who was almost blind. "I don't know how I'm gonna stay clean. There'll be at least two dope dealers sitting on my front porch when I get home."

Ethel, a large black woman, spoke next. "I'm going to a halfway house so I don't have to turn tricks no more."

After the session, the counselor pulled me aside. His name was Ralph.

"You probably have no idea what's going on here, do you?" he asked.

"Not really," I said.

"Usually," he said, "a client stays here three or four days to let the poisons drain out of their body then they head out to a halfway or something. In your case, you being a doctor and all, they got something special planned for you."

In spite of my medical training, I had no idea how addiction was treated. It simply wasn't covered in medical school. I was a child in the dark.

"Only a few places in the country know how to deal with guys like you," said Ralph, "doctors on the skids. The nearest is Atlanta and I just made you a reservation. You'll be on the plane tomorrow morning. Said I'm sending them a bat-shit crazy oncologist."

I paused for breath, but before Cameron could speak, I started again.

My last night in detox, I was torn as to what to do. In the morning I was supposed to fly to Atlanta. My mind kept telling me that if I went to rehab for three or four months, I would have no practice to come home to. And my craving for cocaine was still raging, and part of me did not want to give it up. My heart, on the other hand, knew that my only hope for survival was getting on that plane.

"You're dying and you know it," said Ralph. "If you don't go to Atlanta, you'll relapse. You *know* that. And this time it will probably kill you!"

After he left I knelt in front of my bed like when I was four years old, folded my hands and said simply, *God help me*. The next morning I packed my bag, took a taxi to the airport, and got on the plane. When I was in the sky, I remembered my prayer from the night before, but in the light of day I didn't believe the prayer had worked for me.

“So that’s it,” I said. The words were flying out of my mouth. “What about me? Will I ever stop craving cocaine? What’s going to happen now? How long will I have to be here? I can’t possibly stay more than a few weeks. My practice would be ruined. Why are you laughing at me?”

Cameron’s face flashed a smile I would come to love.

“All in good time,” she said. “All in good time.”

I was not the only doctor with a problem.

*“Walking with a friend in the dark
is better than walking alone in the light.”*

—Helen Keller

After my meeting with Cameron I wandered around the intake area like a puppy dog lost in the rain. Across the foyer I noticed a young black woman wearing a sweatshirt with my university’s logo on it so I walked over to say hello.

“Are you from the southern part of heaven, too?” I asked, making reference to our alma mater.

“Ah,” she said. “It’s good to see a friendly face. I’m Vera. They say I’m an alcoholic so I guess it must be so.”

“They told me if I didn’t finish the program here, they’d take away my medical license,” I said. “That got my attention.”

“Mine, too,” said Vera. Vera was a pathologist who spent most of her day looking at slides under the microscope. She finished a year behind me in medical school, but we had never met. She stayed on at the hospital to do her fellowship in Pathology then joined the faculty.

About that time, Mike showed up. Vera headed off for her intake interview with Cameron.

“You need to know that boys and girls are strictly segregated here,” said Mike. “The women’s apartments are at the other end of the complex from the men. *He-ing* and *She-ing* is not allowed. No dinners for two, hand holding, or romantic interludes in the apartments.”

“That sounds pretty severe,” I said.

“Not only that,” he said, handing me a loose leaf notebook, “here’s your rule book. Be sure to read it right away. If you break the rules they come down on you pretty hard. You have to travel in three’s, to the grocery store, to get a haircut, whatever. You must attend at least one meeting a day, you must be in before curfew, and you can’t have your car the first month you’re here.”

He gave me a quick tour of the building.

“This is the rehab center,” he said—“classrooms, offices, stuff like that.” He pointed to an adjacent building. “That’s Building Two, where they send you when you’ve been a very bad boy. Also where the cafeteria is.” He pointed to a path leading into the woods behind the buildings. “That trail leads to an apartment complex where we live. We stay two to a bedroom, four to an apartment. There are usually between a hundred and a hundred and forty of us drunks and junkies here at one time.” He grinned. “Welcome to country club rehab.”

In the apartments, Mike introduced me to my new roommates.

"This is John," he said, pointing to a man in a sweat suit, "a man who loves his beer and has the raunchiest sense of humor you ever heard."

"Go Blue!" John said, tipping his Big Blue baseball cap.

"Robert here," said the portly man on the couch, wearing shorts and flip-flops and eating a doughnut. Robert was a jolly, round practitioner who never seemed to take anything too seriously. "I hang out here but I sleep next door. Internal Medicine. Drug of choice, crack cocaine."

The last man in the room looked exceedingly like Martin Luther King, Jr.

"This is Reggie," said Mike. "Our preacher from Memphis. Reggie has a fondness for bourbon and the ladies in the front row. But he's a good person in spite of himself."

"Stow your stuff fast," said Reggie. "We're leaving for a meeting in ten minutes. Unfortunately, John's driving."

"A meeting?" I asked. "What kind of meeting?"

"Don't pay any attention to him," said Mike to my new roommates. "He's still toxic." He turned to me. "You're required to attend at least one Alcoholics Anonymous meeting a day."

"You know," said Robert, "AA."

"AA?" I asked.

They all laughed.

"I wouldn't try thinking too much for a while," said Robert, finishing his donut and licking his fingers. "Right now you couldn't think your way out of a wet paper bag, and you'd probably hurt yourself if you tried."

"You'd best follow Mike around for a while until you get your feet on the ground," said John. "Otherwise you might get lost going to the bathroom."

These guys, like me, were not exactly at the height of their careers, but they seemed happy and full of life. I wanted that so badly I could scream.

A huge weight hung around my neck.

*“We have the power to make the world we seek
but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning.”*

—Barack Obama

The next morning, as Mike and I walked the path through the woods to the treatment center, the sky was overcast and gray. It seemed as if a thousand-pound weight hung around my neck. Just looking up hurt my eyes. Mike took pity on me.

“Did somebody run over your puppy dog this morning?” he asked.

I mumbled a response but didn’t feel like talking.

“I guess this is probably the low point in your miserable life,” he said.

I glared but did not speak.

“Drugs of choice: cocaine and alcohol, I’ll bet.”

I glared louder.

“There is one good thing about all this.”

“What?” I growled.

“You don’t have to do it anymore.”

Everything you think you know is wrong.

“The world we see that seems so insane is the result of a belief system that is not working. To perceive the world differently, we must be willing to change our belief system, let the past slip away, expand our sense of now, and dissolve the fear in our minds.”

—William James

“First stop of the day. Morning spiritual,” said Mike. “Promptly at 8:45 a.m., we assemble for a short spiritual lesson to start the day off right.”

“You got to be kidding me,” I said. “A sermonette? I gave up on that stuff long ago.”

“Look, doofus,” he said with an edge on his voice. “If you knew all the answers you goddamn wouldn’t be here. Everything you think you know is wrong. And I mean everything.”

His words stuck in my craw.

“Consider, if you will,” he said, “that maybe you threw the baby out with the bathwater.”

We walked silently into a large room in Building Two and were greeted by Father Mick, a tall geeky man dressed in a suit. He handed a stack of pages to John, who distributed them around the room. On each was the 38th Psalm.

“Father Mick is our spiritual advisor,” said Robert, standing beside me. “He’s been sober for four years and working here for most of that time. He’s a really cool dude.”

I nodded, lest my words get me in trouble again.

“I suspect,” said Father Mick from the podium, once the room became quiet, “that addiction has always been with us. Every time I read this psalm, it reminds me of how I felt at the end of my drinking career. Maybe you can hear your story in it as well. The verse does end on a positive note, that there is hope for even the worst of us. And, of course, my enemies are the negative thoughts in my own mind.”

He began to read.

O LORD, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.
 For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore.
 There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger;
 neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin.
 For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as a heavy burden they are too heavy for
 me.

My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness.

I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long.
 For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease: and there is no soundness in my flesh.
 I am feeble and sore broken: I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart.
 Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee.
 My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone
 from me.

My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar
 off.

They also that seek after my life lay snares for me:
 and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day
 long.

But I, as a deaf man, heard not; and I was as a dumb man that openeth not his
 mouth.

Thus I was as a man that heareth not, and in whose mouth are no reproofs.

For in thee, O LORD, do I hope: thou wilt hear, O Lord my God.

For I said, Hear me, lest otherwise they should rejoice over me:

when my foot slippeth, they magnify themselves against me.

For I am ready to halt, and my sorrow is continually before me.

For I will declare mine iniquity; I will be sorry for my sin.

But mine enemies are lively, and they are strong:

and they that hate me wrongfully are multiplied.

They also that render evil for good are mine adversaries; because I follow the thing that good is.

Forsake me not, O LORD: O my God, be not far from me.

Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation.

Father Mick looked up and smiled.

Spiritual Tools

Often only intervention can penetrate the darkness of addiction.

In detox, the poisons are drained from my system.

In detox, for the first time I refer to myself as an addict/alcoholic.

In rehab, my disease is treated in earnest for the first time.

In rehab, I find encouragement from the sobriety of others.

Everything I think I know about living is wrong.

My enemies are the thoughts in my own head.

What is addiction, anyway?

*“An alcoholic is someone you don’t like
who drinks as much as you do.”*

—Dylan Thomas

“May I ask a stupid question?” I asked as we walked to our first group session in the main building.

“I didn’t know you could ask any other kind,” said Robert, grinning.

“Go ahead,” said Mike, trying to smoke and walk at the same time.

“What is addiction, anyway?” I asked. “I mean, I thought I knew but now I’m not so sure. Nobody here looks like a rummy on the street or a wino panhandling on the corner.”

“Ah, the first sign of progress,” said John, sprinting up from behind. “The good doctor admits he doesn’t know. There may be hope for you yet, boy.”

“Don’t be so hard on him,” said Robert. “He’s just a newcomer. Only an egg.”

“Let me help you here,” said Mike. “Addiction, alcoholism—they’re all the same thing. That’s the main thing—addiction is a disease, just like diabetes or any other chronic illness.”

“A lot people, I suspect, still think it’s a form of moral weakness,” said Robert. “They regard the drunk in the gutter as someone who’s succumbed to the temptations of the devil and Demon Rum.”

“They can’t understand why I don’t just quit, like they did,” said John. “Those without the disease—we call them Earth People—have little hope of understanding it.”

We entered the main building and headed for the lounge.

"Which is why we drunks and junkies have to stick together," said Reggie, who had joined us at the communal coffeepot. "We're a fellowship of the most unlikely companions."

"The disease concept is important," said Robert, "because if I'm a bad person, there's no hope for me. But if I'm a good person with a bad disease, I can treat my illness and live a good life."

"I'm a good person with a bad disease," I repeated, letting the thought settle in my mind.

"You have a chronic relapsing and fatal disease," said Mike.

"But it can be treated, right?" I asked.

"Certainly," said Robert. "I'll tell you the best definition of addiction I ever heard. It came from a young man named Phillip."

I cannot stand living inside my own skin.

Robert told this story.

It was a nasty moonless night when the police delivered Phillip to detox, half-naked, barefoot and in handcuffs, out of his mind. Phillip was a young, well-muscled black man, tall and angry, very angry. He had gone soldiering in the Middle East for his country and returned with a purple heart and an addiction to heroin. He lived on the street.

His first day in detox, Phillip covered his head with a blanket and refused to speak. No one dared speak to him. The second day, he pulled the blanket over his shoulders like an Indian brave and glared at everyone in the room. Still, no one spoke to Phillip. The third day, he raised his hand (his medicines were beginning to kick in) and gave the best definition for addiction I've ever heard.

“My name is Phillip,” he said gently, “and I have a feeling disease. I will do anything I can to change the way I feel.”

I will do anything to change the way I feel.

“My whole life, I’ve wanted to feel comfortable in my skin.

It’s the most liberating thing in the world.”

—Drew Barrymore

We were standing around the coffeepot waiting for a Dr. Taylor to arrive for our first session. Taylor, an alcoholic himself, had founded the rehab center for the treatment of impaired physicians.

“I didn’t drink for the taste,” said my roommate John, “I drank for the effect.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. I seemed to be saying that a lot lately.

“They say understanding is highly overrated,” he said. “I hated the taste of beer, but it got me drunk and then I didn’t care anymore. Dull, boring John became the life of the party. I could flirt with the girls. Leap tall buildings with a single bound. I was King of the World.” He held his coffee cup high. “When I drank beer ...”

“You’ll notice he didn’t say, ‘When I got drunk,’ ” interrupted Robert. “He’s still trying to minimize his drinking.”

“Not me!” shouted John. “I can get as drunk as anybody. As I started to say, when I got drunk, I no longer felt that horribly uncomfortable feeling most people call life. In time, I switched from beer to vodka. It worked faster.”

"There are a thousand things I can do to change the way I feel," said Reggie, "and if I can do it more than once, I can become addicted to it. And almost anything can change the way I feel. Reminds me of my roommate freshman year in college. I'm pretty sure he was an alcoholic. He always had a beer in his hand, and I never saw him crack a book."

"Not useful for success at the university," said Mike.

"His parents were well-to-do," Reggie said. "He drove a new BMW. Every time he flunked a test and felt bad, he would go into town and buy new clothes. He was sort of a clothes horse anyway. Always looked real spiffy."

"Changed the way he felt, I suspect," said Mike.

"Undoubtedly," Reggie said. "I wasn't surprised when he flunked out after the first semester."

Mike grinned, "Yeah, but I'll bet he had a great wardrobe."

Dr. Taylor arrived and we took our seats.

"Back in the '60s," Dr. Taylor began, "I toured the Bowery to see what the most famous drunks in the world were like. There I met another physician who had lost his way. He panhandled on the street to buy wine and lived in an empty tenement with no utilities but no rent. Together, we discussed the nature of our illness. To my surprise, he pulled out a needle and injected himself with a large dose of magnesium sulfate."

Mike leaned over and whispered, "Epsom salts." He laughed.

Taylor continued, "Then he went over behind a post and had an enormous bowel movement. I asked him what in the hell he was doing. He said, 'Well, it's the least expensive way to change the way I feel. It's certainly cheaper than heroin.'"

"We're a strange lot," quipped Mike.

I had to nod, barely able to believe the words I was hearing.

Addiction and alcoholism are the same disease.

My next stop was Matt's group session held in a classroom with a green view of the Georgia woods out back. The story was that Matt had been chaplain to the Special Forces team at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, before he came to work at Taylor. They also said he was an ordained Catholic priest, but then they said a lot of things.

"Welcome to drunk and junkie school," said Matt, as I took my seat. I saw Vera in the back and waved but said nothing.

"You'll find that all the seats in this room are the same, regardless of who you think you are," said Matt. "No matter what you used to believe, today you'll learn that you share a single disease, that of addiction. In this room, a drunk is the same as a junkie and an alcoholic is the same as an addict. There's no difference between a judge who tipples too much and is escorted home by a deputy sheriff and the junkie on the street who's arrested by the same deputy."

Sitting in the back of the room, I knew he was right. I suddenly realized that my palms were sweaty and I was scared shitless.

I found addicts everywhere I looked.

At lunch the next day, Mike pointed out the new fish sitting across the cafeteria.

"Johnny Red Hawk is his name," said Mike. "He's a real Cherokee Indian."

"Not only is he a pediatrician, he's a medicine man," I said. "He's in my afternoon group. He told me that almost half of his relatives are alcoholics! That seems like a lot. He said it was because of his Indian blood."

"He's right, you know," said Reggie. "Taylor said across the board ten percent of the world's population is addicted, right? The only exception is the American Indian, where it's forty percent."

"That old saw about Indians and firewater is true?" asked Mike.

"I'm not sure I'd go that far," said Mike, waving at Johnny, who waved back. Mike returned to his dessert.

"Taylor also said that there are three times as many men as women in AA," I said.

"Yes," mumbled Mike through his pie, "and you'd better not fraternize with any of those women."

Addiction runs in my family.

Mike and I sat in a small crowded room of clients at the Fulton County Detox. As part of our treatment, we drove there every Tuesday morning to lead a class on alcoholism and addiction.

Alicia, who never met a crack pipe she didn't like, looked puzzled. Mike had been explaining the inherited nature of our disease.

"I don't understand," she said in a soft Southern drawl. "Both my parents are alcoholics, but all us kids are all crack heads. How can that be running in the family, like he said?"

Driving back to rehab, Mike said that when he was admitted to rehab, his family was shocked. "None of us ever had this kind of problem, they said." He laughed. "Last night I was talking with my cousin Louise, who's living out of her car."

Mike shared his conversation with Louise.

"I can't believe you're living in your car," I said to her. "Where do you park it?"

"Right now, I'm in my daughter's driveway," Louise replied. "She won't let me in her house, but then neither will my other daughter. At least I still have my cell phone so I can check my email."

"You know," I said, "I'm beginning to think addiction runs in our family."

"Oh, hell yes," she said. "My dad was a workaholic who drank himself silly. I'm sure our uncle Lyndon was a closet drunk, and I went to rehab for twenty-eight days back in the '90s for my Xanax problem. And you know about our cousin Tina, she was a terrible drunk, died of cirrhosis before she was thirty-two."

"Neither of my parents drank or gambled or any of that stuff," I said. "Maybe it skips generations."

"Could be," said his cousin. "Anyway, we sure got it."

"Amen to that," I said.

Addiction takes many forms.

"My grandfather ran moonshine across the ridges of Harlan County, at least until he got religion," said Mike, pulling into the parking lot at rehab. "He became a preacher of the Holy Word, even ran for county judge. My father would drive him to four or five tent meetings a day. He preached at revivals, on the radio, and on TV. You hated to see him coming because you knew he was going to preach at you until your ears turned red."

"A real foot-washing, hellfire-and-brimstone kinda guy," I said.

"Truly. I've always believed that he swapped alcoholism for his own personal brand of hyper-religiosity."

I had heard similar stories in rehab. “A bunch of guys here have swapped addictions, too,” I said. “Like Bobby, the New Hampshire dentist—a heroin addict who gave up the needle for Kentucky bourbon. Now he gets drunk every night.”

“I met a businessman at a meeting in Buckhead,” Mike said. “Told me he was a real alcoholic. After he quit drinking he found himself working 10, 12, even 14 hours a day. He asked me if I thought he’d swapped addictions.”

“Probably,” I said. “You know about James, don’t you? A full professor of medicine at the university whose pleasure was self-administered Demerol. When he got to rehab he gave up the narcotic and started smoking unfiltered Camels.”

Mike laughed. “There’s a guy named Wimpy, a dentist in my morning group, who’s also a fan of Demerol. His other addiction is buying VHS tapes! He would shop furtively at the video store, hide them under his coat until he got to the counter, buy them surreptitiously, then sneak them into his house. He had a whole wall full of them in his den. He never actually watched the movies, only bought them addictively and then put them on the shelf.”

“We’re a strange group,” I said. “I know of a famous Hollywood actress who was arrested for compulsive shoplifting. She apologized in court, but the judge sentenced her to drug abuse treatment. The list goes on and on.”

“My buddy Dan is an emergency room doc from Sacramento. He loves the crack pipe. His sister’s addiction is bulimia—another form. And there was a guy in morning group who admitted to masturbating fifty times a day. Somehow he managed to hold down a full-time job.”

We pulled into the driveway at rehab.

“One last story,” I said. “Big Jed is a bad meth freak. He grinds his teeth all day long.”

“Yep,” said Mike. “He told me he ground down his natural teeth and two pairs of dentures. Picked up his habit after being discharged from the service with PTSD, a problem for a lot of us.”

“We’re a decidedly unusual group,” I said.

“Decidedly.”

Abuse does not make an alcoholic.

Mike and I were standing outside the rehab building waiting for the cafeteria to open for lunch. When the doors opened, he stubbed out his cigarette and we went inside.

“I used to think that most alcoholics came from abusive homes, but that doesn’t seem to be the case,” I said.

“Taylor says only about a third of us come from bad family backgrounds,” said Mike, “which means seventy percent of us come from relatively normal families.”

“My childhood was as much like that TV show ‘The Waltons’ as possible,” I said. “Maybe with a little ‘Ozzie and Harriet’ thrown in. My parents didn’t drink, gamble, run around, or anything like that. I had a perfect childhood.”

Mike shook his head. “That’s not what you said in group this morning.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I answered.

“You said that when you were fifteen, your younger brother died of leukemia. Almost exactly a year later, your father died of a heart attack at the ripe old age of thirty-eight. I think that might qualify as an abused childhood.”

“I never thought about it that way. “I guess I did take a hit, didn’t I?”

“No denying it,” said my friend Mike.

Spiritual Tools

Addiction is a disease; it can be treated.

Addiction is chronic, relapsing and, if untreated, uniformly fatal.

Addiction takes many forms: alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, work, and many more.

Most alcoholics come from normal family backgrounds and work full time.

As an addict/alcoholic, I am uncomfortable in my own skin.

I will do anything to change the way I feel.

I am a good person with a bad disease.

The Beast, the Angel, and the Madman

*"I hold a beast, an angel and a madman in me,
and my enquiry is as to their working,
and my problem is their subjugation and victory,
downthrow and upheaval,
and my effort is their self-expression."*

—Dylan Thomas

I hide a murderous beast within me.

*"The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer.
My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body;
and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame."*

—Edgar Allan Poe

Cameron was leading the morning spiritual. She was the favorite among the guys, for she was the youngest staffer by ten years. She was a pretty brunette with a pageboy haircut that only a slim woman can pull off. I was falling in love with her.

“She don’t hurt my eyes at all,” said Reggie.

“Dylan Thomas, famous for his poetry and his drinking, died of chronic alcoholism at the age of 39,” she began. “He described his own disease as consisting of three parts: the beast, the angel, and the madman. This is a striking insight into the illness and a good place to begin our

inquiry into the nature of the alcoholic. Thomas once told a friend—admittedly while drunk—that he drank to reconcile the disorder outside and the order within himself. Sound familiar to anyone?”

A murmur spread through the room.

“In each of us, Thomas suggests, lives a beast that is capable of anything—absolutely anything—from simply wreaking havoc in the lives of others to committing murder. Like Jekyll’s Mr. Hyde, the beast is completely without morals of any kind and lives only to destroy. There are those who would deny the beast they shelter. *Oh, I would never do that*, they say, referring to the terrors committed by their fellow man, but they simply do not know themselves. The horrible truth is, under the right circumstances, like being stoked up on crack cocaine, the beast will out and have his way.”

I recognized my beast in others.

*“A horrid alcoholic explosion scatters all my good intentions
like bits of limbs and clothes over the doorsteps
and into the saloon bars of the tawdriest pubs.”*

—Dylan Thomas

We were standing in the smoking pit behind the client lounge, waiting for the next session to start. The smoke was curling around the head of a newcomer named Charles; he seemed lost in reverie. Charles was an orthopedic surgeon who had become addicted to pain

pills, which he took avidly. But his real love was cocaine, and he was not shy about sticking a needle in his arm and shooting the drug into his veins.

"It's faster that way," he said. "I started out snorting at parties, but pretty soon Lady Cocaine and I were off and running." He grinned.

"I've done a little cocaine myself," I admitted somewhat tentatively.

"Oh, boy," he began. "I can remember one time. ... Maybe I shouldn't tell this." He laughed.

Robert sauntered up. "They say my secrets will destroy me. You'd better fess up."

My curiosity was killing me. What had the richest orthopod in Sarasota done?

"Okay," he said. "My wife and I had been doing coke, wine and pot all evening, and by midnight I was blitzed beyond your wildest imagination. We both had to work the next day, so I wasn't surprised when she said matter-of-factly, *That's all the cocaine you can have tonight.* Since she was in charge of hiding our stash, I had no idea where it was. Then something strange happened."

"Do tell," said Robert, all ears.

"I can't remember exactly how this came about but all of a sudden I was nine feet tall and stood looming over my wife. I picked her up and threw her bodily to the floor. I stood over her, ripped off my wedding ring and threw it in her face. I cursed her using all the tender words that usually accompanied our love-making. I roared and I mean I really roared. The curtains quivered from the blast." He paused for a drag on his cigarette.

"The next thing I knew," he said, "I was cowering in the corner while the beast stood over her. I was scared to death that he would come after me next. He was huge, angry, and

murderous. When he looked in my direction, I could see he was gloating. If he came at me I knew I would be dead meat.”

Robert and I both stared unbelievingly.

“But you know what,” he said, “all the time I knew the monster was me. I knew that hidden inside me was the beast of my subconscious eager to break out. I’ve never been so afraid in all my life. I told Cameron I would do anything rather than have the monster return. Anything. I knew that the next time he could kill somebody, maybe me.”

“Is that the reason you came to rehab?” asked Robert.

“I hate to admit it, but yes,” said Charles. “I really didn’t care that cocaine was ruining my life, but the thought of this beast emerging and overwhelming me—I’m willing to do whatever it takes to prevent that from ever happening again. Funny, that,” he added. “My wife never refused to hand over the cocaine again.”

A madman lives within my fevered brain.

“During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank,

God only knows how often or how much.

As a matter of course my enemies referred the insanity to the drink

rather than the drink to the insanity.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

We were sitting around after dinner when John, leaning against the door, tennis racket in hand, told this story.

“I was blind drunk when I left home,” he said, “but I didn’t think my driving was impaired at all.”

We laughed at that.

“Within minutes, I was craving another beer,” he said, “so I stopped at a mini-mart and bought a six-pack. I drank most of the beer in the parking lot, then wheeled onto the road in my best imitation of Richard Petty, when I saw the flashing red and blue lights behind me.”

“Having a little trouble there?” the officer asked.

“Rather than speak, knowing I’d slur my words, I simply shook my head. The officer clearly saw the empty beer cans on the floor, but for some reason he took pity on me, knowing I would never have passed the breathalyzer test.

“Okay,” he said. ‘If you promise to go straight home and not stop on the way, I’ll let you go this one time.’”

“I think they call that enabling,” said Mike in a hushed voice.

John continued. “I drank the last two beers on the side of the road and then my craving returned. I drove two blocks to the next mini-mart and bought another six-pack. Within minutes, the flashing lights were again in my rearview mirror. A different officer not only gave me a DUI, but he handcuffed me and hauled me off to jail.

“You know, the whole time this went on, I never understood why the police were hassling me. I was a careful, safe driver, I thought. I was sure my thinking and my reflexes were completely normal.”

“That sounds really insane,” I said.

“I’ve thought the same thing myself,” said John, tossing his tennis racket into the air and catching it.

“I think you may be an alcoholic,” said Mike.

My saving grace is the angel who lives in my heart.

*“I feel that there is an angel inside me
whom I am constantly shocking.”*

—Jean Cocteau

“A number of us have considered a life in religion, though usually with little success,” said Father Mick. “My sponsor was kicked out of divinity school for playing piano at music bars. My evangelist grandfather kept a still out behind the barn. Those of us who didn’t seek a religious life at least thought about it. Strange as it may sound, in us boozers and junkies there exists a strong and unquenchable spiritual streak. Usually we’ve ended up at odds with any religious group we approached. It’s this spirituality that underlies our hunger for recovery and our search for serenity. This is our saving grace, our Angel.”

Timmy arrived at rehab with his mouth shut. A pharmacist from the Midwest, he was thin and blond and I was sure that a strong breeze would blow him over.

“I think he expects to get out of here without saying anything,” said Robert as we headed out to the evening’s AA meeting.

“Good luck with that,” I said.

“I asked him to come over after the AA meeting tonight so we could talk,” said Robert.

Timmy dutifully arrived at the apartment about 9:30 that evening, and as usual John put on another pot of coffee. We filled our cups. Timmy, true to form, sat quietly, his face filled with sorrow.

“So you’re from Dubuque?” I asked.

“Des Moines,” said Timmy, trying to smile. “Dubuque is about 200 miles east of Des Moines.”

“It’s all the Great Plains to me,” I said, trying to be funny.

“I heard your thing was speed,” said John.

“Well, er, yes,” said Timmy. “I used to go back to the pharmacy at night to do ‘paperwork,’ but instead I’d grind up Ritalin and inject myself. I eventually reached a point where I would inject myself in the morning on the way to work. No matter how upset or sad I was, the Ritalin always took away my problems.”

“Speed can do that,” I agreed, “at least for a while.”

“So I found out,” said Timmy.

“What was your sex thing?” asked Robert, who was sprawled out on the couch with a slice of left-over pizza. One of Robert’s pet theories was that everybody in rehab had a sex thing, so he always asked. The new fish always denied it, but within a few weeks you would hear them brag about spending \$3,000 in one night at a strip bar, or something similar.

“Me?” said Timmy, acting surprised. “I don’t have a sex thing! I would never do that.”

This brought a round of applause from the group. Timmy sank perceptibly deeper into his sadness.

“I hear you play the guitar,” I said, for I had seen him unload a guitar case with his suitcases. I noticed because I played as well. Everyone else had gone to bed by the time Timmy

returned with his guitar. I had trouble keeping my eyes open, but I tuned my guitar and tried to forget about the morning spiritual. We played together for over an hour, until Tommy stopped in mid-song and began to cry.

“Robert was right,” he said. “I do have a sex thing. I was having an affair with one of the salesgirls at the pharmacy. We’d meet behind the counter after lights out and play doctor. Then Alice—that’s my wife—found out, and my world started to unravel.” He wiped a sleeve across his face. “Everybody in town knows about me. I may lose the pharmacy, my license, and my family. My life is over—I’ve screwed up beyond any possible repair.”

“Maybe it’s not that bad,” I said, laying my guitar aside. “Try not to limit your Higher Power.”

“What Higher Power?” he asked. “I’ve prayed and prayed but nobody answers. It’s hopeless.”

I reached out and gave him a hug. He kissed me on the cheek.

“Maybe there’s a silent angel looking out for you,” I said, and he began to cry again.

Spiritual Tools

In every addict and alcoholic is a beast, a madman and an angel.

The beast, like Dr. Jekyll's Mr. Hyde, is released from the subconscious by drugs and alcohol.

The beast is murderous, without morals, and is present in every human being.

The madman expresses himself with thoughtless insanity of every sort.

The insanity is rooted in the mind of every drunk and junkie.

The alcoholic/addict possesses a greater degree of spirituality than the average person.

Spirituality is the saving grace of every alcoholic and addict and the key to his recovery.

The Addictive Temperament

Dr. Taylor was leading a group discussion in one of the small classrooms. The white-haired gentleman looked especially professorial in his tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, smoking his pipe.

“My friends in psychiatry don’t recognize the existence of an alcoholic personality type. I understand their reluctance to do so, but in my years in addiction medicine I’ve seen the same character traits too many times to ignore the similarities. This is not to say that a particular personality type predisposes one to addiction, not at all. Rather the traits characteristic of the addict/alcoholic at his worst were already present long before he began to drink. Obviously, you’ll need to think about this question for yourself.”

I lived in a world filled with my own fear.

*“Fear defeats more people
than any other one thing in the world.”*
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“You don’t have to be an alcoholic or an addict to live a life based on fear,” said Robert; “we just seem to do it better than anybody else.” He grinned at his cleverness as we walked from the apartments to a nearby high school stadium where we would run laps and exercise in the cool morning air before the sessions began at rehab. He and I, tubby as we were, must have looked a sight, trying to jog off twenty years of desk-sitting.

“I have trouble thinking of my life as lived in fear. I’m not afraid of anything,” I said.

“Tell me what you mean.”

Robert sat down on the bleachers and began lacing up his running shoes. “My mental life consists of two states: love and fear. When I’m in contact with a Higher Power, honestly try to do the next right thing, treat others the way I want to be treated, and try to make myself a better person every day, then it can be said I’m living a life based on love.”

“Ahh,” I said. “So when I turn my back on God, think only of myself, of how I can use others for my benefit, try to control the world and everything around me, clutch and grab for all the material goods I can get—then I’m living a life based on fear.”

From my earliest days I suffered from low self-esteem.

“Sometimes is never quite enough.

If you're flawless, then you'll win my love.”

—Alanis Morissette

“Something like that,” said Robert. He began his stretching exercises. I tried to pretend I knew what I was doing and copied him.

“It all centers on low self-esteem,” he said, starting to breathe hard. “Which goes hand in hand with fear. Fear and low self-esteem, I mean. I’ve always been afraid. As far back as I can remember I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I’d never be good enough. As a kid, I always felt different, unwanted, on the outside looking in.” He looked at me oddly as he straightened up. “I don’t understand it but I’ve always felt this way.”

I thought about what Robert said, but for me it didn't ring true. After one halting lap around the track I caught up with him at the water fountain.

"Most of us had a relatively normal upbringing," he said, panting. He took a long sip of water and straightened up. "Yet we all struggle with the idea that we're undeserving. Deep inside is the fear that no matter how hard we try, we'll never make the mark."

From somewhere deep in my mind came the memory of feeling very small and helpless. I was maybe three years old, trying to cross the road to a friend's house, but I was frightened by the cars whizzing by. All alone, staring at the traffic, the world seemed monstrously huge and I was so very small and so very afraid.

"Maybe it comes from trying to confront a world that is spinning out of control," said Robert.

Another memory leapt up, the day Mom took me to register for first grade. We walked into the school cafeteria and all I could see were monstrous stainless steel pots and pans, giant mixers, and other ominous shining devices. I knew this had to be some terrible place, like the dentist's office. Something bad was surely about to happen and I clutched at my mother's hand. Panic, confusion, and bewilderment swept over me like a tide. School must be a horrible, horrible place. I began to cry. Why would my mother bring me here? Had I done something wrong? Confused and panicked, I ran crying from the cafeteria.

"I felt I was dying inside," Robert said. I realized I had been lost in thought and had missed what he was saying. "That's when I had my first panic attack," he said. We walked silently back to the apartments, our towels posed stylishly over our shoulders. We had only managed to round the track once. "We have a lot of those."

"What?" I asked, still lost in thought.

“Panic attacks, nervous breakdowns, PTSD, phobias, obsessive compulsive stuff, all that.” He smiled. “I think we invented them.”

Because I was afraid I tried to control the world around me.

After Robert and I returned from our morning exercise, I showered and dressed. Soon Robert was knocking on the apartment door. My roommates had already left for the center. “Hurry up,” he called, pounding, “or we won’t have time for breakfast before morning spiritual.”

Out the door and walking to rehab, I asked Robert, “What did you mean about controlling behavior? What is it and what makes you think I have it?”

Robert laughed. He seemed to giggle and jiggle as he avoided the ruts in the path. “First off, you need to remember what I told you yesterday,” he said, appearing half-serious for a moment.

“Uh,” I said, not wishing to admit I had forgotten.

“If you spot it, you got it,” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” I remembered. “When I see a character defect in another person it’s because I have it myself. If I criticize someone about their behavior, it’s because I recognize that behavior in myself. Got it.”

“Because I’m a controlling S.O.B.,” he said, “I can spot controlling behavior in you, you controlling S.O.B.”

We laughed. I just managed to avoid a large tree root in the path.

“So what is it?” I asked. “Controlling behavior, I mean?”

"I live in terror of what the world and the people in it are going to do to me. Like, you know, steal my woman, invade my country, make me look bad in front of the boss. Makes my thoughts spin out of control."

"Ouch," I said, embarrassed.

"So I do my very best to control everything in the mistaken belief that if I can, I can control the chaos inside my head."

"Sounds reasonable to me," I quipped.

"Not!" said Robert. "The more I persist in trying to control the world, the more uncomfortable I get, because in reality I am powerless over this thing called life."

"So I can never win the game called *Me in control of the world*, eh?" I said.

"Right. It also explains my overwhelming drive to be in charge," said Robert. "I'm trying to control the events in my life by being successful and in charge." He stopped outside the cafeteria and leaned against the wall breathing heavily. "But, you know, as addicts and alcoholics, we have trouble dealing with success. Every time we do something really good, we tend to self-destruct. Eventually, our failures become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more we fail, the more we expect to fail."

"And the less deserving I feel, the lower my self-esteem," I said glumly. "I can hear the tape loop running in my head now, saying, *You'll never get anything right* over and over again."

"Forget that," said Robert as we entered the cafeteria. "It's breakfast!" He grabbed a tray. "Let's eat."

My friend never met a breakfast he didn't like. I laughed and followed him.

High expectations lead to disappointment.

“There were two ways to be happy:

improve your reality or lower your expectations.”

—Jodi Picoult

After the necessary cigarette and coffee break, we met in the front conference room with Jane, one of the family counselors. Jane’s henna-dyed hair was always tied back in a bun, and she brooked no cross-talk or silliness, in stark contrast to Matt’s laid-back approach. She reminded me of my high school Latin teacher, Mrs. Johnson.

“Good morning, class,” she intoned. I usually felt like answering her with the Latin student-teacher greeting that Mrs. Johnson had taught us, *Salve, magister.*

“Who has a topic for this morning?” Jane invariably asked.

The room fell mysteriously silent.

I raised my hand. “We were talking about the character of the alcoholic and addict earlier in Matt’s session.”

“I try not to come into conflict with Matt,” she said, “but let’s venture into the void, shall we? As a recovering alcoholic myself, I have a tendency toward unreasonable expectations. Anyone have a similar experience?”

“I do have a bad habit of letting my expectations get overblown,” I said.

“High expectations, low serenity,” she quoted the common axiom. “Low expectations, high serenity.”

"I can almost live on high expectations," said Vera, sitting near the front of the room. "I feed the yearning in my heart on them. Surely something glorious will happen tomorrow. Happiness is certainly just around the next bend."

"Tomorrow something magnificent will happen that will solve all my problems, right?" she asked.

"I constantly dream of winning the lottery," said Mike, knowing he was asking for trouble.

"So you buy a lottery ticket every day," she said, "even though you know the odds are millions to one."

"Yes, but those odds don't apply to me," said Mike. "I'm above the rules that ordinary people have to follow. I am the Lord of the Long Shots."

Timid Timmy raised his hand.

"I had an alcoholic uncle who lived on pipe dreams," he said.

"You do know what a pipe dream is, don't you?" she asked.

Robert, who liked poetry, spoke up. "The poet Coleridge used to smoke opium until he passed out. When he woke up he would turn his wild pipe dreams into poetry," he said.

"Go on," Jane said to Timmy.

"Anyway," he said, "Uncle Paul was always spinning elaborate get-rich schemes that were going to change his life. Once he wanted me to invest in an exhausted silver mine. He said there was still enough silver left to generate a few thousand a month, and what with the price of silver going up—well, you get it. Another time he cooked up a scheme to invest in used-up oil wells in Texas, same idea."

"He sounds like me," said Mike. "I always jump into everything whole hog. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing to excess."

"Yes, but these wild schemes never work, and I'm always left unsatisfied," said Robert.
"My high expectations always leave me cold and empty."

"High expectations, low serenity," repeated Timmy. "Yes, I know that one."

Jane almost twinkled.

I am my own worst critic.

Lunch tray in hand, I sat down between Robert and Timmy. Mike had arrived earlier and was sitting across from me, sipping his coffee.

"Good morning, gentlemen," I said. Then added, "Good morning, Timmy."

Timmy smiled. "Hello," he said. Following our guitar session we had become friends.

"Timmy," said Robert, munching on his salad, "are you still being too hard on yourself?"

Timmy blushed but said nothing.

"We are hard on ourselves," said Mike. "I'm my own worst critic."

"I'm certainly an expert at putting myself down," said Robert. "In fact, I invented my own personal Ass-Kicking-Machine. Just drop a quarter in the slot, bend over and get a royal ass-kicking."

Timmy laughed. "You're right," he said. "I remember the day I graduated from pharmacy school. I felt that somehow the whole graduation process was a sham."

"Did you cheat on your final exams?" asked Robert.

“No! But I felt like I didn’t deserve the honor. I just knew someday the big people would discover I was a fraud and come and take my license away.”

“The big people may come and do just that,” said Mike. “It’s that old self-fulfilling prophecy again.”

There was a momentary pause as embarrassed forks filled mouths.

“One of the best ways you can tell if someone’s finally getting into recovery,” said Mike between sips of coffee, “is they learn to take a compliment. If you try to give a newcomer a compliment, they just shrug it off—they know they’re undeserving.”

“Isn’t there a poem about banging your head against the wall until it comes back bloody, beaten and bowed?” asked Timmy. “Seems my head is always bloody.”

“I think it’s *My head is bloody, but unbowed*, you know, that *Invictus* thing,” said Robert, always one for quoting things.

“Well, my head is definitely beaten down,” said Mike. “For most of my medical career, I felt undeserving of the respect and the income I received. Inside my head, the tape loop of my mistakes ran on and on and on. I could find no peace anywhere. I couldn’t enjoy life. I was always waiting for the other shoe to fall.”

“I know what you mean,” said Timmy, his head down.

I found unexpected solace in The Prayer of Saint Francis.

*“Prayer is less about changing the world
than it is about changing ourselves.”*

—David J. Wolpe

We cleared the lunch table and headed outside.

"Hey, dudes," said Mike, clapping Timmy on the shoulder. "The weather's nice today. Let's go outside and get some fresh air."

"You mean, go outside and smoke a cigarette," said Timmy.

"Maybe we can find some peace under a shady tree," said Robert. "Shall we go?"

With a chorus of spiritual grumbling, we rose as one and dumped our lunch garbage on the way out the door, heading for the smoking patio. Reggie, our southern-fried preacher from Memphis, was already there.

"What's on your mind, dude?" asked Mike. "Care to share?"

Reggie held a printed page in his hand and waved it at us.

"I've been really down on myself lately," he said, "but I found this today."

"Do tell," I said.

"I told my congregation that I walked with the Lord," said Reggie, "but I was lying. The more I preached about loving God, the more I felt like a hypocrite. I was sure God had abandoned me. I started isolating, hiding from my flock. I avoided my friends and family and quit answering phone calls. Alcohol became my only friend. I slipped into a morbid depression. I was in hell." He closed his eyes for a moment. "But this morning Father Mick gave me this." He looked down at the paper in his hand and read aloud.

Lord, make me a channel of thy peace,

That where there is hatred, I may bring love;

That where there is wrong, I may bring thy spirit of forgiveness;

That where there is discord, I may bring harmony;

That where there is error, I may bring truth;

That where there is doubt, I may bring faith;

That where there is despair, I may bring hope;

That where there are shadows, I may bring light;

That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted;

To understand, than to be understood;

To love, than to be loved.

For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.

It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.

It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.

“St. Francis’s prayer,” whispered Robert into my ear.

“Francis of Assisi?” I asked, and Robert nodded.

Reggie gave me his copy of the prayer. I folded it carefully and put it in my pocket.

Spiritual Tools

The opposite of love, fear is a dominant factor in the life of the alcoholic/addict.

Low self-esteem fuels my fear of not being good enough.

When I spot a character defect in another person, it is because I have the same shortcoming.

Fear pushes me to control the world in an attempt to control the chaos within myself.

Excessive self-criticism troubles every alcoholic/addict.

Surely something wonderful will happen tomorrow that will solve all my problems.

Overblown expectations always lead to disappointment.

The Prayer of St. Francis offers a time-honored approach to dealing with life.

There is a child inside me terrified of a world he cannot control.

“The Child is father of the Man;

I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.”

—William Wordsworth

Jane had asked one of the women to bring in a picture of herself as a baby, and we passed it around. It seemed to me a fairly unremarkable photo of a two-year-old who would grow up to be a physician and a Demerol addict.

Jane held up the photo and asked, “What do you see?” After the usual banal compliments, she shook her head. “Nope. What I see here is King Baby trying to control the adult person. King Baby is a way to think of our behavior as adult alcoholics and addicts. King Baby lives a fear-based life in which he is the most important person in the world. If he’s wet, hungry, or cold, people come running to tend to his needs. He is the personification of a dominating self-will run riot. Such behavior is useful when we’re in diapers, but not as an adult.”

I looked again at the photo. This time I saw a young child whose eyes were filled with fear. She reached out to control everything in her world to avoid acknowledging her own inadequacies.

