

ONLY WITH THE HEART

One Person's story of living the Twelve Steps

By: Frank C.

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ONLY WITH THE HEART

By

Frank W. Costanzo

And he went back to meet the fox.

“Goodbye,” he said,

“Goodbye,” said the fox. “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

“What is essential is invisible to the eye,” the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

Reprinted from the book:

The Little Prince

By Antoine de Saint Exupery

PROLOGUE

Mill Valley, California, Monday morning, March 1, 1971:

I opened my eyes, barely. My mouth felt parched from the cheap gin. It seemed that my whole body was dehydrated. I wasn't sure where I was. Every bone in my body ached. When I figured out that I was lying in my ugly little rented room, I realized I must have had another grand mal seizure after finishing the bottle.

I tried prayer: "Please God, I'm having two seizures a day. What am I going to do? I'm probably going to die. So what? Why don't you just let me die, anything is better than this."

I knew the seizures were a direct result of the drinking, but I just couldn't – or wouldn't – stop. The reason I drank made very little difference anymore. I tried to get up but I was too weak. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten. I finally pulled myself together enough to drag my body, or what was left of it, onto the chair. I was in my shorts. As I looked down at myself I could see that my ribs were sticking through my skin. My six foot one-inch frame couldn't have weighed more than 140 pounds. I was shaking violently.

I struggled to the sink and drank as much water as I could without vomiting, holding the glass with both hands. I lost control and watched it, without caring, while it broke in the sink. My mind had suddenly begun to scream at me to find a drink. Had my roommate left me anything? If I just could have a couple of pulls from a bottle I could muster enough strength to go around the corner and get a fifth. I flopped down in the chair to avoid falling or passing out.

I was starting to become panicky. "Damn, I need to look for the bottle, but I can't get out of this chair. Please, God, even one drink would be enough. I promise to be satisfied with only one. Oh, God, I'm sure I can pull myself together with even one." Shit, I know there has to be a bottle around here somewhere. All I need to do is get up and look.

I'm just so sick I can't move. What am I going to do? "God, stop being an asshole! Show me where that bottle is, or I'll die."

"Frank John, thank God you're here! Help me find the bottle, will you?" I was obviously hallucinating. I saw my seven-year-old son, Frank John, in the room. I hurled myself from the chair to grab him. I ran full force into the wall and knocked myself out.

I looked around the room. All I could see was the ceiling. I was lying flat on my back. I was still shaking. I was calmer than I had been before. I didn't know whether having another drink was such a good idea. I hadn't toyed with a thought as radical as that for as long as I could remember. I was naked in the middle of a raging storm I had created, and the time had come for me to make up my mind to simply die or to ask for help somewhere.

What the hell? There was nothing to live for. My wife had left with the kids, the house was gone, the business was gone, the servants were gone, the cars were gone, and business associates wanted nothing to do with me. I couldn't even imagine the amount of debts I owed. I had lost all my self-respect. I didn't deserve to live.

"Do I really deserve to live?" I asked myself. "Hell, I don't know, but I think something's telling me that I should take a run at it, anyway."

I don't remember much of what happened in the next hour or so. Somehow I dressed and went to the corner phone booth, but can't recall doing so. My next recollection was of talking, for the next two hours, to a woman in some twelve step program. I don't know how I even knew this program existed. I don't know how I found the phone number and dialed it, but I did.

That evening, a man and his wife came to the room to talk. I had eaten nothing, and although I was shaking so violently I could barely hold a fork, they took me to a restaurant and I ate a hamburger. I threw it up promptly. The man and his wife spoke to me in very quiet tones, and even

though I felt I was close to death, they assured me I was not going to die. They added that probably over the next few days there would be times when I wished I would die. They were right on both counts. Since that day I have never found it necessary to drink alcohol again.

UNDERSTANDING OF THE TWELVE STEPS

During my lifetime I have been plagued with numerous addictions and obsessions, but over the past twenty years I have used the Twelve Steps to help me deal with them. The Twelve Steps have helped me: stop drinking alcoholically, overcome a three and one-half pack a-day smoking habit, stop overeating, keep in check my workaholic tendencies, learn to dearly love an alcoholic parent, overcome co-dependency with my children, and any number of other obsessive problems that continued to keep my life in constant turmoil if left to fester without a disciplined program of recovery.

I have dealt with these problems while attending only one individual twelve step program, even though there are twelve step programs dealing with a multitude of personal addictions and obsessions. I discovered that Recovery – the type that brings with it emotional sobriety – will only be found through the spiritual discipline brought about by working the Twelve Steps, not by just attending an individual twelve step program. These simple steps overcame for me what appeared to be insurmountable problems; providing a pathway to a new freedom, stressing love and compassion for a fellow man's problems rather than the bondage of my own.

Although I refer to the Twelve Steps as being a guide to a spiritual way of life, they do not necessarily have anything to do with God as taught in organized religions. They are designed to put each person back in touch with that Inner Spirit that dwells in us all, bringing peace to our lives - an inner peace free of addiction and obsession, anger,

resentment, self pity, fear and revenge. That Inner Spirit is defined by the Twelve Steps as being “A Power greater than ourselves” or “God, as we understand Him;” a Higher Power in each of our lives that is only felt within our being; so personal to only ourselves that it becomes indescribable.

On the other hand, the Twelve Steps are not designed to bypass organized religions or any of their beliefs. Quite the opposite. The spiritual discipline developed with their application in a person’s life should work in unison to enhance the appreciation of present religious beliefs.

There has never been a set way to apply the Twelve Steps. It is obvious that most people understand the concept of a Higher Power differently. What follows is not intended to be a “How To” program, but only a loose overview based on my own experiences. It can be used as a tool for anyone who desires to incorporate these wonderful guidelines into their lives, hopefully finding the happiness I have achieved.

ANONYMITY

“Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all these Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.”

The following is one man’s experience with the Twelve Steps. Who this man is matters little. The purpose is to relay a message: the message of happiness and freedom without addiction or obsession.

THE FIRST STEP: TRUTH

“ADMITTED WE WERE POWERLESS OVER ALCOHOL (OR ANY OTHER ADDICTION OR OBSESSION) AND OUR LIVES HAD BECOME UNMANAGEABLE.”

POWERLESS

For me to ever rediscover that Inner Spirit or God as I understand Him, and know peace, it is necessary to surrender self-will, comprehending that the problems in my life really have solutions, accepting the realization that after all is said and done, as a human being I have absolutely no conception of what transpires in this universe around me. Understanding that I am completely dependent on this Higher Power, whoever that may be, and accepting that if I stop struggling to solve problems and difficulties, those problems and difficulties will simply disappear. That realization is my perception of faith.

Simply disappear! The first person who I can ever remember telling me that was my first sponsor in the twelve step program in which I belong. I was pretty sick from the effects of alcohol abuse and didn't have the strength to argue. I was so sick that I had made up my mind to do whatever this strange man told me to do, without question or thought. I was at the gates of death. He was not only sober, he seemed happy. He would laugh at my problems then jokingly relate some bizarre incident in his own life of a similar nature. It was difficult to imagine this healthy, joyful person ever being involved in the antics he was describing, yet all I had to do was to listen closely to his emotions when he told the story to realize I was hearing the truth. So, it seemed the best course

of action would be to just listen and see where all of this was leading.

He wanted absolutely nothing from me. He told me he would be my friend no matter what I did. He certainly advised against resuming my drinking, but told me he understood even if I ever decided to do so. “Alcoholics do those things, but always remember I’m your friend and will always try to help you.” I would burst into tears when he would say things like that. It had been a long time since I had a friend and it was difficult to curb my emotions.

Sitting around his kitchen table, drinking gallons of coffee, this individual would say strange things like “Each person has been given the ability to set up his or her own little world inside their own minds, having complete control of that world no matter what outside circumstances surround them. They have the right to make all decisions as to what is right, wrong, good, and bad”. I would do my best to just try to absorb what he was telling me, but I hadn’t the slightest idea what he meant and would tell him so. He would tell me not to worry and just continue listening anyway. As time passed it all would begin to make sense. I would say to myself skeptically, “Sure it would.”

He wanted me to work the Twelve Steps. When I asked him what they meant, he said “The Twelve Steps are designed to assist each person in understanding the truth of the personal world I was telling you about inside their head. They also help you acquire the spiritual discipline to give up control of that world by turning that control over to a Higher Power. They help you to begin to live life on an inspirational level by thinking intuitively, throwing aside right, wrong, good, and bad. They begin listening for solutions from their own Inner Spirit to problems that were created only in their own mind, rather than trying to solve these seeming difficulties by logic or will power.” I was not only completely mystified, but being an agnostic, even the slightest hint of God, in any form, made me want to cut and run.

He told me that the First Step represents the truth, the admission that all the problems in my life had been created by me and not someone or something else. Now that was a bitter pill to swallow! I would tell him that if he only knew what was happening to me he would realize that I was a victim of circumstances, that if things had only been just a bit different, and my wife had understood me more, I wouldn't be in this predicament. He would smile, ignoring me completely, then attempt to explain that it was impossible for me to ever relate the complete truth, even to myself, when emotions such as fear, anger, happiness, frustration, and so on, enter into my thoughts. The truth would always become tainted by my life experiences. The only real way to hear the truth was to learn to let this Inner Spirit, or Higher Power, speak through me by meditation and daily writing. It all sounded stupid and outrageous, but my life was in such shambles anyway – what did I have to lose?

He advised me that each morning – upon awakening – I should find a quiet place, somewhere very personal. Because of my hectic living accommodations at the time, I chose the inside of a car. He told me to spend five minutes, eyes closed, remaining completely still, attempting to meditate. I was to clear my mind of all thoughts, with the purpose of inviting my Higher Power into my life. He chuckled when he said that in the beginning I would be lucky to achieve five seconds, must less five minutes. Nevertheless, I was to continue the process each day. He was right. I couldn't believe how long five minutes would become, just sitting with my eyes closed, trying to think of nothing. Because I wanted the peace and serenity I was in him, I was determined to do what I was told. The meditation process became easier as the days passed. The very fact that I was unable to meditate over thirty seconds made me realize just how little spiritual discipline I have in my life.

He bought me some pencils and a pad of paper. He told me to keep them close by. When the meditation period ended I should write down the first thought that came to my mind of

any incident during my addiction. Think of a time when I had become totally powerless to stop drinking. That certainly didn't seem to be much of a problem. The reason I was sitting there was that I felt I was unable to quit using alcohol. He told me not to reread what I wrote or I would probably change what I had written, adding or deleting to better suit my conscious recollection.

I did exactly what he told me to do every morning for about a week. On the seventh day I spent five minutes meditating as best I could, picked up the pad of paper and began to read what I had written. I was shocked! I couldn't believe what was on the paper. Was this person I'm reading about really me? It couldn't be! I knew I had a bad drinking problem, but my God could I have been so totally helpless in coping with my situation.

Here are a few of the items I wrote:

--I was told once by my doctor that I would die in less than a year if I didn't stop drinking. After leaving his office I went to a bar and got drunk so I could contemplate what he had told me.

--Some of my employees once found me lying in a pile of old bricks. I had no idea how I got there, but I must have been there for a day or so. They brought me into the construction shack where I had a seizure after insisting on just one more drink. They took me to the hospital. When I woke up I demanded to be released. I immediately went out and got drunk again. I have no recollection of what happened in the few days that followed.

--I hated to play blackjack. When I was in Nevada I would always go to the casino, play blackjack for hours and lose hundreds of dollars just to get the free drinks they served players.

For the first time I realized the truth about myself, the truth which I believe was told to me by my spiritual, not my intellectual conscious. There was no question that I was an alcoholic, powerless over its use. The problem far exceeded my admission of having trouble quitting. For the first time I

understood that my body craved it and would push me to insanity or death to get it. I became grateful to comprehend this truth at last and I admitted that truth to my innermost self. I had taken the first half of the First Step and secured a solid foundation for moving forward.

I didn't need to show those writings to anyone, they were my own personal truth. I folded them and put them into an envelope. I hid the envelope in a safe place; in the eventuality I ever doubted the existence of my addiction. I would have a judicial paper – written by my Innermost Conscious, through me – and remember the truth of my addiction.

UNMANAGEABLE

When I realized that as part of the first step it would also be necessary to admit that my life had become unmanageable, I felt uncomfortable and preferred to ignore the whole issue. After all, hadn't I already admitted I was powerless? It seemed that I was being put through a great deal of unnecessary humiliation. Wasn't enough, enough? Just because my life had deteriorated to the level of a street person shouldn't imply that when I use alcohol my life was unmanageable. Somewhat unruly I admit, but definitely not unmanageable.

I have since learned that this type of thinking is fairly common to most addictive and obsessive people. Once recovery begins it is quite normal to look back and believe that what took place before wasn't so bad after all, so the immediate admission of unmanageability was essential for my well being, to assure that I wouldn't drift back into my old habits and resume drinking.

My understanding of unmanageability, as it is used in the context of the First Step, has very little to do with paying bills on time, having adequate housing accommodations, or being employed. Actually, in the beginning, I was going through a recovery period similar to that experienced after major surgery. It was a healing time where the mind and body were trying to focus on becoming spiritually restored. I was only able to perform

menial tasks, no matter how well I felt. Real work would have resulted in a relapse. I received a gift of unemployment, although, for someone geared to money and success it did not appear to be so at the time.

For me, a manageable life goes back to the fundamental human concept of the Golden Rule, compassion and caring for others. Yet, unless I'm free from my addictions and obsessions I will always try to take care of my own needs before any else's.

I met with my sponsor and related my view that the problems in my life were not the result of unmanageability but was probably caused by my unruly behavior. He told me that he appreciated my well thought out theory as to my character when I drank, but suggested that the theory had a minor flaw or two. He asked me to spend the next week meditating each morning for five minutes, keeping the pad and pencil close by. He recommended that after each meditation I should write the first incident that came to my mind as to how I treated some other human being when I was drinking. He cautioned me to try and eliminate right, wrong, good, bad, guilt, or emotion from the writing. "Try to remember that what you are writing is what was, not what is." Judging from the experience with finding out just how powerless I was over alcohol through my writings on the first half of the First Step last week, I had an uncomfortable feeling as I left his house that I would begin to see that my relations with others would be different than what I had envisioned. I was right.

I needed to keep in close touch with my sponsor that week. No matter how many times he assured me that I was only experiencing change and growth, I found that the writings had begun to become very painful as they revealed the truth about my relationships with family and friends. Later on in the week, after five minutes of meditation and tears flowing down my cheeks, I read what I had written. I'll share one:

"I was losing my family home in foreclosure without telling my wife about it. It was a magnificent house and was my wife's pride and joy. I owed very little on the mortgage, and the mortgage holder was a friend of mine. He asked me to come in to his office to work out some arrangement. Instead, I left town, got a hotel room, and spent the week drinking alone in the room while the house was foreclosed."

After reading that and several others just as terrible, I immediately admitted that when I drank alcohol my life became totally unmanageable.

I folded that piece of paper and put it into an envelope for possible future reference. I always wanted to have that document available reminding me how I treat others when I'm involved in an addiction or obsession. I believe today that the document was written by my God, through me. I've learned that my personal Higher Power speaks through me, not to me.