My mother used to show me a picture of myself as a baby. In my memory, I saw a child fearful of a world he could not understand. My King Baby was terrified of everything.

I could not deal with my painful emotions, so I shut them down.

“And I've never gotten used to it, I've just learned to turn it off

Either I'm too sensitive or else I'm getting soft.”

—Bob Dylan

The sound of feet running up and down the hall interrupted the class, followed by the sound of more feet and yelling, then the yelling became louder and more insistent.

“Where's the fire extinguisher?” said the first voice.

Then a second voice—“Somebody hit the fire alarm!”

And finally, “FIRE!”

We were out of our seats and running for the exit before the fire alarm began to shatter the air. Outside we huddled up in the parking lot. People poured from every exit until almost a hundred of us were milling around. Bright red fire engines arrived, and figures wrapped in yellow suits and carrying oxygen hurried into the building. There was no smoke, no sign of flames.

“Where's the fire?” asked Bill, the new guy in our apartment. Bill was an anesthesiologist from Augusta who didn't think he had a problem but was in rehab *just to be sure*, he said.

“Don't know yet,” I said. In a few minutes, we learned that the fire was in a wastebasket in Administration.

"I'll bet that Jerry dumped his pipe in the trash can again," said Robert. "Hey, isn't it time for lunch?" The cafeteria was in the next building over, the one without the fire trucks. "C'mon," he said. "Let's get something to eat."

The specialty of the day was baked chicken. Robert examined the chicken on his plate as if it were a specimen to be dissected.

"Chicken flambeau, I suspect," he said. "Must be a refugee from the fire sale next door." He turned the chicken over with his fork. "Fire sale, heavily discounted goods. Sounds like us—heavily discounted lives. All with substantially lowered value."

We laughed. "Fire Sale" was the nickname given to the Tuesday afternoon session that everyone attended, not just physicians and nurses but the nonmedical types as well: lawyers, dentists, and business people, anybody with enough money to cover the cost of country club rehab. And today was Tuesday.

After lunch, we assembled in the large hall next to the cafeteria. The rehab founder, Dr. Taylor, had dragged himself down from the ivory tower to address the multitudes.

"Good afternoon," he said in glowing tones. "Today, I would like us to discuss the issues of the heart. Why do we live in our heads? Why do we shut down our feelings? And why should we change?"

"Uh-oh," said Robert, digging me in the ribs with his elbow.

"Who will start?" asked Dr. Taylor.

The room was quiet for a long moment until Timmy spoke.

"I don't understand," he said. "Of course, I live in my head. Where else would I be? And I have feelings just like everyone else. I don't understand."

"Robert," said Dr. Taylor, "would you care to enlighten Timmy?"

"I told ya so," whispered Robert under his breath. In full voice, he said, "Yes, sir. I don't know about Timmy, but for me, growing up, I found that my feelings just tore me up. They hurt so much I learned to shut them down."

Suddenly I remembered the emotional pain I felt as a teenager. Emotions I didn't recognize began swirling around me. I raised my hand.

"When I was fifteen, my brother died of leukemia," I said. "He'd been sick for less than a year and he died just before Christmas. I can remember feeling like my heart had been torn to pieces, like giant hands ripping a phone book apart." I paused for breath and to let my heart rate slow.

"Then, suddenly, almost exactly a year later, my father died of a heart attack," I said. "I remember thinking, *Well, I've done this before and I know what this funeral stuff is all about. I know what to do.* But the experience wasn't like before. I felt numb all over. It was as if a giant emotional clamp had come down over my heart and shut down all my feelings. Somewhere deep inside me, a voice said, *Enough. You've had enough pain. You won't feel anything now. You must protect yourself.* I think that clamp has always been with me, shutting down anything that threatened to upset me. Has anyone else experienced anything like this? Or am I just nuts?"

"I'm sure you're more than a little crazy," said Dr. Taylor, "but let's see who else has had a similar experience. A show of hands, please."

Hands went up from over two-thirds of the audience. I was shocked.

My head and my heart are out of balance.

"I remained too much inside my head

and ended up losing my mind.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

Timmy, Mike and I walked back to the apartments after lunch. I was hoping for a long nap before dinner, which would be followed by a meeting at the Triangle AA Club in Buckhead. The Fire Sale session had exhausted me. I crashed out on the couch, but Mike went straight for the kitchen, and as the smell of fresh roast coffee filled the room, Bill walked in. I propped myself up and opened one eye.

Timmy sat cross-legged on the floor. “I think I feel ...”

Mike interrupted. “Boy, is that an alcoholic talking. He doesn’t feel something. He *thinks* he feels something. Anyone with a normal head and a normal heart would simply say, *I feel*. Earth People don’t feel with their brains, they feel with their hearts. Timmy, on the other hand, only thinks he feels.”

“Huh?” said Timmy.

“Most people think with their heads and feel with their hearts,” said Robert, pouring fresh coffee and scrounging for leftovers. “But we drunks and junkies learned long ago to shut down our hearts. They simply cause us too much pain, so we avoid feeling anything. We just think we feel.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Timmy.

“We don’t do this on purpose,” said Mike. “I didn’t wake up one morning and decide to shut down all my emotions. My problem is that I’m just too sensitive. My heart is much more sensitive to pain than Earth People’s. A drive-by shooting, an airliner crash in Turkey, an

earthquake in Haiti, all provoke enough pain in me to require numbing myself with my drug of choice.”

“Like seeing the hypocrisy of the world and wanting to cry?” asked Timmy.

“Yet,” said Robert, “as alcoholics, we get accused of lying our asses off. It may be hard to believe, but we alcoholics start out as the most honest of creatures,” said Mike. “The problem is we can’t tolerate the dishonesty we see in the world. An Earth Person may pray in church, spend the afternoon in bed with his neighbor’s wife then top off the day with an evening of cheating on his taxes. The hypocrisy we see causes us untold pain.”

“In the end,” said Mike, “I ended up more dishonest than anybody. I used denial to cover the pain of my wrongdoing. I wore a mask and shut down my heart to avoid the pain.”

“Doesn’t that leave me unbalanced?” asked Timmy. “I mean, I thought ...”

“No thinking,” I said. “No thinking allowed by new fish. Just shut up and listen.” I had heard that more than once since I got to rehab.

“Of course,” said Mike. “Normally, the heart and mind balance each other. Around here,” he waved his arms around, “the mind’s been given unfettered control, and we’re the result.”

At that point I lay back on the couch and pulled a blanket over me. The last thing I remember hearing was Timmy’s soft voice.

“But I don’t understand,” he said.

When I close my mind to new ideas I blind myself to the truth.

“Attempting to debate with a person who has abandoned reason

is like giving medicine to the dead.”

—Thomas Paine

The morning dawned gray and overcast. I pulled the covers up and hugged myself. It felt good to wake up sober. Maybe this was going to work after all. I slid from my warm bed and put on the coffee. In a few minutes we were on our way to the cafeteria for breakfast.

“That reminds me,” said Mike, “of another one of your character faults.”

“Criminy!” I said. “At least wait until we eat.”

“The tide and your character defects wait for no man,” he intoned.

“Go on,” said Timmy. “I wanna hear.”

“Well, just for Timmy.” Mike smiled. “Okay, then: *open-mindedness*.”

“What about it?” I asked.

“You don’t have it,” said Mike. “As an addict, you are one close-minded S.O.B. As a group we’ll argue a point until we’re blue in the face. Our mind is made up long before anyone begins to speak. You wouldn’t change your mind if it hare-lipped Granny and all her poor relations.”

“Whoa!” I said. “Am I really that bad?”

“You are,” said Robert, wiping the sleep from his eyes. “And worse.”

“And me, too?” asked Timmy, trying to be one of the boys.

“Yes, you, too,” said Mike. “It’s a trait we all share.”

Reggie came up alongside us as we entered the cafeteria.

“What’s the deal with holding onto fixed opinions?” asked Timmy.

“As a kid I ached for the approval of others,” Robert said. “If I knew everything, I thought people would like me, so I became an expert on everything. To maintain my intellectual superiority, I had to defend my ideas against all comers.”

“How long ago was this?” asked Mike. “I mean, since you were a kid?”

“About six weeks ago,” said Robert, smiling.

“And what about the need to always be right?” asked Reggie.

“The trouble with that,” said Mike, “is that if I’m right then everybody else has to be wrong. Bet you never thought of that. What are the consequences of carrying around all these fixed opinions?”

“Then there’s no reason for me to listen to the good advice of others,” I admitted.

“My best opinions are mostly trash,” said Robert. “Matt once told me that *everything I think I know is wrong*. All the old ideas I had about virtue, behavior and relationships were wrong or at least not useful. They all have to be jettisoned and replaced with new ideas that can change my life for the better. Until I open my mind to new ideas, I can’t begin to grow.”

Spiritual Tools

The child within me is terrified by a world he doesn't understand and can't control.

My oversensitive heart cannot handle emotional pain, so my mind shuts down my heart.

A mind untempered by the heart unleashes powerful self-will, with disastrous results.

My low self-esteem drives my need to feel superior.

To maintain my false sense of superiority, I must always be right.

If I am right, then everybody else in the room has to be wrong.

Close-mindedness blocks new ideas and prevents spiritual growth.

I have a hole in my chest that can't be filled.

*“Man cannot live without joy;
therefore when he is deprived of true spiritual joys it is necessary
that he become addicted to carnal pleasures.”*

—Thomas Aquinas

Matt led the first session of the day. The morning light coming through the windows of the classroom was soft and serene, so I took a seat up front near the window. It was Wednesday and it was show and tell day.

“What do you know about the character of a person who’s addicted to drugs or alcohol?” asked Matt. Matt was older than I, with salty gray hair and a thin frame. The sharpness of his clear blue eyes gave the lie to the years his body carried.

“It’s bad!” yelled someone from the back of the room.

“Wrong answer,” said Matt. “Try again.”

“I have a hole in my chest I can never fill,” said Vera, sitting across from me.

“That’s a good start,” he said. “Are you drunks and junkies uncomfortable in your own skin?” he asked.

A chorus of hoots and hollers erupted in the room.

“What does it mean, *I have a hole in my chest?*” asked Matt. “Robert?”

“For some reason,” Robert began, “I have a yearning, gnawing feeling, a craving if you will, that’s always there. I’ve never felt truly comfortable in any situation. Always out of place, irritable or edgy.”

“Restless, irritable and discontent!” came the same voice from the back of the room. I would have said the voice was Mike’s, but he was sitting next to me.

“Good,” said Matt. “Go on.”

“Then I discovered marijuana,” said Robert, grinning. “A few tokes and I felt great. I could relax at last. I could talk to girls. I was finally at peace with myself.”

“Then what happened?” asked Matt.

“Pot led to snorting cocaine, which led to crack,” said Robert. “Then the roof fell in.”

“Did it hurt?” asked Mike.

“It still hurts,” said Robert.

“What about you, preacher,” he said, looking at Reggie.

“With me it was alcohol,” said my friend. “As my discomfort grew worse, I found that a mixed drink at dinner really took the edge off. I called it *Attitude Adjustment Hour*.”

“Then what happened?” asked Matt with his avuncular smile.

“One drink led imperceptibly to two,” said Reggie. “Before I realized what was happening, my using had grown to a bottle every night. Every time I went out I always carried a flask of whiskey with me.”

“So we have a hunger, an aching in our chest quenched only by booze or drugs,” said Matt. “Subtly, almost imperceptibly, we cross over the line into addiction.”

Groans from all. He turned and stared at me.

“I found that other things could fill the hole, but only for a while,” I said. “Like women, trips to Europe, buying an expensive new car.”

“And …?” asked Matt.

"At first," I said, "the women filled the front seat and the world noticed how cool I was.

Then, the women left for a faster car, the first car payment came due, and someone keyed the hood of the car."

"You lost your buzz, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Then there's the idea of cross-addiction," said Matt. "Once I cross the line into addiction, any drug can cause a relapse. Deanie, , "you and I were talking before the session about your experience. Would you care to share?"

"Sure," she said. Denise was short, no more than five foot, with short cropped brown hair. A pediatrician by trade, she seemed the essence of the calm caring physician. "When I was in college, I experimented with a lot of different drugs, but I got stuck on the combination of speed and pot. When I mixed the two, I got most incredible clear-headed high. I was completely functional, or at least I thought I was, and was stoned at the same time. Heaven! But I had to flunk out of college before I realized that I couldn't stop. I was introduced to NA, Narcotics Anonymous, and thought I was rid of my problem forever, at least until I had gall bladder surgery. In my shame, I neglected to mention my drug history to my surgeon so they used a morphine pump for post-op pain. With the pump you just push the button and get a dose of morphine any time you want. Heaven, part two. By the time I was discharged, I was in full-blown relapse and within a week I was shooting heroin. Fortunately my partner spotted the problem and got PRN to intervene."

Vera was next.

"My parents used to make beer in the basement and they would let me taste some every now and then, but frankly the taste of it made me sick," she said. "And I never could stand the

aroma of whiskey or how it made me feel the next day, so I was never much of a drinker, not even in college. I did smoke some pot, but in med school I just didn't have time for fooling around. When I joined the faculty, I would attend recruiting dinners where potential new professors were being wined and dined. The wine gave me a buzz that reminded me of pot. I found I enjoyed the yeasty aroma and I never got a hangover. Fine wine was part of the good life I had worked so hard to earn. In time I got to where I would only eat lunch at restaurants with a wine list. I had no idea how bad my boozing had gotten until the Department Chairman showed up one morning with a ticket to Atlanta."

Blanche was sitting up front and Matt called on her next.

"I'm fifty-seven and I'm from Alabama, the old South don't you know," said the petite Southern Belle. "I started on mint juleps when I was sixteen, all the debs did, don't you know. In my sorority at Ole Miss drinking was the in thing and of course I went along, I mean, doesn't everyone drink at parties and whenever a young lady needs to soothe her spirits just a bit. And I've been drinking a little since, which is really the polite thing to do in the best social circles don't you know, but really not that much really. And I heard that a little wine is good for your heart, all you doctors should know that. My children made me come here. I'm sure when I dry out a bit, everything will be just fine. Have you heard about how good the new wines from Australia are this year?"

Matt stared sadly at Blanche but said nothing. Then he turned to face Dolores, a very attractive woman sitting in the back. She looked lost. Like Blanche, Dolores was a newcomer, a nurse married to a physician who had dumped her at the door to rehab and left. She was addicted to heroin and had run through over \$100,000 of her husband's money before he got his credit cards back. Now, he wanted none of her.

"What did you use to fill the hole in your chest, Dolores?" he asked.

"Pain pills, at first," she said. "Soon I was stealing morphine from the narcotics cabinet at work and after I got fired I took to buying heroin off the street. When I ran out of money I would screw for dope. I screwed a lot of guys and did a lot of smack."

"How's that going for you?" asked Matt.

"I've lost fifty pounds, I have tracks up and down my arms, my nursing license is gone and my husband has disowned me."

"What else?"

"I'm HIV positive."

I was so uncomfortable I could bust, or get drunk.

"If we were to live, we had to be free of anger.

The grouch and the brainstorm were not for us.

They may be the dubious luxury of normal men,

but for alcoholics these things are poison."

—Big Book of AA

Reggie was cooking supper for us, rice and beans with cornbread. Eldon, a newly arrived preacher from a small town in the panhandle of Florida, sat surrounded by his suitcases, his jaw clenched. He sighed, rubbed his head with one hand, then licked his lips and sighed again.

"Would you like a drink, Eldon?" asked Reggie.

"Boy, would I," said Eldon. "What've you got? I thought we weren't allowed to drink here. Do you have bourbon?"

"Not exactly." Reggie's smiled. "But we do have iced tea."

Eldon's eyes rolled back in his head and he chuckled. "Should've known," he said.

"And I thought you guys were drinkers like me."

"We are, preacher," I said, "except we don't have to do it anymore."

"I don't have to," he said, "I just want to."

"Are you angry?" asked Robert. "You sound like you might be angry."

"I'm a pastor in the Methodist church," he said. "How could I possibly be angry?"

"Cause we drunks are always angry about something," I said.

"Well, I don't think I feel angry," said Eldon.

"But you do look just a sight uncomfortable," Robert said, giggling. "*Restless, irritable and discontent* is what they call it around here. So stressed out you could bust. Or get drunk. Right?"

Eldon was silent.

"What brought you here, anyway, Reverend?" I asked. "And don't tell me it was the taxi."

"Ha, ha, that's so funny," said Eldon. "If you must know, the wife of the head deacon made an unfair accusation against me."

"Which was?" Reggie asked, serving up plates of food.

"She said I was having an affair with her," Eldon's anger was rising.

"And were you?" I asked.

"Of course I was," shouted Eldon, standing up, "but it was unfair of her to say so."

Reggie held out a plate for Eldon. Eldon smashed it with his fist and stomped from the room.

“Uh-oh,” said Timmy. “He forgot his suitcases.”

Even when I wasn’t drinking I was an alcoholic.

“Reality is just a crutch for people who can’t handle drugs.”

—Robin P. Williams

The overcast sky had lifted and the pale sun was warm on my face. Timmy and I were sitting on the cool grass behind the apartments, soaking up the sun.

“With your superior intelligence I’m surprised you weren’t asked to run for King of the Universe,” Timmy said, grinning. “I hear the position may be coming open soon.”

“You’re so cute,” I said., “But you know, they say a dry drunk would make a perfect King of the World.”

“I don’t understand,” said Timmy. “What’s a dry drunk?”

“A dry drunk is an alcoholic who, for whatever reason, quits drinking. He loses the chemical coping that booze provides but hasn’t developed sufficient serenity to fend off the slings and arrows of the world. He’s very uncomfortable in his own skin. You remember when we visited Big Jed’s family?”

Just before Thanksgiving, Timmy, Mike and I visited Big Jed’s parents. Big Jed’s mom was the most gracious and genuine of Southern hostesses. Knowing we would be stuck in rehab over Thanksgiving, she cooked a huge Southern-style turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

George, Big Jed's dad, was a real honest-to-goodness rocket scientist at MacDonnell-Douglas.

Big Jed's parents seemed exceptionally normal until after dinner.

"When I was in college," said George, the workaholic aerospace engineer, "I tried drinking beer, but I liked it so much I knew I'd better leave it alone."

As he spoke of his son's problems, his hands gripped the arms of his chair. Both Mike and I noticed that his knuckles were white.

"I can't stand spending all that money for Jed's rehab. It really gets me," he said. "I can't believe those people know what they're doing. Don't get me wrong, I love my son, but he sure costs me a lot of money."

"You design experimental planes?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, I lead a team of twenty engineers," he replied, "so you might think the big wigs would listen to me. I do all the damn work and those guys take all the credit. Those guys never had an original idea in their whole life. If it weren't for me, nothing would ever get done."

His hands were still gripping the arms of his chair and his knuckles were still white.

Back at the apartments, Mike said: "I think Big Jed's dad may be a dry drunk. He seems to have all the problems of an alcoholic, just not the drinking. You saw him white-knuckling the arms of his chair?"

"Yup," I said. "He works at least ten hours a day and takes his work home every night. His job has become his life just as medicine became mine. Being an aerospace dude is more important than anything else. And he knows he could do a better job running the world if only people would listen to him."

"We found relief with better chemistry," said Mike.

"I'm all in favor of better chemistry as long as it includes Ritalin," said Timmy.

“But now we have a better way,” Mike said.

Timmy just smiled.

Spiritual Tools

There exists an unquenchable yearning within every alcoholic that can only be eased by using.

Unfulfilled yearning leads to restless irritability and explosive anger.

Without chemical coping skills, I am uncomfortable in my own skin.

In addition to drugs and booze, I can ease my discomfort with gambling, sex, work, and all
the things that money can buy, but these comforts are always short-lived.

Even when I am not drinking, I am still an alcoholic.

Without treatment for my addiction, I am bound to be restless, irritable and discontent.

I have three basic fears that pervade every part of my life.

*"If you listen to your fears,
you will die never knowing what a great person
you might have been."*

—Robert H. Schuller

The next morning Eldon was no better.

“Good morning, Eldon,” said Matt, as we settled down for his session.

Eldon just glowered. He was staring out the window at the falling leaves. It was late November and the air had a chill on it. So did Eldon.

“I guess anger is as good a topic as any,” said Matt. “Why are we angry?”

“I can answer this one,” Timmy said, forgetting himself and standing up. “We’re angry because we’re afraid.”

“And what are we afraid of?” asked Matt.

“Robert told me that I have three basic fears,” said Timmy. “I’m afraid of losing what I have, of not getting what I want, and that if you really knew who I was, you wouldn’t like me. These fears haunt me and generate all my character defects. They prevent me from finding any sense of peace or joy.”

“Very good, Timmy,” said Matt. “You may sit down now. Vera, how does your fear control you?”

"Well," said Vera, "I'll do most anything to control the world around me. I try to manipulate people, places and things. If can control the outer world, somehow that'll control the chaos inside my head."

"How did that work for you?" asked Matt.

"Not very well," said Vera. "Like Eldon, I ended up here."

To hide my fear, I magnified my own self-importance.

"The narcissist's secret to success: self-aggrandizement."

—Sir Edward Burne

"Self-aggrandizement," said Jane, ruler in hand, ready to rap the knuckles of anyone who offended. "Who can tell me about self-aggrandizement?"

Robert leaned over and whispered to me.

"Best get the torture over with quickly," he said. Then aloud, "Self-aggrandizement is when I falsely exaggerate my own self-importance. But what I'm really doing is hiding my low self-esteem."

"You are a dirty little boy, you are," said the unflappable Jane, "but out of our infinite kindness we shall permit you to live at least one more day."

"Blessings be unto the compassionate Jane," Robert quipped.

Still striding the room, Jane said, "And how does the self-important person act, pray tell?"

“Self-importantly?” I asked, the words leaping unbidden from my foolish mouth. Jane headed for me, ruler raised, when Mike spoke.

“He comes to believe in his own importance,” said Mike. “He’s better than everyone else, and he doesn’t mind telling you.”

“Go on,” said Jane, her gaze still fixed on me.

“One does find oneself somewhat above the rules,” John said. “Why, I can recall once when Lin said, *Rules were made for people who can’t think for themselves.*”

Jane’s ruler came down smartly on top of my head right where my bald spot is. I nearly said *ouch* but thought better of it.

“Explain yourself, Old Man,” said Jane, standing over me.

“Well, when I was a young man,” I began, “my mother told me *Think for yourself.*”

“Good advice,” she said. “A wise woman, I’m sure.”

“But,” I continued, “being a good alcoholic, I translated that into *Rules are made for people who can’t think for themselves.* By virtue of my advanced brain, I was entitled to make up my own rules. Being a person of superior intelligence, I no longer had to follow the rules that everyone else did.”

“I suppose you used your superior intelligence to tell other people what they needed to do?” asked Jane.

“Well, I certainly tried.”

“And how did that work for you?” asked Jane.

“It got me here,” I said, rubbing the top of my head.

I wear a mask because I’m afraid that if you knew who I was, you wouldn’t like me.

*“Everyone is a moon,
and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.”*

—Mark Twain

Rummaging in his closet, Bill found a bag full of streamers and a zombie Halloween mask.

“It belonged to Merle,” I said. “We had a Halloween party just before he left and everybody dressed up.”

Bill put the mask on and stomped around the room in his best monster imitation. He paraded into the living room where Mike and Timmy were on the couch.

“Need meat! Eat, NOW!” bellowed Bill.

“Get outa here witch yo’ bad self,” said Mike, grinning.

“Oooh!” said Timmy, “I love masks. Let me wear it.”

“You should,” said Mike. “All good addicts and alcoholics wear a mask every day.”

“How’s that?” asked Timmy.

“I wore a mask to hide my low self-esteem,” said Mike. “I hid because I was afraid that if you really knew who I was you wouldn’t like me.”

Robert walked in munching a candy bar and plopped down on the couch. “We think we’re fooling everybody,” he said, “but in truth, everybody knows we’re drunks and junkies, and we’re only fooling ourselves.”

“The mask helps me hide my bad memories,” said Mike. “It helps cover up the pain.”

"I think I know what you mean," said Timmy. "I was sure I was fooling everybody at the pharmacy, but in the end they were the ones who called the Pharmacy Board. They knew all along."

"I used my mask to look good in front of others," Robert admitted. "I invented a whole persona just to impress you and keep my true self hidden."

"I know I spent a lot of effort trying to please everybody," said Timmy. "I wanted to look good. I even went to my wife's hairdresser and got my hair styled. I got myself elected as a delegate to the Iowa Pharmacy Convention so I could admire myself in the mirror."

"Poor little Timmy Pharma-man," teased Robert swallowing the last of the candy bar and licking his fingers. "Nobody loves him."

I use denial to hide the awful truth of my using.

"Denial ain't just a river in Egypt."

—Mark Twain

The group busted out laughing. By now everybody but big Robert was sitting cross-legged on the floor. I felt like we ought to be passing a joint around or something. Actually, it was time for our house meeting to begin. Once a week we had an AA meeting in our apartment. Wee Willy, our personal Irish leprechaun, and Reggie, our connection to Martin Luther King, Jr., joined us on the floor. Slowly and with much apparent pain, Robert slid off the couch and onto the carpet.

"Let's have a meeting," he called. After a moment of silence Robert asked the group for a topic to discuss.

"I've got one," said Wee Willy. "Let's talk about *denial*, a river in Egypt. Personally, I've never been bothered by denial, so I'd like to hear what you blokes have to say."

"Tell us about your wife," said Mike, grinning, for he knew the drill.

"If you had my wife," said Wee Willy, "you'd drink, too."

"I hear you don't drink anymore," said Mike, still grinning.

"Yes," said Wee Willy, "but I don't drink any less."

"Giving up drinking altogether, eh?" goaded Robert.

"Absolutely," said Wee Willy. "Now I use a straw."

"And I bet you'd never lie about your drinking, would you?" I asked.

"Who me?" said the man from Galway, enjoying his own roasting.

When the laughter subsided, Robert looked squarely at Bill, the newcomer from Augusta.

"Bill," Robert said, "I'm concerned that you aren't taking rehab seriously."

"Well, I'm definitely *not* an alcoholic," said Bill. "I mean, I love you guys, but I'm not like you at all. Sure, I drink some, but the Hospital Board overreacted when they made me come to rehab."

A groan went up in the room. John put down his tennis racket and got up to make another pot of coffee. It was getting late already, but morning was not something we had to worry about tonight. Bill was turning out to be a hard sell.

"So, you're not an alcoholic?" I asked Bill for the umpteenth time.

"Me? Heck, no. I can quit any time I want. They thought they smelled it on my breath in the operating room, that's all."

“But we all agree it would be a real problem if an anesthesiologist showed up in the operating room drunk, right?” I asked.

“Of course, but I’d never do that,” said Bill.

“Never,” quipped Mike.

“Bill,” I said, “my patients dying of cancer would come up with the most elaborate schemes to deny the fatal nature of their illness. We’d talk about going to Disney World or Jamaica when it was all they could do to go from bed to chair. A man who knows he’s about to die still needs to get out of bed, pull on his pants, and prepare for the day. For Earth People, denial is a useful tool. Just not for us.”

“I’m not dying of cancer,” said Bill. “I just drink too much.” The first hint of understanding and acceptance settled on his face. “You know I’d never compromise the safety of a patient. Never.”

“We know,” said Mike, “but you’ve got to quit drinking.”

“I know,” said Bill. “But I don’t know how.” He looked helplessly at Mike and me. “A river in Egypt, huh?”

“A river in Egypt, called denial,” said Wee Willy.

My secrets will kill me.

“A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.”

—Oscar Wilde

Leon, the rabbi from Cleveland, was holding forth at morning spiritual. He had his prayer shawl wrapped around his shoulders and his hands folded in prayer.

“Good morning to you all,” he said, fidgeting nervously with a button on his sleeve. “My name’s Leon. If I seem a trifle nervous today, it’s because I feel like a lion about to be eaten by the Christians. Seriously, my buddy Jaime, who was here last year, said that as a Jew, this was a tough room to play. Jaime said that they’d try to turn me into a Christian. I’m beginning to understand that now, though I don’t see why Moses couldn’t run a good rehab.

“Today,” he said, “I’m going to share one of those deep dark secrets that I’ve been hiding. They say that if I tell on my disease, it loses power over me. So I’m going to tell on myself and maybe I’ll get better. My secret—hold onto your hats—my secret is that I like to play the martyr. Imagine that.”

The room busted out laughing.

“No matter what happened,” he said, “I was always the victim. Nothing was ever my fault. But that always put me in a bad place, so I drank. First, a little Manischewitz with dinner, then some with lunch. Eventually I moved up to Napa Valley wines. I can’t remember when I went from being a social drinker to a real souse. By the way, did you hear the one about the alcoholic who only drank with the crowd? Said he was a ‘social’ drinker. If anybody was having a drink, he said, so shall I. Get it? So shall I?”

I kept waiting for the shepherd’s crook to come out, but it never did.

“Okay,” he said, grinning. “I hope you enjoyed the show. I’ll be appearing nightly at the local AA meeting house and be sure to bring your yarmulke. But we won’t be serving any wine.”

I am happy to say he received a standing ovation for his efforts.

I realized I had been self-centered, selfish, and dishonest.

“The world spins, but not around you!”

—Jasper Comstock

“When did I become so self-centered?” asked Timmy. We were sitting at the kitchen table in the apartment while he worked on his moral inventory, writing down all the bad things he had done so he could see the character defects that shaped them.

“I’ve made this list of my mistakes,” he said, “and figured out which of my character defects led to each one. For example, I lied about stealing Ritalin so no one would discover my using. I was afraid I’d lose my license or worse. In other words, I was afraid, which led to my dishonesty.”

“Sounds right,” I said. “Go on.”

“But, each of these examples ends with me being selfish,” Timmy said. “Dishonest sometimes. Lazy sometimes. Sometimes afraid, but always selfish.” He shook his head. “I never thought of myself that way before. Timmy is a selfish person.”

I picked up the Big Book of AA and read: “Selfishness, self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles.”

Timmy hung his head with his hands covering his ears.

Spiritual Tools

The three basic fears are: fear of not getting what I want; fear of losing what I have; and fear that if you knew who I was, you wouldn't like me.

I try to overcome my fear by exaggerating my own importance.

By virtue of my exalted mind, I came believe I was above the rules.

I wear a mask to hide my fears and insecurities and to make me look good.

Denial is a shield I use to hide my drinking from the world and from myself.

Keeping secrets from myself and others—denying my wrongdoings—will keep me using.

By examining my wrongdoings I can understand the character defects that drive them.

I manipulate other people into enabling my addiction.

*“The worst thing about enabling
is that it almost always feels like the right thing to do.”*

—Jim LaPierre

“Enabling,” said Matt leaning back against the table at the front of the classroom and sipping his coffee. “In the days of my using, I became adept at manipulating others so they would support my using. Or at least, not slow me down. What about you, Timmy?”

“I would lie to my wife so I could go to the pharmacy at night and get high at and screw the saleslady.”

“That’s good, I guess,” said Matt. “What did you tell her?”

“Uh...” began Timmy.

“That he had an itch that needed scratching!” Mike interjected.

Laughter filled the room. Timmy blushed. “I told her that I needed to go work on the books, or that the auditor was coming, whatever I could think of,” he said. “She never said anything, never complained.”

“My kind of woman!” said Mike.

“Hush, Mike,” said Matt. “Timmy, you can’t have an affair and be in recovery. Understand? Leon?”

“I used to come home drunk at 3 a.m. every morning, park the car in the garage and then fall asleep in it,” said Leon. “Dutifully, my wife would get out of bed, haul me inside, and tuck me into bed. Did it every night, at least until her counselor told her she was enabling me.”

“What did she do then?” asked Matt.

“She let me sleep in the car,” said Leon.

A voice from the front of the room spoke. “One time I got drunk, took my pistol out to the country club, and shot up all the ducks in the pond. All anyone ever said was, *Good shooting, doc.*”

Matt laughed. “We don’t care if we hurt other people in the process. All we care about is getting what we want.”

“And we all know that Timmy is a selfish person,” whispered Timmy.

“We make other people dependent on us,” said Matt, “or do the opposite, allow ourselves to be dependent on someone else.”

“I never did that,” I said, to a chorus of boos.

I was afraid to ask for help lest you discover who I really was.

It was Jane’s turn again. I had taken to sitting in the front of the room, thinking I should keep my friends close and my enemies closer. The topic today was asking for help. Jane was staring straight at me over the top of her granny glasses.

“Well,” she said, reminding me ever so much of my ex-mother-in-law, who worked part-time as a harpy. “Why couldn’t you ask for help, Linville?”

“Frankly, I was afraid you’d think that I wasn’t as smart as you,” I said. “I was afraid you’d discover that I was an alcoholic and an addict.”

“Uh, Ms. Jergens, I mean, er, Jane,” said Timmy. “Doesn’t asking for help necessarily imply a certain measure of humility?”

She turned to Timmy and smiled. “Yes, and that is something Linville clearly lacks.

Robert leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Humility, I’ve been told, can be defined as a clear knowledge and acceptance of my place in the universe.”

I held on to my resentments until they poisoned me.

*“If you hug to yourself any resentment
against anybody else,
you destroy the bridge by which God would come to you.”*

—Peter Marshall

It was Eldon’s first day in rehab. He was tall, thin, and grayish with a paunch, a preacher from somewhere in South Carolina. In the cafeteria at lunch, Robert spotted him and grabbed Reggie and me and we sat down next to him.

“Hello, Eldon,” said Reggie, reaching for the salt.

“Hi,” said Eldon grudgingly. “Sit down.”

“We have,” said Robert, maintaining a grin. “Would you care to join us?”

“I have,” said Eldon, managing the barest of smiles.

“You might try the salmon,” said Robert. “It’s really terrible here.”

“It does make me want to puke,” said Eldon, pushing his plate away.

“I do, however, recommend the apple pie,” said Robert, staring at the uneaten pie on Eldon’s tray. “It’s good for the spirit.”

Eldon was decidedly unhappy. He looked like he was about to explode.

"You know, Eldon," I said, "when I got here they told me I had to get rid of my resentments if I wanted to find any semblance of peace."

"I don't have any resentments," he said, glaring at me. "I just hate everybody."

"Isn't that a form of resentment?" I asked.

"Oh, go f— yourself," Eldon cursed. He threw his fork down and bolted from the cafeteria.

"Too bad. He forgot his dessert," said Robert, reaching for the pie.

I was an over-the-top alcoholic and could still hold down a job.

It was mid-morning and we were assembled in the classroom for a lecture by Dr. Taylor.

"When I was younger and just learning about my own drinking problem, I went to New York and interviewed dozens of drunks on the street and in the burned-out buildings of the Bowery. It was amazing how intelligent these guys were. Turned out, most of them were lawyers."

Mike leaned over and whispered, "Makes sense to me."

"Most of us," said Dr. Taylor, "go to work every day, bring home or squander their paychecks and somehow survive in the world. Only at the end of our drinking do we end up on the street and in the soup line. It may take twenty or thirty years of hard drinking to put a man on the street."

"With cocaine it only took me eighteen months," I whispered to Robert.

"Good work," said Robert, under his breath. "Very efficient use of time."

I am responsible for my own limitations.

“The sky is not my limit ... I am.”

—T. F. Hodge

We were sitting on the breezeway watching Mike smoke a cigarette when Eldon walked by.

“Preacher,” said Reggie, “why don’t you pull up a chair and stay awhile. Or maybe a month or two.”

“I can’t possibly stay here for two months,” said Eldon, his eyes like daggers. Unbeknownst to him, he had lost his chemical coping skills when he quit drinking. And he had not yet learned the emotional skills necessary to survive in a world without Scotch. He was getting testy.

“No way I can stay here that long,” he said. “I’ve got business...to take care of. Two months—no way.”

“I’ve learned that I shouldn’t put limits on my recovery,” said Reggie.

“I can’t make it without my Scotch,” said Eldon. “It’s just that simple.” He rolled his eyes at Reggie. “How can you possibly wake up in the morning and realizing this is the best you’re going to feel all day. I just can’t do it.”

“Don’t limit yourself,” said Robert. “You’re capable of much more than you can possibly imagine.”

“You can ask God for help,” said Reggie softly.

“God! What God?” Eldon was all but boiling now. “He never showed up when I needed him. Never answered my prayers. Couldn’t be bothered with the likes of me.”

“If I limit my Higher Power,” Reggie said, “I only limit myself and my life.”

“I just can’t see it,” said Eldon with unexpected honesty. “I’m gonna keep on drinking no matter what you do or say. I’m trapped.”

“What?” I asked.

“Trapped,” Eldon repeated. “Stuck. There’s no way out. I’m finished.”

Matt’s words came back to me: If I feel trapped in the circumstances of my life, it is only my disease talking. Life is always about choices.

Within an hour, Eldon had packed his bags, thrown them in the back of his aging Chevrolet, and driven off. We never saw or heard from him again.

“Don’t put limits on yourself, your recovery, or your Higher Power,” said Robert as we walked to the center the next morning.

Spiritual Tools

There is no room in recovery for extra-marital affairs.

I manipulate others into enabling my drinking and using.

If I ask you for help, you might see my inadequacies; asking for help requires humility.

Humility requires a knowledge and acceptance of my place in the universe.

I must not place limits on myself, my recovery, or my Higher Power.

Regardless of how things may seem, I am limited only by my imagination.

I crossed the line that separates using from addiction.

We were in the break room, silently watching the unobtainable women walk by, trying to be satisfied with decaf coffee.

“We didn’t just wake up one morning and decide to become alcoholics,” said Robert. “It didn’t happen like that. For years I sucked down tons of drugs and booze. Then one day, something happened. My body changed. I crossed the line.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“The line that separates using from abusing,” said Robert. “Once across that line I’ve lost all control over my using. Where once I could take it or leave it, now I can only take it. Once across this line I can never go back to just using again. I’ll never be able to drink like normal people. For the rest of my life, I’ll be an alcoholic.”

“Or an addict?” I asked.

“Or an addict,” Robert said. “The old timers say it’s like a grape becoming a raisin. A raisin can never go back to being a grape, no matter how hard it tries.”

“Or like a cucumber becoming a pickle,” added Mike, who came in and sat down. “Pickled,” he said, and laughed at himself.

“Ah,” I said. “You mean like diabetes. A person can have a tendency towards diabetes but never actually develop the disease. But once he crosses the line from pre-diabetes to the full blown disease, he can never go back. No matter how well he controls his diet he can never go back to eating sugar. His disease will always be there, waiting. Every morning for the rest of his life, when he wakes up, he’ll be a diabetic.

Vera filled her cup and joined us.

“Or she,” she said. “So, for the rest of my life, every morning when I wake up, I’ll be an alcoholic?

“Yup,” said Mike. “You’ve used up a lifetime supply of drugs and alcohol,”
“The cupboard is bare,” I said.

Cocaine and alcohol became more important than being a physician.

“Now you know why Peter Pan never wanted to grow up.”

—Unknown

Andrew, a cardiologist from West Virginia, was telling his story in men’s group.

“I was so powerless over my disease that I abandoned my profession,” he said, head down. “I got a call at about 3 a.m. from the hospital. My usual practice was to see each new admission whenever they hit the ER, no matter what time it was. I couldn’t conscience prescribing therapy for someone I hadn’t personally examined. But that night I was blisteringly high on pot, wine, and coke and was bedding two nurses at the same time. It was incredible. And I wasn’t about to let anything interfere with my fun. The ER physician was very enabling. *No need for you to come in at this hour*, he said. *I’ll write a set of holding orders for Mr. Sams until you see him in the morning.*

“I hung up and immediately forgot about Mr. Sams and his heart attack. Just before dawn, my debauchery was interrupted by another phone call. A nurse on the Cardiac Unit was calling with an update. Mr. Sams’ condition was deteriorating. I said as little as possible to hide

my slurred speech. *The family is here and would like to speak to you*, she said. I nodded through the telephone but hung up anyway. *Back to bed*, whispered my little blonde hussy.

“Two hours later the phone rang again. *Mr. Sams died a few minutes ago*, said the nurse. I took a deep breath but said nothing recognizable. *He was pretty far gone when he got here*, she said. *There wasn’t much you could have done. The family has already gone home*.

“By the time my head hit the pillow, I had again forgotten all about Mr. Sams and his heart. That morning I called the office. *I had a really rough night at the hospital*, I told them. *Reschedule all my appointments for today, will ya?*”

“I was so powerless over my addiction,” whispered Mike, “that I abandoned my principles.”

I ignored the consequences of my addiction.

*“It is wrong and immoral
to seek to escape the consequences of one’s acts.”*

—Mohandas K. Gandhi

Jane sat primly on the desk, legs crossed, looking at no one in particular.

“When I was using,” she said, “I ignored all the consequences of my drinking—broken family, broken job, broken morals. Denial provided me with effective mental blinders. Mike?”

“I know this much,” said Mike. “I would go into a nightclub, sit down at the end of the bar, and drink until I closed the place down. To my mind, I wasn’t hurting anyone. As far as I was concerned, there were no consequences to my using.”

“And now?” said Jane.

“Now I understand how I hurt others. My wife, who never saw me, my kids who only saw me drunk, and my parents, who were glad they never saw me. My performance on the job suffered and my coworkers had to cover for me. The yard went unmowed because I was too hung over. The screen door never got fixed. The list goes on and on and on.”

“You were a bad boy,” said Jane.

“You are a bad boy,” whispered Robert.

“Glynnis?” said Jane.

“I would start smoking crack early Saturday morning,” Glynnis began. She was a nurse from Savannah, dedicated to her patients but more dedicated to her cocaine. “The kids wanted my attention but I was too busy getting high. I told them to go watch TV or play outside on the swings. Anything, just don’t interrupt me. I promised myself I would go play with them when I got a good buzz on, but I never did. Once I went to visit the dope man in the worst part of the projects. My two-year-old daughter, Laurie, was in the backseat waiting while I went inside—just long enough to buy my dope, I said. Three hours later, wasted and sweaty, I suddenly remembered she was out in the car. When I got to her, she was crying, starving to death and scared to death.”

“That’s frightening,” whispered Mike, “but I’ve done worse.”

My mind’s eye flashed on a scene just before I went to detox. Six women worked in my office, some for years. I had visited their houses, eaten at their tables, written letters of recommendation for their kids, even bailed one out of jail. I called them together and told them I was closing the practice. Marty, my transcriptionist, began to cry. I assumed she was crying for me. Immersed in my own self-pity I couldn’t see any other reason. Marty wiped her eyes, her

face a blubbery mess. *My husband Jimmy's out of work*, she said, *and I'm afraid we'll lose our house.*

I isolated myself from the world.

“Isolation is the sum total of wretchedness to a man.”

—Thomas Carlyle

Jane went on. “The necessary consequence of my progressive using was isolation,” she said, waxing philosophical. “I was terrified that someone might discover my drinking. No one could possibly understand the problems I faced or how severe was my need to find relief. In time, I withdrew from all my friends and coworkers.”

I recalled the last year of my using. I never asked anyone over unless they used. In time I only invited people who injected cocaine. At the end I wandered the house, needle in my arm, seeing no one. I stopped answering the phone or my beeper. I just wanted to be alone with my drugs. My gods were Lady Cocaine and John Barleycorn and they allowed no other gods before them.

“The worst consequence of my growing isolation was that all, and I do mean all, of my relations became broken,” said Jane. “Family, friends, social connections, everybody. One of the most important parts of your healing will be restoring all these neglected relationships.”

“Dr. Taylor says recovery is the process of re-people-izing,” said Timmy. “I guess that’s what he means.”

Spiritual Tools

An invisible line separates the user of drugs and alcohol from full blown addiction.

Once across the line, I can never again drink normally; I have lost control over my using.

Once across the line, I will be an addict/alcoholic for the rest of my life.