Over the years I have observed that unmanageability exists within all those I have met who are addicted and obsessive people. Not only the alcoholic or drug addict, but the spouse, child, or parent of the addicted person can have an unmanageable life. Conceding that their life is unmanageable becomes difficult for people who feel they have a legitimate reason to blame someone else. A very good case can be made for balking since the part they played in the melodrama is usually very subtle. Yet, the case they make brings only more unhappiness into their lives. I have observed that it is crucial that each person involved – or caught up in – addiction or obsession, either as a primary or secondary participant, should accept complete responsibility for their own actions. Only by doing so may they move forward to a happy life, free of recriminations and resentments.

THE SECOND STEP: HOPE

“CAME TO BELIEVE THAT A POWER GREATER THAN MYSELF COULD RESTORE US TO SANITY.”

Along with faith, I required hope. Hope that one day, at some future time, I would have the ability to truly surrender my self-will and rid myself of self-inflicted pain. I needed to believe that by seeking God, as I understand Him, one day I would be taught to recognize and accept even a small portion of all the unconditional love that exists everywhere around me.

Accepting love is no easy feat, especially unconditional love. The world around me tells me that love without expectation doesn't exist. I hear constant warnings how I should always be wary of the forces that will reject and harm me. Seldom am I exposed to information that informs me of a perfect world, made by some perfect Being. If I do not have the spiritual discipline to believe those rare comments about perfection the insanity that I continue to be near each day whispers to me from some remote place in the back of my brain. “Psst, Frank, don't believe such nonsense. You know a perfect world doesn't exist. Remember that T.V. program the other day where everyone was hurting one another? That's what life really is.”

My defense in countering that voice of insanity is to strive never to feel good. Feeling good is a trap. The next step down from feeling good is feeling bad, so I work hard to keep my life great. The next step down from feeling great is feeling good. It's relatively easy to return to feeling great when I'm feeling good.

I recall vividly my first introduction to experiencing unconditional love. My sponsor and I were sitting in a booth at a coffee shop one evening after attending a meeting of our twelve step program. I had already quit drinking alcohol for about three months by this time. I had completed my First Step, but life still seemed to be treating me harshly and I was sniveling. My wife had divorced me and left with the children, family and friends, wanting nothing to do with me. I was without a job or a car, no place to live, no money, and I still was sick from the effects of alcohol abuse. All of this was very traumatic, but my sponsor just continued to smile as I went about describing my tale of woe.

Finally he stopped me midway through my ramblings and began telling me how I probably couldn't do much about my personal problems right then. He said I should continue living one day at a time. He advised me to begin working on the Second Step. "Good God," I said to myself, "doesn't he realize how desperate my life is? Can't he understand how it is impossible to think about working one of the steps, especially one that talks about returning to sanity, while I'm just trying to figure out how to survive." He persisted and since I really wanted the peace I saw he had in his life, I bit my tongue and listened quietly.

He said, "Frank, each day during the coming week, as soon as you wake up, wherever that may be, I want you to spend five minutes and meditate. Try and clear your mind completely. At the end of the five minutes write down on a writing pad one "wonderment" that has occurred in your life since quitting drinking. Do that each day without rereading or changing anything. At the end of a week spend another five minutes meditating and then read what you have written. You'll find that you will be reading about hope through the wonderments of sobriety. If you really have made a conscious contact with your God you will understand that just seeking the wonderments in your life will lead you to believe that someday you will not only be returned to sanity, but you will find peace."

I became totally frustrated for the first time in our short relationship. I told him that he must be crazy. Then I blurted out, "Hell, it's easy for you to say. Tonight you'll go home to your wife and I'll be scrounging around trying to find someplace to sleep, all alone at that. Tomorrow morning I'm supposed to wake up, God knows where, feeling wretched and lonely, then hop out of bed – if I happen to locate one – with this overwhelming desire to meditate so I may write about the wonderments in my life. Man, you've asked me to do a lot of crazy things, but this is the stupidest thing I've ever heard of. What kind of word is "wonderment" anyway?" I was almost at a point of hysteria as he sat calmly listening to me. I finally said, "Don't you understand, even though I am beginning to believe in a God, right now I am completely alone." I burst into tears.

He sat quietly, holding my hand, until I began to calm down: pouring out love for me on an unconditional basis, wanting nothing more than to help me find peace from the insanity of my

life. In a voice that sounded almost still, giving the impression that he wasn't speaking at all, he said, "Fran, don't you see. You are not alone, you have me." My near hysteria subsided and a wave of serenity came over me. Somehow I have no idea why, I realized that my God was speaking to me through him.

The next morning I woke up after sleeping on a cot in the back of a dingy little half-way house. (My sponsor had offered me a bed at his home, but I declined as he had already given me more than I needed.) I still felt the peace that I had experienced the previous evening. I closed my eyes and for the first time was able to meditate, completely shutting off the world. After finishing, I turned on the bed lamp and picked up the pad and pencil and wrote:

"My first wonderment of sobriety is to realize that I have a Higher Power, a Spirit that is always with me, but does not speak directly to me, but through others. If I listen I will hear Him use people, like my sponsor, to serve as His channel to bring me peace."

I had come to the realization that God dwells in all human beings, and peace is only available when I treat them with compassion, always seeking or trying to give unconditional love. I spent a week of writing the wonderments in my life each morning. I began to have hope. I came to believe that my Higher Power would restore me to sanity, or the word I use as its synonym, peace. The problems in my life still existed, but I believed in my heart that my search for an understanding of my Higher Power would eventually show me a way to begin coping with my life without alcohol.

THE THIRD STEP: SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

“MADE A DECISION TO TURN OUR WILL AND OUR LIVES OVER TO THE CARE OF GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD HIM.”

I once heard it said that upon completion of a step, a person finds themselves half way through the next one. I do not believe this was truer than when I began to work the Third Step. Once a thorough Second Step has been completed and a belief exists that sanity and peace can become a reality beyond the normal day to day material phenomena, it was possible to accept the existence of a Higher Power. Accomplishing that, it was easy to pass through the gateway to a fourth dimension, where only truth and love exist free of self-will.

As I talked with others, I realized that “God as we understand Him” seemed to manifest in many ways to different people; from the God as taught in organized religions, to a person accepting their whole twelve step group as a Power greater than themselves, to that warm and fuzzy feeling experienced when holding a small baby or hearing music. The Second Step created the spiritual discipline to seek my Higher Power, That search became a part of my daily life, growing each and every day, quietly and unobtrusively, changing my attitude, and working towards creating love and compassion for all human beings.

Making the decision as outlined in Step Three seemed to create a paradox with the statement that I should turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understand Him. If I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of my personal Higher Power then I would automatically do the opposite because that decision was made on my own without the direction of God as I understand him. Quite obviously a decision of the magnitude required by Step Three could only be made by a Spiritual Being.

The solution to this dilemma was simply to ask God, as I understand Him, to form a partnership with me. God becoming the senior partner and I would be the junior partner. God would make all the decisions in my life and I would do the footwork necessary to carry out those decisions. The first decision to be made by the partnership would be for me to turn my will and life over to the care of God. In that way I would start having all my decisions made for me right from the beginning.

This all seemed easy except it raised some interesting questions. How would I know when the partnership had been formed? How would I know when the partnership had made a decision, as opposed to making my own decisions and blaming any negative results on the partnership? These questions were handled with ease by creating a life that strived to live on the basis of intuitive and inspirational thinking brought about by spiritual experiences.