My addiction will become the most important thing in my life.

I will abandon my profession and my principles for my drug of choice.

The deeper I journey into my addiction, the more I isolated I become from everyone;

all my relationships become broken.

My drugs of choice will become my new gods.

I was powerless over my disease.

“Excessive fear is always powerless.”

—*Aeschylus*

Dr. Taylor called a special afternoon session to discuss the concept of powerlessness. It seems someone had complained that the current crop of clients was having trouble wrapping their heads around this central idea.

“I can remember when I recognized my own powerlessness,” he began. “I was so deep in denial, I couldn’t see that my disease had taken complete control of my life. I began each day with an eye-opener. Lunch was always a two-martini affair. I would leave the office early to be home before the sun was over the yardarm. Wine with dinner became good social graces, and I single-handedly invented the custom of the double nightcap. Yet I didn’t have a drinking problem, not even when I was flagged for three DUIs inside a month, and the judge, my good golfing buddy, took away my driver’s license.

“Only when I began to have blackouts did I begin to understand the true depth of my powerlessness. One day I awoke from such a blackout to find myself in the operating room, standing over the open abdomen of a patient I did not know, doing I knew not what. I asked my assistant to finish the case and ran to the scrub room where I threw up and started to cry. I had to come close to killing somebody before I realized how sick I was. My partner intervened on me later that day and took me to my first AA meeting.

“I want you to go back to your apartments now for a special AA meeting, and I want you to discuss the concept of powerlessness. I want you to preface every sharing with the words *I*

was so powerless over my drug that I ... and fill in the blank with concrete examples that demonstrates just how your addiction controlled your life. Rest assured that you will make no headway with this program until you are absolutely convinced of your powerlessness in the face of drink and drug."

We headed back to the apartments.

Timmy took a very deep breath before speaking.

"I was so powerless over my addiction that I used skunk water to inject my Ritalin. When I was at my worst, I would stop along the road and shoot up before work. One morning I forgot the saline I used to dilute the Ritalin. In a panic, I pulled over near a drainage ditch. I dipped stagnant water out of the ditch and used it to inject the drug. I could have cared less what germs and poisons I was injecting into my heart, as long as I got high." Timmy paused and looked around the room as if in a daze. "My God," he said. "I can't believe I did that."

"I'd been up late shooting cocaine," I said, taking my turn. "I gathered up all the dirty needles, put them in a garbage bag, and threw the bag outside. The next morning was sunny, it was springtime and I could hear the birds singing. Life was good. Then I walked past the garbage bag on the way to my car. Suddenly, without thinking, I ripped open the bag, hoping some of the syringes still had cocaine in them. I found two syringes partially filled with cocaine and mixed with blood that was now turning brown. I was so powerless over my addiction that I rolled up my shirtsleeves and injected myself with the dirty needles, not once but twice. The cocaine's 'get-highs' had died in the night. I didn't even get a buzz."

"Makes sense to me," said Mike.

There is hope.

The evening was gray and overcast and I was feeling particularly morose. I felt weighed down by a great set of iron chains that would forever bind me and condemn me to darkness. We were headed across Atlanta with John driving in his usual hell-bent-for-leather style. I felt like a tennis ball bouncing back and forth inside the car. It was useless to tell him to slow down.

In family group earlier that day, Cameron had asked us to think of something we were good at, balancing the ledger with all the negative behavior we had been confessing. I could only think, “I’m good at screwing up.”

We walked into the meeting house and I was immediately aware of a comforting presence. I was reminded of my mother’s house on Thanksgiving Day, full of warmth and love. But there were only old men here drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. As these old timers introduced themselves, I was astounded at the length of their sobriety. One had five years of clean time which seemed like an eternity to me. His neighbor had fifteen years. I could not even remember where I was fifteen years ago. The last man who spoke had thirty years in the program. My oldest child was twenty-nine.

“This is a chronic, relapsing and fatal disease,” said the chairman for the night. “Our first speaker just celebrated his second five years. He went out after his first five but returned from his relapse and now has five more years to his credit. Give a round of applause for Jerry.”

I applauded loudly. For the first time, as I listened to the chairman, I realized it was possible to live a long and happy life—if I applied myself. The clouds parted and the light shone through.

My disease can recur endlessly.

Vera, Mike, and I were at an AA meeting near rehab. Carol was the speaker this night. She was dressed in used clothes, her skin resplendent with fading tattoos, but there was a light in her eyes.

“I’m forty-eight now,” she began. “When I was eight I started drinking the leftovers from my parents’ parties. By thirteen I was drinking every day. My older sister took me to my first AA meeting when I was fifteen, but it was just a bunch of old geezers complaining, so I didn’t pay it no nevermind. By eighteen I was trading sex for cocaine and heroin. I almost died from overdoses twice, so I switched to vodka. I used to keep three or four gallons in the freezer all the time. It’s better when it’s really cold.”

We laughed with her. She continued.

“I picked up my first white chip when I was twenty-five. Social Services had taken away my baby because I was an unfit mother. I was pregnant with my second before I tried to quit for real. I stayed sober for almost eighteen months, but my old man showed up with a bag of dope and I was off and running again. It was seven years before I picked up another beginner’s chip. My kids were living with my mother and she had a court order out against me so I couldn’t see them. I got a job working as a waitress and made pretty good money. I even bought a car. Then my roommate came home with a new drug she called crack and I learned to smoke the crack pipe. Gave my car to the dope man. Spent nine months at Creedmoor Mental Health for depression and drugs. Stayed sober most of that time but was drinking again as soon as I left.”

She paused and looked up at the ceiling before continuing.

“Somebody steered me to a halfway house where I lived with a bunch of women who were actually trying to get sober for themselves. I tried getting sober to get my kids back, but

that didn't work. I tried getting sober to make my mom proud of me, but that didn't work either. Now I'm sober for myself, so I can have a real life. Today I have a job, my own place, and I get to see my kids every weekend."

She grinned, the light shining in her eyes. "Today, and just for today, I'm sober."

We all clapped and cheered.

On the way home I realized that I hadn't seen Blanche in a while, so I asked Vera how she was doing.

"I really don't know," laughed my friend. "The last time I saw her she was being escorted to the airport for a flight back home. She got caught trying to steal four bottles of wine from the supermarket. Hid them in the pockets of an oversized raincoat."

"Oh, my," said Mike.

"I don't think she was ready yet," said Vera.

My addiction can land me in jail.

We were having dinner and a group AA meeting in Robert's apartment. He was grilling hamburgers and corn-on-the-cob. Not known for his skill in the kitchen, nonetheless he did cook a mean burger.

After eating, we settled down to hear Charles tell his story. Dr. Taylor had been rescued him from the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta. The orthopedic surgeon had been self-prescribing pain pills. By the time the DEA hauled him in, he was taking over two hundred pills a day. The DEA was sure he was dealing. They couldn't actually believe he was taking that many pills. Dr. Taylor got wind of his story, pulled a few strings, and had him transferred to rehab. If he could

complete the program here, the authorities were willing to cut him some slack. Failure meant going back to jail.

“It all started when I hurt my back,” said Charles. “My family doc gave me hydrocodone. When the pain left, I kept taking the pills because I liked the way they made me feel. When my doc wouldn’t give me any more pills, I went doctor shopping and got prescriptions from six different physicians, but eventually they quit prescribing too. That’s when I began writing prescriptions for myself, filling them at different pharmacies around town so I wouldn’t be noticed. I mean, what’s the problem, eh? But I musta hit one pharmacy one time too many.”

“You didn’t think you could keep doing that forever, did you?” I asked.

“That was the problem,” Charles said. “I didn’t think.”

“What’re you going to do now?” Robert asked.

“Whatever it takes to stay out of the slammer,” said Charles.

“That’s a good reason to get sober,” Robert quipped, rolling his eyes.

After dinner, Robert and I spoke.

“You know,” Robert said, “staying out of jail is no reason to get sober. It just won’t work.”

Charles left rehab with the blessings of the staff but was picked up six months later by the DEA. He had come up with a new scheme to buy his drugs wholesale from overseas but the law was two steps ahead of him. He was facing eight years of hard time in the Big House.

My disease can rot my brain.

Robert, Vera, and I were hanging out in the courtyard after lunch when Wee Willy walked up. Wee Willy was a podiatrist from Dublin. He was small and spry and when I heard him speak the first time, I was sure he was a leprachaun.

"Hiya, dudes," he said in his impish way. "Howsit hangin'?" Wee Willy was trying to learn American slang.

"Hello," Vera said. "What's new?"

The Irishman frowned. "Just heard from home. My best uncle died last week. He was in a home for the feeble-minded."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Robert.

"Uncle Mick was a good drinking buddy," said Wee Willy, "but I ain't seen 'im in years. They say he lost his mind. One day he was taking the trolley home and couldn't remember his stop. They found him in a city park, crying. Wasn't long before they were feeding him through a tube and changing his diaper three times a day. He was only forty-two."

"Sounds pretty awful," I said.

"That's not the worst of it." He grinned. "Being here, I'm gonna miss the wake. My family throws one helluva party."

After Wee Willy wandered off, Vera said, "Wet brain."

"What?" I asked. "What'd you say?"

"Wet brain. You know, when alcohol rots your brain from the inside out. At the hospital we call it dementia, but around here they just call it wet brain. End up in an institution with somebody wiping your bottom."

My disease can kill me.

We were in Matt's morning session when Ryan stood up and read a poem he had written. It was about a particularly beautiful flower that grew in his hometown in Hawaii. Ryan was quite literally tall, dark and handsome, a neurologist by trade. Later that day I met his girlfriend, Sandy, who had flown all the way from Honolulu to Atlanta to see him. She was without a doubt one of the most gorgeous women I had ever seen. Ryan seemed to have everything going his way—great looks, great job making tons of money, living in a paradise, and dating a beautiful woman, except for the fact that he was a heroin addict.

After group, we talked for just a moment.

"I can't do it," he said.

"Can't do what?" I asked.

"Can't walk across those burning coals," he said sadly.

He left the rehab center a few days later without saying a word to anyone.

Three weeks after he left, Mike caught me in the hall.

"You remember Ryan, the guy who read that sappy poem in group?" he asked.

"Yeah. The guy who had everything."

"Well," Mike said, "he's dead. Heroin overdose."

For guys like Ryan, a heroin overdose is just another way of committing suicide.

Spiritual Tools

I am powerless over my addiction; it will take control over every aspect of my life.

I reached the point where I would do anything to get high, no matter how dangerous or disgusting.

Addiction is a chronic, relapsing and fatal disease.

Addiction often arises because of narcotics prescribed for valid reasons.

Addiction can rot my brain, send me to jail, or kill me.

I must get sober for myself—not to stay out of jail, get my wife and kids back, or to keep my medical license.

Suicide is one consequence of addiction and the depression it creates.

The insanity of addiction takes several forms.

“And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.”

—John 10:36

Matt said, “You’re insane. Crazy. Looney Tunes. And if you’re not sure, look at the front door here at rehab. On the back there’s a sign that reads *state licensed mental hospital.*”

I swallowed hard.

“You guys are insane three ways from Sunday,” Matt said. He looked around the room and spotted Mike. “Okay, Mike, tell us about your insanity.”

“In the ER,” said Mike, “they would bring in guys who were so drunk they were psychotic. Took four big aides to hold ‘em down. A shot of Haldol would quiet ‘em down.”

“No, Mike,” said Matt. “*Your* insanity, please.”

“Oh, okay.” Mike regrouped. “I was insane because the drugs and alcohol I took scrambled my brain. They’re all neurotoxins. They poisoned my brain cells, but good.”

“Good,” said Matt. “That’s one. Go on.”

“When I arrived here,” said Mike, “I was clinically depressed. All the get-highs I took, from weed to whites to wine, are depressants. I felt high when I took them, but I always ended up feeling worse than when I started. It took weeks for my depression to clear.”

“Very good,” said Matt. “A majority of suicides occur in people who are depressed. About eighty-five percent.”

“But the worst insanity is my own,” said Mike, “the insanity of alcoholism. My very way of thinking defines insanity. I know I can’t drink like normal people but my mind finds a

hundred ways to tell me I can. Doing the same thing over and over, each time with a bad outcome and yet expecting things will go differently this time—that's insanity. I think Einstein said that."

"That's not a bad definition of addiction," Matt said. "If I persist in any behavior that results in a repeatedly negative outcome, I'm probably addicted."

Mental illness is made worse by using.

"I got a head full of ideas that are driving me insane."

—Bob Dylan

Following our last session of the day, I had taken possession of the couch in our apartment for my afternoon nap. I was sleeping soundly when Mike dumped me off the couch and onto the floor.

"C'mon," he said. "You overslept. We're on our way to a meeting. You missed dinner—grab some chili off the stove and come on."

I grumbled but found my shoes and stumbled to the kitchen. Robert ladled out a bowl of chili and plopped a thick slice of buttered bread on top.

"Thanks," I said, grabbing some coffee. Shortly I again found myself in the back of John's Jeep heading down the Atlanta freeway. I managed to spill only about half of my chili by the time we arrived. The meeting had not yet begun, so I refilled my coffee cup and stood outside on the porch, staring at the freeway overpass that filled the horizon. The traffic whizzed by on the highway like race cars at near light speed.

"My thoughts race. They never stop," said Mike. "They whir round and round in some kind of high-speed dream."

"Yeah," I said. "I know what you mean." I knew well my own racing thoughts. Some nights, my mind would spin out worries and fears all night long. By morning I was exhausted.

"I'm bipolar," said Mike. "Manic-depressive."

I had often suspected that I was bipolar. I would have alternating periods of depression and mania. But I didn't say anything.

He turned to look at me in the evening light. "I suspect I drank to quiet my mind. But Taylor says using makes mental illness worse, not better," he said.

In the growing darkness, I nodded.

Alcohol eases the pain of depression.

It was Wednesday morning and Mike, Vera, and I had driven to Fulton County Detox to speak to the week's crop of addicts and alcoholics. It was Vera's turn to lead the discussion and she was trying to lecture about the warning signs of relapse, but the clients were having none of it.

"I hurt," said Old Lady Olson, whose pleasure was to tipple sweet wine at home from a crystal stem that sat on a lace doily her grandmother had made. Mostly she sat alone drinking in the dark until one day her nephew dragged her to detox. "I hurt," she said again, pointing to her heart. "And I think I'm depressed."

"I know I'm depressed," said Lula Mae, a heroin lady from uptown. "And I hurts, too, but mine is right here," she said, pointing at her stomach.

Even Old Man Fisher, who had spoken only six words since being admitted, shook off his torpor and spoke. “I don’t know which came first, the depression, or the drinking. But I do know one thing. Drink took the pain away.”

Vera left the blackboard and stood next to Old Man Fisher.

“Where was your pain?” she asked.

Old Man Fisher pointed to his right temple and fell silent.

As the conversation moved around the circle, everyone admitted to depression linked to pain: two in the head, six in the chest and five in the belly. All described the pain as sharp and all agreed with Mrs. Olson.

“I tried everything from aspirin to Goody powders to BCs,” she said, “but nothing worked. Nothing but the booze. And the booze works every time.”

On the way home, Vera was silent for several minutes before she spoke.

“This is all very strange,” she said.

“What?”

“All those people had painful depression that was relieved by alcohol.” Vera turned to look at me. “I thought that only happened to me.”

“And what medicine, pray tell, did you prescribe for your pain, physician?”

“Vodka,” she said, “straight up.”

We laughed.

My morals interfered with my drinking, so I dumped them.

“Bad things, left to themselves, always get worse.”

—Attributed to Capt. Edward A. Murphy

Some days I was more confused than others. Today was a case in point.

“Okay,” said Matt standing in front of the group. “Answer this question for me. What is moral bankruptcy?”

“I understand bankruptcy means financial ruin,” I said, “but I don’t see ...”

Wee Willy spoke up. “You’re daft, man. Have ye never woken on a cold damp floor with no idea how you got there?”

“Or found yourself in bed with a strange naked woman,” said someone in the back, “and can’t find your car keys—hell, can’t find your car?”

“I know my life’s a disaster,” I said. “Everything I do turns out wrong.”

“Good,” said Matt; “now keep going.”

“I always thought of myself as a moral man,” I said. “I ...”

Wee Willy was angry. “What a lat of shite! Even I know my moral compass is out of whack. It’s just that on most days I really don’t give a tinker’s damn.”

“If my moral compass is 180 degrees out of kilter,” said Matt, circling his desk, “then it will take a huge psychological displacement to correct the path I’m on.”

“Yes, but ...” I said.

“Shut up,” said my friend Mike, “and listen.”

“I knew cocaine was a slippery slope,” said William, a cardiac surgeon from Minneapolis with visions of grandeur. “But I knew I could handle it. After all, I’m a physician, right? But bad things, left to themselves, do get worse, they say. I made up excuses for the withdrawals from the checking account that I used to pay my dealer. I stole syringes from the office to shoot

up. I took narcotics from the office supply and lied about it to my head nurse. I had an affair with one of my nurses. I told my wife I was working late at the hospital. With just a little practice, lying came easy."

Matt turned to me. "Are you starting to understand?"

I had heard William's words deep in my heart and I didn't like the way they sounded. I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

Matt questioned Wee Willy. "Tell us about your practice. You're a podiatrist, right?"

"Daggers, man," he said, "you're right on. I can cut toenails with the best of 'em. And I am particularly good at the surgery. I can find a hundred reasons to operate. Sure, the government busybodies are always on my ass, but so what? I kept enough private rich ladies to pay for my booze. I have several trained to bring a fifth of single malt when they came to the office. A little sweet talk and a few kisses on the cheek, you know. For the very best and wealthiest patients, I make house calls. A little of the old in-and-out never hurt a widow."

"So it seems. Tell us what brought you here," said Matt.

"You don't want to hear that tired old story, do ya?" he replied.

"I think we do," said Matt.

"Okay then," said Wee Willy. "The auditor caught me educating one of my female patients in the gentle art of fellatio. The auditor said I had whiskey on my breath but I swear she was drunker than I was."

"Well," said Matt, looking at me. "Are you getting the picture?"

I squirmed, knowing I had done many of the things Wee Willy had.

"I'm starting to understand," I said, unable to look Matt in the face.

I reached a point where it was either quit or die.

Mike and I were sitting in the cafeteria after everyone else had left. I added sugar to the dregs of my coffee and stirred.

“Well,” asked Mike, “What happened that made you realize it was either quit or die?”

I didn’t have to think long before I answered. “I was sitting home one evening, stoned out, watching the sunset through the picture window of my new and very expensive house, when I realized that I would never be able to quit the coke, and that I would die chasing the dope dealer down a dark alleyway some night, a bullet to my well-educated head,” I said. “And I really didn’t care. The inevitability of my fate was clear. I couldn’t quit, and the only other choice was to die, and I was ready for that.”

We sat in silence for a while.

“Fortunately, at that point, someone intervened on me,” I said.

Spiritual Tools

All varieties of booze and drugs are brain poisons.

They always cause depression; drugs and they always make mental illness worse.

The pain of depression is relieved by using.

There is a link between bipolar disease (manic-depression) and addiction.

My addiction is its own form of insanity.

Persisting in behavior that results in repeatedly negative outcome defines both insanity and addiction.

Using inevitably leads to moral bankruptcy.

Using eventually ruins every aspect of my life.

Bad things left to themselves always get worse.

I reached a point where I realized I must quit using or die.

Part 2 The Answer Is Recovery

*“What is required is a willingness to look deeply at one’s present moments,
no matter what they hold, in a spirit of generosity,
kindness toward oneself,
and openness toward what might be possible.”*

—Jon Kabat-Zinn

In rehab, treatment of my disease occurred simultaneously with a growing knowledge of its nature. However, to clearly distinguish the problem from the answer, I have separated the two processes here. This allows for an in depth discussion of each concept that would not be possible if they were intermixed. In part 2, we return to the beginning of rehab and start from scratch.

In the real world of recovery a question usually generates an immediate response, but the reader must bear in mind that in the beginning, my lack of clear thinking and the slow progression of my personal growth did not always allow for effective understanding. Only with time and repeated cycles of questions and answers did my fogged brain and shy heart undergo real spiritual growth.

I have a long way to go.

“You are good when you are one with yourself.

Yet when you are not one with yourself you are not evil.

For a divided house is not a den of thieves

it is only a divided house.”

—Kahlil Gibran

The first baby step is finding hope.

It was the first week of rehab and I was sitting in Cameron’s group for newcomers. All the new fish were required to attend. I had no idea what to expect but I did my best to pay attention. Cameron was the most attractive counselor at the center, which helped.

“Setting out on any journey can take a lot of preparation,” said Cameron. “I may need to find a house sitter, stop the newspaper, put the cat in a kennel, order tickets, make reservations, et cetera, et cetera. The spiritual trip you’re beginning will occupy your entire life, so a lot of getting ready will be necessary. For some of you, the difficulties involved will cause you to quit. That’s cool. You can always come back later if you want to. But for those of you who will succeed, the difficulties of the path must be balanced by the depth of the commitment you make at the start.

“I want to read you something,” she said, opening a book.

“When the world has beaten you over the head for so long that your eyes are filled with blood, when your chest is so heavy you can’t breathe, and when even your children won’t answer the door for you, it is hard to believe that human beings are essentially good. When your

best drinking buddy steals your wallet, your girl and your stash, forgiveness will not be your first thought. When the IRS is knocking on your door, the power company has cut off your lights, and the checks you bounced have come home to roost, it's hard to find joy in the morning. And when all the lies, deceit and pain you have caused others becomes a burden no longer bearable, it's time for a change." She paused and looked up. I, of course, was sure she was looking at me. She continued.

"The image of essential goodness, based on that tiniest piece of divinity burning inside each of us, is a powerful tool. To move from hopeless to hope, I had to grasp the idea that I was a good person. That I was basically honest, no matter how many lies I had told. That I was kind, no matter how many people I had hurt. That I was capable of change, no matter how many times I had failed. Finding hope in the midst of my ruined, burned-out world was absolutely essential. I had to learn that I was worthy of love."

"Hearing the details of the downfall of other alcoholics gave rise to trust. When I heard my story come from their lips, I knew I was no longer alone. We shared the same experiences. You understood. I know who you are, for we have the same illness which overrides any differences among us. Our professions, our fathers' checkbooks, or the cars we drive are insignificant compared with our common dilemma."

Somehow tied up in all this is the idea that we were all children of God. I took hold of this idea without much understanding of what it meant, for it filled some hole in my heart that needed filling. If we were all children of God, then we all had value, even the worst drunks and junkies of the world. If I was a child of God, my nature was good and only my behavior was bad. If I were a bad person, there would be no help for me, but if I were a good person with bad

behavior then my behavior could be changed. In short, I was a good person with a bad disease.”

She put the book down.

“One of our former clients wrote that.”

My secrets are no worse than anybody else’s.

“Take the first step in faith.

You don't have to see the whole staircase,

just take the first step.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mike and I had driven across Atlanta to a small meeting in the courtyard of a church near the University campus. It was called the Starlight meeting because weather permitting, it was held under the stars. Mike was standing just outside the door with Mark, a newcomer. Mark was a young man with dreads dressed in hip-hop fashion and he appeared very uncomfortable. I stopped to listen.

“What I’ve done is...is unforgivable,” said Mark. His eyes were so full of pain I thought he would cry. “There’s no hope for me,” he said. “No hope, no forgiveness.”

“No one’s beyond help,” said Mike. “Look in there,” he said, pointing into the room. There were at least fifty people milling around waiting for the meeting to start. “Every person here brought a secret with him that was too horrible to bear, too awful to share. Every one. Look at them now.”

We gazed at the crowd. They were laughing, joking, pretty obviously not burdened by overwhelming guilt.

"The only real secret in this room is that everybody has a secret," said Mike. "What Joe did was no worse than what Charlie thought about. What Annie thought was no worse than what Mary did. We're all basically the same. We have the same wants, the same fears, the same hopes and dreams. This is the only place in the world where you don't have to wear a mask. Come in and join us. You have nothing to lose but your misery."

Mark still looked a little uncertain.

"C'mon," said Mike, "the coffee's free. If you don't feel better we'll give you twice your misery back." Mark laughed uncertainly. The three of us went in together.

I must learn to trust.

The next morning, we were sitting in the group room as Matt was nailing a newcomer's butt to the wall.

"Chuck," Matt began, "Are you trustworthy?"

"Of course," stuttered Chuck. "I'm just as honest as the next guy."

"That's not what I asked." He turned and looked at Mike. "Mike, what did I ask?"

"You asked Chuck if he was trustworthy."

Matt looked at me and asked, "You've never met Chuck, have you??" I shook my head. "Is he trustworthy?"

"Absolutely not, sir," I said. "Chuck's an untreated alcoholic. He's neither trustworthy nor honest."

By now Chuck was red-faced and squirming.

“Mike, of all the people in this room, who does Chuck trust?”

“No one,” said Mike. “He’s not capable of trust.”

“Vera, what will happen if Chuck doesn’t learn how to trust?”

“His ship will sail over the edge of the world and he’ll die!” she said sweetly.

Matt looked sadly at Chuck. “Failure to trust breeds dishonesty,” he said. “If I can’t trust you with who I am, I can’t expose my true feelings to you. My secret self, afraid of being hurt, will hide every vulnerability. To become trustworthy you must first learn to trust yourself. Then and only then can you begin to trust others.”

I must learn to trust someone.

After our evening AA meeting, I stood next to the van ready to ride back to rehab when my jolly friend Robert came up from behind and slapped me on the back, almost bowling me over. I spilled the last of my coffee.

“What’s up, dude,” he bellowed. “Hey, I got another story for you. Ready?”

I wasn’t sure if it mattered, but I said, “Yeah. Shoot.”

Robert began.

“An alcoholic was stumbling down a city street one rainy night when he fell into a large construction pit. The sides were slicked by the rain and he couldn’t get out. He began to shout. Shortly, a physician walked by and hearing our drunken friend looked down into the pit.

“‘O my good man,’ said the doctor. ‘I can see you’ve fallen into a hole and can’t get out. I’m a Harvard physician, don’t you know, and I have something that might help.’ With that the physician reached into his coat pocket, dashed off a prescription and, ripping it from the pad,

tossed it into the pit. ‘Take two of these,’ he said, ‘and call me in the morning.’ And he was gone.

“‘Merde,’ said the drunk, whose mother was French. He stuffed the prescription into his pocket. Shortly a preacher happened along.

“‘O my good man,’ said the preacher. ‘I see you’ve fallen in a hole and can’t get out. I’m a Seminary man, don’t you know, Princeton. Here, this may help.’ He took out a small Bible, ripped out two pages and threw it into the pit. ‘Read two of these and call me in the morning,’ he said, and was gone.

“‘Sheist,’ said the drunk, whose father was German. He now doubted if any help was possible, but just then a friendly man with a broad smile peered into the pit.

‘Help!’ cried our friend. ‘I had too much to drink and fell into this hole and can’t get out. The doctor gave me a prescription and the preacher gave me a Psalm, but I’m still in the pit.’

“‘Don’t worry, my friend,’ said the stranger. ‘I’m a recovering alcoholic and I know what to do.’

“With that the stranger leapt into the pit with the drunk.

“‘Oh, no!’ cried the drunk. ‘Now we’re both stuck in here. That was a pretty stupid.’

“‘Not at all,’ said our rescuer. ‘I told you, I’m a recovering alcoholic. I’ve been here before and I know the way out.’”

I laughed. “In other words,” I said, “I can’t do this by myself. I have to learn to trust another alcoholic. I hope you know the way out.”

“No,” said Robert, “but I know where the all-night cafe is. Wanna get something to eat?”

I nodded and we were off.

To be worthy of trust, I had to become accountable.

I met with Cameron in her office. Today we were to face the monster of my ex-wife and ask to see my young daughters. On her wall was a diploma which read, Master's Degree, Psychological Counseling.

"How often have you seen your girls in the last year?" asked Cameron.

"Once or twice," I answered.

"Why?"

"I don't know." I felt anger rising within me. "Yeah, I do know—my using was more important than my children."

"Good to know that," said Cameron. "What makes you think your ex-wife will let you see them now?"

I exploded. "What do you mean? I have a separation agreement that says ..."

"Whoa, stop!" cried Cameron. "Have you forgotten where you are? You're a patient in a state licensed mental hospital, for crying out loud! You may have changed lately, but to your family you're still an undependable raging drunk."

I bit my lip and let my counselor take over. In a few moments she had my ex-wife on the phone.

"What would it take," she asked my ex-wife, "to begin trusting the children's father again?" The answer was much simpler than I could possibly have imagined.

"If he would just show up when he says he will," said the mother of my children. "If he says he'll be here at five o'clock on Friday, then he shows up at five o'clock on Friday." I was flabbergasted.

"So you got to see your kids last weekend?" asked Vera as we stood in line in the cafeteria.

"Yeah, I was really astonished by the whole thing," I said. "My kids and I sat around singing and watching TV. We went swimming at a local lake and even tried canoeing. We went out for pizza and laughed and laughed. My ex-wife and I actually got along. It was like the best part of our marriage before everything went south."

"How did it make you feel?"

"I was happy for the first time in years. Nothing was bothering me and I wasn't afraid of anything. And it was all due to Cameron."

"Maybe what Cameron says is true," said Vera. "Accountability got lost in our addiction. To become accountable again is to become trustworthy."

Not drinking or using for just one day was all they asked.

"If nothing changes, nothing changes."

—AA

My roommate John was speaking at our house check-in group one afternoon. For once, he had left his tennis racket behind. Cameron was leading the session.

"Yeah," he said, "I lived under a black cloud. My sole purpose on any given day was to consume enough alcohol to numb myself."

"What happened?" asked Cameron. "Short version."

"A friend took me to an AA meeting and made me pick up a white chip," he said. "At the time I thought it was stupid, but it started me thinking. I couldn't conceive of never drinking again for the rest of my life. That would be impossible. But maybe I could do it for just one day—today—then come back tomorrow. That was all they asked. Just one day."

"Without commitment, nothing changes," Cameron said. "The spiritual path you guys have chosen enables you to make sense of the pain you feel, to understand your own inadequacies, and overcome the fear that limits you. It would seem that anyone would jump at such an opportunity, but few even try. Why? Change is always difficult for human beings, and particularly so for addicts and alcoholics. Even if our old world is full of misery and anguish, at least it's a known."

I was given a white chip as a visible token of my commitment.

*"Keep on adding, keep on walking, keep on progressing:
Do not delay on the road, do not go back, do not deviate."*

—Augustine

On my first Tuesday evening in rehab I was to be introduced along with all the other newcomers to the assembled drunks and junkies in a raucous meeting. Each newcomer had to stand and answer questions then recite a poem his housemates had written about him. The affair was screamingly hilarious to the old timers, but for us newcomers it was terrifying.

As I walked to the classroom building, butterflies filled my stomach. I thought Mike was going to get behind me and push. I knew I was going to throw up.

“C’mon. This is your big night. You pick up your white chip,” he said.

“I’m not sure I understand why it’s such a big deal?”

“The white chip,” he said. “It’s called the surrender chip, the hope chip, and a bunch of other things. It’s a pledge to stay sober—for just twenty-four hours.”

The meeting was screamingly funny, breaking down tensions and sprinkling humility around the room. Then my turn came.

“What’s your name?” asked the chairman. “Where’re you from? What’d you used to do? What was your drug of choice? What brought you here?” I answered each question.

Then I recited the poem Mike had written for me. My knees were shaking, but no one seemed to think my confession was out of order.

O! My name it is Linville

My junk was cocaine.

The reason I love it I can’t rightly say.

I crave it at dinner

And the start of each day.

Cocaine is my mistress

And I do what she says.

I once was a doctor

So bold and so gay,

But now I’m a slave

To the Lady Cocaine.

There was a speaker that night but I don't remember what he said. I was nervously awaiting the chips. Finally, the chairman rose, holding a white chip in his hand.

"For all those who are tired of the high cost of low living and who want to begin a new way of life, we have the white chip, a promise not to drink or drug for twenty-four hours—and to come back tomorrow. Any takers?"

Slowly, one, two, then four and five people walked to the lectern to receive a hug and a chip. My head was spinning. Should I do this, or no? What if ... then Mike grabbed me by the arm and shoved me down the aisle.

"Go," he said.

I was propelled toward the front as if some force was pushing me forward, my feet not touching the ground until I came safely to the lectern and picked up my chip.

Willingness, I discovered, was essential.

"Being ignorant is not so much a shame,

as being unwilling to learn."

—Benjamin Franklin

After my public humiliation we returned to the apartment. As we sat down, Robert came in, brownie in hand.

"Hey guys!" He was grinning from ear to ear. "Three frogs are sitting on a log. One decides to jump in the water. How many are left?"

I must have looked at Robert like a fool because both he and Mike busted out laughing.

Mike held up three fingers.

“Huh,” I stammered.

“Three. One made a decision to jump but he never did.”

“Like a lot of people in the program,” nodded Robert, my huge jolly clown.

“It takes more than willingness,” said Mike, again holding up three fingers. “Let’s review,” he said. “One: child of God. Two: made a commitment to change. Three: became truly willing.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’m with you.”

“But how willing are you?” asked Mike.

“What do you mean, *willing*?” I asked.

“Would you stand on your head in the middle of Main Street, eating chocolate cake?” said Mike.

“Huh?” one of my more spiritual replies in those days.

“Would you go to Montana and shine shoes for a year?” asked Robert. “Well, would you?”

“Wait a minute! What’s chocolate cake and shining shoes got to do with recovery?” I asked.

“Exactly this,” said Mike. “You have no idea what’s good for you. If you listen to what your diseased mind is telling you, you’ll use again.”

“And if you use again, you’ll die,” said Robert. The last part I could believe.

We stopped long enough to refill our coffee cups, then continued.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m willing to change. Admittedly I don’t know how, but I assume someone will tell me, right?”

“Right,” said Robert. “For example, you have to be willing to accept that you’re sick.”

“Got that,” I said with a grimace.

“Not only that,” said Mike, “but you’re not the doctor anymore. Now you’re the patient.”

“Next,” said Robert, “you have to be willing to find a Higher Power you can come to believe in. This is essential.”

“If I stop growing on my spiritual path,” I repeated what I had been told, “I’ll use again, and if I use again,...”

“You’ll die,” said Robert and Mike together.

“I have to become willing to do all those things?” I asked. “That’s an awful lot to swallow all at one time.”

“Not really,” said Robert, “you just have to become willing to become willing. One little bite at a time.”

“That sounds easier,” I said. “But what if I can’t do it?”

“Failure is no longer an option,” said Mike.

“I’m willing to accept that,” I said, grinning. “Now I’m going potty. I’m willing to do that.”

“If you’re willing to try,” shouted Mike as I walked away, “all doors will open for you.”

I must become open to new ways of thinking.

“I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ,

think it possible you may be mistaken.”

—Oliver Cromwell

“What next?” I asked when I returned.

“Openness,” said Mike. “You must become open to new ideas.” He sipped on his coffee and looked like he wanted a cigarette.

Robert added, “The first requirements of your new life are honesty, openness and willingness. The H-O-W of recovery.”

“Or as some say,” said Mike, “the W-H-O of your new spirituality.”

“But what do you mean, *openness*?” I asked.

“Keeping an open mind,” said Robert, putting his feet up on the couch. “Open to new ideas. New ways of seeing the world.”

“What’s wrong with my old way of thinking?” I asked.

“My friend,” said Mike condescendingly, “it was your old way of thinking that got you here in the first place. Your old thinking was insanity let loose upon the world.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I forgot about that.”

“You also have an overactive forgetter,” Robert said, grinning.

“And a broken filter,” added Mike.

“I knew about my forgetter,” I said. “It’s easy for me to forget things I don’t want to remember. What’s the deal with this filter thing?”

“Your filter screens the information coming into your head,” said Robert.

“I get it,” I said, although I wasn’t sure I did. “I filter out all bad news and every bit of truth that told me my using was killing me.”

“Yes. Now you have to learn to see the world in a new light.” ” said Mike.

“I’m with you,” I said.

“In our old lives,” said Robert, “our opinions were pretty much fixed, since we knew we had all the right answers.”

“Okay,” I said; “I need to develop an open mind. How do I do that?”

“Won’t be easy. We hold onto our opinions fiercely, even when they lead us into negative consequences,” said my friend Mike. “Since new thinking will ruin your drinking, your mind will hold on to old ideas at any cost. You’ll hear yourself saying something like *I never did that*, or *This can’t be right*, or *Yes, but.*”

“And when you hear such stupid thoughts in your head,” said the jolly Robert, “remember these words: *consider that it may be so*. In other words, don’t throw out any new ideas just because they are new.”

“In other words,” said Mike, “keep an open mind. And why’s that?”

“Cause my thinker is broken,” I said.

“And?” asked Robert.

“Everything I think I know is wrong.”

“And?” asked Mike.

“It was my very best thinking that got me here.”

Honesty is the rock upon which I build my recovery.

“*Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom.*”

—Thomas Jefferson

"H stands for honesty," said Robert as he and Mike and I piled into the car. It would be a long drive to an Old Timer's AA meeting on the other side of Atlanta.

"Honesty is the spiritual principle behind the first step of AA, right?" I said, taking the backseat while Robert slid into the driver's seat. As we drove out of the parking lot, we picked up Reggie, completing the foursome.

"Reggie," said Robert, "we're trying to explain to our buddy here the true meaning of honesty."

"The spiritual principle behind the first step," said Reggie.

"We did that part already," said Robert, turning and talking over his right shoulder.

"Eyes on the road," said Mike.

"How about this," said Reggie. "The honesty of the first step is the only part of recovery that has to be perfect."

"How's that?" I asked.

"If the house of your recovery is built on a shaky foundation," said Reggie, "everything that follows will collapse when you need it most. The first bit of honesty is this: you need to accept in your heart and mind that you are an alcoholic and an addict and that will never change. You must accept that you'll never again be able to drink like a normal person. You need to accept the fact that your life, as you've been living it, is simply not working. And you need to become willing to do whatever it takes to fix it. Until you understand this, you won't be able to accept the help that'll save your ass."

"I can remember sitting in my palace of a house and thinking I'll spend the rest of my days chasing the dope man down a dark alley, at least until someone put a bullet in my miserable brain," I said.

"Amen," said Reggie, who believed me. "You're going to find some old virtues you forgot about, like charity, compassion, kindness. But none will be perfect. However, if your honesty is perfect, everything that follows will turn out okay."

Robert craned his neck toward the back seat. "You have to be honest about your mistakes, too," he said.

"Eyes forward, please!" Mike said.

"You'll be able to admit your mistakes," said Robert, "no matter how impossible that seems now."

Mike spoke up. "And honesty is more than just telling the truth," he said. "Your honesty will force you to look clearly at who and what you are. It's how you'll face yourself, your character defects, your fears."

"Honesty is a way of living, of doing things," shouted Robert over his shoulder. Suddenly the traffic on the freeway came to a complete stop. After looking both ways, Robert turned in his seat. "If I'm walking across campus and throw a gum wrapper on the ground, I'm being dishonest. I can't ignore my responsibilities or my bad behavior any longer."

"If I hide my feelings because I'm afraid," said Mike, "that's dishonesty, too."

"No more swallowing emotions," said Robert.

"Or hiding your feelings behind your false mask of superiority," said Reggie.

There was a merciful pause in the conversation as an ambulance flew by.

"As children of God, we were born with an honest heart," said Reggie. "We started out expecting, I don't know, something. But what we found was hypocrisy and mendacity. (Don't ya just love that word? Sounds like something out of one of my sermons!) But we ended up dealing with the world's dishonesty by surrendering to it. We learned to deny the things that caused us pain. In time, we came to speak in half-truths. We became fluent in our lies."

"You know how you can tell if an alcoholic like you is lying?" asked Mike, grinning. Somehow I knew his riddle was about to land on my head.

"Okay, I give," I said. "How can I tell when an alcoholic like me is lying?"

"Because his lips are moving!" said my three friends in unison. My face got hot. I knew it was crimson.

"Damn!" I said.

We were approaching the meeting house when Mike spoke again. "There are four ways you can tell when someone's starting to get the program. First, he stops cursing."

"When you clean up your mind," said Robert, "your mouth will follow."

"Second, he quits driving like a madman," said Reggie. "He obeys the traffic laws."

John's manic driving style immediately came to mind.

Mike again: "Third, he can finally accept a compliment, because he's learning his true worth as a human being.

"Last," said Robert, "he quits lying."

We pulled into the parking lot at the meeting house. I sat still for a moment, remembering what Matt had said: "Honesty is as addictive as anything else. But it's sweet and clean." I took a deep breath, let out a sigh and walked into the meeting. A skinny blond woman named Susan was talking.

Getting honest with myself.

Susan was a blackout drinker. From the first time she ever got drunk when she was twelve, she blacked out—every time. She would wake up the next morning with no idea what she had done or what had happened. After her last blackout, she awoke in the Intensive Care Unit of a trauma hospital a hundred miles away. Drunk, she had run a stop sign and crashed into two other cars.

“They took me on the helicopter to this hospital,” she said, standing at the front of the room. “They had to shock me back to life seventeen times before we got there. I broke my neck, two ribs, my left arm, busted a hole in the spleen and both my lungs. They said I was in a coma for three weeks. When I woke up, first thing I did was try and get high. I hid pain pills in my shoe so I could get stoned when they weren’t looking.”

“One night, I had a dream that God was talking to me and he said that if I didn’t do any more bad things, I would come to him when I died. I figured I better do what he said. I was there for almost two months before I remembered to ask how the people in the other cars was doing.”

“One of the male nurses starting getting really friendly and I thought he was coming on to me, but actually he was trying to get me to the AA meeting they had down in the cafeteria. At the meeting, one of the women told her story and it was like she was telling my story. She had done everything bad that I had done. After the meeting we talked and I decided maybe I was in the right place after all. After I got out of the hospital we hung out and went to meetings together. I found a sponsor at one of those meeting and I’ve been doing really good ever since. If I don’t do anything more bad I’m hoping...well, I’m just hoping.”

Spiritual Tools

No matter how far down the scale we have gone, hope is possible.

I am a child of God and therefore honest by my very nature.

I am a good person with a bad disease; I can change my behavior.

I no longer have to wear a mask; we all carry the same secrets.

Failure to trust breeds dishonesty.

Hope leads to trusting myself and others.

Trusting allows me to swallow my pride and ask for help.

By myself, I cannot change or find recovery from my addiction.

Even if I can't quite imagine a life without drinking, I can quit for twenty-four hours.

Willingness to consider new ideas is essential.

Honesty is an absolute requirement for obtaining recovery.

Krishna to Christ

*“How many honest seekers for Truth,
 confused and worried by the babel of conflicting theologies and brawling sects
 have yearned with their whole hearts for some simple test whereby the honest seeker
 could discover for himself what the Truth really is?”*

—Emmet Fox

I began searching for spirituality in mankind’s oldest testaments.

Lindsey was a tall, sandy-haired pathologist from Knoxville who relapsed following the death of his youngest son, so this was his second trip through rehab. In spite of his relapse, I sensed in him the recovery I wanted for myself, so I listened to what he had to say. After lunch one afternoon, we drove to a local mental health center to learn from the clients there. They called it “mirror imaging,” where we can see ourselves in the lives of others and learn from the experience.

During the ride, Lindsey shared some of his ideas with me. “I began my journey,” he said, “with the spiritual principles described in the Big Book of AA. Some people say the program has a spiritual side. Others say it *is* a spiritual program. I’ve learned more about human nature in the rooms of AA than in all the psych courses I ever took in school. I’ve learned about character defects, relationships, and about boundaries.”

“I’d never even heard of boundaries until I got here,” I admitted.

“I think the most important idea was that I was a spiritual being and it was possible for me to live in harmony with the universe,” he said. “But AA only took me so far, and I knew if I wanted to keep growing, I had to look elsewhere.”

“Matt says being in recovery is like going up the down escalator,” I said, trying to sound knowledgeable. “If you stop moving, you go backwards.” Lindsey nodded.

“In the medical world,” he said, “anything published in a scientific journal more than a year ago is already out of date, right? But spiritual wisdom has been the same since shepherds first stared into the night sky. Mankind has spawned a lot of different religions, and in each of them the same truths have been discovered over and over again, although they’ve always been altered in the retelling. So I started searching for spiritual ideas in some of the world’s oldest religious texts.”

I found relevance in ancient Hindu texts.

We pulled onto the expressway. “I studied the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* in college,” Lindsey continued, “but I remembered almost none of it. I was stunned when I picked up a copy, opened it to a random page and read, *the spiritual path is one of attraction rather than promotion.*”

“Wow,” I said, “that’s the eleventh tradition of AA almost word for word.”

“Right. This truth was as valid when the *Gita* was written, 2,500 years ago, as it was in 1939 when the Big Book of AA was published. There are also striking similarities between the *Gita* and the New Testament. I found the same spiritual truths appearing over and over again in both books.”

“Makes sense,” I said, trying not to pontificate.

“Here’s an eerie bit of information,” said Lindsey. “The language that Jesus spoke was Aramaic. Not Greek or Latin. Krishna, the Hindu name for God Incarnate, is also Aramaic. When Krishna is translated into Greek, the result is Kristos. Translate that into Latin, and the word becomes Christ.”

“Wow, that’s deep,” I said. “What next?”

“So I took what I could from the *Gita* and moved on to Buddhism. The Buddhists always seem to get a lot of good press in recovery circles and I wanted to know why.”

After half an hour on the heralded Atlanta freeway, we arrived at the mental health center and went inside.

The gentleness I found in Buddhism appealed to my heart.

*“There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth;
not going all the way and not starting.”*

—*The Buddha*

We continued our conversation on the breezeway in front of our apartment.

“Much of the Buddha’s teaching struck a resonant chord in me,” said Lindsey. “While it seemed to me that craving, or high expectations, could be a source of sorrow, the concept that low expectations led to serenity or *nirvana* seemed just as true. The pursuit of selfhood, for example the materialism of Wall Street, has caused trouble in every age. Avoiding materialism is usually described as a prerequisite to the spiritual life.”

"That thing about the rich man not getting into heaven, yeah," I said, thinking about my own material wants.

"The Buddha's Eightfold Path encourages a life filled with honesty, non-hurtfulness to others, a non-hurtful occupation, personal improvement, giving up selfhood for a true understanding of one's place in the universe, and the use of prayer and meditation as essential tools for growth, all virtues common to AA."

Having reached my spiritual limit for the day, I was glad when Mike showed up and suggested we go out for dinner before the evening AA meeting.

At the meeting, Mike serendipitously introduced me to a new friend.

"I want you to meet Sil. He's a Buddhist who lives here in Atlanta."

"Wow," I said. "I never heard of a Buddhist in AA before. How does that work?"

"I'm just another drunk who found a way back," said Sil. "My path just happens to be a little different than everybody else's, that's all."

"How long have you been sober?" I asked.

"Almost four years," he said, grinning, "so I must be doing something right."

"How is it different?" I asked. "I mean, being a Buddhist and all."

"Not that much different," he said. "Every time I hear or read the word *God*, I just substitute *The Good*."

"Time to go in," I said, heading into the meeting.

"We'll meet again," he said, smiling.

I ran into Lindsey the next day and we picked up on our earlier conversation.

“The Four Immeasurables of the Buddha took me to another level,” he said.

“Wait, hold on,” I said. “What are the four—what did you call them, immeasurables?”

“Sorry,” said Lindsey. “They’re Loving-kindness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy and Equanimity.”

“That’s what I thought they were,” I said, tongue in cheek. “But what about the idea that man’s natural state is one of suffering? That idea kind of sticks in my throat.”

“Yes,” said Lindsey, “but it is one way of explaining the evil in the world.”

“What about *joie de vivre*, the idea that just being alive is an exuberant joy, an exaltation of the spirit? Look at a beautiful sunset and tell me life is sorrow.”

“I agree,” said Lindsey. “That’s why I revisited the religion of my fathers, Christianity.”

I reconsidered the teachings of Jesus.

*“More of man's inhumanity to man
has been done in the name of religion than any other cause.”*

—Author unknown, circa 1929

“Stop the presses,” I said. “Most people I know dropped Christianity like a hot potato. I know I dumped all that bullshit when I was sixteen. Religious wars, hypocrisy of the basest kind, corruption at the highest levels of the church. But most of all it was the idea that God was only available through us, the church, and if you didn’t do what we told you, you were going to hell. What would I want with all that?”

"Not to mention thunderbolts of wrath, an eye for an eye, and conformance to the letter of the law but not the spirit," Lindsay said. "You're preaching to the choir."

"So what gives?" I asked, puzzled.

"In my reading I came across the idea that if I studied only what Jesus said, I would find a totally different set of values than what the church preaches," he said. "Using this new way of thinking, I found that Jesus was a revolutionary, always turning the world upside down."

"You mean like, refusing to stone the woman caught in adultery?" I asked. "Or refusing to condemn the woman with five husbands? Or saying the meek would inherit the earth? Stuff like that?"

"Exactly," he said. "If the words attributed to him turned the world upside down then they probably were his words. If not, some zealous clerk may have added them years later trying to prove a point."

"So, what did you find?" I asked.

"I discovered that if I looked for the spiritual meaning behind the parables and sayings, whole new interpretations emerged. I found wisdom I'd never known."

"Like what, pray tell?" I asked.

"I found that Jesus taught not hard and fast rules but principles that guide right action. But the most astonishing revelation, and the key to my new understanding, the idea that it's our mental states which determine life as we experience it. The whole outer world is amenable to our thought, and we're capable of exercising dominion over it. By controlling our thoughts, we determine the life we lead, either consciously or, as most people do, unconsciously. Our thoughts are the most powerful forces in the universe and they direct our future. Free will is

simply the choice of thoughts we entertain in our hearts and minds. As we hold these thoughts, and especially if we project them in prayer, they take form in our lives. As within, so without.”

“Holy bejesus, Batman!” I said.

“But there’s more,” he said. “Whatever the object of my attention, my thinking draws it toward me. If I think about crack all day, by nightfall I’ll have it in my hand. But if I dump my negative thoughts and live in a world of positives I’ll draw good things to me.”

I was set free by the truth I found.

*“For where your treasure is,
there will your heart be also.”*

—John 6:21

Later, I spoke with Mike and Robert about what Lindsey had said. They were skeptical. “In other words,” I paraphrased, “the spiritual treasure I keep in my heart will eventually become manifest in the world around me. If I harbor thoughts of revenge and resentment, of taking what’s not mine, of deception and meanness, then these qualities will become manifest in my world. If, on the other hand, I fill my heart with thoughts of improving myself, of making the world a better place, and of finding my Higher Power, then my world will reflect the beauty and love in my heart. It’s as simple as garbage in, garbage out.”

Mike, a good Jewish boy, picked up Timmy’s Bible, flipped to the Book of Matthew and read.

“According to your faith be it unto you.”

—*Matthew 9:29*

“That does kind of shed a new light on things,” said Robert, who, like me, had given up on the so-called Christian dogma. “I’ll have to think on this.”

“I see what Leon meant now,” said Mike, “about trying to turn us sons of Abraham into good Christian boys. Oh, my! I’ll need to do some heavy thinking myself.”

When I ignored the trappings of Christianity, I was enlightened by what I found.

“Pray without ceasing.”

—*I Thessalonians 5:17*

“More about thought,” said Lindsey when next we met. “Every thought in my head is a prayer.”

“Stop!” I said, “Stop right there.”

“Paul said to pray without ceasing,” he laughed, “which would be impossible in a normal existence, unless ...”

“Every thought in my head is a prayer,” I conceded. “Go on.”

“Saying that my thoughts direct how the universe responds to me is just another way of saying that God responds to my prayers. Whatever I broadcast into the ether eventually comes back to me. Not only that, but the more I practice prayer, the more effective it becomes. Like exercising a muscle in my arm, the more I use it, the stronger it gets.”

I went back to the apartment to be alone. All my roommates had gone home for the weekend so I had the place to myself. All night I prayed, meditated, and thought about Lindsey's words. Lindsey came over the next day, a Saturday, and we continued the most important conversation of my life.

"The real goal of all our striving is to find serenity," he said. "All the steps, the making of amends, exposing our worst secrets, all these are nothing but road signs on our way to developing a relationship with God. And the benefit of that relationship is nothing but heaven on earth—the peace that passeth understanding, the serenity of the serenity prayer."

*"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding,
shall keep your hearts and minds."*

—*Philippians 4:7*

"Heaven is real," he said, "and it exists here and now in this life in front of me and is accessible by me or anyone who seeks it."

*"The time is fulfilled,
and the kingdom of God is at hand."*

—*Mark 1:15*

"But to reach this state of grace requires a lot of work on my part," he said. "First, I have to forgive others so my own trespasses will be forgiven."

"Son, be of good cheer: thy sins be forgiven thee."

—Matthew 9:2

“I have to avoid negativity in all its forms—bigotry, hatred, arrogance, spiritual pride, and the like.”

“*If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness.*”

—Matthew 6:22.

“I have to realize that confession of my sins frees my soul.”

“*From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say,*

Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

—Matthew 4:17

“That I must forgive all those who have wronged me.”

“*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*”

—Matthew 6:12

“That I must not judge others.”

“*Judge not, that ye be not judged.*”

—Matthew 7:1

“That we are all children of God.”

*“That you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven:
for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”*

—Matthew 5:45

“That as children of God we are all valued and worthy of love.”

*“Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven,
that one of these little ones should perish.”*

—Matthew 18:14.

“That since we are children of God, I should love all my fellows without limit, for we are all brothers.”

*“This is my commandment,
That ye love one another, as I have loved you.”*

—John 15:12

“That I should live not in fear but in peace.”

“And Jesus came and touched them, and said,

Arise, and be not afraid.”

—Matthew 17:7

“That by living in the moment I cease to live in a world filled with worry.”

“Take therefore no thought for the morrow:

for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”

—Matthew 6:34

“That by performing these actions, all obstructions to walking the spiritual path will be removed.”

“The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed,

and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up,

and the poor have the gospel preached to them.”

—Matthew 11:5

“That those who are dead to life shall be shown the way to live.”

“He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.”

—John 11:25

“That an array of promises will be fulfilled for those who pursue the spiritual path in earnest. That the will of God for us is always joyous and vital, far better than anything we could imagine for ourselves.”

*“If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children,
how much more shall your Father which is in heaven
give good things to them that ask him?”*

—Matthew 7:11

“That if we follow the path, making peace and serenity within ourselves, we’ll be able to claim our inheritance.”

*“Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called the children of God.”*

—Matthew 5:9

“That fear will be replaced by faith.”

“Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?”

—Matthew 8:26

“That this way of life offers the peace I seek.”

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

—Matthew 11:30

“That I’ll find a new priority for my life and my purpose on this earth.”

“Jesus said unto him,

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,

and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.”

—Matthew 22:37

“That a new man will be born, rising like a phoenix from the ashes of his old life.”

“Jesus answered and said unto him,

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again,

he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

—John 3:3

“That serenity, or peace on earth, is a function of the thoughts we hold in our minds and hearts. The peace that passes understanding is the inevitable consequence of finding our Higher Power.”

“And he said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you,

Hereafter you shall see heaven open.”

—*John 15:1*

“That truth, light, and love are all the same and liberate my spirit.”

“And ye shall know the truth,

and the truth shall make you free.”

—*John 8:32*

“That I’ll find hope, I’ll do the work required, and I’ll walk the path of peace all of my days.”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”

—*Psalms 23:6*

I had not spoken a word. I was dumbfounded. Lindsey left the room silently and I was alone again. I laid my head on the couch pillow and slept. When I awoke, the soft afternoon light was flooding through the window. I knew, finally, what I had to do. Finally it all made sense.

I stayed up all night, drinking hot tea, praying, and thinking.

My spirituality would become a path leading to serenity.

That Sunday evening, as usual, John was driving fast. We swung from one side of the Atlanta freeway to the other until he found the exit he wanted and slowed down. We pulled up outside the AA meeting house and got out. We were early, so we stood around outside.

What seemed so clear the night before was less so in the light of day.

“I’m beginning to understand how spirituality can be a guide to a new life, but I’m having trouble separating spirituality from religion,” I said.

“There is a difference between them” said John.

“I don’t understand,” I said. I seemed to be saying that a lot lately.

“If I get up every morning at 7 a.m. and brush my teeth for exactly two minutes, and never miss a day,” said Robert, “then I’m doing it religiously.”

“Okay,” I said.

“That’s not going to get me sober,” said Robert. “Just doing something religiously won’t help,” he said. “I need something more. I need spirituality.”

“What is spirituality?” I asked.

“It’s hard to define,” said John, “but for me it’s a way of living. A set of deeply held values and meanings,

“For me, spirituality involves meditation and prayer,” said Robert.

“The practice of spirituality would include stuff like cooking for people I love, putting my hands in the dirt, communing with nature, stuff like that,” said John.

“Finding the connection between ourselves and the universe,” said Robert, smiling like the Buddha.

John opened the door to the meeting house.

As we passed inside, Robert said, “Spirituality is how I relate to the universe and how I act in this world based on that relationship.”

I went in. Religion should take me to spirituality, I thought. Then I thought, *God help me.*

Tonight’s meeting was an unusual one, tucked into the back of a store that sold Native American goods. The small room smelled of burning sage and was filled with the soft sound of a flute. This was my first “spiritual” meeting, based, they said, on the spiritual aspects of AA. The topic was finding the spiritual path. The moderator, Red Thunder, spoke.

“I have heard it said that spirituality is a path toward a higher state of awareness. My cousins have used marijuana, and peyote to attain this state.”

“We just used ‘em to get high,” said a voice from the back.

“Hopefully the spiritual path will lead me toward perfection,” said someone near the front.

“So one hears,” said the same joker in the back.

Red Thunder spoke again, “Today, I can be reach out and be filled by the presence of The Great Spirit.”

“Amen,” Mike whispered.

On the way back to the apartments I was lost in thought. It seemed to me that while religion might take me to spirituality, my journey to spirituality was not dependent on any religion. Rather, it was up to me to find the path that would change my life and help me find serenity.

The next day Mike and I were talking in the hallway between sessions at the rehab center. Suddenly a middle-aged man—bearded, with longish hair, and dressed only in a bed sheet wrapped around him like a toga—emerged from a back room and wandered down the hall, dodging people as he went. His eyes were wild, his voice like that of a prophet. He bellowed out his message.

“The end is near, prepare to meet thy maker.”

Mike and I looked at each other and laughed.

“Who are we?” yelled the prophet, “Why are we here? What’s it all about?”

I asked Mike, “Is this the new spiritual counselor I heard about?”

“No,” said Mike. “That’s Crazy Larry. He’s a pharmacist from New Bedford. Has a wife and six children and runs an organic farm on the side.”

“Oh,” I said. “For a moment I thought he was going to lecture on metaphysics for the alcoholic.”

“The meaning of life,” shouted Crazy Larry. “What’s the meaning of life?” His waved his arms around like a madman.

“I think his roommates slipped LSD into his coffee again,” said Mike, grinning.

Spiritual Tools

Spiritual truth can be found everywhere and is everywhere the same.

No one religion has sole ownership rights of the pathways to God.

Religion and spirituality are different things.

I found the most concentrated dose of spirituality in the Book of Matthew.

I can access my Higher Power without the need of an intermediary.

My thoughts determine my reality; the outside world is amenable to the thoughts inside my head.

Whatever the object of my attention, my thinking draws it to me; as within, so without.

Every thought in my head is a prayer.

Spirituality can be defined as how I relate to the universe and how I act in this world based on that relationship.

Spiritual Principles

Principle 1 Life is easy

If life seems difficult, maybe I am doing it wrong.

“The world is so full of a number of things

I think we should all be as happy as kings.”

—Robert Louis Stevenson

Mike and I were doing the weekly grocery shopping at Food World. Robert was checking out the dessert section.

“You okay, my friend?” Mike asked, putting eggs into our cart. “You’ve got a strange look on your face.”

“I’ve been thinking about something,” I sighed.

“I told you not to do that,” he said.

“I can’t help it.” I grinned. “It’s in my nature. If I have to give up my old ideas, if everything I think I know is wrong and if Jesus turned the world upside down, then I have a problem.”

“Do tell.”

“It always seemed that life was hard,” I said. “It beat me over the head at every turn. But if everything I think I know is wrong, then life is really easy. Eh?”

“The Big Book says that our lives should be happy, joyous, and free from fear.”

Robert joined us. In the checkout line we overheard two women talking in front of us.

“You know, Susie,” whispered the first, “Sex gives me a real pain in the ass.” Her friend Susie thought for a second, then grinned devilishly.

“If sex is giving you a pain in the ass,” she said, “honey, you doin’ it wrong.”

We snickered to ourselves.

Later at lunch, we continued our conversation.

“You know,” said Mike, “that lady might just as well have said *If life is giving you a pain in the ass, you’re doing it wrong.* Let me give you an example.”

I nodded.

“When I was an undergraduate,” he said, “the hardest course I ever took was College Physics.”

I had taken the same course and it was rough. “Yeah,” I said, “an airplane leaves Detroit at 2:30 pm carrying 50 passengers, 4 crewmembers, flying 37 degrees west of east against a crosswind of 67 degrees at 45 miles an hour. When will the stewardess run out of coffee?”

“Something like that. One day I realized I’d spent four hours on one problem and was beating my head against the wall. Finally, I went outside with a cup of coffee and a cigarette and considered my situation. Then I was struck with a moment of clarity.”

“By a what?” I laughed.

“A moment of clarity, you yo-yo! I suddenly understood something that had baffled me.”

“Okay,” I continued to laugh, “What was this great epiphany?”

“That I was making the problems too hard. The homework I’d been given was simply not that difficult. If it was taking me four hours to work one problem, obviously I was doing it wrong.”

“It wasn’t because you were lousy in physics, was it?”

“No. Now shut up and pay attention. It was because I was making the problems harder than they were supposed to be. I went back inside and worked all twenty problems in just under two hours. Voila! *If life seems difficult, maybe I’m doing it wrong.*”

“What a great idea,” I said. “You should write a book.”

“No, my friend, you’re the writer, not me. You’ll write the book.”

“And you’ll kibitz?”

“Of course!”

Why does life seem so hard?

Summer was hot and the air conditioning in the cafeteria felt good. Mike and I were having lunch.

“So, why does life seem so hard?” I asked. About that time, the beautiful Cameron sat down beside us, only a salad on her tray.

“A good question,” she said. “Mind if I join you?”

I started to say *I thought you just did*, but thought better of it.

“There are a lot of reasons why life might seem difficult,” she said. “Can you think of any?” For a second I thought I was back in her newcomer’s class.

“If I believe life is hard, my choices are pretty limited,” said Mike. “One is to hide under the covers, avoiding as much pain as possible.”

“Another would be to suppress everything about this life in anticipation of the next,” I said.

“Or a person could surround themselves with all the worldly goods they can acquire, buffering themselves from the pain,” said Cameron.

“I tried that,” said Mike. “It didn’t work.”

“But what if I believe life is easy but still come home with a headache and a bruised ego?” asked Cameron. “What then?”

We sat silently for a long moment, Mike and I, holding our forks in eager anticipation.

“I can think of two biggies that keep me from finding harmony,” she said. “First, I’m not at peace with my place in the universe, and second, I’m afraid.”

Mike and I grinned at each other and dug into our apple pie.

If I think I have humility, I have it not.

“Do you wish to be great? Then begin by being.

Do you desire to construct a vast and lofty fabric?

Think first about the foundations of humility.

The higher your structure is to be,

the deeper must be its foundation.”

—Augustine

“If I think I have humility, I have it not,” said Cameron, talking to her class. She smiled at Mike and me. “Like serenity, it comes unbidden when the heart is ready and not before. I cannot pursue it. Like most spiritual concepts, the word *humility* all but escapes rational definition. It has long been considered the virtuous opposite of pride. Included in its meaning

are the concepts of selflessness, calmness, and serenity in the face of adversity. Taken as a standard for my behavior, humility helps me define my motivation, which in the past had been less than useful. The best descriptions must therefore come from others wiser than me.” She read from a handout:

“Humility is perfect quietness of heart.

It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me,

to feel nothing done against me.

It is to be at rest when nobody praises me, and when I am blamed or despised.

It is to have a blessed home in the Lord, where I can go in and shut the door,

and kneel to my Father in secret and am at peace as in a deep sea of calmness,

when all around and above is trouble.”

—Andrew Murray

“There is no limit to the amount of good a man can do,

as long as he does not care who takes the credit.”

—Sunday-Bolorunduro Awoniyi

“We are here to add what we can to,

not get what we can from, life.”

—Sir William Osler

“You must know nothing before you can learn something,

and be empty before you can be filled.”

—*Lloyd Alexander*

“Take my yoke upon you,

and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart:

and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”

—*Matthew 11:29*

Vera added, “Humility is being at peace with my place in the universe.”

Fear paralyzes me.

“To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.”

—*Bertrand Russell*

“I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.”

—*Frank Herbert*

A group of us was walking back to the apartments after an AA meeting at the detox wing.

The topic had been fear.

“Fear negates everything good about life,” said Mike. “I can marry the most beautiful and talented woman in the world who loves me without condition, but if I’m afraid of losing her,

my life will suck. I could earn \$200,000 in the first six months of the year, but if I'm afraid the stock market will collapse while I'm on vacation, I won't have peace. I can be elected chairman of the board, but if I'm afraid of the vice-chairman's ambition for my job, I won't have serenity. Fear brings out the worst in me. Every fault of character I possess will blossom on a diet of fear. Anxiety, stress, indigestion and headache all follow my discomfort. Life gets hard."

"Where does fear come from?" I asked.

"Somewhere deep in your subconscious," said Vera, walking alongside me.

"The natural state of man?" asked Robert.

"No, no, no!" said Vera. "Fear is an unnatural state! The natural state of man is to live happy, joyous and free of fear."

"For me," said Timmy, "I'm paralyzed by fear, like a deer frozen in the headlights. My mother used to say that a little fear was good for you, but she quit driving because she was afraid of turning left across the traffic. I love you, Mom, but ..."

"It is said, *faith replaces fear*," quoted Robert.

"So where do I get this faith thing?" I asked. "Do they sell it like a relic at the corner cathedral? Is it hidden in the bottom of a Cracker Jack box?"

"O, ye of little faith," quipped Robert. "Laugh not, lest ye be laughed at."

Vera waved and headed off towards the women's apartments.

"My little brother," said Mike, "you're a long way from understanding the meaning of faith. Just know that you need it badly, and if you come back in about fifty pages, you'll find it. As for today, don't drink, go to AA meetings, and have fun."

"Yes, master," I said.

My fears are not rational and not subject to reason.

“Matt said the thing about fear is that it’s not rational,” said Timmy from the back of the group. “What did he mean by that?”

“Timmy, me boy,” said Wee Willy, “none of your emotions are rational. They all spring from the heart, where rationality is given very short shrift.”

“What’re you talking about?” asked Timmy, starting to get irritable.

“Easy, Timmy,” I said. “Wee Willy is right. The brain, the mind, if you will, is the rational part of us. It does calculations, measurements and projections, but the mind can’t feel. The heart, the source of symphonies, paintings and poetry, houses all our emotions, which are never rational.”

“The point is, Timmy boy,” said Wee Willy, “your emotions are yours and yours alone. They are not subject to debate. They must be accepted for what they are. Your mind can argue facts, but no one can argue with your emotions.”

“That’s the problem with fear,” I said. “I can’t think my way out of it.”

“Only faith replaces fear,” Robert said.

“But I still don’t know where to find this faith,” said Timmy.

Fear has no existence outside my head.

“The whole secret of existence is to have no fear.”

—*The Buddha*

At morning check-in, Timmy told us about his dream. It was a scary one.

“I was a child again, sleeping alone in my mother’s bed. Everything was dark and I was afraid. The only light was a candle on the dresser. Alone in the darkness, I knew that something terrible was in the room with me. I looked under the bed and a witch, black as night with eyes like burning red coals came screaming out and flew around the room. She blew out the candle and came straight at me. I pulled the covers over my head but I was helpless. I screamed and woke myself up, in a cold sweat and scared to death.

“But none of it was real,” he said. “It was all in my head.”

Do the next right thing, even if you are afraid.

“We must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

“What is courage, then?” asked Timmy.

“Courage is no more than doing the next right thing, even though you’re afraid,” said Robert.

They told me that fear was the absence of love and that faith replaces fear.

*“There is no fear in love;
but perfect love casteth out fear.”*

—1 John 4:18

We were in Cameron's class again. The room was packed, for she was wearing a red dress that looked painted on and her neckline was dangerously low.

"I always thought that hatred was the opposite of love," she said. "But I was to learn that hate was just another negative emotion, alongside envy, jealousy, and the rest. I was told that in order to live the life I wanted, I had to shed negativity of all kinds. The opposite of love, it seems, is fear."

All the males in the room clapped.

Spiritual Tools

Life is easy; if it seems otherwise, I may be doing it wrong. Two reasons:

I'm not at peace with my place in the universe.

I'm afraid.

If I believe life is hard by its very nature, I condemn myself to a life that is difficult.

Knowing my true place in the universe is a good definition of humility.

Emotions are personal and irrational and are not subject to debate.

Fear is the *un*-natural state of man; it is neither rational nor subject to reason.

Fear is only in my head.

Faith replaces fear.

Courage is doing the right thing even though I am afraid.

Principle 2 There is a God, and it ain't you

I thought I was God, but I might have been wrong.

On my first day of rehab, Mike helped me take my bags up to the apartment we would share. He dropped them on the living room floor and announced to my roommates that I had arrived.

“Attention, attention,” he said. “The new fish has arrived. Attention, attention.”

John came out of his bedroom wearing only his gym shorts and tennis shoes. He was a general surgeon from Detroit and he was very buff.

“Hello, new fish,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Lin,” I said.

“And what did you used to do?” he asked.

“I … uh, I was an oncologist,” I said.

“And your drug of choice?” he asked.

I mumbled. Somehow I thought I could keep my using a secret.

“Lin is a wino who loves cocaine,” said Mike. “He’s from the hinterlands of Virginia.”

“Well,” said John, “the lesson for your first day in rehab is simple. There is a God, and it ain’t you.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

The first task at boot camp was to dump my over-inflated ego.

Jane had me by the throat during group session. Her flaming red hair perfectly complemented the flaming red of her cheeks. She seemed determined to nail my hide to the wall.

“I guess you’re a pretty smart guy, huh?” she asked me.

“Yes, I think so,” I said warily.

“You’re so smart you woke up one morning and decided to become a drunk and a junkie, right?”

“Well, no, not exactly.”

“But it was your very best thinking that got you here, yes?”

“Yes, but ...” I knew she had me.

“I understand you almost died, is that right?” she asked.

“I guess so, yeah, I guess that’s right.”

“So your over-inflated ego almost got you killed?”

“If you say so.”

“Listen, mister. If you don’t lose that ego of yours, you’ll use again, and if you use again, you’ll die.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but I knew it was true. To use again would be to die. John’s words echoed in my head—*There is a God, and it ain’t you.*

“You ever been to boot camp, boy?” Jane asked with an edge to her voice.

“No, sir,” I felt like saluting.

“In boot camp, they take away your clothes, shave your head and teach you to march like everybody else.” “Your hot-shot personality is of no use to you when the enemy starts shooting.

If I'm your drill instructor, my job is to give you the skills you need to stay alive when the killing begins. Right, boy?"

"Yes, sir!" I really wanted to salute.

"If a dumb plebe thinks he knows more than his sergeant, he'll get us all killed, right?"

"Right, sir, yes, sir." This time I did salute.

"This isn't funny, dumbass!" she screamed. "If you fuck this up and go back out again, *you will die and it won't be pretty!* Got that?"

"Yessir!"

"Then shut up and pay attention," she said. "And from today on, when you come into my room, you'd better check that ego of yours at the door."

I discovered that I was not king of the world.

*"It is well to remember that the entire population of the universe,
with one trifling exception, is composed of others."*

—Andrew J. Holmes

We decided to take a walk around the apartment complex in the cool of the evening.

Robert looked at me sternly. "Who are you?" he asked. Before I could answer, he said, "Not who you think you are, or who you want me to think you are, but in the grand scheme of things just who the hell do you think you are?"

"Go easy on the dude," said John, coming to my rescue. "Remember, he's only an egg."

"Egg or not," said Robert, "he needs to know who he really is."

Mike lit a cigarette, blew out the smoke, and said, “That’s the question now, isn’t it? Have you cut as wide a swath through life as you intended? Are you in danger of having your life amount to nothing at all?”

My head was spinning. “Wait a minute, guys,” I said. “What are we talking about?”

Mike took another puff on his cigarette. “To find the comfort you’re looking for, you have to be content with your place in the universe. If my plan was to be CEO of Microsoft by age twenty-one, my life is already a failure. If I hoped to be a millionaire by age thirty, I’m foiled. If I hoped to have the loyalty and respect of ten thousand screaming fans, my life is for crap. Got it?”

“My expectations need to be in line with reality, or something like that,” I said.

“Yes, but more than that,” said Robert starting to breathe hard. “My over-inflated ego wants me to be King of the World, so I can try to control my unmerciful fate.”

“You’ve got to realize that you’re only the tiniest of raindrops in an endless ocean,” said Mike. “Just the smallest cog in an immense if caring universe. Took me a long time to get comfortable with that.”

“I always did want to rule the world,” I said, “but maybe I could give that up if I could be happy again.”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds,” said Robert.

I am just another bozo on the bus.

The next morning in group, Matt was bearing down on me in all my ignorance.

“I hope you’re hearing this,” he growled at me. “You’re no longer driving the bus. You’re not even the navigator any more. From now on, you sit in the back of the bus just like

everyone else. Maybe you can learn to enjoy the ride. We're all just bozos on this bus, you most of all."

I blinked.

"I've been having trouble wrapping my head around that," I said.

"You need to be taken down a few notches," he barked. "You are your biggest problem. That mind of yours is truly going to kill you. Not only that, but you need to understand that you're no better and no worse than any other human being. In a hundred years, no one will remember either one of us. Here, let me read this."

He took a book from his desk and read: "Blinded by my own brilliance, I could not fathom any other point of view but mine. But if I were to find my heart and the Higher Power that came with it, I had to abandon the idea that I was God and surrender the self-will that had all but destroyed me."

I was too embarrassed to respond.

"If you don't get this," he said, "you'll use again, and if you use again ..."

"I'll die," I said, hearing the words echo in my ears like a death knell.

There are as many pathways to God as there are people walking.

"Every soul walks its own path."

—Kahlil Gibran

Later that day, Cameron had us for another newcomer session. The afternoon Georgia sky had turned black and dumped thunder and rain, but the overhead lights and the smile on Cameron's face lit the room.

"I want each of you to name one spiritual act that will help you find your path."

"Cooking for the people you love," said Vera, still damp from the rain.

"The fellowship of human connection," said one.

"Hands in the earth, gardening," said another.

"Exercise," came a voice.

"Yoga."

"Connecting with nature, walking in the woods."

"Cleanliness."

"Puppies and unconditional love," I said.

Cameron then asked us to name different pathways that could lead a person to God.

Vera spoke first, drying her hair with her gym towel.

"Religion," she said. "Religion should take me to God."

"But how many of us have been abandoned by the religion of our fathers?" Cameron asked.

"Prayer," said a voice. "Prayer should lead us to God."

"But it's said that faith without works is dead, right?"

A murmur went through the group.

"Following a moral code should do the trick," said Vera.

"What," said Cameron, "without confession of sins and a change in character?"

"Developing a set of moral principles would be a good start, I should think," said another.

"And which of these principles actually works in the real 9-to-5 world?" asked Cameron.

"We could become vegetarian and do yoga all day."

"And who is going to pay for all this spirituality?" asked Cameron. "How will you support yourselves while you're chasing nirvana?"

I started to speak when the shy, mousy woman in the corner, who had not said a word in any of our sessions with Cameron, spoke up.

"There are as many ways to God as there are people in his universe," she said.

"I like that," said Cameron. "Would you repeat it for those who were meditating or doing yoga in the back of the room?"

"There are as many ways to heaven as there are people in God's world," she said, more forcefully, gaining the strength of her conviction. "No one is excluded."

Spiritual Tools

There is a God and it's not me.

I am not the center of the universe; I am just another bozo on the bus.

When the ego is unchecked by the heart, it will run amok and kill me.

Only after my ego is deflated can I find my place in the world.

My self-will and I are the biggest problems in my life.

The spiritual path is open to any who would walk it.

There are as many pathways to God as there are people walking.

I am no better and no worse than any other human being.

Principle 3 God is approachable

*"Thou hast made us for Thyself,
And our hearts are restless
Until they repose in Thee."*

—Augustine

When I drank, I turned away from the light and love of God.

Stephen was a born-again preacher who liked his Scotch. His language was full of Biblical references, which bothered me, but he was fun to listen to.

“You lost the light,” he told me. We were sitting on the porch outside the apartment.

“I’m not sure he ever had it, Stephen,” said Robert.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You turned away from God, from his light,” Stephen said, “and took up living in the darkness.”

The darkness part made sense.

“When we turn away from God, we lose his help. We’re lost and alone,” said Stephen.

“Without the light of his word, we grow cold and weary.”

He had the cold and weary part right, too.

“Tell me about this light,” I said.

“The light is the love of God,” Stephen said. “Without that love, we live in fear.”

“Why didn’t your God reach out and help me?” I asked. “I certainly could have used it.”

"He doesn't butt in," said Stephen. "He's a polite gentleman, the kind uncle who won't interfere unless you ask him."

"I thought ..."

"If you want to have a conversation with God," he said, "you'll have to turn around and face the light."

I needed help, but I wasn't sure about facing the light. I had been dodging the truth for a long time.

Suddenly, I remembered a conversation I had with Sarah, a counselor I met in detox. When she was first struggling to find her sobriety, she had her troubles, she told me. The last time she got drunk, she sat at the end of the bar and drank until she closed the place down. She took a taxi home and in her drunkenness, she prayed. *God does this mean we can't have a relationship?* To her surprise, she heard an answer as clear as day: *No, but it makes it more difficult.*

Could it be true that my using did actually block the light?

Without access to a Higher Power, I have no defense against my addiction.

"The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few rare cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense.

His defense must come from a Higher Power."

—Big Book of AA

Reggie had just returned from a weekend trip to visit his family. It was Sunday evening and he was eager to report his adventures to us as we sat in the breezeway drinking coffee.

"It was a crisp, cool day back home when I came out of the AA meeting downtown," he said. "My plan was to walk down the street to my favorite deli and grab a couple of sandwiches to take home. I was in a sweet, serene state of mind, which made what happened next all the more surprising."

"Go on," said Mike. "We're listening."

Reggie grinned sheepishly and said, "As I was walking, a voice came over my right shoulder. *Why don't you have a glass of wine while you wait for the sandwiches*, it said. I don't have to tell you I was shaken by the thought. *They won't be able to smell it on your breath*, it said.

"I know that wine gives my breath a distinctive alcoholic aroma. But if the voice said it, I thought, it must be true."

"Woe unto the drunkard!" said Robert.

"I knew I was in deep trouble. I was alone, with no one I could ask for help. I'd just come from a meeting, so that wouldn't help. I had no Big Book with me to read and no cell phone to call my sponsor. I was more than a little worried, since one glass of wine would inevitably lead to many bottles before the deli closed at midnight. They would pour me into a taxi and I would have to face the pained and disappointed looks of my family. Not only that, but I would have to pick up another white chip, and they would almost certainly send me back to detox. What should I do? Then the voice spoke again."

"Holy shit," said Robert.

“The voice said, *Why don’t you have two glasses?* I was rapidly sinking deeper and deeper. Then I had an idea—I would pray. The only prayer I could think of was the serenity prayer, so I used it. *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*”

“Wow,” I said.

“I was so frightened I started saying the prayer again. Halfway through I stopped because I couldn’t remember why I was praying. I walked into the deli and ordered my sandwiches. It wasn’t until later when I paid the bill that I remembered what had happened on the street. I laughed and went home.”

I came to a new understanding of God as unconditional love.

“I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

We had just returned from the evening’s AA meeting when Timmy opened the Big Book and read the Third Step: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” He closed the book slowly and put it down.

Robert came in and sank into the couch. I turned the TV off and put on another pot of coffee.

"I don't understand the part about *God as we understand him*," said Timmy.

Robert said, "As a kid, I had a lot of trouble with the hell-and-brimstone of my father's religion, so I dumped it. And God, too. God is dead, they said. But living in a godless world left me to my own devices, sure trouble for an addict like me. Here in rehab they said I had to develop my own concept of God, one that worked for me. Not for anybody else, just me."

"How did you do that?" asked Timmy.

"I began with the idea that my God was a being of unconditional love," said Robert.
"Everything else fell out from that one idea."

"Okay, I'll bite," I said. "Define unconditional love."

"Unconditional love means that he loves me no matter what," said Robert. "His love isn't conditional on anything I might do or not do. He'll love me if I don't honor my father and mother or if I kill my neighbor or covet his she-ass. He'll still love me if I don't pray or if I take his name in vain. He'll love me if I don't carry out the garbage or if I spend all my money on drugs and booze."

"That must mean he's willing to forgive everything," I said. "Surely you can't mean that."

"Yes," said Robert, "that's exactly what I do mean."

"I think I'm getting it," said Timmy.

"God made me and he knows exactly what I'm capable of. He knows how I'll respond in any situation and he'll forgive me when I make the wrong choice. That doesn't mean that I can commit an endless series of sins and expect forgiveness over and over. Forgiveness involves much more than that. Which brings me to another point," said Robert. "My God doesn't test

me. He doesn't try to trick me into making a mistake. I'm quite capable of making mistakes all by myself."

"God is not mocked," said Timmy, "and he doesn't mock his children."

"We're all children of God," said Robert, "all his sons and daughters, all equal in his sight. No one is better or worse than anyone else."

"Which is why the Lord's Prayer begins with the words *Our Father*," I thought out loud.

"If he's my father, does that mean I inherit his kingdom?" asked Timmy.

"Exactly," said Robert, "and his kingdom is here and now."

"And my inheritance is a life that's happy, joyous and free of fear," I said, suddenly beginning to understand.

"Which means life is supposed to be easy!" Timmy grinned. "Hey, I'm starting to like this stuff."

"Sometimes I think of God as the benevolent uncle," said Robert.

"Like Walter Cronkite?" asked Timmy.

"Avuncular," I added.

"Uncle God will never interfere with my life," said Robert. "He's too kind and polite. After all, he gave us free will, didn't he?"

Timmy and I nodded.

"He'll keep hands off until we ask him," Robert said, "but he'll always respond if we ask. He's very good that way."

"Don't stop now," said Timmy.

“Okay, you asked for it,” said Robert. “God is not up in the sky sitting on some exalted throne. God is here, right here. There is nowhere I can go where God is not, for all of God’s creation exists within him. Nothing can exist outside God, including me.”

“So I’m within God,” I said, trying to wrap my head around this new idea. “Somehow, I think I already knew that.”

“So I’m within God,” said Timmy, “and God is within me. That’s comforting.”

“Yes, yes,” I said, “that makes sense. I must look for God, not outside me, but within.”

“And if he’s always within me,” Robert said, grinning, “then God is always accessible to me. I don’t need a priest or rabbi to interpret for me.”

“If I knock on the door, he *will* answer. Always!” I said.

“Cool,” said Timmy.

“And if he’s inside me, then only I can block the light of his love,” said Robert.

“Careful,” I said, “You’re starting to sound like Stephen.”

“And God can touch me anytime,” said Timmy, smiling his ass off. “God can touch me with a moment of clarity or a white light, or ...”

Or even a simple new understanding, I thought.

I walked outside and sat by myself in the moonlight. This thought suddenly appeared in my head: If God is unconditional love, then, by definition, life is good. Maybe it is true, life is easy. Maybe.

I required a power stronger than myself to overcome my addiction.

Timmy and I were looking for Mike so we could go out to a Mexican restaurant. House rules required that anyone leaving the rehab campus must ride three to a car. Two addicts by themselves, it seemed, might too easily stumble and get into trouble.

“He was here just a minute ago,” I said.

“I guess we’re not in that big a hurry,” said Timmy.

“Yeah, but I’m hungry.”

In the lull, Timmy grew thoughtful. “You know,” he said, “I tried everything I could think of to quit.”

“They told me my only chance was to find someone or something with more power than me,” I said.

“That’s why they call it a Higher Power, I guess.” About that time, Mike came out of the bathroom.

“I’m hungry,” he said. “Where’re we going to eat?”

We piled into the car and headed out.

Mike said, “For me, *talking* about a Higher Power wasn’t useful. I had to be hit over the head—I had to *experience* God for myself.”

Timmy and I stared silently at each other.

“It’s not as strange as it sounds,” said Mike, pulling into the parking lot at El Charro Restaurant.

I became willing to accept knowledge from unconventional sources.

“*Faith is a knowledge within the heart,*

beyond the reach of proof.”

—Khalil Gibran

The waitress served us chips and salsa and we dug in.

“Proofs for the existence of God have always sounded hollow to me,” said Timmy. “I can believe that a Higher Power created the world, but I can’t understand why a loving God allows evil to exist.”

“And how does an agnostic like me find a Higher Power?” I asked.

“It all boils down to accepting knowledge from unconventional sources,” said Mike. “Knowledge that exists outside science.”

“I’ve always been a big believer in science,” I said. “Science is the art of measuring things.” I was finally on familiar ground. “Science can measure the speed of light, send rockets to the moon, or spin electrons through my computer.”

“How did you answer the questions that science rejected?” asked Mike.

“Mostly I didn’t,” I said. “That sounds kinda materialistic, doesn’t it?”

“More than a little,” said Mike. “You see, this life”—he swept his arms out as if trying to encompass the universe—“is more than what you see in front of you. Sure, science measures things, but that necessarily excludes all things of the spirit. Things like kindness, love, integrity and courage. These ideas can’t be measured, but they *can* be demonstrated.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “How can I gain knowledge of truths that can’t be measured?”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” said Mike.

We fell silent, finished our dinner and headed home.

I found that inspiration, intuition and insight lived in my heart.

The next day we ran into Matt at lunch. I waved him over. The special of the day was turkey tetrazzini which we eagerly avoided.

“We’re still talking about this morning’s group,” I said. The session had focused on knowledge of the immeasurable.

“Still trying to figure out non-conventional wisdom?” Matt grinned and sat down.

“Science measures. The spirit demonstrates. I got that,” said Timmy, reaching for the salt.

“The brain isn’t any good at painting pictures,” said Matt, spooning green beans into his mouth. “Nor is it any good at writing symphonies or composing poems, only the heart can do that,” he said, and swallowed. “Only the heart can know courage, honesty and compassion. Only in the heart will you find intuition and inspiration.”

Suddenly a door opened inside me.

“Conscience,” I stumbled. “Conscience lives in the heart.” Matt reached over and clapped me on the shoulder.

“Of course,” said Mike. “Without conscience as a guide, the mind will always run amok.”

“This deserves a celebration,” I said, and got up to get a second dessert. I returned with a piece of cherry pie and dug in. “So,” I mumbled through a bite of heaven, “what’s next?”

“Take the wax out of your ears,” said Mike, “for the voice you hear will be small and still.”

“Where will these new insights come from?” asked Timmy.

"They say God speaks to me through other people," said Mike.