I believe that God speaks to me in a language different than I use in my day to day life. His word – or the fourth dimension as it is sometimes referred to – takes many forms. Unless I am constantly aware to what is really happening around me, as opposed to what I perceive to be happening around me, I completely lose conscious contact with Him. I am unable to hear what He is trying to tell me and I begin to make decisions based on my own thinking. At that point the chaos in my life begins. I become self-centered and egotistical. Self-pity and anger set in and the joy that I normally find in my life no longer exists. I know I must constantly strive to learn the language of my God – the spiritual experience.

I was sure that I would never be able to complete Step Three the way I was told to do it. How could someone like me have a spiritual experience? I was spiritually bankrupt! Everything I had been told by my sponsor in the past had happened exactly as he had said it would, yet partnerships with a Higher Power, with all communication taking place by spiritual experiences, seemed absolutely radical. He told me not only could I speak to my God, but God would answer me through a spiritual experience. I was glad no one was within earshot of this conversation because they would have locked us up in a mental ward. He advised that upon awakening I should once again meditate for five minutes and then write in my own words something like this:

God, if it's your will please form a partnership with me, where you become the senior partner and I become the junior partner. One where you make all the decisions. One where those decisions are shown to me in whatever form you think best. Give me the strength, willingness, and ability to carry them out. Would you also please show me when the partnership has been formed.

While all of this was happening, coping with my personal life still remained difficult. I was living in an old friend's house for a

couple of weeks while he was on vacation. I also had the use of his car, so my basic living conditions had improved. Meanwhile, my wife of many years had divorced me because of my alcohol problems and was getting on with her own life, working to support herself, and even dating other men. The jealousy I felt seemed to be all consuming. I was told this emotion was another obsession similar to my addiction to alcohol, and that each morning after writing my Third Step prayer, I should write about my feelings of jealousy. When I tried to do as I was told, the emotion was so strong that I could barely lift the pen. Nevertheless, I did begin to write about the relationship, honestly admitting that the problems that had occurred were my fault. A week passed. I began to feel some relief at times, but soon I would experience another overwhelming jolt of jealous rage and return to my emotional mire.

One evening a tall, thin man named Glenn – who had accumulated several sober years in the twelve step program, and who shared the same sponsor as me – told me that obsessions of jealousy can, and will, be removed if I ask my Higher Power to do so without putting conditions on my request. As usual, I didn't believe him, but felt so heart-sick that I decided to follow his advice. Each evening I began to pray for this jealousy to be removed from my life for only one reason. The emotion was an ugly obsession. I added that the prayer was not meant to restore my wife back to me. I cannot be sure how truthful that prayer was, especially when I first began writing it, but it was becoming apparent that the emotion of jealousy was unhealthy and would always stand in the way of my progress of ever gaining lasting, positive sobriety.

One morning, about ten days later, while I was in the shower, for no apparent reason, I began to cry hysterically. I couldn't seem to stop and became frightened. I hopped out of the shower – running through the house stark naked, dripping wet – and picked up the telephone and called my sponsor. For some reason he hadn't left for work yet and told me to come over right away. I took him literally, slipped on a pair of pants, and went driving down the freeway in my borrowed car – still dripping wet, no shirt, no underclothes, no shoes or socks, and still crying hysterically. (I must admit that I tend to vent my emotions more outwardly than some.)

When I pulled up to my sponsor's house, my friend Glenn arrived at exactly the same time to keep an appointment he had previously made. (That was the reason my sponsor had not yet left for work when I made my hysterical call.) I was so upset I didn't realize the strange coincidence of Glenn's arrival at the same time as me until later. As we both got out of our cars, he came over to what must have appeared to be a raving maniac, wrapped his arms around me and held me until I became somewhat coherent. He then led me into my sponsor's apartment. I was still sobbing. They both sat quietly for the next thirty minutes until my sobbing subsided. They began talking with me in that quiet, almost still, manner I recognized from the conversation at the coffee shop while beginning my Second Step.

I have no recollection of what they said to me, but in the end my feelings of jealousy simply disappeared. They have never returned. I want to stress that fact. The emotion of jealousy simply disappeared and never returned to haunt me again in my life, under any circumstances! I believe with all my heart that what happened on that day was the spiritual experience my Higher Power set up, showing me that our Partnership existed and I had completed my Third Step. I was beginning to understand the language of my God as I understand him.

Since that time, over the last twenty years I have become a sponsor to, working with a few hundred people, both men and women in all sorts of twelve step programs. As a sponsor I believe my responsibility is to give direction in working the Twelve Steps. I do not believe that I am supposed to give direction to anyone to find God, as I understand Him, but only as they understand Him. I hope that at times during this service I may have the honor to serve as a channel for Him to speak through me as my sponsor did while attempting to help me. I have no answer for anyone's personal problems – since we are equal in this world as children of God – except to share what has happened to me when I tried to thoroughly work the Twelve Steps, and what I've been told by others as to what happened to them.

Over the years I have explained to the people I sponsor that I felt my God speaks through spiritual experiences. I first counsel them that in order to thoroughly complete the Third Step, a partnership with a Higher Power needs to be formed, followed by a sign, in the form of a spiritual experience from this Power greater

than themselves. Usually I receive the same reaction I gave my sponsor. They look around to see if anyone is lurking about who might throw a net over both of us and haul us off to the loony bin. Still, like me, most make the effort, and when they do, the spiritual experience always occurs. It always happens if the person is sincere.

Many Third Step spiritual experiences have been related to me by different people over the years. In one special case I was not only given the opportunity to witness the event personally, but I was also given the opportunity to realize and understand what was taking place. During my own Third Step experience, even though my sponsor was there, he did not perceive exactly what was happening until we talked later. He and Glenn simply served as the channel to manifest my God's will for me. That has been true in my case with several people I sponsor. I have found that spiritual experiences are usually very personal.

One evening I was working late at my office when a man that I sponsored came there, quite upset about his progress in working the Fourth Step. I listened for awhile, becoming somewhat confused. I did not remember him ever telling me that he had completed his Third Step by having the spiritual experience I had previously discussed with him.

When I questioned him, he gave me a sheepish look and said, "Oh yeah, that. Well, Frank, after a couple of days meditating I decided that it all sounded pretty silly and even if it wasn't, I was sure that someone like me could never have anything like a spiritual experience happen to them. I decided to forget the whole thing. I made my own decision to turn my will and life over to my God and began to write my Fourth Step. I guess I should have first discussed with you how to do the Fourth Step because I'm sure having a lot of problems trying to figure it all out".

I couldn't help smiling to myself. I certainly had heard that exact line many times. Much to his dismay I began, once again, to explain what I felt he should do to accomplish the Third Step. I continued on for five or ten minutes about the necessity of relinquishing self-will by forming the partnership with his Higher Power before any attempt could be made to begin any meaningful personal inventory.

Suddenly I felt the room become quiet. My voice seemed distant as I spoke. He just sat there, staring vacantly at me. I

stopped speaking, but he didn't move, continuing to look at me with eyes wide open. I was sure he wasn't seeing me. The room was completely silent and intuitively understanding what was taking place, I made a conscious effort to remain motionless. After about two minutes he blinked, said nothing, but rose from his chair. I got out of my own seat as he moved toward me. He hugged me, kissed me on the cheek and said "Thank you, Frank." He then walked out.

He later explained that he saw the ceiling of my office covered with a white light that slowly descended, engulfing the entire room. He told me that his whole life had suddenly become calm, and the frantic feeling he had lived with all his life had disappeared. He insists he was completely conscious through the whole experience even though it did not appear that way to me. He had completed the Third Step.

Other Third Step spiritual experiences have been related to me by people I have sponsored. Most have been less than white lights coming down from the ceiling, but were very moving for each individual at the time. Since I was not present it is not possible for me to vouch for their authenticity, but I know each person intimately, and have no reason to believe they are not true.