"Whoa there, boy!" I said. "I'm not sure I'm ready for a conversation with the Almighty just yet."

My heart opened and I learned the meaning of coincidence.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

—Shakespeare

I became willing to accept the fact that there might be more to the universe than what I could measure. I just hoped I wasn't opening the gates to crystals, chakras and séances. But I had to open my eyes wider than ever before. My first taste of non-logical experience came one evening during a meeting in our apartment.

Alan was a tall GP who had lost his license and his practice. He was at the end of his stay in rehab and what he said had the ring of truth. We sat cross-legged on the floor, talking about the true meaning of coincidence.

"Sometimes it seems I'm the beneficiary of a lot of happy coincidences," came a voice from the back of the room.

Alan spoke. "One thing I've learned here," he said, "is that there are no coincidences. Coincidence is simply God's way of remaining anonymous."

Robert chimed in. "There's no such thing as luck or chance," he said. "Nothing happens in God's world by mistake."

I sat with my back against the wall. Suddenly I felt the certainty of Alan's truth deep in my gut—that coincidences were in fact God's way of working behind the scenes. Without any effort on my part, I knew it was true. I hadn't looked up any references, searched the literature, or taken a poll. I simply knew it was true. New knowledge had entered into me, not through my mind but through my heart. I had my first introduction to my Higher Power through the simplest of means.

Spiritual Tools

Addiction overwhelms the spiritual path with negativity.

Only a power greater than myself can provide protection against the first drink.

If God is unconditional love, then life is good.

A God of unconditional love will forgive my shortcomings, if I ask.

God doesn't test me; he already knows who I am.

God won't interfere in my life unless I ask him.

All of creation exists inside God; since I exist inside God, I must look for God within myself.

Spiritual ideas, such as love, courage and integrity, cannot be proven but can be demonstrated.

Words of enduring wisdom were driven into my heart.

"Coming home from a meeting yesterday I had a strange experience," I told Father Mick as we sat in his office.

The priest nodded. He added fresh tobacco to his pipe and tamped it in, then leaned back in his rocking chair.

"We were driving back to the center," I said, "and the sun was setting in gorgeous shades of orange and pink. I felt almost, well, contented."

Father Mick nodded as he lit his pipe.

"We were in the van and I was sitting by the window with Robert and Alan sitting beside me. John went around a corner a little too fast and both Robert and Alan slammed into me, shoving me against the window. In the same moment, words were driven into me like the platen of an old typewriter being slammed across the page. What I heard was *God doesn't want you to drink, use drugs, or kill yourself*. The voice was my own, but it had more power and certainty than anything I could have managed."

Father Mick nodded as a curl of smoke encircled his head.

"I could understand the part about not drinking or using drugs," I said. "That's what my mind would have said. But the part about committing suicide was not something I would ever come up with."

"Maybe the universe was reaching out to you," he said.

"That's what I thought," I said, "but I don't understand ..."

"Don't try," said Father Mick, smiling. "Understanding is not nearly so important as acceptance."

I was shown the error of spiritual pride.

I had a weekend pass and visited my girls in the poor down-east part of Carolina.

Driving back, I took a slow and winding route through the lowliest parts of the hinterland. When I returned to rehab I spoke to Reggie.

“I had another experience of unconventional knowledge,” I said. “My kids and I spent a wonderful weekend just hanging out. I was in a very peaceful state of mind when I left.”

“What’s the punch line?” asked Reggie.

“As I drove through the lowlands, I noticed an endless array of small churches. The Brethren of Redemption, the Second National Church of God, Bought by the Blood, the True Church of Gospel Holiness you know. Most were humble little buildings, some not much more than shanties. In the glow of my new spirituality I was sure I was now on the one true path. My spiritual arrogance made me superior to such lowly houses. I asked myself, *Why are there so many of these insignificant little churches?*”

“Did you get your comeuppance?” he laughed.

“I was told in no uncertain terms why God welcomed such backward little churches. The message was strong as steel and angry as a bull.”

“Yes?”

“*Because I like them*, the voice said. *Because I like them!*”

I experienced a white light that took away my fear of death.

*“Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd
when he stands before the king whose hand*

is to be laid upon him in honour.”

—Kahlil Gibran

We were attending a large AA retreat near Lake Lanier. The room was packed but I found a seat near the aisle. The speaker was discussing meditation.

“Sit up straight, put your feet flat on the floor, and close your eyes,” he said. “Now, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Don’t freak out, but I’m going to turn the lights out.”

More than three hundred drunks and junkies became silent in the darkness.

“Now,” he said, “I’m going to put on some music.”

The refrain was familiar, but I was nonetheless taken aback when I remembered the words:

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind, but now, I see.”

—John Newton

I gasped, for in my addiction I had certainly been as lost and blind as a person can be.

Then something strange and wonderful happened.

I spoke about it with Mike later that night. “I’ve known Amazing Grace since I was a kid. My parents would take me to little churches in the wildwood where they played it at every

service. My dad would play it on the guitar at Sunday family gatherings. When I learned the guitar, I played it myself.”

“I can’t even remember the first time I heard it,” said Mike.

“While I was meditating at the meeting this morning, something astonishing happened. I’ve been afraid to tell anyone.”

“Should I call for the priest?” he teased.

“Actually, I did think about seeing Father Mick.” I looked straight at Mike. “I was focusing my meditation on a little spot of light just off the tip of my nose. If only for a moment my mind was still and clear.”

“Get on with it,” said Mike. “I have a group session in twenty minutes.”

“Okay,” I sighed. “Suddenly my consciousness was filled with an overwhelming white light that expanded until it filled every corner of my mind.”

“Holy cow! Were you scared?”

“Sir, I was sore afraid. Too scared to breathe.”

“What happened next?” Mike’s eyes were wide.

“I held my breath, afraid to move. The light was cool, white, and gentle.”

“You’re starting to scare me.”

“When the music ended, the light vanished instantly. I was left with the strange sensation of having been cleansed. I began to take stock of myself and realized something much more substantial had taken place.” I looked at my watch. “This is going to take a while,” I said. “How much time before your session?”

“Oh, I made that part up. Please go on.”

“My younger brother died of leukemia when I was fifteen, and it really shook me up.”

"I remember when you brought that up in group."

"It was a long time ago, but it's haunted me ever since. When we buried him I knew I didn't believe in the religion I'd been taught. I could only imagine that in dying, my consciousness would vanish like pulling the plug on a TV set, slipping into empty oblivion."

"That sounds pretty awful."

"Anyway, the concept of death as oblivion followed me growing up and into my adult life. The idea of a personal death was an unspeakable fear that held sway in everything I did." I paused. "Listen close now," I said, "here comes the good part."

"I'm all ears," said my friend.

"When the light vanished, I sat very still. Then it hit me. I was no longer afraid of dying. My fear of death had been taken away. For the first time in my adult life, I could take a deep breath without a knot of fear in my belly."

"Holy Rollers, Batman," he said. "I see why you haven't told anybody. Mother would call it the grace of God. She said grace was *an unexpected and undeserved gift from God*. Sounds like you got a double dose."

"My mom called it the *peace that passeth understanding*."

"There you go again, trying to turn me into a Christian." He grinned.

"What's true is true," I said, "whatever the source."

I do not believe there is a God, I know there is.

I was surprised when I got the card from my oldest daughter. No one was supposed to know where I was. I smiled and opened it. On the front it read, *I have come to understand Carl*

Jung's answer when asked if he believed there was a God. I opened the card and read, “Sir, I do not believe there is a God. I know there is a God!”

If I center myself every morning I fill my day with serenity.

Matt was trying to teach Timmy the art of becoming centered. It was Monday and already I wished it was Friday.

“Timmy,” he asked, “how did you used to begin your day?”

“I would jump out of bed, shower as fast as I could, then grab a cup of coffee as I was going out the door. If I didn’t pick up a honey bun on the way to work I’d have one of my clerks fetch me a glazed donut. I could usually make it from my bed to my desk within forty-five minutes. Sometimes faster.”

“What did you do when your day started talking back to you?” Matt asked.

“You mean when my plans for the day got shot all to hell? I guess most days I slammed the phone down and got really irritable.”

“How often did that happen?”

“Pretty much every day. Some days more than once. I’d bitch at everyone around me, then go home and yell at the wife.”

“And how did this work for you?”

“Not very well, I guess.”

“That may be the most intelligent thing you’ve said since you got here,” said Matt. He turned to Mike.

“Mike,” he asked, “Do you meditate in the mornings?”

“I try to, every morning,” said Mike.

“When you meditate, what happens?”

“It clears my head and helps me focus. I end up in a place that’s calm and comforting where the cares of the outside world are without meaning. I sit there and bask in the glow for a few moment. Later in the day, if I get upset or frazzled I can reach back and pull that serenity into the present to calm myself.”

“What happens if you forget your meditation?”

“By eleven o’clock my day is usually screwed.”

“I think what Mike’s trying to say,” Matt said to the group, “is that the serenity of morning meditation is more useful than a glazed donut.”

“Or a honey bun,” said Timmy.

I discovered a prayer for resentments.

“Prayer is the song of the heart.”

—Kahlil Gibran

Harold was still in his first few days of rehab when Mike cornered him in the apartment before breakfast. Harold had just moved into the empty bed in my room. He was growing visibly angrier each day.

“Give me your car keys,” said Mike, his hand extended toward Harold.

“Why should I?” growled Harold.

“Because you’re so angry, I’m afraid you’ll hurt yourself.”

Harold fumed for a moment, then took a deep breath and sat down.

"You're right," he said, handing over his keys. "Last night all I could think about was parking on the railroad tracks and waiting for the train."

"Do you know why you're so angry?" I asked.

"Sure," said Harold. "I'm pissed about my ex-partner back in Macon who turned me in to the Hospital Board and ruined my entire life. He really stabbed me in the back."

Robert was sitting on the couch munching loudly on a bag of chips. He wiped his fingers on his pants and began to speak.

"You know," he said, "you don't have to be so angry. I know how to get rid of your resentment."

"Oh, yeah?" Harold blurted out, almost shouting. "How?"

"You do know what a resentment is, don't you?" Robert asked, throwing the empty chip bag at the trashcan and missing.

"No!" Harold countered, "but I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"Calm down there, doc," said Mike. "He's only trying to help you."

Harold crossed his arms over his chest and shut up.

"A resentment is when I harbor ill feelings against someone for something I think they did to me," said Robert.

"...and hold on to those feelings," said Mike, "until they become a ball and chain tying me to that person and filling me with a negativity so strong it overwhelms my thinking."

"Holding on to a resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die," I said.

Harold closed his eyes and shook his head. "Sounds like me. What do I do?"

"There's a simple prayer someone taught me not too long ago," Robert said.

"Hold on," Harold interrupted. "I have no idea how to pray and I'm not even sure I believe in God."

"It doesn't matter," said Robert; "just listen, okay?"

"Okay."

"Every night before you go to bed, I want you to get down on your knees, fold your hands and close your eyes. Thank God for all the good things that happened during your day. Then, say, *God, I thank you for taking away the resentment I feel against this man and replacing it with the faith that no matter what happens, everything will be all right.* Got that?"

"The part about faith is important," said Mike, "because you don't want to leave an empty hole when the resentment disappears."

"The whole thing sounds pretty silly to me," said Harold. "But I'll try."

"Do it once a day for fourteen days," Robert said, "and I guarantee your resentment will disappear. Don't quibble, just do it."

Some days later Harold reported back on his progress.

"You seem a lot calmer these days," I said. Harold nodded.

"I guess Robert's prayer must have worked," he said. "I don't exactly feel love toward my ex-partner, but my anger is no longer driving my thinking."

Mike reached into his pocket, pulled out Bill's car keys, and threw them across the table to his roommate.

As my prayer life improved, so did my faith.

"For what is prayer

but the expansion of yourself

into the living ether?"

—Kahlil Gibran

"So Harold, I hear you got a response to your prayer," said Father Mick. "That must've been interesting." Father Mick stood across the room pouring his famous strong coffee for Harold, Robert, and me.

"I was surprised when I realized my anger was gone," Harold said. "Made me wonder if the prayer would work on anything else."

"That sounds like the beginning of faith," said Father Mick.

"I still don't understand what faith is," I said, stirring my coffee. "Certainly not pink cherubs riding chariots drawn by winged horses, I hope."

"I hope not," said Father Mick, settling into his rocker. "One definition of faith is success in prayer. The more you try your hand at prayer, the better your results will bed. And the better your results, the more faith you'll have in the whole process."

"Like doing reps in the gym?" Robert ventured. I think he read about that in a fitness magazine.

"Is any one form of prayer better than any other?" I asked, and immediately felt stupid.

"I suspect God loves to hear from all of us, whether by telegraph, telephone, or smoke signal. But yes," he said, "some have described what they call scientific prayer."

"Father Mick!" said Robert. "That sounds like an oxymoron. I thought science and spirituality were opposite ways of looking at the world."

"Those who know more about prayer than I say that some prayers are more successful than others," he said. "They've sought out which forms are the most effective, kept them, and discarded those that don't work as well. They've discovered what works best, that's all."

"What about gratitude?" I asked.

"The psalmist says that prayers should always be in the form of thanksgiving," said Father Mick. "Since God knows what we need before we ask, we're actually thanking him for what he is already doing for us."

"Mike said I should say something like, *God, I thank you for helping me do this or become that.* Does that sound okay?"

"Certainly," he said, "that makes a lot of sense. The mystics also say that effective prayer requires a heart that's at peace. Don't come before the altar filled with resentments or ill feelings."

"I guess that as I clean up my side of the street, my prayer will improve," Robert said.

"Of course," said Father Mick. "As I improve my inside, everything outside improves as well. But the most important benefit of prayer may be that it opens a relationship with God."

Father Mick stood up and held out his hands. "Would you care to join me?" he asked.

The four of us stood, held hands, and bowed our heads.

"God," said Father Mick, "I thank you for helping us to be the best persons today that we've ever been."

In the everyday world, faith replaces my fear.

"Why are you so afraid?

Have you still no faith?"

—*Mark 4:40*

"I can remember when I learned for certain that faith replaces fear," said Reggie, holding forth in his best imitation of a preacher. "It happened one day sitting in a courtroom waiting for my case to come up. Of course, I was innocent, but that didn't stop me from being afraid."

All of us around the lunch table laughed.

"I arrived in the courtroom at 7:30 in the morning," he said, "and took a seat on a wooden bench. I wouldn't be able to leave until close to 1 o'clock. Almost every breath produced a fear that leapt into my belly and sent shock waves through the rest of my body. So I prayed. *God, I thank you for taking away my fear and replacing it with the faith that no matter what happens, everything will be all right.* Immediately, the fear would melt away and I could breathe deeply again. But within moments, the judge would look at me funny, or the bailiff would shuffle his feet, or someone would cough, and the fear would come screaming back. So again I'd say my little prayer and again the fear would leave. This happened over and over for the next five hours, probably at least fifty times. The young man sitting next to me looked at me like I was crazy, then got up and moved away. But I kept praying and each time the fear would leave. I was regenerating my anxiety, but I had the means to defeat it."

"The power of prayer," I said. "Working in the real world."

"And it worked every time?" asked Timmy.

"Yes," said Reggie. "For the first time, I realized that prayer works every time."

Spiritual Tools

Words of enduring wisdom can appear spontaneously

Once I am open to unconventional knowledge, new sources of wisdom will open
everywhere.

I will lose my fear of death.

I don't believe there is a God, I know there is a God.

The serenity of morning meditation can last all day.

Holding on to resentments is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to
die.

A simple prayer can banish any resentment.

Faith can be defined as success in prayer; I have faith that my prayer will work.

Prayers should take the form of gratitude; they work best when the heart is at peace
with the world.

Principle 4 No matter what the question, the answer is love

Love is the underlying principle of the universe.

*“And when we realize that our true Self is on of pure potentiality,
we align with the power that manifests
everything in the universe.”*

—Deepak Chopra

In the newcomers' group, Cameron said, "The universe is composed of galaxies full of stars and planets. Our planet is made of dirt and rock and iron." The grayness of approaching fall was tempered by the bright flower in Cameron's hair and the gentle smile upon her face. "Our bodies are made of tissues composed of molecules built out of atoms. Our atoms are made of electrons, neutrons and protons. Subatomic particles have dozens of names. All matter, they say, is but concentrated energy, which is itself composed of strings and waves, electromagnetic and gravitational forces. But what is the essence that underlies all these particles and forms of energy? If the answer to every question is love, is it possible that love is the reason that there is something instead of nothing, that there is a universe rather than black emptiness? If the entire universe is contained within the mind of God, as some suggest, and if God is love, as others have suggested, is it possible then that love is truly the creative unifying force of the universe?"

Could I live with love as the guiding principle?

*“When you love you should not say,
God is in my heart, but rather,
I am in the heart of God.”*

—Kahlil Gibran

“Cameron said love is the underlying principle of the universe,” said Robert. We were enjoying coffee in the cool of the evening outside a cafe before an AA meeting near the Tech campus. The area was filled with small boutiques, T-shirt shops, and quaint mom-and-pop restaurants. It was Saturday and the streets were filled with university students. The scene could have been a college campus anywhere in the country. There was a sense of carnival and everyone seemed happy. Except Timmy.

“That’s hogwash,” said Timmy. “You guys sound like an old broken Beatles record.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t make it any less true,” Robert argued, hugging his coffee in both hands.

“I can only speak for me,” said Timmy. “There is precious little love in my life today. I’m not even sure if I’m capable of real love.”

“Look now, Timmy,” I said, “we all agreed we would change the direction of our lives in order to get sober. That means we don’t have to live in the negative world we made for ourselves.”

"If the universe is devoid of meaning," said Robert, "if chance is more important than compassion and if power and prestige are more important than loving our fellows, then pursuing a spiritual path makes no sense whatsoever. If nothing matters, we might as well use again."

"Maybe that's the right answer," said Timmy, looking especially morose.

"C'mon," I said. "You know you don't believe that."

Timmy grunted, his hands tucked under his thighs. "I just got a call from my wife. She's wants to leave me, move to California, and take the kids with her. How's that supposed to make me want to love everyone?"

"I know you may not be able to hear this," said Robert, "but the answer to all your problems is simple—love. No matter what the question, the answer is love. No matter what the situation, it's always made better by throwing love at it."

Timmy stared stubbornly into his coffee cup and didn't answer.

"At least give Robert the benefit of the doubt," I said. "Remember, we're supposed to be open to new ideas and new ways of thinking."

Timmy looked up with tears running down his cheeks.

The purest love is unconditional.

The AA meeting ended with everyone standing in a circle. The chairman asked us to speak the names of the people we loved and wished to pray for. Just the names, nothing else. For the next few minutes dozens of names flew skyward in a group prayer. Next to me I heard Timmy speak the names of his children. Later, on the ride back to rehab, Robert continued our earlier conversation.

"Timmy, are you on board with the idea that prayer is a useful tool for living in the world?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, yes," said Timmy, less argumentative than before. "And I'm willing to accept the idea that God's love is unconditional. It's just..."

"Yeah," said Mike, "she hit you right in the heart and it hurts."

Timmy was silent.

"We need a definition of love," I said. The drive home on the Atlanta freeway would take forty-five minutes, so we had time to talk. A chill had begun to settle in the air.

"Matt shared his concept of love yesterday," said Robert. "He said love means I wish you and yours all the good things that life has to offer even if I never see you again. And I want nothing in return."

"Sounds like a Hallmark greeting card," said Timmy.

"Don't be so critical," I said. "That's a pretty good definition. My dog loves me even if I forget his birthday or our anniversary."

"Your dog is a sap," said Timmy. "Try treating a human being that way and see what happens."

"That's exactly the point," I said. "Treat everyone you meet with love, the unconditional kind. Your family, your coworkers, and the anonymous people you meet every day, especially the ones giving you the hardest time."

"Pshaw," Timmy said as we pulled into the parking lot at rehab.

"Nobody said you had to like them, just love them for the goodness within them. They are your brothers."

We will love you until you learn to love yourself.

“No man is an island, entire of itself; ... any man's death diminishes me,

because I am involved in mankind;

and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;

it tolls for thee.”

—John Donne

We reassembled in Timmy's apartment and put on a pot of coffee. Robert was not ready to give up on Timmy, at least not yet. Robert glanced at the kitchen clock, then poured himself a fresh cup.

“Matt said, ‘We will love you until you learn to love yourself,’” quoted Robert. He turned to Timmy. “Does that make any sense to you?”

“Not really,” said Timmy. “I haven't loved myself in a very long time. I've made so many mistakes and hurt so many people, I don't see how anybody could possibly love me.”

“We all felt that way when we got here,” I asked.

“So, happened?” asked Timmy.

“We let them love us.” Robert said.

“Why would anyone want to love me?” Timmy whispered.

“We're all children of God,” I said. “We're all worthy of love. The more I can love you, the more I can love myself.”

“With time,” Robert continued, “you'll begin to rebuild your self-esteem and love will come easier.”

"That's awfully hard to believe," said Timmy.

"Then let us love you until the love returns to your heart," I said.

"After all," said Robert, "love is our essential nature. We just have this bad-ass disease that makes us feel unlovable."

"I'm a good person with a bad disease," I echoed.

"So I've heard," said Timmy.

Great big yellow buttery balls of love.

"The more you give, the more you will receive."

—Deepak Chopra

The next morning the air was warm and the sun felt good on my bare arms as we sat on the smoking patio behind the rehab center.

Timmy spoke: "Look, guys, love may be the answer, but it's hard to remember that when a five-hundred-pound gorilla is sitting on me. Most days I don't fight gorillas, it just seems that way. The idea that love is the answer is so pie-in-the-sky it couldn't possibly be true, could it?"

"Let's assume it's true," said Mike, lighting a cigarette. "How could love possibly be the answer to anything in the real world? What are the problems I must deal with today, this day, in the here and now? Mostly it's my relationships with other people, like my boss who won't give me a raise, my kids who want \$100 tennis shoes, and the banker who won't lend me any money. It's ordinary people with aching feet who were up all night with a crying baby. And let's not

forget the problems that fly around inside my head. Old ways of thinking, resentments, fears. These are my gorillas."

"To make a change," said Reggie, "first I have to recognize that my problem is me."

Timmy nodded. "My name is Timmy and my problem is Timmy. Gotcha," he said, wiping his eyes.

"I need to find a new way of thinking," Mike said, blowing smoke into the air, "to get me out of the gorilla cage. And I'm not just blowing smoke here." Mike laughed but coughed when he did.

"Reggie said, "Try this. It may sound a little like science fiction, but...." He did his best imitation of Rod Serling: "Imagine, if you will"—Robert started making Twilight Zone music with his nose—"Imagine, if you will, a yellow ball, the size of a beach ball, covered with gobs of yellow gooey buttery love. Dripping yellow sunny buttery balls of love. Hold it over your head and throw it. Like this." He heaved his imaginary big yellow buttery ball of love toward the horizon.

"Now," said Reggie, "and this is the best part, you don't have to know where to aim it. It's like a cruise missile, just tell it where to go and it will. For example, you might want to throw one at your wife right now. Go on, try it!"

Timmy looked sheepish but did as instructed, throwing an imaginary great big yellow buttery ball of love in the general direction of his wife. He grinned.

"It seems silly ..." he said.

"Sure it does," said Reggie. "It makes you grin just to do it. But it works, I swear it works."

Later, Reggie told me the great big yellow buttery balls of love idea was just another way of asking God's blessing for the person I'm in conflict with.

"It also works both ways," he said. "The blessing always comes back to me."

I am rewarded when I share God's love.

*"Cast thy bread upon the waters:
for thou shalt find it after many days."*
—Ecclesiastes 11:1

The next day, after Matt's group session, I headed toward the coffeepot and found myself behind Reggie. My friend was frowning.

“Whassup?” I asked.

Reggie sighed as he stirred his coffee.

“You remember when we talked about the great big yellow...”

“...buttery balls of love?” I asked. “How could I forget?”

“Well, I got a call from my friend Zack back in Memphis today,” said Mike. He shook his head sadly. “Zack was Special Forces and came home with PTSD. He ever could seem find his place in the real world. Did a lot of drugs and booze, for all the good it did him. When I first met him, he had lost his two front teeth, his hair was scraggly half down his back and he was eating nothing but raw food. He'd been denied disability, and he couldn't get along with his parents. I tried to help him see the goodness in himself. You always hope your words actually help someone.”

“And you taught him the buttery balls of love thing?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Reggie, “He said he tried it on his parents and it worked!”

“And?”

“Like I said, Zack called today. His voice was unusually calm and peaceful. He’s been diagnosed with a degenerative nervous condition. He’s in a wheelchair and having trouble using his hands. He’s selling everything he owns and moving into a nursing home.”

Reggie paused.

“The doctors told him he had less than six months to live. He’s already having trouble breathing. I asked how he was taking all this. He said he was actually doing pretty well. He said every time he gets into self-pity or feeling depressed, he thinks about the great big yellow buttery balls of love and it makes him feel better. He was calling to thank me for that.”

Reggie paused again.

“You always hope your words of kindness help someone, but you never know,” he said, turning his face away.

“Now you know,” I said.

If my motives are good, I can express unconditional love to everyone.

“Perhaps the most “spiritual” thing any of us can do is simply to look through our own eyes, see with eyes of wholeness, and act with integrity and kindness.”

–Jon Kabat-Zinn

We had gathered in Robert’s apartment for our weekly AA meeting.

“No conditions means no conditions,” said Mike, coming in from smoking a cigarette.

“When I was in practice, if I did something for charity I always made sure I got my picture in the paper or some other kind of recognition. If I bought my employees lunch it was because I

expected them to work late. If I gave you something I always expected something in return. Tit for tat, good business principle. That was the old way. The new way is love, but without conditions. Cameron said, love is accepting a person for who they truly are.”

Robert, occupying most of the couch, picked up the thread. “*Not ‘I will love you if you do this,’ and not ‘I will have sex with you if you do that.’”*

“What’s my motive,” said John, swinging an imaginary tennis racket over his head. “I need to question my motives—*why am I doing this?* To make myself feel better? Remember, one definition of addiction is doing something to change the way I feel. If I help another person just to make myself feel better, I’m only exercising my addiction. Wrong motive.”

“Father Mick said something,” Robert said. “Bless everyone around you silently. Do it in a crowded subway, in a busy checkout line, anywhere tempers might be getting edgy. The phrase Father Mick taught me to use is, *You are blessed.* This causes love to flow from the universe, through me, to those around me.

I could hear Cameron’s voice in my head: *Try loving someone without expectations. Tell your child, I love you no matter what grades you make. Tell your wife, I love you even if you screw up the checkbook again. Tell your brother, I love you even if you don’t live up to my expectations. Tell your dog: I love you even if you chew up my favorite slippers. Tell your Higher Power, I love you even if I don’t understand why your world doesn’t seem perfect.*

You may never know when your words of kindness benefit another.

“*When you meet someone, you can silently send them a blessing, wishing them happiness, joy, and laughter.*

This kind of silent giving is very powerful.”

—Deepak Chopra

“Let me tell you a story,” said Reggie, sitting down on the couch. “One evening I was in a crowded emergency room with a friend. She had passed out at work.

“I asked Marie, *How’re you feeling?* She stared at the ceiling but didn’t answer. I didn’t like her answer. It worried me, for she didn’t seem to know where she was.

“From across the waiting room, I could hear a father consoling his daughter. She looked to be about twelve years old and was slouched down in a wheelchair. *It’s going to be all right*, he said in soft tones. *Try to sit up, will ya, honey?* The girl made a feeble effort to sit up, but slumped back down. Her father tried to hug her but without much success.

“*Aiyeee!* came the voice of a child from the back of the room. *Mommeeeeee!* came the reply of his younger sister. The pair was running endless circles around their parents. The young father said, *I give up.* The mother held an infant in her arms and didn’t answer. He asked her, *Can’t you do something to settle them down? They’re driving me crazy.* The children kept running around wildly, much to their parents’ displeasure.

“The automatic doors swung open and a woman entered in a wheelchair pushed by her daughter. Her voice was as loud as her body was large. She shouted, *I need to be seen right away. I’ve twisted my ankle and I think it’s broken. I have high blood pressure and I’m a sick person. Call the doctor right away! My brother is a lawyer and I’ll sue somebody.*

“About that time Marie awoke and asked me, *Where am I?*

“I told her, *We’re in the ER. You passed out at work. Do you remember what happened?*

“She said, *I felt woozy, but that’s all. Did I hit the ground?* A lump was growing on her forehead.

“Almost hidden in the half-light was an elderly couple anxiously holding on to each other. The woman said, *You go first, dear. You’re sicker than I am.* Her husband said, *No, you must go first, darling. You’ve had a fever all day.* She said, *Maybe we can go in together.*

“From behind the window partition, a nurse was complaining. She said, *These people are making me crazy. I wish they would all go home and leave me in peace.*

“I looked at each person in the waiting room and to each I whispered under my breath, *You are blessed.* I made a full circuit of the room, reaching out to each person in turn, then began a second round. The children suddenly became quiet and sat down, the 12-year-old sat up and smiled at her father, the obnoxious lady shut up, and the old couple smiled at each other. The nurse appeared at the door and began calling names and within minutes the waiting room was empty.

“By the way, Marie was just fine. She fainted from lack of a good lunch.”

My job is to bring God’s love into the world.

“*These things I have spoken unto you,
that in me ye might have peace.*

*In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer
I have overcome the world.”*

—John 16:33

When Reggie had finished, Robert raised his hand.

“My turn,” said Robert. “Me next.”

After much moaning and groaning by the audience, Robert was allowed to share.

“I was at the back of a long, slow-moving checkout line at the superstore. The people ahead of me were fuming at the delay. The young cashier seemed incapable of finding the right price or correctly running her register. Her supervisor stood frowning behind her. Customers headed for the door filled with justifiable anger, steam pouring from their ears, for the clerk was running the only open cash register in the store.

“After what seemed like an eternity of waiting, I reached the front of the line. I could see the hurt in the cashier’s eyes and I could feel her pain.

“*Having a rough day?* I asked her.

“She spoke softly as she rang up my items. *You don’t know the half of it*, she said. She looked up at the clock on the wall. It was 5:45 p.m. She said, *I was supposed to pick up my kids at 5. They’re waiting for me at the daycare center. Their teachers get really mad when I’m late and take it out on my kids.*

“The tears began to well up in her eyes and her nose was running.

“She said, *I’ve had this stupid cold for over a week and I just can’t shake it. And I’ve had to pee for over an hour but I can’t get away from this @#xx** register.

“*Don’t worry*, I said. *Everything’s gonna be all right.*

“She looked at me like a long lost friend. *You really think so?*

“*Of course*, I answered. *Things will always work themselves out if I just let them.* I handed her a tissue and she wiped her face and blew her nose.

“I guess you’re right, she said. I’m lucky to have this job. My husband’s been out of work for over two months.

“I said, Don’t be afraid, you’re not alone.

“I know, she said, but sometimes I forget. She smiled and her grin lit up her whole face.

“After she checked me out, her smile lingered. Those in the line began to smile as well.

In a few moments, she headed for the bathroom and then was on her way to pick up her children.”

Spiritual Tools

Love is the underlying principle and the creative force of the universe.

Love means I wish you and yours all the good things life has to offer with no expectation of return.

Love means accepting a person for who they really are.

When I send love to another person, it flows on to God and then back to myself.

Throw great big yellow buttery balls of love at your problems.

The goodness I give to others has benefits far beyond what I can see.

I must always ask myself, What are my motives?

Even a small blessing can have a profound impact.

Remember, no matter what happens, everything will be all right.

Principle 5 You are a child of God

Who are you?

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us,

that we should be called the sons of God.”

I John 3:1

Robert caught Timmy in the hallway between sessions. They disappeared into an empty classroom and I followed.

“Today in group,” Robert said, “Matt asked *Who are you?*”

“I answered that I was a pharmacist from Iowa,” said Timmy, “and Matt said, *That’s what you used to do.*”

“And?” asked Robert.

“Then I told him I was a husband, a father and a friend,” said Timmy, “but Matt said those were simply my relationships. He asked me again, *Who are you?* Finally, I told him I was a guitar picker and singer of songs, but he didn’t like that answer either.”

“Listen up, then,” said Robert, “and I’ll tell you who you are and what your job is in this life.”

“I’m all ears,” said Timmy.

I knew what was coming, for Robert had put me through the same torment.

“You’re a child of God,” he said, “and your job—is to bring God’s love into the world.”

Timmy grinned. “And all this time I thought I was a career pill pusher and pillar of the community.”

“You were not put on this earth to sell shoes, make bricks, or fill prescriptions,” Robert said. “In every breath you take, every step, every thought and action, your job is to bring God’s love to bear. Not to climb the corporate ladder, run for office, or accumulate the most toys.”

“No matter what the question,” said Timmy, “the answer is love.”

Our Father.

*“My religion is summed up
in the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer.”*

—Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Cameron was discussing the Lord’s Prayer, not so much as a prayer to be spouted by rote, but as a work of supreme spiritual relevance. Apparently chastised for the red dress episode, she was dressed in a simple white frock buttoned to the neck.

“Let’s start with the first two words, *Our Father*,” she said. “This powerful opening specifies the character of our relationship with God as well as the nature of our own character. Just as importantly, it defines our connection with our fellow man. Here, we’re told that the bond between God and man is that of father and child. This excludes any possibility of an Old Testament God of lightning bolts and terrible wrath who tests and punishes his offspring. If human parents will go to any lengths to provide for and support their children, will not God, the perfect parent, do infinitely more?

“Since man is the progeny of God, then he must share the essential nature of God for like always begets like. Sheep can’t give birth to wolves nor bees to wasps. Since God is spirit, then man must also be spirit, a being in this world but not of it. We stew in the pot of our own fear, yet were we to accept that our father is an all-loving, all-caring, all-forgiving being of love, would not that fear be dispelled?

“The prayer also clarifies how we should view our fellow man, for we are all children of the same father, all gifted with similar hopes and desires. We should treat all our fellows with love and pray for them as well, both enemies and friends, for we are all one family without regard to any artificial boundaries that man has established.

“As the children of our father, we’re all entitled to his inheritance. As the prodigal son discovered, our inheritance of forgiveness and love is always available whenever we claim it for our own. The birthright we’re offered is a life of happiness, joy, peace and freedom from fear of every kind, an invitation to participate in the kingdom of God here and now.

“*Our Father*: two simple words that encompass an entire and entirely new way of life, an answer to addiction that any faith or denomination can embrace.”

God provides.

“*Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat?*

Or, What shall we drink? Or wherewithal shall we be clothed

For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.”

Matthew 6:30-33

Robert and I went to see Father Mick. We were wrestling with a problem we could not solve.

I went first. "I'm trying to accept God as my Higher Power and to understand what that means, but I'm still trapped in the world of Caesar. My status in society has always been determined by my income and my profession. Then there's my fear of financial insecurity, which clutches at every paycheck as if *it* were the source of all goodness."

"This idea leaves you living with fear, doesn't it?" asked Father Mick. "At any time your bank could go under, you could lose your job or, God forbid, someone could steal your identity."

"I know, Father Mick," said Robert. "I know in my head that all good things come from God, but I'm having trouble letting go of the idea that I'm the one that earns my money and I alone am responsible for my life."

"Are you responsible for the sun?" asked Father Mick. "Without the sun to provide heat and light, there would be no plant life, no animals, and no humans. What good would your paycheck be then?"

"Yes, but ..." I said and fell silent.

"You're beginning to grasp the idea that God's world and man's world are the same," said Father Mick. "God is not somewhere off in space looking down. His world is here and now. The love of God is found in the fruit on the tree, the cry of a newborn baby, and the sighs of young lovers. The love of God provides the living waters of life, all of our atoms, and my monthly Social Security check. Should the government go broke, don't be afraid, but instead look up. Are the stars still in place? Does the sun still shine? Let your faith cast out your fear."

Father Mick smiled at us both, and I withered under the love in his gaze.

"I could ask you the question that God posed to Job," he said softly.

“Which was?” asked Robert.

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” said Father Mick.

“Declare, if you have understanding.”

Daily bread.

“And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life:

he that cometh to me shall never hunger

and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”

—John 6:35

This was Cameron’s last session. She was taking a position with a treatment center near her mother’s home in New England. Her mother was sick and probably dying. Since Cameron had no real attachments in the Atlanta area, she was leaving us.

“For our last session,” she began, “I’d like to talk about daily bread. Who can tell me what daily bread is?”

After a moment, Mike answered. “Isn’t daily bread a line from the Lord’s Prayer? You know, where we ask God to feed us for the day?”

“Good,” said Cameron.

“What about the manna that God showered on the children of Israel when they were lost in the desert?” asked Leon, true to his upbringing. “That manna was only good for a single day.”

“Better,” she said, smiling. “And what is daily bread besides food?” she asked. The sunlight coming through the window was radiant on her face.

“What we need to survive each day,” said Robert.

“Yes,” said Cameron. “In the Bible, bread is a metaphor for all the physical needs we have in any given day. Not just food, water, light, clothing, shelter and companionship but all those things that nurture the spirit, fellowship, love, peace, joy, serenity—in short, everything I need to live the life more abundant. The key is that we need these things every day. I can’t eat once a month and be filled; neither can I pray once a month and live life fully.”

“At a meeting last week, the speaker said he had the disease of addiction,” said Timmy. “He said he treated his disease with a daily dose of spirituality and he got this spirituality from prayer and meditation and from going to AA meetings. I guess that might be daily bread.”

“Very good, my Timmy. And does this daily dose come unbidden?”

“God is supposed to provide for us, isn’t he?” asked Mike.

“If you go into a closet, shut the door, and ask God for food, don’t expect a hot dog to come rolling under the door,” said Robert. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Cameron. “You have to claim your daily bread. You must recognize and know in your heart that God is the source of all goodness. If I believe in lack, I’ll be left wanting. If I believe that God is the source of all the good things in my life and claim that goodness, I’ll never lack.”

“What else?” asked Timmy, softly.

“I’ll miss your gentle heart, my Timmy,” said Cameron. “Yes, there is one more thing. Daily bread is not just the thought of God as our provider, not just heartfelt believing that he is that, but an actual realization, a vibrant living of that faith. If I look at a plate of food, it will do me no good. If I discuss that food stridently or even poetically with friends, I’m not sustained. Singing songs of praise to bread is not helpful. I must actually eat the food and incorporate it

into my being in order for me to grow in mind and body and spirit. No one chew the food or swallow it for me. And the process is good for only one day. Tomorrow I must do it again."

"Daily bread, with butter?" asked Timmy.

"Yes, Timmy." She folded her hands in front of her and her gaze moved over us from face to face. "God bless you all," she said.

God's World.

"Money is a great servant but a bad master."

—Francis Bacon

Saturday morning we piled into the van. It was shopping and haircut day, and we went as a group. John wiped the sleep from his eyes and cranked up the engine.

"First stop," he shouted, "coffee!" We all cheered.

Next to John up front was Wee Willy, who lately seemed a different man. Round Robert and I took the first-row seat while Reggie took the back seat with my buddy Mike.

"Who was at Stan's NA meeting last night?" asked Wee Willy.

"I was outside chasing Little Susie around the parking lot," Mike bragged.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," I said.

"I was the one sleeping in the back," said Robert.

"Did you hear Stan rip into our pal here?" asked Wee Willy, staring straight at me I blushed as I recalled the grilling Stan had given me.

"What did Stan say?" asked Mike.

"He asked Lin whose car he was driving," said Robert. "Buddy boy made the mistake of saying it was his." He laughed.

"Come on, guys," I said. "He set me up. He sees me as a good example of how not to think."

"Yup," said Robert. "You got that right."

"So what did Stan say?" asked Mike.

"Stan most pointedly told me it was God's car," I said. "He told me I'd better take care of it because I have to give it back every night."

"Gotcha there," said Reggie, starting to wake up.

"I had a sudden sinking feeling when he asked me whose house I lived in back home," I said. "Stan's idea about God as owner had never occurred to me before. After all, I'd earned the money to build the house and buy the land, I'd built the road, excavated the pond, hired the architect . . ."

"Yes," said Robert. "We've all heard about your house. A hundred times."

"By then I was starting to get the idea," I said, "so I told Stan it was God's house and I'd better take care of it because I had to give it back every night. I must admit, I wasn't too hot about this new way of thinking about *my* material possessions."

"I don't know," said Reggie. "I kinda like the idea. After all, it's God's world, not mine."

"But the conversation didn't end there," said Robert.

"One of Stan's students spoke up and asked him about the money in our bank accounts," I said. "The student asked, *Whose is that?*"

“Stan said God was the owner of all the money in his account,” said Robert. “He said when the money belonged to Stan, people came out of the woodwork to try and take it away from him. He went around hoarding money, always trying to get more, afraid he’d never have enough.”

“Greed,” said Reggie. “The love of money being the root of evil and all.”

“Stan said now he knows the money belongs to God,” Robert continued, “and his job is to husband the money, putting it where it does the most good, put into the right pockets. He doesn’t worry anymore about how much money he has. It’ll always be replaced when more is needed.”

Love for my children cannot be greater than love for my God.

*“And he said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,
and get you into the land of Moriah;
and offer him there for a burnt offering
upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of.”*

—*Genesis 22:2*

Our first stop was at Caribou Café for our daily dose of caffeine. There was an immediate improvement in the group’s attitude.

“What about children?” asked John, settling back into the van with his coffee. “I have a boy and a girl. Do they belong to God too?”

“You could argue that our children belong to God,” said Mike. “If my car, my house and my money belong to God then I would think my kids belong to him as well. After all, who knows my child’s heart better than God? And who can provide for them better than God?”

“In Genesis,” said Reggie, “God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering. This sounds horribly barbaric. As you’ve said, Mike, we love our children more than anything else.”

“Even ahead of our Higher Power?” asked Wee Willy. “Isn’t that like worshiping a false idol, having another god before him?”

“That’s exactly the point,” said Reggie. “I’ll lose anything I place above my Higher Power. That includes worldly possessions, honors, and certainly children. Loving God must become my highest priority. The love I get from God I then shower on my kids. The more I love God, the more I’m able to love my kids.”

“So God was really teaching Abraham that he must not let his love for Isaac become more important than his love for God,” said Wee Willy, smiling. “God never intended for Abraham to harm his son.”

“Because Isaac was truly one of God’s children,” said Reggie. “It’s Abraham’s job to care for Isaac and to provide for him until God calls him home.”

This last caused a hush to fall over the group. We arrived at the barbershop.

My life does not belong to me but to God who created it.

*“In whose hand is the soul of every living thing
and the breath of all mankind?”*

—*Job 12:10*

As I climbed into the barber chair, Wee Willy spoke.

“We might as well go the whole hawg,” he said. “If this is God’s world and not Wee Willy’s, then whose life is it?”

“It can only be God’s life, not mine,” I said. I was going the whole hawg.

“I certainly didn’t will myself into existence,” said Reggie. “And unless I commit suicide I won’t will myself out of existence.”

“I always considered this life to be mine,” said Mike. “It’s mine to screw up or make a success of. Mine to waste or put to good use.”

“Our lives are given to us to shepherd,” said Reggie. “I don’t own myself. Like my car, my house and my money, my life belongs to God.”

“And when I’m done with it at the end of my time,” said Wee Willy, “I have to give it back to God, so I’d better take care of it.”

“No burying my talents in the ground, eh?” asked Reggie, “or in a bottle of booze.”

We found a small measure of humility and wisdom in the skit we performed.

It was Skit Day, and each residence group had to present a three-minute skit about some topic in recovery. There was a prize, but I can’t remember what it was. Costumes and silliness were encouraged. Reggie came up with the idea of Grasshopper and Earthworm.