In one case, while working dialing on his Third Step, a young man entered a church. He was casually going through the motions of spending the normal hour he puts in every week going to Mass with his family. During the course of the Mass the word "holy" was repeated by the priest and the young man had an overpowering feeling to return to the God of his childhood. Now, each morning before meditation, he repeats the word "holy" to revitalize the commitment he made to his personal God while doing his Third Step.

After hearing that a spiritual experience would be required to complete a Third Step, a woman became quite upset. She had several years sobriety, but had never attained the measure of peace she saw in others, so she had come to me to help her rework the Twelve Steps.

"Frank, I am sure nothing like that could ever happen to me. I believe they happen, but to much more spiritual individuals." She said. Over the years she had become very set in her own version of how her personal God operates.

“Well,” I commented, “you’ll never know until you try, will you?”

“Okay,” she frowned, “but I know it won’t happen.”

Two months passed. Each week she would become more and more convinced that spiritual phenomena was not part of her life. One day we were discussing the subject, and I asked her what she thought should occur when she had a spiritual experience.

“Oh, you know,” she replied, “one day you are walking down the street and your God gives you this extraordinary sign that He is working in your life.”

I asked her to try and remember all the areas in her life that she told me she wanted to improve by working the Twelve Steps when we started just four months ago.

“Well, let’s see,” she thought, “I wanted to establish a new and more meaningful relationship with my parents that had never existed before. I wanted some real friends that I could count on. I wanted to stabilize my relationship with my children, and wanted to rectify a bad employment situation.”

“Now let me ask you,” I grinned, “have any of these things happened?”

She sat there stunned. It had suddenly occurred to her that not only one, but all of the areas in her life that she wanted to improve had already happened.

I said to her, “While you were looking for the burning bush, the forest was on fire all around you without you noticing. You would not let go, you were going to tell your God how he should perform a spiritual experience. He didn’t seem to mind because He just continued to work all the miracles in your life that you had ever dreamed of. In four months, at that. Sounds to me that you have a very strong partnership formed.”

To my knowledge, she has never doubted her ability to have a spiritual experience since. She learned how the Third Step works by recognizing the spiritual experience after it had taken place.

The stories are endless, but the Third Step spiritual experience will always happen. As in the case of the woman, it sometimes happens even when you fight against it.

THE FOURTH STEP: SELF-PERCEPTION AND SELF-DECEPTION

“MADE A SEARCHING AND FEARLESS MORAL INVENTORY OF OURSELVES”

It was for me, as it is with most individuals, important to reread the wording of the Fourth Step many times. The words, “...a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,” seemed to read, a shameful and fearful immoral inventory. I believe that is how I perceived my life when I first began working the Fourth Step. As much as I tried, I simply could not comprehend the fact that I was – and always had been – just a child of God. I felt completely undeserving of the new, almost magical existence that I had experienced after completing the first three steps.

To prepare a list of individuals and circumstances encompassing my entire life – which would include a description of my moral values in dealing with those individuals, and my participation in what took place, seemed beyond my comprehension, much less my ability. I not only felt worthless in any society, other than the safe haven provided by my twelve step program, but I harbored deep, inflexible resentments against people who I believed did great harm to me. I was told by my sponsor that the list wouldn't necessarily be the complete truth regarding each person or event, but would only be my distorted perception, clouded by years of consuming alcohol and my runaway emotions and distorted feelings. Yet, each time I even thought of putting on paper the inventory of what appeared to me to be a lost wretch, who led a life devoid of moral values, a deep inner fear would come over me and I would quit before I would even start.

The Fourth Step was the turning point in working the Twelve Steps for me. It was absolutely necessary to write down my perception of my life and its major events, no matter how painful they seemed at the time, so I could achieve some degree of honesty. Without that inventory I would have been damned to a limbo of self-deception, no matter whether I remained sober or returned to the gates of death by drinking again. The dishonesty I would have continued to experience would have doomed me to hell, on this earth or elsewhere.

My sponsor began to prod me to begin my Fourth Step. I dodged the issue. Pretty soon each time we met he would inquire as to my progress and I would evade the question. I soon found it difficult to become evasive with him so I began to go the twelve step meetings in which I believed he would not attend. After a while I realized that I would have to begin lying to him, completely stop going to the twelve step meetings he attended, find a new – less rigid – sponsor, or get on with the business of writing my Fourth Step. I finally settled on the inevitable and began to write my shameful and fearful immoral inventory.

Each evening I would force myself to write for half an hour. After completing this daily chore I would reread what I wrote, decide that I had been a much worse person than I had realized or cared to admit, and would tear the paper into bits and pieces, only to try once more the following evening. About a week passed. All that happened was that I was becoming depressed and downhearted. As is my custom, in most of the endeavors I had attempted in my life, I waited until I was thoroughly frustrated, then decided to ask for instructions as to how I should proceed. I picked up the phone and called my sponsor.

While sitting once again at the familiar kitchen table drinking another cup of coffee, I heard that I had not been approaching my Fourth Step correctly. Big news! Still, even though the method I had been using was terribly painful, I hated to admit that there could possibly be a better way than the system I had devised. Taking instruction was never my long suit. Self-will had been my style for a long time. My sponsor pointed out one major flaw in the way I had been writing my inventory over the pass week. I had left out meditation and my Higher Power.

“Frank,” he said patiently, “start everything you do in life with God.”

“But you don’t understand.” I replied. (That phrase had become my standard answer in all the conversations I had with him.) “No one can do that. I try to meditate, but in the morning I seem to be rushing around, then during the day I’m busy, and certainly never in a place where I can stop. In the evening, after going to a twelve step meeting, it’s late and I have just enough energy to spend a half hour writing that stupid inventory which I then tear up and throw away anyway.”

He sighed and gave me that loving and knowing smile I detested so. He then said, “Without pausing to bring a God in your life you will always come up with the wrong answers to problems.” He then pulled out a spiritual book that I was supposed to be reading. He turned to a passage that he had asked me to read each morning after my meditation, but I had conveniently forgotten to do. He read out loud,

“In thinking about our day we may face indecision. We may not be able to determine which course to take. Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or a decision. We relax and take it easy. We don’t struggle. We are often surprised how the right answers come after we have tried this for a while.”(From the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous)Once again he explained probably the simplest concept for a peaceful existence I had ever heard. Somehow I refused to take him seriously. “Frank, try and understand that we are all just children of God without the ability to make decisions. You’ve tried, and all you’ve ended up with was addiction and obsession. In the Third Step you began looking to a Higher Power, whoever that may be for you, to make your decisions. You learned that your God will explain the solutions to your problems through inspiration and intuition. He will then show you how to solve them, but you need to remain in the proper spiritual frame of mind. So always start your day with five minutes of meditation, read the passage I’ve just read to you, and then spend fifteen to thirty minutes writing on your Fourth Step. You’ll find that it will become much easier. You shouldn’t experience emotional pain while writing, and if you do, then remember that you’re probably doing something wrong.”

“But you don’t understand,” I replied, “I just don’t seem to have enough time in the morning.”

“Then get up a little earlier.” He countered.

“Oh,” I said, but I thought to myself how irritating it was that he always seemed to come up with such easy solutions to the problems I have for not following his instructions. I said to myself, “Does he actually get up each morning and meditate for five minutes?” I quickly dismissed that thought by thinking, “Naw, with all that serenity he possesses, he wouldn’t need to do that

anymore.” It would still be a while until I truly understood the context of what he was trying to teach me.