“Imagine two characters,” Reggie said. “Grasshopper, like the Kung Fu guy on TV. He flits about the recovery message, jumping from idea to idea like a grasshopper jumping from leaf to leaf.”

“Who’s the second character?” asked Robert.

“Earthworm. He digs deep in the dirt and isn’t bothered by the goings-on in the material world. He’s concerned only with the task at hand and lives entirely in the moment. He’s the titular leader of the group.”

“Titular,” said Timmy and giggled.

“We’ll have to have a narrator, like in *Our Town*,” I said, imagining myself in the role.

“Of course,” said Bruce, “and we’ll need a love interest.”

“I know,” I said, “let’s dress Timmy in drag and we’ll call him Butterfly!”

So it was done: Grasshopper, Earthworm, Butterfly, and the Narrator, collectively known as the Foreskins of the Apocalypse.

Our creative efforts spawned The Adventures of Earthworm, Grasshopper and Butterfly.

The skits were presented in the main classroom to the assembled clients and staff. The room was packed. The lectern had been replaced by a set of risers but there were no curtains or backdrops just a bunch of drunks and junkies trying to be funny without looking too stupid. Because of his meliferous FM radio voice, Reggie was chosen to be the Narrator. Because of his esteemed if sometimes obscure wisdom, Robert was to play Earthworm, and because of my tendency to jump around a lot, I was to be Grasshopper. Timmy, of course, was Butterfly.

Reggie, dressed in a borrowed tuxedo one size to small, took the stage first.

Narrator: “Today we present The Adventures of Earthworm, Grasshopper and Butterfly, three make-believe characters that you may recognize.”

Narrator: “In a past life, Grasshopper was a physician. His name in the real world was Leonardo. Earthworm, previously known as Roberto, began life as an English major, then

became an internist until he gave it up to seek the meaning of life through prayer and medication. The curvaceous Butterfly began life as a cheerleader, graduated to career woman then hurdled into motherhood before starting over as the short-lived but incredibly beautiful Timmy.”

At this point Timmy jumped onto the stage, pulled his wig off and waved to the crowd.

Narrator: Imagine if you will that it is morning at the Café Kavavita, a small coffeehouse overlooking the river of life. Our story begins...”

Narrator: “Butterfly, Grasshopper and Earthworm walked from the coffee shop down the path that leads to the river’s edge. Grasshopper carried three coffees, Butterfly carried the croissants, and Earthworm did well not to fall in the water. They sat by the river and began to enjoy their picnic.”

Robert and I joined Timmy on the stage and distributed coffee and pastries all around then the three of us took seats near the front of the stage.

“What goes around comes around.” said Earthworm, his eyes closed as he meditated on the whipped cream atop his latte.

“Yes,” said Grasshopper. “In other words, every pain I inflict upon another, intentioned or not, will result in an equal pain visited upon me. Every evil will be returned, and likewise, every good.”

“In other words, if I put my bread upon the waters I shall find it after many days,” said Butterfly, the rechristened Timmy. He flipped the long blonde curls of his \$1.99 wig.

“Not just returned but returned manyfold,” said Grasshopper.

“Manyfold,” echoed Earthworm.

"And the part about, 'thou shall find it after many days'?" asked Butterfly. "What does that mean? I would think that after many days the bread would be soggy or moldy, either that or eaten by the fishes and seagulls."

"Dumb blonde," muttered Grasshopper, licking the foam from his mustache.

"Daily bread," said Earthworm, yawning.

"So," said Butterfly, "the bread I receive today is the result of the good works done by me earlier. Isn't that karma?"

"Not exactly," said Grasshopper. "Karma suggests we are inexorably bound to the fate we have created. However, many of us believe we have free will and can make amends for our wrongdoings. We can change our lives for the better."

"Life is good," said Earthworm, causing Butterfly to swoon.

Spiritual Tools

You are a child of God and your job is to bring God's love into the world.

I am a being of spirit, same as my father.

I am heir to the kingdom of heaven—here and now.

My birthright is a life that is happy, joyous and free of fear—here and now.

I treat my disease with a daily dose of spirituality, which comes from prayer, meditation and going to AA meetings.

Everyday God works provides for all of my needs, everything necessary to thrive and flourish in the world.

If I believe in lack, I will be lacking; if I believe in God's providence, I will be filled.

It is God's world, not mine; my children are not mine, but his.

I will lose anything I place above my Higher Power—my possessions, my relationships, my life.

I have dominion over the things in my life; I don't own them, I just take care of them.

Every good and every pain I give to others will be returned to me; what goes around comes around.

I am not bound by my wrongdoings; I can change my life for the better.

Principle 6 The natural state of the universe is harmony

I must accept the world as it is.

*“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*

—Mathew 5:44

A gray rain filled the sky outside. Inside, the apartment seemed especially cozy and warm. I yawned, then quickly covered my mouth. It was breakfast on Sunday morning. John was cooking; the aroma of coffee and bacon was delicious in the air.

“My old way of life was always getting me into trouble,” said Mike. “At the time, my thinking seemed normal, but today I realize just how crazy I was.”

“In detox,” I said, “they called me the bat-shit-crazy oncologist. I had no idea what they were talking about.”

“I’m not sure you’re a whole lot better now,” Robert said, grinning. “If I truly desire a life filled with serenity, they say I have to change how I see the world. For me, acceptance of the world as it is, and not as I think it should be, has been most difficult thing I had to learn.”

Robert picked up the Big Book of AA and began to read:

“... acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because some person, place, thing or situation—some fact of my life—is unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing

or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and my attitudes."

"I have a lot of trouble accepting a world that's full of evil," said Timmy. "How can a loving God allow wars, misery, and poverty on such a grand scale?"

"Where did this thinking get you?" asked Wee Willy.

"I got upset a lot," said Timmy.

"In other words, you're taken out of your serenity?" asked Mike.

"I guess so," said Timmy.

"What's the answer to Timmy's problem with the world?" asked Robert.

"First off, the definition of evil is important." said Mike. "The best definition I've found is simply man's inhumanity to man. God doesn't rain evil down upon the world, we generate it ourselves."

"We're the ones who brought slavery, bigotry, genocide, and all the other tribulations into the world," said Robert. "God gave us free will to make decisions for ourselves. It's not his fault if our decisions end up hurting others."

"But I don't want to live in a world with Adolf Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan," said Timmy. "I try to accept that these things exist, but it still upsets me to no end."

"If life is easy, as I've heard," said Robert, "then what's wrong with Timmy's view of the world?"

"It's not Timmy's world," said Wee Willy, sincere like never before. "It's God's world.

Who is Timmy to judge God's handiwork? Who died and made him king?"

"In other words," said Robert, "God is perfect and so is his world—this world is perfect just the way it is."

"What's required is a new way of looking at the world," said Mike. "Perfection becomes simply this—everything is exactly the way it's supposed to be. When I came to understand that, life got much simpler. But there's one more layer to this onion."

"Acceptance isn't enough," said Robert. "Timmy accepts the world, but his acceptance doesn't give him any peace. The last layer is embracing. I must learn to accept the world and embrace it as it is. Acceptance with understanding and love will lead me toward serenity. *God let me accept the world as it is, without the need to judge it.*"

Judging any person, place, or thing only diminishes me.

*"When you judge another,
you do not define them, you define yourself."*

—Wayne Dyer

"The only way I could stay sober was to quit judging other people," said Raphael. A few of us were sitting in the lounge trying to avoid judging the decaf coffee. Raphael had replaced Cameron as family counselor and leader of the newcomer group. He was the only Hispanic member of the staff. His dark eyes sparkled when he smiled.

"One reason not to judge others is that it puts limitations on them, and by association, on me." Leon said.

"Living without limitations," I said. "I don't understand."

"I'm sure you tried living without *restrictions*," said Raphael. "No limit to the amount of drugs or alcohol you could consume, but that's not what I'm talking about. See Mountain Jack over there?"

I grinned. Mountain Jack had come in last night from somewhere in the backwoods of Tennessee. Long-haired and woodsy, he made a stark contrast to the professional-looking people around him.

"If I told you he had an IQ of 85, pumped gas and cooked meth in his basement, would you accept that?" asked Raphael. I looked at Mountain Jack and nodded.

"But what if I told you he had an IQ of 155 and was a tenured if somewhat eccentric professor of mathematics and physics at the state university?"

"I'd say I had badly misjudged him," I said. "By assuming he has a low IQ, I limited what I thought of him."

"When you limit what you think of others, you necessarily limit not only them but yourself," said Raphael.

"But it's terribly difficult not to judge," I said. "For example, every time I see a person jogging, I want to put them down, even though I can't make it around the track even once. They're doing a lot better than my fat tubby self, but I'd never admit it. I guess I'm afraid they're better than me."

"I have a bad habit of putting down people who are fat," said the skinny Timmy. "I guess I have this need to look better than everybody else."

“Comparing myself to others is always a bad thing to do,” said Raphael. “It’s a game I can’t win. Someone will always be faster or smarter or better looking than me.”

“I need to quit playing games I can’t win,” said Timmy.

“When I start judging other people, I put myself in the role of being superior to God,” said Leon. “By judging this world and the people in it, I’m in effect judging God’s handiwork. Not something I do well.”

“It also makes you arrogant,” said Raphael.

“Not me,” said Timmy, grinning.

I am powerless over the world.

After lunch we reconvened on the breezeway, awash with the smell of rain on hot pavement. A cool mist floated around us.

“Accepting the world as it is means I have to recognize that I’m not in charge of the world,” said Mike. “As much as I tried to control everything around me, today I know that all the people, places and things I encounter are well beyond my ability to control them.”

“But …” said Timmy.

“No buts about it,” said Robert, who joyfully found a pack of salted peanuts in his pocket. “You have no control over anything in this world.”

“What about bodily function?” asked Wee Willy, a man of podiatric science.

“The next time you have diarrhea,” said Mike, “stand outside the bathroom door and repeat after me: *I will not have diarrhea, I will not have diarrhea*, and see what happens.”

“I certainly don’t have control over my pancreas or my pituitary,” I said. “Nor can I will myself to grow an extra six inches so I can make the basketball team.”

“All right, Mr. Smarty Pants,” said Timmy, “what *do* I have control over?”

“Your thoughts, my good friend,” said Robert, chewing the last of the peanuts. “You have control of only one thing in this life—your thoughts.”

John came out from the apartment, “Coffee’s ready.”

We filled our cups and returned to the breezeway.

The thoughts I entertain will become manifest in my world.

“We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think.

When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.”

—The Buddha

“All kinds of terrible ideas come into my head sometimes,” said Timmy. “What about them, huh?”

“All manner of thoughts come unbidden into my mind,” said Robert, washing down the peanuts with fresh coffee. “Thoughts of punching my neighbor, poisoning his dog, or screwing his old lady, but also thoughts of helping him rake his leaves, bringing him food in times of illness, or giving him a ride when his car’s in the shop.”

“I’m not responsible for the thoughts that come unbidden into my head,” said Mike. “But I am responsible for what I do with them. I can either reject it—refuse to give it a place in my mind—or I can hold onto it, maybe even obsess on it.”

“If I obsess on something,” asked Timmy, “won’t I draw it to me?”

Spiritual Tools

I must learn to accept the world as it is, not as I think it should be; I must accept life on life's terms.

I need to focus on the changes I need in my life and not on the changes I would impose on the world.

It is humankind's misuse of self-will that results in evil; God does not rain evil upon the world.

It is not given for me to judge God's handiwork.

Judge not; judging others limits both them and me.

Comparing myself to others is a game I cannot win.

In all the world, I have control over only one thing—my thoughts.

I can control the thoughts in my head.

Later, in Raphael's class...

"One of the secrets of life is this," said Raphael: "whatever I focus my attention on, I draw to me. If I focus on a cold beer, pretty soon it'll be in my hand. Being obsessive-compulsive, I'm good at fixating on any thought that passes through my mind. If I hold onto that thought it will eventually become my reality. If I reject the thought, it will have no effect on my world. Once I understand where my freedom lies, I'm the one who gets to choose."

"In other words," said Timmy, "I'm not responsible for the first thought that comes into my head, but I am responsible for what I do with that thought. If the thought of getting high enters my head, I have the choice of obsessing on it or rejecting it."

"Matt said the way the human mind is constructed, it can only hold one thought at a time," said Reggie, brandishing a lemonade topped with a slice of lime. "By focusing my attention on lemonade, I effectively reject the thought of a cold beer."

"That makes sense," I said.

"It's a good way to fight off negative thoughts," said Raphael. "I can switch my attention to a ball game on TV or where to go for dinner," he said.

"My problem," said Timmy, "is when the thought keeps coming back."

"The only real defense against the first drink comes from my Higher Power," said Reggie. "If the thought of using refuses to leave, I can pray what Cameron taught us:

*'God, I thank you for taking away my obsession with using
and replacing it with the faith that that no matter what happens'*

everything will be all right. ’’

“If I focus on the problem,” said Robert, “I’m stuck.”

“But if I focus on the solution, I’m free,” said Raphael.

Negativity must be driven from my consciousness.

“Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal

with the intent of throwing it at someone else.

You are the one who gets burned.”

—The Buddha

Raphael continued. “Last week I was driving downtown and pulled to a stop at a traffic light. An old song by Sting started playing on the radio. My ex-wife and I had partied and gotten high listening to it. In a flash of anger, a flood of resentments against my ex-wife filled my mind and the memory of our marital woes came roaring back. In an instant, I was consumed with rage. It mattered not that all this had occurred ten years before, the hurt seemed as fresh as yesterday. Staring into the traffic light, I knew exactly what I had to do. I closed my eyes and prayed.

“God, I thank you for taking away my resentment

against my ex-wife

and replacing it with the faith that no matter what happens,

everything will be all right.

“Just as quickly as it had arrived, the resentment was gone. The song ended, the light turned green, and I drove off. And I had been spared hours of angry grief and turmoil,” said Raphael. “Resentments won’t go away by themselves. A song on the radio, a fragrance of perfume or an old memory can bring about the full-blown explosion of old memory.”

“Matt said alcoholics and addicts are especially sensitive to them,” said Timmy.

“To keep from accumulating new resentments. I must deal with them the moment they arise. I need to recognize what’s happening, forgive the other person right away, and apologize as quickly as possible for my part in the trouble. That way, lingering resentments won’t fester until they become nearly impossible to root out.”

I must be constantly aware of the thoughts in my head.

*“The answer is that, as we have already seen,
the changing of one’s consciousness is really very hard work,
calling for constant unceasing vigilance
and a breaking of mental habits which is sure to be very troublesome for a time.”*

—Emmet Fox

We were again in Jane’s classroom. For some reason, the high priestess of intimidation was mellow this day. She smiled benignly at Reggie and stuck her pencil into her henna-dyed bun.

Reggie said, “I’ve been considering what Father Mick said about right thinking. How do I go about ridding my mind of all things negative?”

Jane pursed her lips thoughtfully then placed her ruler on the desk.

“One of the central ideas of AA is that I no longer have to respond blindly to what happens in the world around me,” Jane said, glaring when she saw me. “My old thinking consisted of two steps. First, *You slander me*, then reflexively, *I hit you in the nose*. Now, I’m no longer bound to respond that way. Now it becomes, *slander me*, and I stop and think, *that’s interesting, I wonder what he meant by that*, and my response becomes *I think I’ll ignore him*.” She patted the bald spot on the top of my head and said, “We no longer have to respond blindly to the first thought in our head.”

“I’m with you,” said Reggie. “But how does that help me get rid of all the negativity that lives inside my head?”

“I need to recognize negative thoughts as soon as they arise so I can dispose of them just as quickly,” Jane said. “I need to be constantly on guard for such thoughts.”

“Oh Lord,” said Reggie, “how long would that take, I wonder?”

“Six months,” said our counselor. “It took me six months to go from being full of negativity to a place where it no longer colored my thinking and affected my behavior. I’ll never be free of every negative thought, but at least today I can recognize one when it appears and dump it as quickly as possible.”

She looked directly at me. “Of course, for some of you, it may take a little longer.”

I must quit holding on to blame and shame and guilt.

“It has not been in the pursuit of pleasure that I have periled life and reputation and reason.

It has been the desperate attempt to escape from torturing memories,

from a sense of insupportable loneliness

and a dread of some strange impending doom.”

—Edgar Allan Poe

Matt called the session to order. “Today, we’re going to work on improving our thinking.

Let’s start by naming the forms of negativity that intrude upon the mind? Mike?”

“Dwelling on a past I can’t change,” he said.

“Good start,” said Matt. “What else?”

“Worrying over a future that may never materialize,” said Vera.

“Living in fear of any kind?” said Timmy.

“Yes, of course,” said Matt, “but let’s be a little more specific.”

“How about ruminating on what should’ve been, or what could’ve been?” Timmy asked.

“Excellent, Timmy,” said Matt.

I spoke next. “*What if* and *if only* sound a lot like Timmy’s idea.”

“All these are good,” said Matt, “but there are still a few biggies left. How about *blame* and *shame* and *guilt*? They will always affect my thinking in a useless way if I let them. They’re deadly for the addict and alcoholic.”

“Ever since I was a kid I’ve blamed myself for all the world’s problems,” said Vera.

“When my father got mad it was always because of me. When my parents divorced, I was sure it was my fault. Today I still beat myself up over my mistakes.”

“I know that if you scratch my shame,” I said, “you’ll get an instant and aggressive response.”

“My sins left me with this overwhelming sense of both shame and guilt,” said Reggie. “My pain was so great, only my friend Jack Daniels could relieve it.”

“Exactly,” said Matt. “I need to dump my blame and my shame and my guilt here in this room, and I suggest you start doing it now. If you don’t, you’ll use again, and if you use again ...”

“We die,” came the chorus from the room.

My resentments arise from my mind and not from the world outside.

I asked Matt about the resentments against my ex-wife that kept popping up.

“It doesn’t take much to get me going,” I said. “A telephone call from her can put me into a tailspin lasting from three hours to three weeks. It makes me crazy, irritable, and very unhappy.”

“Do you feel like a puppet being pulled by strings your ex-wife holds?” asked Matt.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s it exactly.”

“Then let me tell you what to do. Close your eyes. Go ahead, do it now.”

I closed my eyes.

“Now reach into your shirt pocket and pull out your spiritual scissors.”

My eyes popped open. “What? What are spiritual scissors?”

“Close your eyes,” he said softly, and I complied.

“In your pocket you’ll find a pair of spiritual scissors. They look just like regular scissors except they cut through the strings of fear and resentment. Got ‘em?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Now imagine the strings that connect you to your ex-wife. Reach out and cut all the strings with your scissors and watch her walk away.”

“Got it,” I said, a smile on my face.

“Over the next week I want you to keep track of the number of times you use your scissors then report back to the group.”

“Can I open my eyes now?” I asked.

All week I kept my scissors handy, snipping away at strings whenever the need arose. By group the next week, I was ready to report.

“Okay, tell us about your week,” said Matt, relaxed in his chair.

“Well, I used the scissors five times, and each time they worked just fine. But you know what? My ex-wife only called me once. The other four times it was my own thinking that made me crazy!”

My resentments, it seems, arise from the thoughts in my head rather than any event in the real world. It is my own mind that takes me out of my serenity. I cannot control anything in the world outside, but I can control my thoughts.

Go toward my goal.

*“The goal of life
is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe,
to match your nature with Nature.”*

—Joseph Campbell

“There are a lot of manic-depressives in this room,” said Matt. “You know, bipolar types.”

A grumble approaching a roar spread through the classroom.

“One of our character traits is the inability to stay on track, to stay focused, even if you’re not bipolar,” he said. “We’re easily distracted. We’re often accused of never finishing anything.”

“Enlighten us, O great master,” said Mike.

“Okay, I will,” said Matt. “Go toward your goal. In life I need to ask myself, will my decision take me toward my goal or away from my goal? When confronted with a fork in the road ahead, take the path that leads you toward your goal.”

“Should I study for my test tomorrow,” said Timmy, “or should I go the pharmacy and shoot up Ritalin? Makes sense to me. Let’s go to the pharmacy.”

“You have a broken thinker,” said Matt, smiling.

“Still toxic,” shouted Mike from the back of the room.

“But you get the idea,” said Matt. “It’s your own personal Occam’s razor.”

“What the hell is that?” Timmy whispered to me.

“Never mind,” I said. “Just do what he says.”

Low expectations, high serenity.

*“Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz,
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends,*

Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz."

—Janis Joplin

Having finished our cups of non-caffeinated coffee, we assembled in a small classroom for Raphael's session.

"My expectations were always getting me in trouble," said Raphael. "If I expected a Mercedes-Benz for my birthday and instead I got a Porsche, I'd be crushed. It matters not that the Porsche cost more, was sexier, and came in midnight blue, it was not a Mercedes-Benz and therefore a disappointment. My expectations kept me from having any peace or satisfaction. If, on the other hand, I had kept my expectations low, then a 1976 Ford Pinto would have been quite satisfactory and I would still have had my serenity. High expectations, low serenity. Low expectations, high serenity."

"Does that mean I should always expect nothing, then be satisfied with less?" asked Timmy.

"Who can answer Timmy's question?" asked Raphael.

"Absolutely not," said Mike, "but my expectations should be in line with the world around me. If my parents were gad-zillionaires they might buy me a Porsche for my birthday. However, my parents are retired and live on a modest income, so I'm happy with a phone call, a birthday card or a pair of hand-knitted socks."

"Good," said Raphael. "But let's make this a little more real. How about looking for a job? Willy?"

Wee Willy grinned his impish smile. “Whenever I applied for a job, I always expected to get hired on the spot as the new CEO and make \$200,000 a year. But you know, I’ve applied for dozens of jobs and that’s never happened.”

Robert spoke up. “If I go to a job interview with outrageously high expectations, I’m bound to be disappointed. I’ll do a lot better if my goal is to show up, fill out the application correctly, and present myself in the best light possible. That way I’m a success at every interview.”

“High expectations, low serenity. Low expectations, high serenity,” repeated Raphael. “There’s a short prayer that touches on this idea, which I present for your consideration: *God, let me love what I have.*”

Do the next right thing.

“*Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.*”

—Thomas Jefferson

Reggie had invited Sil, the young Buddhist I’d met earlier, to dinner at our apartment to share how Buddhism and recovery fit together for him. We talked as we ate vegetarian hotdogs and beans.

“As a newcomer to the study of Buddhism, one of the first things I learned was the Eightfold Path. Today, in recovery for over four years, I still see the Path as an enlightened way

to live. Nothing in the Eightfold Path contradicts anything in AA. In fact, I think you can find all of its elements someplace in the Big Book."

"What is this eightfold thing?" asked Timmy, putting the dishes in the dishwasher.

"That's a lot to swallow," said Reggie, "but I agree with you—all these principles can be found somewhere in AA."

"Does that mean I get to wear a saffron robe?" asked Timmy.

Sil laughed, and it was like the peal of a silver bell. "No," he said, smiling beatifically, "the robes are only for the monks."

After Sil left, we sat together drinking coffee.

"What do you think about all that stuff?" I asked.

"Mostly it's just good recovery, but on a higher plane than any of us usually reach," said Reggie. "You could boil it all down to *do the next right thing*. If I put that ideal in front of me all day, trying to think, talk, act and live the right way, I'll end up on Sil's Eightfold Path."

"Do the next right thing," said Timmy. "I think I could do that. But I don't get to wear the fancy robes, eh?"

"Nope, no fancy robes for you," I said.

When I tell on my disease, it loses power over me.

Mike and I ran into Mark at the AA meeting in Buckhead some weeks after we first met. Mark had been attending AA meetings every night since then. He had exchanged his hip hop clothes for jeans and a sweat shirt but he still sported the dreads. He looked discouraged. We stopped outside the meeting hall to talk.

"Hi," he said. "I've got a problem. Could you guys help me?"

“Sure,” I said. “You not drinking again, are you?”

“No,” said Mark, “I still think about it, but I guess that’s normal. My problem is my secrets.”

“What secrets?” I asked.

“All of them. I’m afraid to tell them to anyone. I couldn’t possibly admit all the things I’ve done. I always assumed they’d go to the grave with me.”

“If you do that,” Mike said, “you’ll go drunk to the grave.”

“Like I said, that’s the problem,” Mark repeated.

“You’ll remember,” I said, “everyone in AA has a secret, and nobody’s secret is any worse than anybody else’s. There’s no real difference between any of us when it comes to the mistakes we made or the secrets we harbor.”

“Frankly,” said Mike, “nobody gives a damn about what you did, only about what you’re doing now. The man you used to be is not nearly as important as the man you are today. If you really want to get sober, you have to dump your secrets and get on with it.”

“Well,” said Mark, “since you put it that way.”

“Besides,” I said, “if you tell on your disease, it loses power over you.”

“I don’t understand,” Mark said.

“Let me give you an example,” said Mike. “When I was home last weekend I went out with my girlfriend. She’s in the program, too. As part of her job, she organizes dinner parties for dignitaries who visit her department. During the meal, they were serving what used to be my favorite wine. Before long, the yeasty aroma of the wine was driving me nuts. The urge to drink was spinning wildly in my head. I reached over and touched my girlfriend on the arm and told her the smell of the wine was getting to me. She said, ‘Not to worry, we can leave and go

somewhere else.' But it wasn't necessary. Simply by telling on my disease, I instantly became comfortable in my own skin again. By telling her how I felt, the whole notion of drinking immediately left my mind."

Integrity is simply being honest with myself.

*"This above all: to thine own self be true,
and it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."*

—Shakespeare

The success of skit night prompted the staff to repeat the experience. This time the reward was a free pizza dinner for the winners. Only three residence groups were invited to participate. Unfortunately we were included.

"Everybody shut up and let's get on with this thing," said John, the most anal of us all. "We have to present a three-minute skit at 10 a.m. tomorrow, and it's almost midnight. I for one would like to get done and go to bed."

"I thought we were doing *Hamlet*?" said Timmy.

"No problem," said Robert, tongue in cheek. "We should be able to boil down a three-hour play to three minutes without much problem."

Reggie reached in his pocket and pulled out his three-month AA chip. "Here it is," he said. "Read what's on the back of the chip: *To thine own self be true*."

"Yeah," said Mike. "We ought to be able to talk about integrity for three minutes."

“Does that mean I don’t get to wear tights?” asked Timmy.

“No tights and no sword fights,” said Mike. “Let’s stay on point here. Can anybody define integrity?”

The room fell silent.

“We’re a bunch of drunks and junkies,” said Robert. “What the hell do we know about integrity?”

“Maybe more than you think,” said Timmy. “Like Reggie said, it’s on the back of all the AA chips. It must have something to do with recovery. I guess.”

“If I’m true to myself, I’m no longer dependent on the opinions of others,” said Reggie. “It’s a very freeing feeling.”

“And frightening,” said Timmy.

“If I’m a child of God and I’m true to myself, doesn’t that mean I’m true to that piece of God that shines within me?” asked Robert.

“Well put, kind sir,” said Reggie. “Of course it means I’m true to my relationship with God. I don’t have a significant relationship with my liver or my Jack Daniels.. At least not anymore.”

“Can I be Polonius?” asked Timmy.

“The piece of God that’s the core of my being partakes of his perfection and love,” said Reggie. “Living inside me are kindness, compassion, charity, courage, honesty, and all the other virtues. If I’m true to them, I will necessarily be true to my fellows. Emmet Fox said it like this: ‘Cost what it will, involve what it may, the integrity of the soul must be preserved.’”

The next morning, we were ready with our skit.

Narrator: “And now, back by popular demand, reprising their success on this very stage just three weeks ago today, your very own Foreskins of the Apocalypse, presenting a somewhat abbreviated version of *Hamlet* by the immortal bard, William Shakespeare! Let’s give it up now for the boys in tights!”

Timmy bounded onto the stage in black tights and a short white wig, brandishing a Star Wars light saber and singing *To Thine Own Self Be True*, to a chorus of catcalls and kazoos. The musical *Hamlet*, in three minutes or less, was a roaring success. We enjoyed the pizza.

Spiritual Tools

The human mind is so constructed that it can hold only one thought at a time.

I must deal with resentments quickly, lest I obsess on them and they grow.

Ridding my mind of all negativity requires constant attention to the thoughts in my head.

I do not have to respond blindly to the first thought in my head.

Thoughts of blame and shame and guilt are deadly and must go.

Resentments arise, not from the issues of the world, but from my own thinking.

Take the road that leads toward your goal.

Keep expectations in line with reality; God, let me love what I have.

Best advice for the seeker—do the next right thing.

Who I used to be is far less important than who I am now.

When I tell on my disease, it loses power over me.

Principle 7 New thinking will replace old thinking

New thinking will bring wholeness of mind, body, and spirit.

*“The answer lies in the extraordinary potency of habit;
and habits of thinking are at once the most subtle in character
and the most difficult to break.”*

—Emmet Fox

We were walking back to the van following the Starlight meeting. Something about a spiritual meeting under a canopy of stars brought out our philosophical sides.

“One of the first things Matt told me when I got here,” I said, “was that everything I thought I knew was wrong. Of course, I didn’t believe him. If you had asked me, I would’ve told you that my thinking was quite normal, thank you very much. Only much later did I realize just how truly crazy I was. Matt told me nothing would do but that I had to dump all the garbage in my head and start from scratch, replacing every bit of misinformation with a new way of thinking.”

“New thinking must replace old thinking,” said Mike.

“The idea of replacing everything, every old idea about living and my place in the universe, was overwhelming,” I continued. “But fortunately Matt said I didn’t have to do it all at once. I could take baby steps.”

“How’s that going for you?” asked Robert.

“Better,” I said.

Leon took advantage of the break in the conversation to begin one of his tirades.

“Sanity,” he said, “comes from the Latin, *sanitas*, meaning soundness of mind or right reason. Wholeness.”

I nodded and was glad my coffee cup was full.

“Wholeness, of course, is the object of healing and health,” he said. “Usually a sign of your sanity.”

“Sanity, wholeness, health. I got that. Go on.” I sipped.

“But more importantly, wholeness is the essence of holiness! This includes peace of mind, prosperity, even spiritual harmony. So whole, holy, healing and sanity are all related.”

“I’m waiting for the punch line,” I quipped.

Leon grinned. “To find my sanity means to be made whole again. To be made whole is to regain my health, in mind, body and spirit. New thinking that puts me on the spiritual path will return me to sanity by reconnecting me to the source my own holiness.”

“Assuming I ever had it,” lamented Timmy.

Searching for truth, I became a revolutionary.

“Jesus is the most revolutionary of all teachers.

He turns the world upside down ... nothing is ever the same again.

All values change radically.”

—Emmet Fox

The next morning when we met with Matt, the mood of last night's meeting still lingered. Leon, exploring his new ideas, spoke first.

"The words of Jesus provide a good example for completely reversing our ideas about life," said Leon, grinning. "Entirely new thinking replaces ideas that existed since the time of my buddy Moses. I know this may sound heretical for a son of Abraham, but it's true. For example, Jesus replaced *an eye for an eye* with *love thy neighbor*. And who can forget, *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her*. He turned the world upside down and created a new way of thinking and living."

"We're spirits in search of ourselves," said Matt. "We live in the world, but are not of it. If we have a motto as recovering addicts and alcoholics, it should be this: Question everything."

"What do you mean?" asked Timmy. "When I was above the rules, I was shooting up Ritalin."

"There's a huge difference, my friend, between ignoring the rules of life and questioning the old concepts that got me into trouble," said Matt. "I need to be open to examining all the old ideas my brain has accumulated."

"Fixed ideas are the downfall of all sentient beings," added Robert, in one of his pontificating moods.

"Am I sentient?" asked Timmy.

"Sometimes I wonder," chortled Robert.

"I think what we're trying to say here is that we're seekers," said Matt. "Seekers after truth wherever we find it. Without trying to define the nature of truth or reality, we're simply looking for answers that make sense and are practical."

““Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,”” said Reggie. ““That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’ Keats, I think.”

“Very good, preacher,” said Matt. “I think Keats was right. When we question all things of importance, we’re really seeking the beauty of existence. We can’t resist the ideas that hide just around the next bend in the road or over the next hill.”

“More than that,” said Reggie, “we can’t allow our ideas to become fixed, because when we think we have absolute knowledge, we’ve closed our minds to new ideas and new experiences.”

“And to the flow of love from God,” said Leon. “The sin that cannot be forgiven.”

“Exactly,” said Matt. “Cutting ourselves off from the light.”

“So, with open hearts and minds,” said Leon, “with beauty consciousness on our brows, we look to find a Higher Power in our existence. In other words, we’re Israelites.”

“Wait a minute! I’m not even Jewish! How can that be?” said the Timmy.

“Oh, you silly boy,’ said Robert. “An Israelite is any person who seeks God. The Israelites in the Bible were all seeking God, his will for us, his rules of conduct, his likes and dislikes, his pet peeves, you know, that kind of stuff.”

“Exactly,” said Matt. “To ignore the questions of life is to opt out of life itself with all its beauty and joy. ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’ I think that was Emerson.”

“Ahem,” chimed Robert and Mike as one.

“Uh, I think that may have been Socrates,” said Robert.

“Thanks for refreshing my memory. Of course, it was Socrates,” said Matt. “One last thought, then: be a revolutionary.”

I am responsible for the consequences of my actions.

After the last group of the day, Leon and I were asked to take a newcomer named Brice to the apartment and introduce him to the fellows. We escorted him to dinner and an AA meeting then sat in the apartment talking. It was well past bedtime, but Leon and I sat patiently listening to Brice, a lawyer from Memphis, droning on. This was not his first time in rehab and he was sure he had it all figured out. He trotted out one fine platitude after another.

“I got high a lot of times and never got in trouble, but every time I got in trouble, I was high,” he said. “I’m not my disease any more than I’m my arthritis. In other words, I’m a good person with a bad disease.” Leon and I nodded agreement.

“If I were simply a bad person, I’d be without hope for change. If it’s my disease that provokes my bad behavior and if my disease can be treated, then there’s hope for me.”

“And without hope,” said Leon, “nothing is possible.” I yawned my agreement. Brice seemed very pleased with his analysis.

Brice yawned. “Time for bed,” he said.

Leon almost smirked. “Not quite yet,” he said. “I think you forgot something.”

Puzzled, Brice asked, “What?”

“Brice,” I said. “You are without a doubt the most arrogant drunk I’ve ever met! Sure, the disease theory explains a lot about the nature of our addiction. But you have conveniently forgotten that you and you alone are responsible for the consequences of your actions. Now we’re going to bed.”

Avoid the words “good” and “bad.”

Robert came bouncing into the living room and plopped down on the couch and kicked off his flip-flops.

“I’ve just had a great idea. Everyone sit down and listen to this,” he said.

“No controlling behavior here,” said Mike.

“Hush,” said Robert, “I have the floor.”

“And most of the couch, too,” I laughed.

“Okay, here it is,” said Robert. “You know how Matt said we shouldn’t judge. Yet every time we use the words *good* and *bad*, we’re actually making a judgment call. We’re saying that, for example, the rain is good if we like it, but bad, or at least not good, if we don’t.”

“Yeah,” said Timmy, “who gave Robert the right to judge the rain, anyway?”

“Timmy,” said Robert, “sometimes I wonder about you, and then sometimes I just wonder.”

“I see what you’re saying,” I said. “I mean, is the rain good or bad? Good if I’m a farmer whose fields need water, but bad if I want to play golf.”

“Or tennis,” said John.

“Yeah,” said Mike. “I remember being taught that World War II was a *good* war and that Vietnam was a *bad* war. I guess a war could be *useful*, but I can’t imagine the idea that any war is ever good.”

“But how can any of us go through the day without using those words?” asked Leon. “*Good* and *bad* are so ingrained in my everyday vocabulary, I’m not sure I can do without them.”

“Here’s what I propose,” said Robert: “that we use the terms *more useful* and *less useful*. *More useful* suggests we’re moving toward a goal, while *less useful* suggests we’re being taken away from that goal.”

“And we wouldn’t have to judge everything,” said Timmy.

In everything there is a lesson and a blessing.

“*Every burden is a blessing.*”

—Robert H. Schuller

It was late afternoon and the sky was overcast as Timmy and I walked back to the apartment.

“I heard that your discharge was denied,” said Timmy. “Weren’t you supposed to leave next week sometime? What happened?”

“Right after lunch, Matt called me into his office. *I have some bad news*, he said. *You were supposed to go home next week but staff has decided to cancel your discharge.*

“I was dumfounded. I’ve been here over four months and my heart was set on going home in time for Thanksgiving. I broke out in tears, started to get angry then I remembered what Father Mick said at this morning’s spiritual.”

“You mean ‘In everything, there’s a lesson and a blessing?’ asked Timmy. “That no matter what happens, whether it seems a joy or a sorrow, it can help me?”

“I didn’t expect to put the idea into practice quite so soon,” I said. “I was really heart broken. Then I remembered Father Mick’s words. I tried to overcome my runaway emotions

and find the lesson. Maybe, high expectations, low serenity. Or that I shouldn't count my chickens before they hatch. Or that I wasn't the best judge of my own mental state. And the blessing? Maybe by staying an extra month I could avoid the relapses I was seeing all around me. Immediately I felt better. Not happy, but better. Finding the meaning in Father Mick's words really helped. I know my pain was diminished by at least half."

"I'm sorry you won't be going home," grinned Timmy, "but look on the bright side, you'll have my wonderful company for another month."

There is a better way.

Leon poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down beside me in the lounge. "I'm having a bad day," he said. "Really bad." His face looked like sundown in a rainstorm.

"Yes?"

"My wife's getting an abortion." His voice was flat and low.

"What?" I knew Leon and his wife Hannah were separated.

He stared into his coffee. "She found out last week she's pregnant."

"So why ...?"

"She's sick and tired of putting up with my bullshit. Of the ten years we've been married I've been wasted for at least nine ... ruined birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, every kind of family thing ... spent rent money for drugs, gave her car to the dope man." He raked a hand through his hair, exhaling loudly. "I've been fired from more jobs than you can count. Been in court for drunk driving, bad checks, IRS. Humiliated her in front of her family, in department

stores, in temple, for God's sake. And I've demonstrated pretty clearly that I can't be trusted. I know she loves me, but she finally ran out of patience."

"And she wants an abortion?"

He looked at his watch. "She had it an hour ago. She doesn't want to have anything to do with me."

"What're you going to do?"

His voice dropped even further. "I was thinking about going over to the 'hood and buying some heroin. Wanna come along?"

"I think not," I said.

"Right now I'll do just about anything to make this hurting stop." He buried his face in his hands. "Case of beer and a bottle of vodka?" he mumbled. His red eyes peered at me between his fingers.

"And what'll happen if we do?"

"We both know the answer to that," he said.

"So this horrible thing has happened and now you have to decide what to do."

"When I was using, I wouldn't have given it a thought. I would've gotten smashed."

"Did that ever change anything?"

"No."

"What are your options?" I asked. "Today, you can choose how to respond. You can obsess on the thought of using, or replace the thought with a better one."

His grimace smoothed out a little. "We could get some ice cream and watch the Knicks."

"That'd be a start."

He grunted and looked up. "We could go to group and I could share how bad I feel."

“That’s better. Keep going.”

“I could ask the question, what’s my part in all this?” said Leon. “What is it about me that’s upset? A part of me has been destroyed. I feel betrayed. My pride’s hurt. My self-esteem is dashed. Shall I go on?”

“And what’s at the bottom of this list of your character defects?” I was starting to feel like a real guru.

“Fear,” he said. “When I’m afraid, all my character defects come screaming out.” He turned to me. “Hey, didn’t you teach me a prayer for that?” He closed his eyes and recited:

*“God I thank you for taking away my fear
And replacing it with the faith
That no matter what happens,
Everything will be all right.*

“Oh, I just remembered something else,” he said. “In everything, there’s a lesson and a blessing. But I’ll tackle that after two scoops of ice cream.”

New thinking requires a change in behavior.

Raphael had a dentist appointment so Carl, a psychologist on staff, took his place. Carl was known for pontificating at times, but he knew a lot about living and was good at sharing it. “Today, we’re going to talk about the turd cycle,” he said. “As a child, my daddy repeatedly told me that I was a little turd. After hearing that long enough, I came to believe him and I acted accordingly. Those around me said, *Carl acts like a little turd*, and they began

treating me like a little turd. Of course, I felt their disregard and I was sure that my dad's assessment was correct. I was a little turd. So goes the turd cycle.

"To change my view of myself requires intervention at the point of my perception of myself. As long as I believe that I'm a little turd, I'll continue to act like a little turd. Only if my self-image changes will my behavior change. If I'm repeatedly told that I'm not a little turd but actually a fine upstanding young man, eventually I'll become convinced of my self-worth. With a change in the way I perceive myself, my behavior will change, and because if I believe I'm a good person, I'll act accordingly. Those around me will begin to think, *Carl acts like a fine and worthy person. We must have been wrong in our assessment of him.* Then they'll begin treating me with respect. I'll sense this and begin to think, *Maybe I'm a good person after all.* With the change in my self-image, my behavior has changed. The negative cycle that ruled my life has been broken.

"But for the alcoholic, this process doesn't work," he said. "The addict's thinker is broken. He labors under his insanity, and his negative self-image only brings more drinking. Stuck inside his fixed opinions, he won't listen to any new ideas. A change in his life must come at the next step in the cycle, that of behavior. He must first learn to act sober, even if his mind refuses to accept the tenets of recovery. He must practice this behavior over and over again, because instilling new behavior doesn't occur quickly. With abstinence and the sanity it brings, others will perceive his new and worthy behavior and they'll begin to treat him with respect. In the fullness of time, he'll sense his own worthiness and start to act accordingly, and the cycle will be broken. Because of the depth of his insanity, however, the cycle must be repeated many times before the insanity will begin to clear. That's why the process of recovery takes so long to be successful. Certainly much longer than twenty-eight days."

Leon leaned over and whispered: “And the only way to build self-esteem is to do estimable acts.”

“Yup,” I said, wondering how long my cycling would take.

If I don’t swallow the bait, I won’t get the hook.

*“The fish sees the bait, not the hook;
A person sees the gain, not the danger.”*

—Chinese Proverb

Timmy and I were preparing dinner for tonight’s AA meeting in our apartment. The menu was tuna casserole, green beans from a can, and frozen dinner rolls. Neither Timmy nor I were known for our culinary expertise. Besides, the meal was cheap.

Timmy was upset. He seemed to be having trouble opening the can of tuna fish. His face looked like a bowl of jello about to melt.

“My wife called,” he blubbered. “She wants me to pay her back every cent of the cost of rehab. When we decided I should come here, we agreed to take the money out of savings. I don’t know what to do. The bill here is over \$12,000 already and I’m not done yet. Janet’s really pissed. I feel like shit.”

“How does she expect you to pay her back while you’re in here?” I asked. “Do you have piles of money hidden someplace?”

“No, of course not. I have twenty bucks in my pocket,” he moaned.

“And she knows this?” I asked.

“Of course she does,” he said.

“Maybe she’s just trying to yank your chain?” I asked.

“She definitely knows how to punch my buttons,” said Timmy.

“So you’re obsessing about something over which you have absolutely no control, and you’ve gotten yourself into a real snit,” I said. “You swallowed it, hook, line and sinker.”

“I guess I did,” said Timmy. “I never thought of it that way.”

“If you don’t take the hook,” I said, “you avoid all this wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth. Or do you like it when she upsets you?”

“I do not!” said Timmy.

“To stop taking the hook, you have to recognize the bait for what it is,” I said. “You don’t have to respond reflexively.”

“Don’t take the hook,” said Timmy.

“Don’t take the hook,” I agreed. “And remember these words: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.*”

Quit playing games you cannot win.