He explained that an inventory was a list of certain events in my life and a description of how I perceive those events at that moment. The list was to be written without trying to analyze right, wrong, good, and bad. It should contain as little emotion as possible, trying always to have my Higher Power do the writing as I had been taught to do right from the beginning of my First Step.

After that conversation, each morning I grudgingly crawled out of bed forty-five minutes earlier than I had been use to. Still in my bathrobe I would staffer to the stove of my friend’s home, in which I was living at the time, light a fire under the coffee pot which I had prepared the night before, walk over to the kitchen table, put my head in my hands, close my eyes, and try to meditate for five minutes – hoping I would not fall asleep during the meditation. For some strange reason I would not fall asleep, instead the perking of the coffee pot would bring me out of the wonderful nothingness I was experiencing. I would open my eyes completely refreshed, pour a cup of coffee and have a few sips as I read the passage in my book about inspiration and intuitiveness. I then began to write about my life.

My sponsor was correct, as usual. I no longer felt the pain, anger and self-pity I had been experiencing doing the Fourth Step my way. Instead, I began to watch the life of a confused, sensitive, over-emotional, irrational human being unfold. Not a bad person, I was sure of that. Just someone who had a distorted view of the events that had occurred in his life and with the use of alcohol, the distortions became more acute.

I was sure at this early stage of my sobriety that I wouldn’t be able to remember, much less write about, most of the things that had occurred during my lifetime. I decided to list individuals that I felt a close relationship with, and write down how I truly felt about that person at that very moment. I then would write how, over the years, I came to have those feelings. Following my sponsor’s instructions, I did my best not to try and analyze those feelings. After all, this was an inventory, a description of my feelings toward certain loved ones. I knew those feelings were only my perception of the truth and could be completely the opposite of the real truth.

I then wrote down a series of incidents, as best as I could remember, that I was not particularly proud of. Again, I did my best not to analyze them, realizing that my guilt would always blow them out of proportion. I would explain them in detail to God and to my sponsor when I took a Fifth Step, receiving input as to the exact nature of their meaning.

Finally, I wrote down a series of incidents of nice things that I felt I had accomplished during my lifetime. My self-esteem was at rock bottom at this point so I had a great deal of trouble remembering anything that was positive in my life before sobriety. I since have been able to revise that assessment.

It was a wonderful daily experience that began to lift several burdens from my shoulders. I experienced very little emotional upheaval, and when I did, I would simply stop writing that day. usually, with a day's reflection, whatever was troubling me would carry much less emotional impact the next morning.

I spent about forty-five days to complete the inventory, and the more I wrote the more it became apparent to me that what I was writing about was only my perception of the people and events in my life. All my life I had deceived myself into believing that those feelings were actually true.

THE FIFTH STEP: THE EXACT NATURE

“ADMITTED TO GOD, TO OURSELVES, AND TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING THE EXACT NATURE OF OUR WRONGS”

When questioned, I will attempt to discuss the subject of spirituality as if I really know what I’m talking about, but it is apparent that while using alcohol, my spiritual life has always been in a state of confusion. In most daily situations I had absolutely no idea what was suitable or appropriate spiritual or moral behavior. I was always just striving to be accepted as part of society, feeling this would be the best course to take. Yet, it has now become obvious that while striving to achieve recognition from my peers, my compassion for my fellow man, as outlined in the Golden Rule, was cast aside. I could not reconcile compassion with success, so self-will ran riot. Conscious contact with my God, as I understand Him, on a daily basis became infrequent. Life became a frantic search for whatever I believed would make me a respected member of society, while ignoring almost completely the real spiritual part of my life.

When I failed in my quest for total identity among the human beings with whom I lived on this planet – and I always did fail because I continued to equate right from wrong, good from bad, hoping to fit in with the society in which I lived – the search only intensified, creating more unsuitable or inappropriate behavior. In other words, I created wrong with an erroneous concept that I was achieving good. My original concept of good – money, success – was something I perceived rather than understood. This concept was unreal and was only created in my mind in the vain hope that with them I would be an acceptable human being. It held very little relationship with the truth, and therefore, was usually unattainable. This failure created the foundation for most of my addictive and obsessive behavior.

When I finally finished the Fourth Step it became important to me to find the exact nature of what I had written to allow me the opportunity to see if, in fact, I had an insane nature – which was how I viewed myself – or whether I was just a misguided wretch, unable to function in society because I lacked spiritual discipline. God, my sponsor, and the Fifth Step gave me that opportunity. What I learned put me on a pathway that changed my life forever.

I became apprehensive about asking my sponsor to review with me what I had written about my past and about the resentments I still carried. I was worried that if I showed him even a small portion of what I used to be like he would become revolted and would not sponsor me anymore. His direction, advice, and friendship had meant a great deal. Even though I was overcoming a lot of the physical effects of my alcohol abuse, my emotional level was still critically low. Nevertheless, I gathered together all my remaining gumption and called him to set a date to meet and go over everything I had written.

He told me, “Fine, Frank, but I’d like to schedule a meeting with you first to explain fully what I need you to do to become ready for doing the Fifth Step with me.”

“What do you mean by getting ready?” I was becoming edgy and wanted the whole thing behind me. I protested, “I don’t understand why we should delay. I’ve spent the last few weeks writing this thing and let’s be done with it!”

“Relax,” he said, “we’ll meet for coffee after the twelve step meeting tomorrow. What I have to say will only take a few minutes, but should be talked about in a face-to-face conversation.” Damn easy for him to tell me to relax. He’s not sitting on the hottest written property since Valley Of The Dolls. “Okay,” I replied, “but make sure we get together tomorrow. I’m really nervous.”

“No kidding,” he joked. “I would have never known unless you told me.”

The next evening, while we sat in a booth at a coffee shop, he began to explain a five day preparation period he believed was required to properly complete a Fifth Step. “Over the last few months you and I have been meeting on a regular basis. I told you in the beginning, when you first asked me to be your sponsor that each time we met I wanted you to meditate for five minutes before we spoke. I told you I would always do the same. In that way you would bring your Higher Power to the conversation, and so would I, eliminating any three-legged dog conversations. The conversations that take the same direction as a three-legged dog walking down the street, moving here and there with difficulty and making very little progress are not productive. In the beginning it was obvious from your behavior that you spent very little time in meditation before our meetings, and we constantly flip-flopped around getting

nowhere.” I cringed as I recalled some of my more emotional outbursts, and knew he was right. “Lately,” he continued, “our conversations are filled with recovery. The sniveling has disappeared from our meetings. It’s a pleasure to be with you and with your Higher Power.”

I blushed at what he said, but realized it was true. Lately I had been conforming to his request that I meditate before our meetings, and I could feel a difference. I was trying hard to put recovery in my life, rather than constantly discussing my problems. I had pretty much gotten away from telling my God my problems, and had begun telling my problems about my God.

He grinned. “The relationship we have built – you, your God, me, and my God – is being molded into one force. We’re coming to a place where at times I feel that you and I are not consciously speaking at all, but I am sitting here listening to your Higher Power speaking with my Higher Power. People constantly discuss relationships with partners, parents, children, and so on, yet, it’s so easy. Ours is becoming what a true relationship should be. We are two people coming together with God in their lives, hopefully letting their God speak through them so the relationship becomes spiritual - the Fourth Dimension.”

I was fascinated. If I was able to create a close relationship with him, then I should be able to create the same type of relationship with all people I come into contact with, a relationship free of expectations and obsessions, simply by bringing my Higher Power with me. Then no matter what the other person feels about me, I will continue to have a loving nature toward them.

He went on to say, “As we sit with each other the day we do the Fifth Step, we will both attempt to be on as high a spiritual level as we can achieve. If we do this step correctly, we will get out of the way and let our Higher Powers speak through us, shutting off our own thought processes and letting whatever comes out of our mouths just come out. Our Higher Powers will tell us the exact nature of what is really taking place in your life.”