*“Only by joy and sorrow
does a person know anything about themselves and their destiny.*

They learn what to do and what to avoid.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Vera and I drove to Fulton County Detox to mingle with the residents and learn from their mistakes. We were supposed to see ourselves in the behavior of those we observed. Staff called it mirroring. The drunks and junkies here were usually rescued from the drunk tank or pulled out from under bushes. A few walked in voluntarily. Three days was the usual stay before they were turned back on to the street. Their care was paid for by the county. Except for being at the bottom of the social heap, they were just like us.

They brought Leroy to detox instead of letting him spend the night in the drunk tank, a kindness of the policeman who picked him up. Leroy worked day labor, and every day after work he walked to the local mini market and bought a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of wine. Then he'd sit down on a street corner and drink his wine in the cool of the afternoon. It was not uncommon for the local police sector car to roll by about then and arrest him for public drunkenness.

"I just don't understand," he said. "That officer keeps arresting me over and over. I don't know why he don't leave me alone. I just want to drink my wine."

"How many times has he picked you up for drinking in public?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe twenty or fifty times."

Later, Vera put on a tape by Father Martin, a Catholic priest famous for his talks on alcoholism. Today's story was about an alcoholic who climbed into the ring with Mike Tyson every day, and every day came out bloody.

"This alcoholic comes out of his hotel room one morning and Mike Tyson is sparring in the ballroom, getting ready for a championship bout," said Father Martin "The alcoholic thinks, *you know I used to be on the boxing team in college. Sure, that was twenty years ago, but I bet I*

could still take him. Our friend climbs in the ring, gets soundly trounced, and slinks out of the ring, saying, ‘I’ll never do that again.’

“The next day our friend passes the ballroom again, thinking, *I did a little shadow boxing yesterday afternoon and I bet I could take Mike on.* He climbs in the ring and he gets pasted. He crawls out, saying, ‘I’ll never do that again.’

“On the third day, our friend gets a sudden uncontrollable urge and without thinking jumps into the ring, with the same result as the two previous days. He gets his ass whipped. Again, he slithers out of the ring, saying, ‘I’ll never do that again.’

“Our pugilistic friend is like every alcoholic,” said Father Martin. “He continually thinks that someday he will be able to drink alcohol like a normal person. But each time, alcohol whips his butt. Now, AA has a very simple solution to this problem. Don’t get in the ring.”

“And quit playing games you can’t win,” said Vera.

I need a new definition of perfection.

“*When you stop expecting people to be perfect,
you can like them for who they are.*”

—Donald Miller

The next morning we sat in Matt’s group talking about the perfect world.

“I used to think perfection was getting everything, well, perfect,” I said. “If I took a test with a hundred questions and got a hundred right, that was perfect. If I got ninety-nine right, it was a good score but it wasn’t perfect.”

"I'll bet that got you into trouble," said Matt.

"Yeah," I said, "I chased a perfection I could never achieve. And I was chronically disappointed by the imperfection of the world I lived in."

"I see," said Matt. "What about now?"

"Now, I'm not so sure," I said.

"Who can help us out here?" he asked.

"The answer's a lot simpler than you'd imagine," said Robert. "You need a new definition of perfection. And I'm the man to give it to you."

Matt interrupted. "What he's trying to say is that it's not your world, it's God's."

"And since by definition," said Robert, "God is perfect then his world must be perfect."

"But what about the pain and suffering I see every day?" asked Timmy.

"Perfect means that everything's just the way it's supposed to be," said Robert.

"Not that man's inhumanity to man is useful," said Mike, "but free will is what makes us human. It's a gift we can use or abuse."

"Pain and suffering are certainly not to be glorified," said Robert, "but without them, we can never grow as individuals. Joy and suffering, you will remember, are two sides of the very same coin."

If only I have the eyes to see.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

—John Keats

We were walking down the mall, sipping our Orange Juliuses, and heading for the movie theatre. We walked slowly so as to maximize the staring time at the female children of God as they passed. We tried our best to enforce the ten second rule: If I stare at a woman for more than ten seconds, I am no longer admiring the handiwork of God, but have moved over to lust, which was to be discouraged.

“They say God created all women beautiful,” said Timmy, only partly succeeded in keeping his eyes pointing straight ahead.

“If only I have the eyes to see it,” said Robert, his usual profound self.

“How’s that,” I asked.

“Like Keats said, *Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty*,” Robert answered. “In other words, the beauty of a woman is not in her external appearance, or her perfume, but in the Godhead that shines within. When I can see that, I can see the real Beauty of her person. And seeing that Beauty, that perfection, I see Truth underneath. Beauty is Truth.”

“I guess that means all men must be handsome,” said Timmy, slicking back his blonde hair with one hand.

We had sauntered slowly past several good examples of Beauty and Truth before Reggie spoke.

“If you carry that thought one step further,” said the preacher, “all the world is beautiful. All the world is perfect, and the Truth of it lies underneath what seems obvious.”

“Yes, the world is perfect,” said Robert, “if only I have the eyes to see it.”

That’s all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know, I thought to myself.

“He that hath eyes to hear, let him see,” said Reggie under his breath.

Spiritual Tools

I found the revolutionary way of thinking I needed in the Book of Matthew.

I must not take the hook.

I must quit playing games I cannot win.

To ignore the questions of life is to opt out of life itself with all its beauty and joy.

When I can see the beauty of the world, I will see the truth hidden underneath.

I am responsible for the consequences of my thoughts, words and actions.

In everything there is a lesson and a blessing, if only I can remember to look for them.

Beauty and Truth are manifestations of the perfection of God.

Principle 8 Honesty is the essential virtue

Honesty is the virtue upon which recovery is built.

“Truth gets you high.

There is no doubt about it.

Lies bring you down.”

—Baba Ram Dass (Richard Alpert)

For the last few days, Jane had been discussing the virtues to be found along the spiritual path. Today the topic was honesty.

“Honesty is the spiritual principle behind the first step of AA,” she said. “Why is that?”

“Because honesty is the lamp of Diogenes,” said Timmy. “Without it I can’t find truth.”

“What about dishonesty, Timmy?” she asked. “Tell me about that.”

“Well, first is cash register dishonesty, where I sell you something for three dollars, you give me a five, and I give you one in change and pocket the other.” He paused for a moment and seemed lost, when Robert jumped in.

“When I hide my emotions under a smokescreen,” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” said Timmy, “like, I’m fine, you’re fine, and we’re all here in rehab because we’re so fine.”

“Emotional dishonesty,” said Jane, nodding approval.

“Let’s not forget the lies we tell ourselves,” said Reggie. “If I tell myself the same lie often enough, even I’ll believe it. These are the hardest untruths to get rid of.”

“Yes,” said Jane, “but what else?”

“It takes honesty to look at myself and know who I really am,” said Mike.

“Imagine honesty as Timmy’s light that shines on all the important parts of me,” said Jane. Her eyes became sad and her shoulders hunched over, as if the demons of her own past had suddenly settled on her. “My behavior, my mistakes, my sins and errors, the people I’ve hurt, my secrets and my fears. Until I see these clearly, I have no hope of fixing them.”

When she looked at me, I was sure that she was in pain.

That evening, Leon was chairing an AA meeting in our apartment. When time for sharing came, my hand went up. Leon winked as he called on me. I had seen many of my chums breaking house rules, coming in late, pushing the envelope wherever possible.

“Look,” I said, “some of you guys have been, well, bending the rules. Small things mostly, but the first steps down a slippery slope that I know all too well. So, starting today, I’m going to follow the rules, no more lies of any kind. If I’m going to change I have to get honest” I looked up at twelve men, all staring at me as if I’d lost my mind.

The next day, I tiptoed around, watching my language and behavior carefully, and that night I proudly announced to Leon that I had succeeded in my efforts at honesty for one day.

“One day at a time,” said Leon with another wink.

However, in group the next day, I felt a lie form up in my mouth like a fish. Of its own accord it jumped out of my mouth and flopped around on the floor. I was aghast, but my counselor and the others in the group recognized the lie at once and booed me soundly. Yet, in my embarrassment, my old way of thinking kept me from admitting what I had just done. Finally, that afternoon I had to seek out my counselor because my conscience was killing me.

"Today in group, what I said, it wasn't true. I, uh, misspoke." It was the kindest way to say I had lied. My counselor looked at me and smiled.

"It's good you're learning to tell the difference," she said.

Leon was waiting for me in the hallway.

"If you wink at me one more time, I'll hit you," I said, "and that's no lie."

My troubles are of my own making.

*"So our troubles, we think,
are basically of our own making."*

—Big Book of AA

Outside the approaching fall was coloring the leaves and the sun was thin but inside Matt's morning session, the lights were bright and friendly.

"I must understand that I'm the source of all of my problems. Not God, not fate, not my disease," said Matt. "No ill-tempered winds blow troubles my way. No other person is responsible for my sorrows and heartaches. I alone am the source of my torments."

"It took me forever to realize that my ex-wife and her lawyers were not the cause of my problems," said Mike. "For a long time I blamed them for every bad thing that happened. If my dog pooped on the rug, it was their fault."

"But didn't Matt say we had to dump all our blame and shame and guilt?" asked Timmy.

"Exactly," said Matt. "Mike, how did you overcome your dog's poop?"

“Slowly,” Mike said, “and I do mean slowly. As much as I’d like to, I can’t change the behavior of others. But I can change my thinking and how I respond to the world around me. You taught me that I alone am responsible for the consequences of my actions.”

“Did you blame yourself?” asked Timmy.

“At first I did,” said Mike. “But like Matt says, I can’t hold on to blame anymore.”

“So God isn’t punishing you?” asked Matt.

“Nope,” said Mike. “I’m the only one punishing me.”

Using honesty as a guide, I looked for my mistakes and defects.

“Confess your trespasses to one another,

and pray for one another that you may be healed.

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

—James 5:16

Earlier, Raphael had told us that an essential step in changing our character was to admit to our mistakes and be willing to share that confession with another person—and with God. Back in his classroom after lunch we were getting sleepy, so Raphael was trying to keep the discussion moving.

“Now,” said Raphael, “you’ve reached a point where you have to inventory your past.

When you do this you’ll know what your hidden character defects are and you’ll know what you need to work on next.”

“Oh, shit,” said Timmy.

“Easy, Tim,” said Robert. “It’s not as tough as it sounds. Remember, baby steps.”

“Right,” said Timmy, “baby steps.”

Raphael continued, “Leave no bit of backwater undisturbed. Turn over every old rotted log and poke into every crevice. Write everything out longhand. Don’t dictate or keyboard. There’s something important about writing it out with pen and paper, some connection is made that’s essential. Don’t argue your side or try to make yourself look good. We’re not about defending ourselves or pleading our case. We’re after the plain, unadorned facts.”

Sitting at our dinner table that night, Timmy began writing his moral inventory on a large yellow pad. Three hours later, his fingers were sore, but he had filled seven pages with descriptions of his resentments and wrongdoings.

“I want to throw up,” he said. “This really hurts.”

“Maybe it’s time to quit for the night,” I said. “Here, give me your pad.”

Timmy came back the next night and worked for another three hours.

“How much more do I have to do?” he asked. “How many pages did you end up with?”

“Most of the guys end up with about twenty pages,” I said. “But the number of pages isn’t important. Much better you should get all the big chunks out.”

The next night, Timmy finished up with twenty-two pages. He threw the yellow pad down in disgust.

“I know I did all that stuff,” he said, “but I sure don’t like seeing it on paper.”

“You’ve done well,” I said. “This step separates the survivors from the failures, and you’ve done it! Countless newcomers have failed at this and have gone back out to drink again. Now you’re ready to read it to somebody.”

“Ugh,” said Timmy.

The next morning, Timmy made an appointment with his counselor to read what he had written.

By telling my sins to another, I began the process of changing my character.

*"The confession of evil works
is the first beginning of good works."*

—Augustine

I waited eagerly for Timmy to come back from his confession. When he returned he looked relieved. He threw the yellow pad in the trash and flopped down on the couch.

“I’m tired,” he said. “I hope I never have to do that again.”

“Let’s hope not,” I said. “A good reason not to relapse is so you don’t have to do such a massive confession again.”

“Why is it I have to read all my junk to another person?” he asked. “Why can’t I just tell God and be done with it?”

“The answer to that is simple,” I said. “It doesn’t work.”

“Oh,” said Timmy.

“Okay, Tim,” I said, “go meditate on your list of wrongdoings, on why you did each thing and how it felt to dump your garbage. Meditate for at least an hour and come back and we’ll start working on your character defects.”

My list of misdeeds help me uncover the character defects that caused them.

*“This is the very perfection of a man,
To find out his own imperfections.”*

—Augustine

Timmy dutifully returned before dinner. We were having spaghetti with meatballs, a favorite among the guys in our apartment. Timmy sat at the table, yellow pad and pencil in hand.

“I’m hungry,” he said. “Let’s get started so we can eat.”

“For each of your misdeeds, now confessed,” I said, “select the character faults that were responsible for your actions. You want to end up with a list of defects so we know what to work on next.”

“In other words, generate a list of my character defects based on the mistakes I made.”

“Right. I began with the seven deadly sins and added some more.”

“The seven deadly sins being ...?”

“Wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. But you might want to add resentment, cowardice, self-pity, dishonesty, jealousy, envy, intolerance, stuff like that.”

I served the spaghetti while Timmy wrote. He finished in just over an hour and handed me his tomato-stained sheets.

“Any surprises?” I asked.

“I’ve known about most of my character defects for a long time,” he said. “But I found myself writing down *selfishness* over and over. I never thought of myself as being selfish before,

but it's hard to deny when it's there in black and white staring up at you. I'm a selfish person," he said, "but I can work on that, right?"

"Right."

Spiritual Tools

Honesty is the essential virtue; I must see myself as I truly am.

The foundation I build with my honesty must support the weight of my recovery.

I am the source of all my problems.

I cannot change the world or the people in it, but I can change how I think about them.

God does not punish me, but I do.

Seven deadly sins: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony.

Seven more deadly sins: resentment, cowardice, self-pity, dishonesty, jealousy, intolerance, and hatred.

Confession clears the pathway to serenity.

Principle 9 Forgiveness is available to all

In a moment of clarity, I asked God to remove my character defects.

*"Thou must be emptied of that wherewith thou art full,
That thou mayest be filled with that whereof thou art empty.
Give me chastity and continence, but not quite yet."*

—Augustine

Timmy and I were walking to morning spiritual. His step was lighter and his smile more sincere than in recent days.

“So now you’ll tell me how to rid myself of selfishness and the rest of my character defects?” asked Timmy.

“I’ll try,” I said, “but you have to learn the trick.”

We walked on in silence for a while. Then I began.

“Imagine yourself floating down a sparkling blue river with banks of the most luscious green foliage, the most brilliant blue skies, and the whitest of white clouds floating above. You’re filled with peace. In this moment you have no fear, nothing to drive your character defects to the surface. When your defects were active, they protected you from the world, hid your addiction and helped you gain advantage over others. But now, for this single moment, you have no need for any of them. In this moment, in the here and now and just for this moment, let’s agree to do away with all your defects of character. Let’s hold to the faith that if you do this, everything will be all right. That whatever needs beset you in the future, you won’t need to

resort to old thinking. Some manner of new thinking will protect you. You won't be able to hold onto this perfect moment for very long. Quickly the material world will begin knocking on the door of your mind, wanting in. But for one second, you know with absolute certainty that you no longer require any of your shortcomings. The process of reducing them to manageable levels will be long and slow, and you'll never be completely free of them, but never again will they control you. In this moment of clarity, ask God to remove them all."

"Sounds simple enough," said Timmy. "I'll need to think about this."

"Yes," I said, "Yes, you will."

Fear is the root of all my shortcomings.

"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth:

I came not to send peace, but a sword."

—Matthew 10:34

"I had a strange dream last night," said Timmy the next morning, sitting at the kitchen table in the apartment. "I can't seem to get it out of my head."

"Tell me about it?" I said, refilling my coffee.

"I dreamed I was a huge evergreen tree in the forest. My job was to trim myself, the tree that is, of my character defects, so I began pruning. I shook the tree as hard as I could, dislodging most of the dead needles and debris.

"Is this good?" I asked.

“Yes,” came the answer, “but not good enough.”

“I then took a huge pruning saw and cut out all the dead wood I could find.”

“Is this good?” I asked.

“Yes,” came the answer, “but not good enough.”

“Next I began to trim back all the irregular and small limbs, quite a bit.”

“Is this good,” I asked.

“Yes,” came the answer, “but not good enough.”

“Then I really began to attack the middle branches, hewing madly for what seemed an endless time.”

“Is this good?” I asked.

“Yes,” came the answer, “but not good enough.”

“At this point over half the tree had been trimmed but I persisted until only the major branches remained and they contained no green needles at all.”

“Is this good?” I asked.

“Yes,” came the answer, “but not good enough.”

“I discarded the saw and took up an axe. Slashing and attacking, I removed the last of the main branches until only the trunk remained.”

“Is this good?” I asked.

“Yes,” came the answer, “but not good enough.”

“Using the axe and all my strength, I felled the trunk until only the stump remained, relieved of most of its bark.”

“Is this good?” I asked.

“Yes,” came the answer, “but not good enough.”

“The final attack was slower and more careful but just as fierce. I hewed and hammered and splintered until nothing of the giant tree remained above ground and only its roots below. I started to ask again but realized that I already knew the answer. I had done nothing to remove the roots that fed the tree.”

“What is the name of the root that feeds this tree,” I asked, awaiting the answer we both knew.

“Fear,” said Timmy. “Fear is the root that supports and nourishes the tree of my character defects. I must attack the root.”

Only prayer can change my character.

“... prayer is the only thing that changes one's character.”

—Emmet Fox

Matt was a few minutes late to his morning group session. He took off his raincoat and shook the rain from it, for the day had begun with a steady downpour. He smiled, flipped on the lights and asked, “How do I go about changing my character for the better.” When no one dared answer, he began.

“The problem,” Matt said, “is that habits of thinking are tenacious, tough to overcome. Especially if we’re only halfhearted about giving up our defects. New ideas about how to live may lodge in our minds, but until they make their way into the subconscious—the heart, if you will—and are incorporated into the whole person, a change of character isn’t possible.”

“As a man thinketh in his own heart, so is he,” quoted Leon. “Proverbs, I believe.”

“A change in character,” said Matt, “which is exactly what we’re seeking, is a change in the soul. Such a change produces a new and different person. It’s only in the heart where these changes can occur.”

“Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life,” said Leon. “More Proverbs.”

“Once a real change in character happens in a man,” said Matt, “the new man, the new Adam, will forever think and act differently. Such a change may come about slowly, as we work our way through recovery, but it will happen. He’ll experience a new way of reacting to the world. His old motivating force, fear, will be replaced by love.”

“How do I do this?” asked Timmy. “My character’s definitely in need of an overhaul.”

“Anyone?” said Matt. “Who can tell Timmy what’s required?”

“Prayer,” said Mike and Robert together. “Prayer.”

“Yes, of course,” said Matt. “A true change in a person’s spiritual character will result in a blossoming of his inner being, and his imagination will transcend the limitations he used to live by.”

“Prayer,” said Timmy. “I should’ve known.”

“The spiritual path doesn’t require that we attain perfection, only that we strive honestly and persistently toward that goal,” said Matt.

To make adequate amends, I must look into the hearts of those I wronged.

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive.

He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.

There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.

When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Timmy sat in Father Mick's study while Father Mick made coffee. Timmy's palms were sweaty and he was sighing a lot. He was there to work on making amends for his mistakes and he held the list of his misdeeds in his hands.

“You know you can't do this by yourself,” said Father Mick.

“Eh?” Timmy looked up, rubbing his hands on his pants.

“You can't make amends by yourself. Too many people jump the gun and try to do it alone. It doesn't work.”

“I'm worried I won't be able to do it, even with help,” said Timmy. “I'm afraid to face some of those people.”

“If God's in you life,” said Father Mick, “you'll never be alone. Besides, what's the absolute worst that could happen? You get arrested, somebody throws a punch at you, or calls security to throw you out?”

“How do I begin? How do I go about making amends for a lifetime of mistakes? Some people have died. Some moved away. Some won't even talk to me.”

“Let's start with your moral inventory,” said Father Mick. “Let me see what you've got.”

Looking as sheepish as only Timmy could, he handed the list to Father Mick.

“Remember, my son,” said Father Mick, “your misdeeds are no worse than mine or anyone else's. Let's go over these one by one and see what we come up with.”

In about two hours' time, they had divided Timmy's amends into three piles: those to do right away, those to do at some later time when conditions warranted, and those that probably would never get done.

"After you get out of rehab and you have a permanent sponsor," said Father Mick, "go over this list with him, and with his guidance begin with the first group. Visit those people, either at home or at the office, if necessary. Don't try to make friends or show them the error of your ways. Simply apologize for your part in whatever happened then stop. Your job is simply to apologize for your mistake. If you owe money, you must make arrangements to pay it back. How they respond is of no importance to you. They may shake your hand, throw you out, or forgive your debt. You're there to remove the errors of the past from your heart. You're not asking for their forgiveness, for only God can give you that."

"What about my dad?" asked Timmy. "He's been dead ten years."

"Write him a letter in which you make your amends, just as if he were standing in front of you. Go to his grave and read the letter aloud then take the letter and burn it. Remember, you can't ask for forgiveness for yourself until you've forgiven all the others who've wronged you."

Later, Timmy shared his session with Reggie and me.

Reggie smiled. "First time around I had to make amends to my ex-wife. We hadn't been on speaking terms for years, so I was more than a little hesitant to contact her. I called and said I wanted to make amends. To my surprise she invited me over for coffee. We talked for a long time about my recovery and what I was trying to do with my life. I must have struck a chord with her, because she stretched her hand out to me.

"She said, Tell you what, I'll forgive you for everything you did to me, if you'll forgive me for everything I did to you.

“I didn’t have to think twice about my answer. We shook hands and clinked our coffee cups. Now we often talk as co-parents and have dinner and holidays together with our children. Life is so much easier.”

“Father Mick mentioned two things,” said Timmy. “He said love is the underlying principle in any relationship, and second, that the natural state of the universe is harmony. Given half a chance, love and harmony will prevail. But some wounds are deeper, and words simply won’t suffice. I need to find a place in my heart that corresponds to the heart of the person I’ve wronged. I need to literally walk a mile in their shoes; otherwise I can’t understand their pain. I need to come to understand the effects of my mistakes on their lives as well as the pain I caused. My actions had significant consequences that I have to acknowledge.”

I must claim my forgiveness.

“To err is human; to forgive, divine.”

—*Alexander Pope*

Father Mick took the podium for the morning spiritual and smiled benevolently at his flock of drunks and junkies.

“Forgiveness is all around me,” said Father Mick, “but in order to obtain it, I must first forgive others. I’ve heard that prayers of forgiveness should be said only once for each person on your list. I guess my willingness hasn’t been all it should be, because I generally have to pray to forgive others several times in order to clear my side of the street of anger and resentments.

Even today, old resentments and disappointments surface that require me to forgive someone.”

His kind gaze seemed to touch each face in the room.

“Consider this radical idea,” he said. “If I wronged a shopkeeper by stealing a six-pack of beer, I can apologize for my wrong and pay him for the beer. I’ve made amends for my behavior but I have not found forgiveness. Forgiveness, I’m suggesting, is available only from my Higher Power. Contrary to what is written in many places, I believe that forgiveness is always there. I believe that at the moment of my quickening in the womb, I was granted forgiveness for every wrong I might possibly commit in my lifetime—a gift from my Father that is always available. Like the prodigal son, to claim my inheritance of forgiveness, all I have to do is ask!

“I learned that I must forgive myself as well. Failure to do so ensnares me in the trap of spiritual pride, which says that my judgment is more important than God’s. I have forgotten that it’s God’s world and not mine. For myself, I have learned that I don’t do well trying to play God.”

“Lead me not into temptation,” whispered Reggie.

Respond to anger and hatred with love and tolerance.

*“Give evil nothing to oppose
and it will disappear by itself.”*

—Lao Tzu

We were in Matt’s morning group. The topic was tolerance.

“As soon as I resist mentally any undesirable or unwanted circumstance, I endow it with power, the power of my own thought,” said Matt. “The longer I obsess on this negativity, the more the tape loop plays in my head and the more powerful the evil becomes. It’s only by my thought that such a predicament has come about, and it’s only by my thought that it can be dispelled. Whatever the problem—be it marital, business, or financial—if I hurl myself at it mentally, I only make it stronger.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” asked Timmy.

“Rather than struggle with my enemy, I must look for the God that lives within him, because I can love that part of him, even if I can’t stand to be in the same room with him. I can throw Reggie’s great big yellow buttery balls of love at him, which releases us both from the strife that binds us. Remember, the natural state of the universe is harmony, and if I just get out of the way, harmony will prevail.”

“I guess that rules out trying to retaliate,” said Timmy.

“Yes,” said Matt. “Seeking revenge only makes the problem worse. Thoughts of anger, harsh words, and violence must be removed from my mental vocabulary. Tolerance for others is required if I expect the same from my fellows. Instant forgiveness must be ever ready in my mind.”

“Tolerance is really just love, isn’t it?” asked Timmy.

Not by me but by the grace of God.

*“Burn the idea into the consciousness of every man
that he can get well regardless of anyone.*

The only condition is that he trust in God and clean house.”

—*Big Book of AA*

Leon was discharged from rehab and sent home with a good report. He called me a week later.

“Still sober?” he asked me.

“Yes, and you?”

“Got another AA chip yesterday. One of the women at the meeting picked up a one-year chip at the same time. She said something that stuck with me. Someone asked how she had done it, stayed sober for a whole year.”

“What did she say?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“She said she couldn’t do it, at least not by herself.” Leon smiled into the phone. “She said, *It is by the grace of God and the fellowship of these rooms I haven’t found it necessary to drug or drink in over a year.*”

“No one can do it alone,” I said. “If we could, we wouldn’t have to go to rehab.”

Humility allows me to ask for help.

*“Verily I say unto you,
Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child
shall in no wise enter therein.”*

—*Luke 18:17*

Robert, John, and I were at the shopping center to buy groceries and get our monthly haircut. John was getting his usual crew cut. Robert and I sat flipping through old magazines as we waited.

Something was bothering me and I mentioned it to Robert.

“Huh?” said Robert. “You don’t know what it means to become as a child?”

“No, honestly, I have no idea,” I said. “I know it’s said that to walk the spiritual path, I need to become as a child. I’ve repeatedly asked for an answer to my question, but have never gotten a satisfactory answer. Is it because children have big heads and they look cute? Is it because they’re innocent? Innocence never got very far in my book. What gives?”

“It’s quite simple, actually,” said John. “The thing that marks a child most characteristically, and that the child knows with painful clarity, is that it needs help. For almost everything in life, the child is dependent on others and must ask for help. In the adult world, we have forgotten just how powerless we really are and how dependent we are on others. A child knows what we are afraid to admit, that it has to ask for help.”

“Sounds like a good definition for humility,” I said.

Spiritual Tools

I no longer need to hold on to my character defects.

Fear is the driving force behind all my shortcomings.

The tenacious habits of thinking can be broken effectively with prayer.

Prayer accesses the heart and the subconscious and is the only way to change a person's character.

There is some good in the worst of us and some bad in the best of us.

I must forgive all those who I think have wronged me before my own wrongdoings will be forgiven.

To forgive effectively, I must look into the hearts of those I wronged.

Forgiveness for my wrongs is only available from my Higher Power.

I must not forget to forgive myself.

Respond to anger and hatred with love and tolerance.

By struggling with the thoughts of anger, reprisals or resentments, I give them power over me.

To become as a child on the spiritual path, I must learn to ask for help.

Principle 10 I discover new priorities and honor all relationships as sacred

I had to abandon my old priorities.

“What was it like?” asked Mike. We were riding in a van with two other guys to an AA meeting in north Atlanta. The weather had turned unseasonably cold and I was glad I brought my jacket.

“What was what like?” I asked, staring out the window at eight lanes of Atlanta freeway.

“You know, practicing medicine in a small town? How many docs were there?”

“About fifty.”

“So you must have gone straight to the top of the society page,” said Robert from the back seat.

“Boy, I’ll say,” I said. “You can’t do anything at lunch but it’s all around town by dinner. I hated it.”

“Not like the anonymity of the big city?” asked Mike.

I shook my head. “No, not at all. And the whole thing fed into my sense of superiority. It suited my arrogance.”

“Where was God in all this?” asked Robert. “Was he on the hospital board? Attend any medical society meetings?”

I laughed. “The practice of medicine *was* God. Somehow that slid into the practice of making money. I never had much experience with greed, but I learned fast. I became interested only in how much money I could make off a patient, which made the angel in me feel terribly guilty. To feel better, I just worked harder in my clinic—that always made me feel better—which only made more money. I got real focused on the material things money could buy.”

“Not much talk of spirituality in the ER, I guess.” said Robert.

I shook my head glumly. “It was easier to discuss your mistress than matters of the heart. In the end, John Barleycorn and Lady Cocaine became my Higher Powers. I worshiped at their altar and did whatever they asked.”

“Sounds vaguely familiar,” Mike said, grinning. “Obviously you need a new Higher Power.”

“So true,” I said. “So very true.”

The most important thing in my life must be my recovery.

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

—*Exodus 20:3*

As I entered the cafeteria I saw Mike sitting near the window. He had a newcomer with him and was giving him both barrels. Mike must have been running short on ammunition, for he waved at me to join them.

“There are a lot of ways to look at the program of recovery,” said Mike, looking over at me. “Right?”

I nodded as I bit into my biscuit.

Mike waited until I swallowed. “My roommate here likes to talk about the value of reordering priorities,” he said.

Trapped by my friend, I sized up our new companion. Wendell was a dentist from Alabama. He had a pencil-thin moustache and looked like he just stepped out of a 1950s cigarette commercial. He stared at us with the eyes of a deer caught in the headlights.

“Hello,” I said, reaching across the table to shake his hand. His palm was wet. “Relax. No one’s going to bite you. When did you get in?”

“Early this morning,” he squeaked.

“What brought you here?” I asked.

“They told me if I didn’t come, they’d take away my dental license.”

“And …”

“They caught me snorting nitrous oxide.” He hung his head. “After work on Friday, I rolled a tank of the laughing gas into my office and sat in my chair with the prongs in my nose. I had planned on spending just an hour or so getting high before going home. But on Monday morning my staff found me in my chair, unconscious.”

“Sounds bad. What’re you going to do?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” said the dentist. “I guess that’s why I’m here. I don’t know how any of this happened to me.”

“Maybe your priorities are screwed up,” said Mike. He kicked me under the table.

“Okay, okay. Wendell—it is Wendell, isn’t it?” The new fish nodded weakly. “There are lots of ways to look at recovery, but my favorite is as a reordering of priorities. Got that?”

Wendell nodded again.

“What’s the most important thing in your life?” I asked.

“Now, you mean?” asked Wendell. “Uh, Molly would have to be first, I guess.”

“Is Molly your daughter or your wife?” I asked.

Wendell laughed and his face flushed. "Well, actually, she's my mistress."

"That will have to change," said Mike. "She can no longer be the center of your world."

I said, "Ask Mike what happened when he told his girlfriend she was no longer the top priority in his life."

"She threw her coffee at me," said Mike.

We laughed.

"The most important thing in my life has to be my sobriety," I said. "Getting sober and nothing else. Eventually for me I came to understand that my relationship with God *is* my sobriety."

"I don't think I follow you there," said Wendell.

"That's okay," interrupted Mike. "I didn't expect you would."

"I know that for me," I said, "my first three priorities were my job, my job, my job. My all-consuming medical professional money-making, prestige-building, egocentric job. My family was in there somewhere but I couldn't have told you where. And God, well, I don't recall him being on the list at all."

"Who's number one now?" asked Wendell.

"My first priority is my relationship with God," I said.

"My sobriety *is* my recovery *is* my relationship with God," said Mike. "Nothing else will keep me from using again."

"But there's more," I said. "And this is critically important. Anything I place above my sobriety, I'll lose."

"That's why I can't get sober for my wife, my kids, or my job," said Mike. "If my mistress is more important to me, I'll make decisions for her over my sobriety. My focus won't be my recovery. I'll eventually drink again and I'll lose both my sobriety and my mistress."

"My second priority has to be my family," I said. "Other than my Higher Power, they're the most reliable source of support and love I'll ever have."

"And the new number three?" asked Wendell.

"Learning to think more about others than myself," Mike said.

All relationships are sacred.

*"... to recover from alcoholism and other drug addictions
you have to trust people, be honest with people, and love people."*

—Dennis Wholey

When Dr. Taylor was recovering from his alcoholism there were no treatment centers that dealt with the problems that physicians face, so he went out and built one. At least once a week he would bend our ears with his personal take on recovery.

"An essential element of recovery is the process of re-people-ization." he said. "For years as active alcoholics we underwent progressive isolation, from our coworkers and colleagues, from our friends and families, and finally from what remained of our Higher Power. To move forward with recovery, we must renew these old relationships. We can no longer live in isolation from the world around us. We're social animals and require nourishing relationships with other humans in order to thrive."

Later Robert and I talked as we walked back to the apartments.

"I don't have to like anyone," he said, "but I must learn to love everyone."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that?" I asked.

"It's simple," said Robert. "'We're all children of the same father, so we're all related in the largest sense. I think you'll agree that since all relationships with a Higher Power must by definition be sacred, then all relationships between human beings must also be sacred. We need to learn to honor all, and I do mean all, of our relationships with other people."

"That's a lot to swallow," I said, thinking of the enemies I made when I was using.

"Look closely at every person you meet," said Robert. Try to see below their outer appearance and actions. Look for the God within."

"Honor all relationships as sacred," I said, "because they are. Okay, I'll try."

Applying new priorities can be difficult.

Bill, Robert and I were hiding in Matt's group room, staring out the window onto the smoking patio, trying to avoid being seen by Rita, Bill's wife, who was here for family day.

"She's out there. I can see her," Bill said, gnawing at his fingernails. He turned to Robert.

"Is she smoking?" asked Robert.

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, that gives us a minute or two," Robert said. "Let's review."

Bill had reached a point in his program where he was learning to place his Higher Power first in his life. Today, he had to tell Rita that she was no longer the most important thing in his life. He was deathly afraid of her reaction.

“Okay,” Robert said, pacing. I think he was more nervous than Bill. “Let’s review.”

“You already said that,” said Bill.

“Right. So in the past, your Higher Powers were wine and your old lady. The two of you partied hearty together and supported each other’s using. At the end, it was pretty much just the booze that mattered, but she still thinks she’s on top of the heap, right?”

“Right.”

“But today your life is on a new path.”

“Right. Of trying to live as God would have me, doing the right thing, bringing love into the world.”

“Right. So you found a new Higher Power.”

“Right.”

“And you’re going to walk outside right now and tell her that?” Robert sighed. “Good luck!” He looked at Bill. “Uh, does she have the checkbook and the credit cards?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Right. Well then, try to let her down easy.”

“Right.”

Later in the day, Robert and I caught Bill coming in the apartment.

“Well,” I asked. “How did it go?”

“Better than I had hoped for,” said Bill. “She’s what you’d call a social drinker and she has no intention of quitting but doesn’t care if I do. However, there was one other thing.”

“Yes?” asked Robert.

“She’s keeping the check book and the credit cards.”

The only enduring relationships are grounded in the love of God.

“The way you make love is the way

God will be with you.”

—Rumi

Father Mick joined our afternoon house meeting to talk about sex relations. We were all dying to hear what a Catholic priest could tell us about sex.

“All my relationships with women were built on physical attraction,” Mike began. “The first time the two of us were alone together we ended up in bed.”

“Umm,” I mumbled, unwilling to admit that the same had been true for me.

“Then I’d wake up one morning and ask myself, *How the hell did I get into this mess?* But by then it was too late to get out.”

“What you’re saying,” said Father Mick, “is that perhaps you should spend more time getting to know a woman before you take her to bed?”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” said Mike, “but it’s not as much fun.”

“But the breaking up wasn’t much fun either, was it?” asked Father Mick.

“What does walking a spiritual path tell us about the nature of relationships and how to make them work?” asked Robert.

“I’ve never been married,” said Father Mick. “But I have counseled and listened to many married couples. The relationship that began with romance and lust often ends up as an exercise

in fear and resentment. It's impossible to maintain the ecstatic high of their coupling and they lose their buzz. Because the relationship has no permanent basis it collapses under its own weight.

"Sound familiar," said Timmy.

Father Mick grinned. "Okay, but what if relationships could be made stable?"

"I'm not sure what you're driving at," said Timmy.

"The bond between a man and a woman will not be stable until it becomes grounded in the presence of God."

"Do you really think God cares if Susie and I screw?" I asked.

"Oh, much more than that," said Father Mick. "If God's a participant in the relationship between two people, then every act of intimacy becomes a sacred event."

"Huh?" I blurted.

"Intimate sex between truly married people in the presence of God is the most spiritual act in which any two people can participate," said Father Mick, leaving us speechless. "You see," the priest said, "in reality, all relationships are sacred. We should never treat any relationship as anything less than holy."

"Great big yellow buttery balls of love!" said Robert.

"One more thing," Father Mick said, grinning. "Love, once born, never dies. Not divorce, not death, not anything in this world can break that bond. Here, let me read this." He took a book from the shelf and began to read.

On Marriage

You were born together, and together you shall be forever more.

You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days.

Ay, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God.

But let there be spaces in your togetherness,

And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond of love:

Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.

Fill each other's cup, but drink not from one cup.

Give one another of your bread, but eat not from the same loaf.

Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each of you be alone,

Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.

Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.

For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.

And stand together yet not too near together:

For the pillars of the temple stand apart,

And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

Without boundaries I cannot be part of a mature relationship.

“He will not go behind his father's saying,

And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’”

—Robert Frost

I arrived late to Matt's group, dodged eye contact with him, and slunk into a seat at the very back of the room. Timmy was speaking.

"But I thought ..." said Timmy.

"I told you not to do that," said Robert, shaking his head. "Relationships are difficult for alcoholics. We don't seem to know how to act."

"Yes," said Matt. "Either we're fear driven and trying to hold onto someone with chains of iron, or we devote ourselves to another person so completely that we subjugate our own personality to theirs. Both extremes are deadly."

"We don't have relationships," said Mike. "We take hostages."

"It's taken months for me to realize just how I did that to my ex-wife," I said.

"Can one alcoholic marry another?" asked Vera. "What about dating a compulsive gambler?"

"A stable relationship exists when two whole people come together," said Matt. "A recovering addict cannot live with a using partner without relapsing. I've seen it over and over again. Two recovering alcoholics can have a relationship, but usually a lack of emotional maturity dooms the effort. Not impossible, by very difficult. And don't forget, no relationships for at least a year!"

"I was afraid you'd say that," said Vera.

"From somewhere," said Matt, "we came up with the idea that we own our partners. We never learned how to set up healthy boundaries."

“What are boundaries?” asked Timmy. “All I know is that as I got closer to some people, my relationships got all sticky and mushy. I found I couldn’t say no, which got me into endless trouble.”

“That’s not uncommon,” said Matt. “Boundaries are necessary to maintain my individuality. I can’t merge myself with another person. A mature relationship exists when two *whole* people come together, something two broken alcoholics can never pull off.”

“I always expected the other person to complete me and solve all my problems,” said John. “I thought we had to be soul mates bound in perfect love nests, like mating octopi.”

“It’s no wonder you’ve been married three times,” Matt said, grinning. “I might add that it’s not healthy to be instantly intimate with a stranger, either conversationally or sexually. The second date between two AA members usually consists of backing up the U-Haul trailer. That won’t work.”

I can focus on the material or on the spiritual but not both.

“If you want money more than anything,

You’ll be bought and sold.

If you have a greed for food,

You’ll be a loaf of bread.

This is a subtle truth,

Whatever you love, you are.”

—Rumi

Mike came out of the apartment and we headed down the path to rehab. He grinned.

“My daughter sent me this new T-shirt,” he said. On the front of the shirt was a phrase in a foreign alphabet.

“What does it say?” I asked, pointing to the indecipherable writing.

“It’s Celtic,” he said. “*Whoever dies with the most toys wins!* Wanna play that game?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I already did and I lost.”

Wee Willy was leading the morning spiritual. We slipped quietly into the back of the room, late as usual.

“... but if I sweated bullets to buy something, made layaway payments, hungered for months waiting for it, I could get very attached to my material dream—a new car, a stereo TV, a college education for my kid. I can clutch my possessions with unbelievable tightness, afraid I’ll lose them, and won’t be able to replace them. Any path based on material goods is governed by fear and fear alone. But two pathways exist—love of money or love of God. As I let go of the former, the latter has begun to fill my heart and govern my actions.”

“Good move,” whispered Robert in my ear.

“All material possessions will eventually fail me,” said Wee Willy. “Light bulbs burn out, tires go flat, the roof leaks. Nothing worldly lasts, so if I put my faith in worldly goods, I shouldn’t be surprised if my life resembles a garbage can full of broken toys. Only the foolish man builds his house on the sand.”

“That’s me,” said Timmy, “the blissfully foolish man.”

“Besides,” Wee Willy continued, “as an alcoholic and addict, none of my problems were ever solved by money. In fact, the more money I earned, the more I spent on booze, gambling, and women.”

“My daughter once told me cocaine was God’s way of telling me I was making too much money,” said Robert.

“Hey,” said a voice from the back of the room, “does that mean I have to give up my new Jaguar?”

“No,” said Wee Willy, “but it does mean I have to give up material possessions as the measure of my success and happiness. My goals in life must change. No longer will I seek material comfort but rather find comfort in my Higher Power.”

“So I can keep my Jaguar?” said the voice.

“In your case,” said Wee Willy, “*go and sell all thy hast and give it to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.*”

“Oh, shit,” moaned the voice.

Thinking more about others than myself.

“Life's most persistent and urgent question is,

What are you doing for others?”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Miguel had finished rehab five years ago and had been sober since. He was a friend of Bill’s and we ran into him at the mall on Saturday afternoon. We invited him to share a cup of coffee and tell us about his new life.

“You’ve gone five years without drinking?” asked Timmy. “Don’t you ever want to pick up a glass of wine or a bottle of beer?”

"Of course I do," said Miguel, an obstetrician who had gone to medical school with Bill and was practicing in Atlanta. "After all, I'm an alcoholic. But just because it's in my nature to drink doesn't mean I have to. Today I have the tools to stay sober."

"Do you go to meetings ever day?" asked Robert.

"In the first 365 days," he said, "I went to 432 meetings without missing a day. I go to fewer meetings now, but I pray and meditate every day. The key for me is the maintenance of my spiritual fitness. If I'm right with God, nothing can hurt me."

"Did you have to give up your possessions?" asked Bill, the one with the new Jaguar.

"Actually," said Miguel, "in recovery I've been showered with more material blessings than ever before. But acquiring possessions is no longer what life is all about."

"Do you have fun?" asked Timmy, who was afraid that recovery would be like sitting in the front row of church every day.

"I promised myself the first day I got sober," said Miguel, "that if recovery wasn't more fun than using, I'd go back to using. Right from the start, life became easier and more wonderful. I have lots of good times now. What's more, I can remember them."

We laughed at that.

"What's been the hardest thing you've encountered in your recovery?" I asked. "Making amends to other people?"

"Making amends proved a lot easier than I thought it would be," said Miguel. "My mother died in my second year, and that was difficult, but I didn't drink over it. Turning my will over to God was a problem at first but has gotten easier with each passing year. Most difficult by far has been learning to think more about others than myself. I'm basically self-centered and selfish and I'm certainly the center of my world. But I pray every day for God to make me a

better person and to teach me to love my fellows as myself. Thinking of others first is a priority I aspire to but have by no means achieved."

Spiritual Tools

Once firmly on the spiritual path, my priorities will necessarily change.

My sobriety *is* my recovery *is* my relationship with my Higher Power.

Anything I place above my Higher Power, I will lose.

I don't have to like anyone, but I must love that bit of God in everyone.

All relationships are sacred and should be honored.

The most stable relationship includes God as a silent partner.

We don't have relationships; we take hostages.

Clear boundaries are essential for mature relationships.

I can have material possessions, I just cannot place them first.

My possessions cannot be the measure of my success; however, success on the spiritual path
always leads to success in life.

My life should be lived so as to consider the needs of others.

Principle 11 I will practice these principles in all my affairs

I will use the Golden Rule to guide my behavior.

“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you,

do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”

—Matthew 7:12

We invited Father Mick to join us for lunch at the cafeteria. Robert, Timmy, Mike and I chipped in to buy his meal. We were wrestling with the concept of loving your neighbor—*in the real world*. So we wanted to hear his take on the Golden Rule.

“Every religion, culture or ethical tradition I know of,” said Father Mick, “has some variation on the Golden Rule. Christians claim the saying for themselves, but they can be a tad self-righteous at times.” He grinned.

“But if I actually follow the Golden Rule,” asked Timmy, “won’t other people just run over the top of me?”

“Only if you let them,” said Father Mick. “There is nothing in this ethic that says you have to lie down and let people walk all over on you.”

“So, whatever goes around comes around?” asked Robert, scraping the last of the chocolate pudding from his bowl.

“Certainly we reap what we sow,” said Father Mick. “As alcoholics and addicts we tried to ignore the consequences of our actions, but that never worked very well. You should’ve

learned by now that you're responsible for the effects of the decisions you make. By hurting others I'm only hurting myself."

Timmy said softly, "No matter what the question, the answer is love."

"That makes sense," said Mike. "If I'm kind to others they're more likely to be kind to me. If I'm rude to someone on the phone, I'm not likely to get what I want."

"Sugar draws more flies than vinegar," said Robert, surveying the chocolate on his fingers. "That's definitely true."

"If someone's mean to me," asked Timmy, "should I be mean back to them?"

"Timmy," said Father Mick, "you know better than that. All the Golden rule says is that, as a child of God, my job is to bring God's love into the world. No matter how others may act toward me, I can send God's blessing to them and be blessed in return. Kindness and love always beget kindness and love. Let me quote the Buddha: Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself."

Robert grinned and said, "Great big yellow buttery balls of love!"

Father Mick laughed out loud.

Do the next right thing.

*"Love is the foundation from which your decisions
about your life should be made."*

—Darren L. Johnson

The Triangle AA meeting house was located in the middle of the strip club region of Atlanta and was surrounded by bars on all sides. *A good place for an AA meeting*, Mike had said. The best attended meeting in the city, it was not uncommon to have fifty or sixty people show up on a Saturday night. The chairperson asked the group for a discussion topic and Timmy raised his hand.

“What about doing the next right thing?” asked Timmy. The chairperson agreed and opened the floor for sharing.

“If I can remember to do it,” said a lady near us.

“I ask myself, what are my motives? said another woman. “Am I pursuing my own self-interests, or am I actually trying to do some good? But I usually forget to stop and think first rather than just plunging ahead without thinking.”

“Sounds like me,” said Vera, who rode with us to the meeting. “I get carried away by events and don’t stop to think.”

“You know what Fozzie the Bear said, don’t ya?” asked Robert. Not waiting for a response, he said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

I grinned and poked him in the ribs.

A young man in the front said, “Every day, I have a hundred decisions to make.” He was dressed in mechanic’s garb and his hands were stained by the grease of his profession. “I try to imagine that God’s sitting on my shoulder, watching and helping me. What would he want me to do? That’s how I decide.”

Another woman spoke. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen. “I’ve been in the program for four years. At first, I had trouble with doing the next right thing, but I kept trying. With practice, life gets much easier.”

On the way home, Vera said, “If our job is to bring God’s love into the world, then all my decisions should be made out of that love.”

“You’re starting to sound like a Hallmark greeting card,” said Mike.

“Life does have its risks,” I said.

“Great big yellow buttery balls of love,” said Robert as we pulled up at the apartments.

“Great big yellow...” said Timmy.

Avoid situations that will trigger my craving.

“We gain the strength of the temptation we resist.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“When I make the wrong decision,” said Timmy as we settled into the couches back in the apartment, “does that mean I’ve given into the devil’s temptation?”

“Me and my disease are the sole sources of all my temptations,” said Robert.

“But the thought of using doesn’t go away that easy,” I said. “The thought of cocaine still lingers in my mind. It promises me a good time just for the asking.”

“What the program suggests,” said Mike, “is that I play the tape of my craving all the way to the end. When I do that, I know for certain that the end of my using will always be darkness and death.”

“Being hungover, hiding and lying, hating myself,” said Timmy, softly.

“Matt says I have to avoid the people, places, and things that got me into trouble in the first place” said Robert. “I have to recognize the situations that trigger my craving and avoid them.”

“Avoid old playgrounds and old playmates” I said.

“Amen to that,” said Robert. “Father Mick said that I grow in spirit every time I deny temptation.”

“That’s a lot to remember,” said Timmy.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “If it’s important, you’ll hear it again.”

I must quit trying to fix other people.

The sun was a pale yellow dot in a gray November sky. We were in Matt’s morning session discussing how addicts and alcoholics like to fix things.

“The role of a friend is to support and confront,” said Matt. “Not to fix, or bail out of jail, or lend money. It’s not for me to come riding in on a white horse like a knight in shining armor.”

“I was planting nasturtiums when my daughter Dorothy drove up in her new car,” Reggie said. “I knew something was wrong when I saw the mirror dangling on a wire and a big scratch on the door. Dorothy was crying when she got out of the car. I dropped my shovel and ran to her. *Don’t worry*, I said, *I can fix it*. *Let me get my tools*. I ran into the garage and grabbed a few things and set about putting the mirror back together. But Dorothy just cried all the more.

“Somewhere along the line I picked up the idea that I’m supposed to fix things. No matter what the problem, Daddy can fix it. But my daughter could have cared less about the car. She didn’t need socket wrenches or hex nuts, she needed a hug. The thought of scratched paint

was not even on the back porches of her mind. She said, ‘Daddy, just hug me and tell me everything’s all right.’”

“The lesson here is clear,” said Matt. “Just because I’m an adult doesn’t mean I need to fix things all the time, especially other people. Clocks, bicycles, and minor plumbing problems are okay. But I cannot fix another human being. Reggie’s daughter needed support and wanted to hear the same words I want to hear from my father: Don’t worry. No matter what happens, everything will be all right.”

I had to learn to still the mind and let the heart speak.

“You must learn to get in touch with the innermost essence of your being.”

—Deepak Chopra

Jane was pacing back and forth at the front of the room. She was in her element.

“I’m having trouble figuring this out,” said Timmy.

“Quit trying to analyze everything,” said Jane. “Some things cannot be understood by the mind. They have to be felt. Mike?”

“Not only do I try to analyze everything,” said Mike, “I overanalyze everything. My mind can spin itself into some unbelievable places. I can make mountains out of molehills faster than you can say Mount Everest.”

“You must learn to listen with your heart,” said Jane, coming to a stop in front of me. “Analysis is the province of the mind, not the heart. Let yourself feel! Quit trying to analyze everything. It only gets you into trouble.”

I started to say something, but thought better of it. Good move.

I must learn to take care of myself.

Raphael was in a particularly effusive mood. He had been walking in the gardens after lunch and he was filled with the happiness of a peaceful man. He almost bubbled as he began our afternoon session.

“Don’t drink! Go to meetings! Have fun!” said Raphael as if leading a pep rally cheer. “Having fun is an essential part of life. But no real joy is possible if I don’t stay sober and stay spiritually fit.”

“What else?” asked an eager Timmy.

“Who knows what H-A-L-T means?” asked Raphael.

Mike answered. “Hungry, angry, lonely, tired. Don’t get too hungry, too angry, too lonely, or too tired.”

“Why not?” asked Raphael.

“Because my thinking gets disordered and I make mistakes,” said Reggie.

“What mental illness lives in the rooms of AA?” asked Raphael. The room grew silent.

“Bipolar disease?” asked Timmy. “Like, manic-depression?”

“Personality disorders?” asked Robert.

“Depression,” said Vera.

“PTSD?” asked Reggie.

Raphael nodded. “It’s absolutely necessary that you treat your mental illness with professional help. Remember, any kind of substance abuse always makes mental illness worse, and the worse the thinking gets, the more likely relapse is. And if I use again ...”

“I’ll die,” echoed in the room.

“One last and very important item,” said Raphael. “The more people I have looking after my disease, the better off I am. It would not be unreasonable to have an addictionologist, a psychiatrist, a sponsor, and a psychologist all participating in your care. As Dr. Taylor said, the more people I’m accountable to, the better off I am.”

“Kinda sounds like the old Greek thing,” said Timmy. “You know, a sound mind in a sound body.”

“Except your mind makes a sound as awful as your guitar playing,” said Robert.

Raspberries followed.

“One last thing,” said Raphael. “Pray and meditate every day—and I mean that.”

Spiritual Tools

Practice the Golden Rule in all your affairs every day—it works!

The Golden Rule doesn't require I become the doormat of the universe.

By hurting others, I only hurt myself.

Kindness and love always beget kindness and love.

Knowing my motivation helps me make the right choice.

The secret to right action is to stop and think.

All of my temptations are the result of my own thoughts.

I gain strength every time I deny temptation.

It is not my job to fix anyone.

Quit trying to analyze everything.

Take care of yourself: mind, body and spirit.

Don't get too hungry, too angry, too lonely, or too tired.

I must treat my mental illness if I want to stay sober.

Pray and meditate every day.

Principle 12 Serenity is the reward

Serenity is a state of mind, not a destination.

“This is as good an example of serenity as I’ve heard in a long time,” said Father Mick, leading the morning spiritual. He read a poem called *If*, by Rudyard Kipling.

“If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,

But make allowance for their doubting too,

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,

Or, being lied about, don’t deal in lies,

Or being hated don’t give way to hating,

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;

If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same,

If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken

Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,

Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,

And stoop and build ‘em up with worn-out tools;

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
 Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
 If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
 If all men count with you, but none too much,
 If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
 And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!"

"You must clear your mind of all sense of resentment and hostility until you are conscious only of harmony and peace within yourself and have a sense of positive good-will towards all," said Father Mick, quoting Emmet Fox.

Queuing up at the coffee pot later, Robert said, "There are probably as many definitions of serenity as there are people looking for it. Serenity has to include calmness and solitude of the soul."

Reggie said, "It has to include peace and joy."

Timmy said, "Living in the moment, not worrying about yesterday or tomorrow."

Robert quoted the Buddha: "Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment," and "Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without."

I added, "Like Baba Ram Dass said, 'Be here now.'"

“Don’t forget the serenity prayer,” Robert said: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

“Reinhold Niebuhr,” said Mike, nodding. “And don’t forget Lao Tzu: ‘If you are at peace you are living in the present.’”

“And faith,” said Reggie. “As my faith grows, so will the measure of my peace and joy.”

“Whoa!” said Robert. “You won’t believe what just came flying into my head: by living in the moment we’ll see the face of God, for God lives in the moment.”

“Which means I don’t have to shoot up Ritalin ever again,” said Timmy, smiling.

When will I find serenity?

“Let us know peace.

For as long as the moon shall rise,

For as long as the rivers shall flow,

For as long as the sun will shine,

For as long as the grass shall grow,

Let us know peace.”

—Cheyenne prayer

Sitting in Matt’s group, I posed a question that had been bothering me.

“Everybody talks about finding serenity,” I said. “How long will it take me to find my own peace? I still have times when my head’s filled with jumbled-up thoughts. I’m constantly

plagued by poor sleep and I've been working hard on the Steps but I'm not happy, joyous or free."

"A year," said Matt. "For most people, it takes a year to find any significant degree of serenity."

I was appropriately discouraged.

Later, Reggie and I spoke with Father Mick.

"How did your serenity come to you?" I asked.

"I'd been out of seminary for about four months when one summer morning I awoke with a strange feeling of happiness with no idea why. I could hear a mockingbird singing outside my window. Nothing was bothering me. I had nothing I had to jump up and do. There was no sense of time. I didn't feel old or young. There was only the moment I was in and nothing else. You might say I was centered for the first time in my life. This was peace. It only lasted the morning, then it was gone."

I suddenly remembered the same feeling not too many days ago. For a few hours, and a few hours only, I was at peace. I told Father Mick about it.

"I have no idea what brought it on," I said.

"Nor do I," said Father Mick. "Some things aren't amenable to my thought. I can only experience and cherish them. Over the last few years, my serenity has come and gone, each time longer and deeper than the time before. I can remember the ecstasy of two full months of peace, which collapsed into a time of turmoil only to resurface some months later. Then I found myself in a six-month period of bliss, but it faded as well. In time, my periods of peace came more often and lasted longer. Now, I rarely have a bad day."

"When you found this peace," asked Reggie, "where were you, I mean spiritually?"

“First,” said Father Mick, “acceptance was always there. I’ve had clinical depression since my university days and at times my depression has been severe. When I’ve had peace, I’ve also been at peace with my mental illness. My happiness seems related to how much of my ego I can surrender to my Higher Power. Realizing my powerlessness over life, I asked God to do for me what I cannot do for myself. With time, I’ve gotten better at this process, but I’m so hard-headed and stubborn that progress has been slow. Still I persist.”

Happiness follows serenity.

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

—*Madeleine L’Engle*

“For those of you who are about to leave your spiritual center here at rehab,” said Raphael, “I have a few parting bits of wisdom.” He paused and looked out over his audience, knowing full well that many would never achieve any form of long-term remission.

“I’m a big fan of Thomas Jefferson,” he said. “In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson suggested that under the law, we’re guaranteed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He knew that in this life we are not promised happiness. You can look for it in a particular job, a city, or with a particular girl, but I doubt if you’ll find it. For me, when I reached out for happiness it always seemed to vanish like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. When I began to achieve some measure of serenity, I discovered that happiness came tagging along behind like a joyous puppy dog. Happiness is the child of serenity. Find serenity and you’ll find happiness.”

“Remember, only you are responsible for your happiness,” Robert whispered into my ear. He would finish his time in rehab this week. “No one can give you happiness and no one can take it away.”

In giving up my old life, I gave up nothing worth having.

“When most of you arrived here,” Raphael continued, “you probably felt like you were giving up the best parts of your old life. How many feel that way now?”

A few hands went up in the room, but only from the newcomers.

Mike, who would join Robert in those leaving rehab this week, spoke.

“I’ve given up nothing that was worth keeping,” he said slowly, “but if you’d told me that when I got here I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“I’m giving up hangovers, blackouts, and trying to control the world around me,” said Robert, “and when I wake up, I know where to find my shoes and my car.”

“If I give up my affair,” said Timmy, “maybe my wife will take me back. I’d like that.”

“I’m giving up the tracks in my arm,” I said, “and having to wear long sleeves in the summer to hide them.”

“I can actually enjoy myself without worrying about getting caught,” said Robert.

“And you can live your lives without having to wear a mask,” said Raphael, “but you must maintain your spiritual fitness on a daily basis. Nothing less will do.”

I will turn my desire from worldly passion to a passion for God.

“I once had a thousand desires.

But in my one desire to know you

all else melted away.”

—Rumi

Jane stood at the front of the class, her arms crossed. Her jaw seemed more pointed than usual and her eyes were sharp as knives. She knew that Robert and Mike were leaving rehab later this week and this might be her last shot at them.

“Where does desire come from?” she asked pointedly.

“From the devil?” asked Timmy.

“But doesn’t that eliminate my part in my mistakes and let me avoid the consequences of my decisions?” She looked in Robert’s direction.

“We’ve come to believe that we alone are responsible for our problems,” he answered.

“And …?” asked Jane.

The room was quiet.

“All desire comes from God,” she said.

“But …” Timmy sputtered.

“Repeat after me, class,” she said. She intoned, “All desire comes from God.”

We dutifully responded, “All desire comes from God.”

“Then our mistakes must come from twisting that desire into a less than useful direction,” said Robert.

“Precisely,” said Jane. “Free will is sometimes a curse, since it lets us pursue actions that are harmful. As alcoholics and addicts, our feeble minds lead us astray.”

“I have a broken thinker,” said Robert. “I need all the help I can get making decisions in the material world.”

“And where do I find such help?” asked Jane.

“From my sponsor,” said Timmy.

“From my psychiatrist and my counselor,” said Mike.

“Where else?” Jane asked.

“From going to AA meetings,” said Timmy.

“From my Higher Power,” said Reggie.

“Good,” said Jane, “and what do I do with the desires I’ve twisted into harmfulness?”

Again the room fell silent. After a few moments, Jane smiled.

“First, you need to recognize that the object of my desire may be harmful,” she said.

“Desire for women is my problem,” said Timmy.

“Mine too—especially the ones who sit in the front row,” said Reggie.

“My desire to look good in public,” I mumbled.

“This next part is really important,” she said. “You’ll need to return to God the desire he has given you. Let your desire focus on God and his love. You can ask him to help you change the direction of your cravings, away from a passion for the world and into a passion for serenity and a relationship with him. Every time a useless appetite arises within you, whatever its object, first recognize its nature, then convert that craving into love and send that love back home to God.”

“God, take away my lust for women and the other thing she said,” said Timmy.

Serenity came unbidden.

A few days later, Mike and I were hanging out in front of the center. Late afternoon sun gilded the young maples that dotted the parking lot. Unexpectedly, the world around me changed abruptly. Suddenly, the trees popped out of the landscape, like opening a child's pop-up book. The colors of the leaves glowed like I had never seen them before. The grass under my feet shimmered in iridescent green. I looked at Mike and he looked back at me with his shit-eating grin. We were sharing the same experience. The landscape had gone from a flat 2-D background to a vivid 3-D world. In this moment, I was content and comfortable in my own skin. My mind was clear of all distractions and free of worry. I didn't dare speak, lest the spell be broken. I was living in the moment. I had found serenity.

"Now I understand why we're doing all this work," I said. "Now it all seems possible."

"When I went through rehab before," said Mike, "I never experienced this. Whatever just happened, I want more of it. Maybe I can make it this time."

"Mike," I said softly, "why do you think you relapsed?"

"I thought I had this thing licked," he said. "I quit going to meetings and started visiting the ladies in the strip clubs. I quit doing my morning meditation and prayer. I was stupid."

"You are definitely not stupid," I said. "Maybe we'll both make it."

The grand summing up.

In celebration of the departure of Robert and Mike, we met for dinner with Father Mick at a local sushi bar. Timmy and Reggie completed the table.

"I've never had sushi before," said Father Mick. "I'm not too sure about eating raw fish."

"Don't be afraid," said Mike. "I've had sushi lots of times and I've never gotten sick once."

"Back home, they call it bait," said Reggie. "You put it on the end of a hook and throw it in the river."

"The green stuff gives the fish more flavor," I said to Father Mick, tongue in cheek. "It's called Wasabi. You'll want to put on a lot."

The waiter served the first round of rice and raw fish. Father Mick slathered wasabi on his and took a huge bite. In seconds, his face turned red as he frantically reached for his water glass. The rest of us tried to avoid laughing but with limited success. When the steam cleared from his ears, Father Mick spoke.

"My," he said, "that was really good. I think I'll have some more."

"Try the ginger this time," I suggested. "You'll like it."

Father Mick ate the ginger soaked tuna roll and grinned.

"I've always been a fan of firehouse Mexican chili," he said. "I'm really enjoying myself. I guess there was nothing to be afraid of after all—which sounds like a good topic for my final sermon to you two." He looked at Robert and Mike.

Having finished the first round of food, we settled back to listen.

"Someone in seminary told me the words *fear* and *faith* are connected more than three hundred times in the Bible."

"Seems like it might be important, then," said Timmy.

"Faith is what replaces fear," said Reggie. "'Fear not, O ye of little faith.'"

“Exactly,” said Father Mick. “The goal is to live a life free of fear.”

“Love is the opposite of fear, right?” asked Timmy.

“Right,” said Mike, “and it’s fear that brings out my character defects. By dealing with my fears, I reduce my faults.”

“I know that fear has driven my life and that it pushes me to make wrong decisions,” said Reggie.

“Fear makes me wear a mask to hide my true self,” I said.

“As children of God,” said Father Mick, “our inheritance is a life that’s happy, joyous and free of fear, a life based on love.”

“God is love,” said Timmy.

Father Mick nodded and grinned at Timmy.

“My innocent one,” he said, “you give me such joy.” He looked around the table with his most loving smile.

“Fear is the great paralyzer,” he said, “It’s the driving force for my character defects and perhaps the major cause of failing to stay sober. But every time I use prayer to defeat fear, I grow inside, and that growth is never lost. Fear is a hurdle I must overcome every day, and great are the rewards thereof.”

“A life lived in love and free of fear,” said Timmy.

The waiter brought the next round, California rolls and eel. By this time we were eager for the raw fish.

“I was afraid this sushi stuff would be really bad,” said Reggie, “but I have to admit I like it!”

“Isn’t that condemnation prior to investigation?” asked Mike.

“Yes,” said Robert, “and also judging. Judging is bad for my emotional health.”

“The other way to say that,” said Father Mick, “is that I must learn to accept the world as it is. Remember, that’s our new definition of perfection. God’s world is perfect just the way it is. I only need the eyes to see it.”

“Matt said if I judge God’s handiwork,” said Timmy, “then I’m judging God, which might be something I should avoid.”

“The more I judge others—or anything, for that matter—the further I am from my serenity,” said Robert.

“If you think about it,” said Reggie, “I can’t judge the path another person is on, because I have no way of knowing what’s in their mind or their heart.”

“I set standards for the behavior of those around me,” said Robert. “Standards impossible for even me to reach.”

“Judging others comes from my own inferiority complex,” said Father Mick. “A good first step in removing this shortcoming is to show tolerance to others. But the largest hurdle may be the requirement that I forgive everyone for everything.”

“Limitations,” said Mike. “When I judge someone, I necessarily put limitations on them, and I’ve learned that I shouldn’t limit myself, my recovery or my Higher Power. I need to extend this idea to everyone I meet.”

“If I want to live a life free of fear and find the serenity that’s my inheritance,” said Robert, “then I’ll have to learn to love everyone I come in contact with.”

“But what about those SOBs who think they’re better than me?” asked Timmy.

Father Mick just sighed. “Leave them alone and they’ll do just fine. Could you pass me the wasabi?”

I realized that my new job was to tell the story of addiction and recovery.

Mike and I were hanging around the coffeepot waiting for our last house group together.

“Psst,” I said. “Come with me.” I took his arm and pulled him outside.

“What’s up?” he asked, trying not to spill his coffee.

“Something strange happened last night,” I said. “I’m afraid to tell anyone but you.”

“Go on.”

“You know I’ve been thinking about what I should do when I leave rehab.”

“You said you might not go back to medicine.”

“Yes, but I’ve got no idea what I’m supposed to do, so last night I prayed and asked God what I should do.”

“And?”

“This morning when I woke up, I found this thought in my head.”

He grinned. “Don’t hold me in suspense.”

“Tell our story,” I said; “just three words—tell our story.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I’m not sure, so I thought I’d ask you.”

“Good choice.” He smiled. “I’m well known around here as the Alcohol-oracle and Diviner of Dreams. Maybe you’re supposed to write a book about what it’s like being a drunk and a junkie and how you got sober.”

“But Mike, I have no idea how to get sober!”

“Then you’d better start taking notes.”

The road ahead will be a journey into joy.

*“May the road rise up to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And the rain fall soft upon your fields,
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of his hand.”*

—Irish blessing

The day of Mike's leave-taking had finally arrived. Robert had gone the day before. I hated to see my friend Mike go, but I was happy for him.

“When will you go back to work?” I asked. We walked toward the parking lot where Mike's car was packed and ready to go.

“I have a week off, then I start back to work half time for a month before I hit the grind full time,” he said. “And you?”

“I wish I had a good answer. If I went back to medicine now I think it would kill me.”

“That bad, eh?”

“Yeah, it's going to take a while for some of my scars to heal. That's all I know for sure.”

Mike stopped and turned toward me. “You know if you get into trouble or start Jonesing real bad, you can always call me.”

“Yeah, I know. And that goes likewise, I'm sure.”

He looked into my eyes. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"The problem is addiction," I replied, beginning the catechism.

"And what's the answer?" he asked.

"The answer is recovery," I answered.

"And how shall we live now?"

"We shall live happy, joyous and free—free from fear."

I put my arms around him and gave him a hug. In less than a minute he was in his little green sports car, around the corner, out of sight and on his way back to New Jersey. As I headed back toward the apartment, I realized that my path would be much longer than the highway to Newark. Ahead of me were the Beast, the Angel, and the Madman, all vying for control of my life. No matter how long or soberly I lived, the Beast would always lurk somewhere close, ready to return at the first slip. The Madman was woven into the fabric of my thinking—an insanity so insidious that some days I could not tell his thoughts from my own. But my Angel, my saving grace, would always be near, pointing the way home.

"I hold a beast, an angel and a madman in me,

and my enquiry is as to their working,

my problem is their subjugation and victory,

drownthrow and upheaval,

and my effort is their self-expression."

—Dylan Thomas

Spiritual Tools

Serenity is a state of mind, not a destination.

Serenity is being at peace with the world, filled with love, expecting nothing, living joyously in the moment.

God lives in the moment.

Happiness is the child of serenity.

I alone am responsible for my own happiness.

In giving up a life of drugs and alcohol, I give up nothing worth having.

All desire comes from God; it is I who twist desire into something less useful.

I can overcome harmful desire through prayer.

Life is easy—life is good!

Epilogue

Many years have passed since I received my first AA chip in 1997. For all those many days I have remained clean and sober. My addiction has never left, but it long ago ceased to control me. I have had my share of good days and bad days, but with time the good days have only increased and the bad days are all but gone. Over the years, I have learned much more about myself and my disease. My experience of life has been deep and rich, and unlike before, now I can remember most of what happened. I offer this epilogue to bring you, the reader, up to date and to provide some measure of closure.

What I hope you got from this book.

First, let me congratulate you for getting this far. To finish a book is often a pleasure and a sorrow, pleasure in its telling and sorrow in its ending. I hope you found it so.

I set out with certain principles in mind: that addiction is a treatable disease; that life is easy; and that harmony is the natural state of the universe. If any of these ideas came through, I am pleased. If you found yourself teachable, your willingness, honesty, and hopefulness should have carried you far. If you are an addict or alcoholic like me, I hope you found some measure of hope and a sense of self-worth. Self-worth is improved, they say, by performing worthy acts. If you were able to accept some of the ideas presented here, you may feel more comfortable in your own skin. I hope that, like me, you discovered the value of prayer: that it actually works and can change your character and your life for the better. Perhaps you are no longer dependent upon your own resources but can now find help from a Higher Power. Maybe you related to some of the stories and experiences presented here. Behind each was a spiritual principle that

helped move my own recovery forward. Perhaps you were able to spend time reflecting on the truths I was given. If you recognized yourself in this book, you may have begun to undergo that total and overwhelming change in yourself that is required to overcome addiction. I hope so.

If you persevered in the journey, you may have come to a new understanding of spirituality and of your relationship with the universe and your fellow man. In this you will have experienced spiritual growth. You will realize that there are as many pathways to God as there are people walking. You may find, in spite of your past experiences, that life is good. Peace, joy, and serenity can be yours.

After rehab my life has continued to improve.

When I left rehab I was incredibly worried about the prospect of relapse. Instead of returning to my old home and my old using companions, I chose to move to another city and live with my mother and my son. Dr. Taylor once said that the single most important factor in staying sober was family support. In my new environment, I was swaddled in my family's love, and staying sober was easy.

There were more than 400 AA meetings a day in my new neighborhood, so finding meetings was no problem. I went to one meeting a day for the next year. I acquired a temporary sponsor right away. In a few months I met Walter, who would become my permanent sponsor until his death ten years later. Walter never lent me money, never let me date his daughter, and never told me what to do, but he was always there when I needed him, sharing his experience and hope.

The staff in rehab referred me to Dr. C., a physician with training in addictionology. He in turn helped me find a counselor who specialized in the problems of addiction. Finding a

psychiatrist took longer, but Dr. S. had spent a year studying addictionology as part of his training and was of invaluable help. My initial recovery package was completed when Dr. C. arranged for me to lead an AA group three times a week at the county detox. You never learn something so well as when you have to teach it to others. I felt right at home.

In rehab I was told that even when I stop the boat, I may be pummeled by the wake for a while. My foggy brain cleared only slowly, but I plodded ahead. I am bipolar, and controlling my mood swings between depression and mania proved difficult. One round of depression was so deep that for six months I was unable to get off the couch. For a time, I blundered through life only half aware of the world. Only the structure provided by my recovery kept me going.

As my head cleared, I took up the task of telling our story. I began this book in the first of its many incarnations. I wrote a novel that won an award and two award-winning screenplays, all of which remain unpublished. Every time I fell in love I wrote poetry. I even made a movie, complete with cameramen and a make-up artist. As they say in the business, the film is still in turnaround. I took up an old hobby I had almost given up on—photography. I delved into the inside of a computer. I even took a course in children's literature.

I learned what I had to avoid.

I learned to avoid anything that would compromise my sobriety. I had a plan on what to do when I met my drug of choice again, for I surely would. At social occasions where drinking would occur, I always had an escape route planned. I never bragged about my recovery to old friends I had used with, and I never tried to sell AA to my drug dealer. When in doubt, I learned to ask for help and to ask myself, What are my motives? My answer always proved enlightening and helped guide my behavior away from the temptations I encountered.

I was told in rehab that I was cross-addicted, meaning that my addiction to cocaine and wine insured that I was now addicted to every get-high known to mankind—marijuana, beer, heroin; benzodiazepines such as Xanax, Valium and Ativan; all narcotics, from common pain pills to oxycodone, and most of the drugs used as anesthesia for surgery. My first psychiatrist relapsed after fifteen years of sobriety when she was given a morphine pump following surgery, so I was dutifully warned. For even the smallest medical procedures, I had to stand my ground to avoid the benzos and the narcs. On one occasion I told the referring doctor, his nurse, two nurses at the hospital, and the operating surgeon that I could tolerate neither benzodiazepines nor narcotics and was assured that they would not be used. Then the anesthesiologist showed up with syringes of Versed and Demerol in hand, ready to send me to la-la land. I told him *no*, that I was deathly allergic.

I learned what I needed to do.

I have continued to expand my meditation and prayer life. I am no more religious than I ever was, but today I can see the value of spiritual wisdom, whatever its source. I have continued searching for my own spirituality and have tried to walk my own spiritual path.

I have done my best to reach out to other addicts and alcoholics. I have told my personal story many times to newcomers, sharing the hope and strength I found. I have sponsored men with addiction to drugs and alcohol when they came into the program. I learned why they call newcomers “pigeons.” As Walter said, “They fly around your head, shit on you, then fly away.” At times I have taken such men into my home, sometimes successfully. I learned I cannot help someone unless they ask, but when they do, I must be ready to reach out. I was warned that I should never lend money to an alcoholic unless I was prepared to lose it. Today, I can verify the

truth of that saying. I became adept at seeing the problems of others, and I learned to apply these lessons to myself.

I have wrestled with a number of issues, especially becoming willing to accept and embrace the world as it is rather than feeling the need to judge it. I have worked on rebuilding relationships and acquiring tolerance and forgiveness. I spent six months systematically rejecting negativity in all its forms, including resentments, anger, and hatred. Learning to think more about others remains the most difficult task of all, but it is probably the most important. I have by no means met with success in everything, but I continue to seek progress everywhere.

What happened to Mike?

Every year the rehab center has a reunion of sorts, but I quit going after a while. Most of my counselors were no longer there, and I didn't recognize any of the recovered clients I had known. Over the years I have lost track of all of my rehab friends except Mike, who has given up medicine to become a personal trainer with a practice built on the Twelve Steps of AA. He is still a son of Abraham who remains open to all forms of spirituality whatever their source. We met at a wedding a few years after finishing rehab; he looked tanned, buff, and very happy in the company of his new girlfriend. Oh, by the way, he quit smoking.

Within a year of rehab, Robert relapsed on crack cocaine and fell off the radar. When I last heard from John, my fast-driving, hard-headed buddy, he was plodding along fearlessly in his hard-won recovery. He has successfully returned to his surgical practice. I assume his driving has improved but can't say for sure. He still plays tennis. Vera got married to a recovering compulsive gambler and they moved to Las Vegas. Timmy relapsed quickly, losing his family, his business, and his pharmacy license. Following two more stints in rehab, he has

been clean. Last news was that he had regained his license and was working as a pharmacist at a free clinic in the slums of Chicago. Wee Willy, to my great surprise and even greater pleasure, ended up as a spiritual counselor at Taylor Recovery Center, filling the post vacated by Father Mick's retirement. I heard a rumor that Reggie had quit drinking but was still having trouble with the ladies in the front pew, but that was only a rumor. They say only ten percent of all those who attempt recovery with a twelve-step program will achieve long-term sobriety. I like to think that we did a little better than that. As Wee Willy said, "Don't worry. When the game is over, everybody goes home."

What it's like today.

Today I try to begin each day with prayer and meditation. I have become diabetic, so my diet has improved significantly. I have lost weight and can wear the white pants I wore thirty years ago as an intern. Mostly I sleep through the night without disturbance, a real boon for an alcoholic. I schedule my day around my afternoon nap. My mind has slowed to the point where I can read for pleasure again. I have a number of close friends. Not surprisingly, they are all in AA. I am working on a novel about the confessions of an addicted doctor. Sound familiar?

I live with my new wife on a small farm high in the Blue Ridge Mountains. We have four dogs, five alpacas, three sheep, a donkey and a yard full of chickens and ducks. Our garden is half the size of Texas. We grow alfalfa sprouts in the windowsill and hummingbirds visit our porch. I cultivate roses and take photographs of them. I even entered a photo contest. I cherish my relationships with my wife, my children, and my family. I no longer worry about my finances and I feel no sense of lack. Each night at bedtime, my wife and I hug and share the same thought, "Another day in paradise!"

My levels of worry and anxiety have fallen to almost nothing. My mistakes have been legion, both financial and interpersonal, for I am still only an egg. I no longer feel the need to control life. I live in a world where I know everything will turn out fine if I just let it. I can love most everyone, but I can also draw real and useful boundaries. I helped start an AA meeting at a local church. There are only four of us, but we are growing. Once a year I reread *The Sermon on the Mount*, *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. These books live on my desk next to the Bible.

I have found what I believe to be a real and personal relationship with the God of my understanding. As Carl Jung said, “I don’t believe there is a God, I know there is a God.” Today I am willing to let my God provide for and direct me. My fear of death, which left me on that glorious day in rehab, has never returned.

As good as my life is today, I remain painfully aware of the incurability of my disease. Recently a famous actor with over twenty years of sobriety relapsed on heroin and died. A friend of mine with twelve years clean time committed suicide. He sat next to me at an AA meeting for years and I had no idea what he was about to do. Relapses are part of the disease and only constant vigilance of my thoughts and maintenance of spiritual condition give me a daily reprieve. For the rest of my life, when I get up every morning I will be an alcoholic and an addict and every morning I ask God to keep me clean and sober, just for today. Today, life is easy and life is good, but I still keep a close eye on my disease. And every night when I lay my head on the pillow, and every morning when the sunlight comes through the curtains, I say,
Thank You.

Resources

My editor asked me to prepare a list of the resources that have helped me the most in my recovery. That list would include Mike, Robert, John, Timmy, Reggie, Raphael, Cameron, Matt, Father Mick, Jane, Walter M., Larry, Dr. C., Dr. S., Walter P., Ann-Marie, Crazy Mark, Gary, Bobby S., Lydia H., Ruth B., Rick, Captain America, Steve, Beth, Robert T., Keith, and hundreds of others I have met in and out of the rooms of AA. My fellow travelers have always been the most important influences by far. God, it is said, speaks through other people.

The Holy Bible. I have come to think of the Bible as a manual for development of the soul and Jesus as the supreme spiritual master of mankind. My edition is always open to the Book of Matthew. I prefer the King James Version, the one with the large print. The more modern translations-for-today versions not only lack the power and poetry of KJV but often lose the meaning altogether.

Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism. Fourth Edition. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, New York, NY, 2001. First published in 1939 and known as The Big Book, its lessons are as valid as ever. My copy is underlined in a hundred places. The Big Book was my manual for early recovery and it continues to provide a source of wisdom. It is available at most AA meeting houses, on Amazon.com, and online.

The Sermon on the Mount: The Key to Success in Life, by Emmet Fox. HarperOne, San Francisco, 1934. If it can be said that a book can save a person's life, then this book saved mine. Not only does Mr. Fox reexamine the Sermon on the Mount as it appears in the Book of Matthew, he provides a key to an understanding of spirituality. His approach opened my eyes to a new way of looking at the world and at my life. In the days before the Big Book was written, AA mythology says this book was the manual for newcomers. I consider it required reading at least once a year.

The Bhagavad Gita, translated by Juan Mascaro. Penguin Books, London, 1962. My first sponsor was an African-American ex-heroin addict who was a practicing Hindu. He taught me to chant *hare krishna* and introduced me to the *Gita*. I don't chant anymore, but the wisdom I found in this 2,500-year-old inspired work is as relevant and necessary as that of the Bible. Mr. Mascaro's translation is the classic one and, for my money, the most powerful and direct. A related and useful translation is ***Bhagavad Gītā as It Is***, a translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, with commentary, by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. He expounds and explains the *Gita* in detail from an entirely different point of view.

A lot of really good books.

There are literally thousands of books on alcoholism, addiction, and spiritual recovery. Some I have personally found to be rewarding, useful and practical.

Wherever You Go, There You Are, Mindfulness, Meditation In Everyday Life, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Hyperion, New, 1994. A follow-up of his earlier book, **Full Catastrophe Living**, which describes how to use the concept of mindfulness in times of emotional or physical stress, this volume is a guidebook to using meditation and mindfulness to improve one's everyday life. A spiritual gem.

The Essential Rumi, New Expanded Edition, by Jalal al-Din Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks and John Moyne. HarperOne, San Francisco, 2004. Rumi was the first of the Sufi masters, and he took his spiritual truth from all the religious traditions of his time. His poetry touches on the deepest issues of human spirituality. Coleman Barks' translations are wonders! This volume has been the bestselling book of poetry in the US for some time, and for good reason. Meditation, recovery, poetry, and spirituality all in one! My favorite small volume of Rumi is **Birdsong: Fifty-Three Short Poems**, Maypop, Athens, GA, 1993.

The Prophet, by Kahlil Gibran. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1973. Enough spiritual wisdom packed in these few pages to last a lifetime.

Touchstones: A Book Of Daily Meditations For Men. A collection by various authors. Hazelden Foundation, Center City, MN, 1986. Hazelden has published a host of fine books dealing with nearly every aspect of addiction and recovery. *Touchstones* is not just for men anymore. For years, this book provided me with a short bit of necessary inspiration every morning for living in a seemingly insane world.

The Science of Mind, by Ernest Holmes. Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1938. Mr. Holmes takes the idea championed by Mr. Fox, that the outer world is but the outpouring of the thoughts in my mind, and carries it to its logical extreme. It works!

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, by Richard J. Foster. Harper San Francisco, San Francisco, 1988. A Christian apologist, Mr. Foster offers a series of useful disciplines, including meditation, prayer, fasting, simplicity, solitude, celebration and more. Good stuff from within the established Protestant Church.

Heart of Forgiveness: A Practical Path to Healing, by Madeline Ko-I Bastis. Red Wheel/Weiser, San Francisco, 2003. A Buddhist nun's exploration of the value of forgiveness.

Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, by Robert H. Schuller. W Publishing Group (Thomas Nelson), Nashville, TN, 1982. Long-time pastor of the Crystal Cathedral Ministries, Rev. Schuller preached the concepts of spiritual recovery under the guise of Christianity. My Jewish friend Mike called me one day and said, Hey man, you gotta listen to this guy. He preaches recovery.

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, New York, NY, 1952. Written as an expansion of the ideas presented in The Big Book. A Bill of Rights for AA.

The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams, by Deepak Chopra. New World Library/Amber-Allen Publishing, San Francisco, 1994. My first psychiatrist gave me this book. Coming from a background of Hinduism and medicine, Dr. Chopra describes a set of spiritual principles. He has written many other excellent books.

Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue, Books 1-3, by Neale Donald Walsch. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, NY, 1996. Mr. Walsch picked up a yellow pad and began to write. When he was done, he had written three books detailing his conversations with God. Informing knowledge from unconventional sources. A must-read.

The Dragon Doesn't Live Here Anymore, by Allen Cohen. Ballantine Books, New York, NY, 1993. Mr. Cohen synthesizes spiritual wisdom from a multitude of sources, yielding a work filled with insights and especially relevant to the recovering alcoholic and addict. Good stuff.

Remember, Be Here Now, Ram Dass (Richard Alpert). The Lama Foundation, Questa, NM, 1971. Mr. Alpert was a professor at Harvard down the hall from Timothy Leary. Leary took LSD; Alpert went to India. When Alpert returned he wrote his now famous book on what he learned there: that living in the moment is everything.

Codependent No More & Beyond Codependency, by Melody Beattie. Mjf Books (Fine Creative Media, Inc.), New York, NY, 2001. Ms. Beattie is the first and last word on codependency, especially as it relates to addiction. Required reading.

The Shack, by Wm. Paul Young. Windblown Media, Los Angeles, 2007. More learning from unconventional sources. An allegory about God, the universe, and me.

The Elements of Style, by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. MacMillan Publishing, New York, NY, 1959. The ultimate source of writing discipline. An absolute essential for writing and a life of writing.

Internet

Enter the words “recovery from addiction” into Google Search and in 0.3 seconds you will find 52,700,000 results, just to name a few. Google *spirituality* and you will be overwhelmed with 94,200,000 results just as quickly. For me, the Internet has been useful for finding quotes, uncovering the history of ideas and the lives of spiritual leaders, and providing background. It is also useful for finding AA meetings when I am in a strange town. In Atlanta, I just google *Alcoholics Anonymous Atlanta* and I find contacts to every meeting in the city at <http://www.atlantaaa.org/contact.php>. Every region of AA has a hotline that is available 24 hours listed under each local group. AA chat rooms and such were popular for a while, but no Internet site can provide coffee, fellowship and a hug. Real recovery is a one-on-one proposition. Having said that, you may find help here:

Information for Health Care Professionals

<http://www.aa.org/catalog.cfm?origpage=223&product=11>

How to find an AA meeting near you

<http://www.aa.org/lang/en/subpage.cfm?page=28>

Each state generally has its own website; for example,

<http://www.aavirginia.org/hp>

North Florida Area 14, my home area for years

<http://www.aanorthflorida.org>

New York City Intergroup

<http://www.nyintergroup.org>

General AA Stuff

<http://www.e-aa.org>

Big Book Online

<http://www.aa.org/bigbookonline>

The National Institute for Mental Health is a valuable source of real information

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/schizophrenia/what-about-substance-abuse.shtml>

Video

My Name is Bill W. Actors: James Woods, Jobeth Williams, James Garner; director: Daniel Petri. Warner Home Video (Garner-Duchow Productions, Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, Warner Bros. Television, 1989). The story of how Bill W. and Dr. Bob came to form Alcoholics Anonymous. Essential for every alcoholic and addict.

The Lost Weekend. Actors: Ray Milland, Jane Wyman; director: Billy Wilder. Universal Studios, 1945. The earliest presentation of unadorned and untreated alcoholism.

The Days of Wine and Roses. Actors: Jack Lemmon, Lee Remick; director: Blake Edwards.
Warner Bros., 1962. An early presentation of AA.

When a Man Loves a Woman. Actors: Andy Garcia, Meg Ryan; director: Luis Mandoki.
Touchstone, 1994. A modern version of *The Days of Wine and Roses*.