“The first thing that I want you to do over the next few days is to completely forget what you wrote in your Fourth Step. In that way you will come into our meeting without any preconceived ideas that will color the conversation. Anyone who has worked as long and as hard on a personal inventory as you have, usually has analyzed what was written. I’m not interested in what you think

happened. I'm interested in hearing what your Higher Power has to say."

I was flabbergasted, and said, "After all that work writing the Fourth Step over the last couple of months, you actually want me to spend the next few days trying to forget the whole thing. Why the hell did I do it in the first place?"

"Remember, Frank," he answered, "what you wrote was only your perception of what your life was all about. It doesn't mean that it was the truth. Look how your life has turned out by carrying those thoughts around all these years. It was essential for you to write down how you felt so that when you hear the truth, or the exact nature as your Higher Power will explain it, you will have a better understanding of the deception that has always existed in your life. We will refer to your writing a great deal though."

I wasn't too happy, but reluctantly acquiesced.

"Over the next five days I want you to work extra hard in raising your spiritual level." He went on, "something like how an athletic team tries to peak before a big game. Go to as many twelve step meetings as you can. Maybe go to church if you like, and make sure to spend an hour or so each day meditating. I'll try and do the same. Let's go into this Fifth Step with God in our lives."

I was a bit overwhelmed. "I have to tell you that what you're saying sounds screwy. Of course almost everything you've told me sounded screwy, and in the end, happened just about the way you've said it would. Most of the people I've talked with about the Fifth Step have never told me these things. I thought this would be the same as when I was a boy taking confession every Saturday night. I would kneel down and tell the priest all the previous week's sins, and he would have me say a few prayers. That would be it."

"Tell me something," he inquired, "would you then go out and do the same things the next week, and confess them again the following Saturday?"

I made a wry face. "Okay, I see your point."

We met the following weekend at his house. No one was there except the two of us, and the house was very quiet. I felt the stillness that I had experienced many times while working through the Twelve Steps, assuring me that my God was present. I had worked very hard to prepare, going to many twelve step meetings during that week, meditating, and even going to church, taking

confession and communion for the first time in years. I believed I was spiritually prepared, and although I felt anticipation, I wasn't nervous.

We spent five hours discussing my life, past and present; the people I hurt; the unsavory events; the resentments I still held. I was dumbstruck when each time I would discuss someone or something, our conversation would turn the same facts around just a bit, giving me a whole new perspective. When it ended it became apparent that what I perceived my life to be was simply not true.

In my discussion of my mother I reflected how dedicated she was to my sisters and me, how difficult her life must have been living in the middle of the wilderness of Colorado and how much more I could have done to relieve her burden. I remembered as a boy that the iron had to be heated on an old coal stove, yet she took the time to iron a clean handkerchief for me each day. Somehow, thinking about that one incident touched me deeply. She had a great devotion to her children. I wished I could have done more for her before she passed away. I always carried guilt. We got into a discussion of the thing that I did do. I was amazed at the ways I had tried to make my mother happy, both as a child and as an adult. Because of my guilt I had never thought about those positive actions before.

In discussing my father, I realized that I had always concentrated on the 5% negative I saw in his life, and had completely forgotten the 95% positive. The 5% negative completely negated the 95% positive. My dad had died of alcoholism when I was a young teen-ager, and I was very angry that he was not with me when I was growing up. The more we talked, the more it became apparent that my anger was based on very selfish motives – I was mad because he didn't do certain things for me. We talked about the good things that he did do in his life: hard work, loving nature, his singing, his smile. I started to realize that he was a good man, filled with love and caring for me. How could I condemn him when I too had almost died of alcoholism when my children were very young.

I had always viewed my grandfather as the most wonderful human being imaginable, an old Italian man that, through my eyes, could do no wrong. Throughout my life it was important for me to emulate his achievements, and I'm sure to downgrade my

father in the process. I viewed myself coming close to living up to the standards I had set for myself. My desire for achievement knew no bounds, and I would do almost anything to be that person my mind told me I should be. I wanted to be a respected member of society, even if it included stealing. I came to the conclusion that I was not my grandfather, and it was time to be about the business of being myself.

As we discussed my wife – actually my ex-wife then – I believe I made a breakthrough that would eventually reestablish my marriage. We had been going together since we were fourteen years old, and married when we were nineteen. She was the only woman in my life and I loved her with all my heart. While discussing our relationship I suddenly blurted out, “In all truthfulness, I have finally come to realize that she can get along fine without me.” In one moment I realized that all our married life I had been trying to control her life like some Italian Don. I wasn’t that person at all; in fact, I wasn’t able to even control my own life. Just to make that admission lifted a large weight from my shoulders. I didn’t have to make any decisions in a relationship; God would take care of that. All I really needed to do was show my love and everything would always be okay. People would love me just as I am, I don’t have to control them.

I left with five written character defects that came out of the Fifth Step. These were the items that I was to carry into the Sixth Step to ask God to make me entirely ready to have removed.

1. Concentrate on the 95% positive side of my father’s Personality, and eliminate the 5% negative side.
Begin to love him unconditionally.
2. Work toward the elimination of the guilt I felt about my mother, and concentrate on the good things that I had done for her. Begin learning to just love her rather than feel guilty when I thought about her.
3. Remove the distorted view of my grandfather, learning to love him as the wonderful human being he was. Stop using him as the role model I had carried with me for so long.
4. Eliminate the frantic search for success I had carried while trying to imitate my grandfather.

5. Love my ex-wife unconditionally, trying to support her financially and emotionally, wherever her life might lead her. Free myself from any and all expectations of her. With that, I gave my sponsor a big hug and left to work toward this new life I had discovered that day.

THE SIXTH STEP: RECEIVING NOTHING

“WERE ENTIRELY READY TO HAVE GOD REMOVE ALL THESE DEFECTS OF CHARACTER”

I was very serious about doing the Sixth Step, becoming entirely ready to have God remove the five items we had agreed upon as defects of character. As I meditated each morning, and read the five items that I carried out of the session, it became obvious that if I had those defects removed from my life, my life would take a new and positive course. I was convinced I would experience a major change, especially since I no longer drank alcohol.

I had two stumbling blocks: my feelings for my father, and my search for success. After minimal meditation, I believed that I was entirely ready to have God remove every other item on my Fifth Step list. I knew intellectually that my feelings for my father were unfounded, but the resentment persisted. Each morning after my meditation I would ask my Higher Power for the strength to deal with this problem. I loved my father, so why should I feel this way? I certainly had no room to castigate him because of his alcoholism; I came very close to death myself doing the same thing. After about two weeks of heavy daily meditation about the problem, I just gave up. I couldn't help me. While driving down the freeway that afternoon I realized that, even though I still felt the way I did about my father, I was entirely ready to have God take those feelings from me.

The search for success was a different matter. Running a business seemed to be as natural to me as breathing. Making money, I kidded myself, did not seem to be a character defect, it was the way I supported my family. I began to make half-hearted attempts to ask my God to make me entirely ready to remove the drive inside me that required success, but I was not truthful. As I look back, I wanted to return to my old ways, although I had seen enough of this wonderful new spiritual life that I fought the urge.

In an effort to fight the urge, I began to work with fellow alcoholics almost full time. The work was probably the most satisfying work I had ever done. It is amazing that I never recognized that my Higher Power had put in front of me my life's

work, but I chose to ignore it while I continued to listen to the little voice in my head telling me about money and success.

Eventually, I returned to business, receiving what my Higher Power promises me that I'll receive when I do not deal with a character defect.

Nothing.

THE SEVENTH STEP: HOW – WHEN – WHERE

“HUMBLY ASKED HIM TO REMOVE OUR SHORTCOMINGS”

My sponsor, my friend Glenn, and I sat around the old familiar kitchen table and I discussed my progress with the Seventh Step.

“You just can’t imagine how beautiful it all way,” I grinned. “That morning I asked my Higher Power to take away the guilt I’ve always experienced in thinking about my mother. I was feeling so great that I decided to drive out to her grave to clean it up and decorate it with fresh flowers. I had brought clippers, so I spent some time just making sure it looked real nice, then I sat down and became quiet. For the first time I was completely at peace with her. The love inside me welled up and I must have cried for at least a half-hour.”

“I wasn’t crying because I was unhappy,” I went on. “I was crying because of the peace that existed between us. There are times in life lately when I feel God just reaches out and touches me.”

They both were sitting there not saying anything, listening and enjoying my enthusiasm. I knew they were filled with love and happiness for me, and my new found freedom from the bondage of me. I detected a small tear in the corner of my sponsor’s eye.

“Then yesterday morning after asking that I be relieved of any expectations from my ex-wife, I felt so good that I decided to invite her out to lunch. I told her that I loved her and was truly happy that she had been my wife. I said that I would do my best to support her both financially and emotionally in whatever she intends to do with her life. I wasn’t too sure if she didn’t think I was drinking again. She graciously thanked me, inquired about the next month’s child support, and we parted with a kiss. You know, she certainly is a nice human being who was treated pretty shabbily by me. It would be nice to get back together again, but mainly, the important thing is her happiness, I guess.”

“You sound a little tentative,” my sponsor inquired. “Are you sure you’re not doing this just to get her back?”

“To be perfectly honest,” I said, “I can’t answer that question. I realize I would do almost anything to have her back, but I doubt I

would lie to my Higher Power. At least, I've spent an awful long time asking Him to point me in the right direction."

"I think that's about all any of us can do," Glenn interjected.

I then asked the question of my sponsor that I had been thinking about for the last week. "Tell me, it's obvious that God lifted the guilt feelings about my mother, and if I am anywhere close to being honest with myself, is moving forward along the pathway to resolving my shortcoming with my ex-wife, but what about my father and grandfather? I've humbly asked Him to remove my role model feelings with my grandfather and my resentment against my father. Nothing has happened. I feel pretty much the same way even though I have worked hard to meditate and pray about what direction I should take."

My sponsor and Glenn both looked at me, smiling as if they had heard this story before. My sponsor said, "Frank, read exactly what the Seventh Step says."

I didn't need to read the step. I had been so diligent over the past three weeks that I was quoting it in my sleep. "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings." I answered.

He looked at me very intently and said, "You'll notice that nowhere does it say how, when, where. You humbly ask Him; now take the rest on faith."

"Damn, I knew it was too good to be true." I thought to myself, trying hard not to show my disappointment. "Why the hell can't all of this be more cut and dry? I just hate that word faith."

They were both laughing out loud now. I never was very good at masking my emotions. Their merriment didn't help my disposition. All at once I realized my old alcoholic nature had surfaced. I was looking for the quick fix, requiring immediate gratification for an event taking place in my life, but my Higher Power doesn't work that way. I had learned one thing throughout the process of working the Twelve Steps. If I get what I want, I will always settle for second best. If I wait for God's time, the gifts in my life will overflow. I decided to join in their laughter.

Two years later, while flying cross country to New York. I detoured to visit my grandfather in Colorado, who was in his nineties. He had become senile and had completely stopped conversing with the people around him. That evening while my grandmother was in the kitchen cooking dinner, he and I were left alone in the front room. He sat, staring vacantly, and I remained

perfectly still. Suddenly his eyes became clear. He rose from his chair, held me with both of his hands in my hands, and with a perfectly lucid voice told me how much he loved me and how much he had loved my father. For some strange reason I didn't cry. I just stood there, holding his hands with love, as two men like us should do. I was, at that moment, the grandson to him that I had always strived to be.

That part of the Seventh Step was now completed, in God's time, with a moment only God could create.

The following year my grandfather passed away. I was back with my wife by then, living at Lake Tahoe. We left immediately for Colorado to be with my grandmother and to attend the funeral. Upon arriving I was struck by the large number of people that had come from many areas to pay their respects. There were a great number of older Italian people who I either didn't know or could only vaguely remember. There was food at all my relative's homes, and as is the custom on these occasions, people would wonder in to chat.

The first day I was introduced to a lovely little lady and saw her eyes light up when she understood who I was.

"Oh," she exclaimed, somewhat wide-eyed. "You're Elisio's son."

(Elisio was my father's name.)

"Sit down; let me tell you about how wonderful your father was."

"Oh, boy," I thought, "I'm going to have to sit here listening to this woman tell me about some of the drunken antics of my father. I certainly have enough of those memories without hearing more."

She had me in a corner and I would have been hard pressed to get away without throwing her to the ground, so I just accepted my fate. She told me a story of how several families, her family being one of them, were having severe financial problems, to the point of having trouble feeding their children. She related, in glowing terms, how my father had provided their food for many months, wanting nothing in return. Could she be talking about the same person I knew?

Later that day I was cornered by a man who told me about my father climbing down the steep cliffs of a mountain pass to rescue the passengers trapped in a car that had gone over the side

of the road. It sounded as though I was hearing a story about some courageous person I had never met, but wished I had. Everywhere, during those few days, people continued to tell me stories of a father I had never known. I knew what I was hearing had to be true because of the deep affection that showed in each person's eyes when they would tell their individual stories. What I couldn't understand was how I could have lived with him and not seen the same qualities.

Driving home to Lake Tahoe gave me a great deal of time to think and do some serious meditation. Of course, there was only one conclusion to draw – I had never seen the positive part of my father because I was too involved in my own selfishness. All I could see was what I needed from him, not who he was. When I didn't receive what I believed he owed me, I began to concentrate on the negative 5% of his personality. I was very ashamed.

Upon returning home I drove to San Francisco and after a great deal of difficulty, I found his grave site. I cleaned it up, as I had done with my mother's grave. Standing there, my eyes filled with tears. I formed a whole new relationship with my father. I realized how lucky I was to be his son. I loved him unconditionally.

Again, in God's time the Seventh Step with my father had been completed.

I dislike admitting this, but it was over fourteen years before I completed my Seventh Step concerning my defect of character with my desire for success. That came only while facing a prison sentence based on actions while trying to become financially successful. I'm not sure whether it just took God that long, or that I never was entirely ready to have it removed when I did my Sixth Step. I have to believe it was the latter.

THE EIGHTH STEP: HOUSECLEANING

“MADE A LIST OF ALL PERSONS WE HAD HARMED, AND BECAME WILLING TO MAKE AMENDS TO THEM ALL.”

Holding resentment has always been something that creeps into my being without my realizing it. It immediately seems to feel comfortable and warm; almost like a cup of hot chocolate on a freezing night. I tend to nurture it: carrying it with me everywhere I go, repeating it to anyone I can corner – whether they want to hear it or not – until, if I’m not careful it becomes a full blown obsession. It begins to be the first thing I think of in the morning, the last thing I think of at night, and most thoughts in between. “Look what they did to me,” becomes my call to arms, written on the banner I carry with me everywhere--- and getting even is the battle I fight each day.

This behavior, even in its most menial form, is my most destructive thinking, completely negative and totally dishonest. I know the truth to be that no one does anything to me. Today I try -with great difficulty I might add – to understand that with a Higher Power in my life I have the ability to overcome any adversity, emerging a much richer person for the experience. Misfortune is a gift, if I have the ability to view it as such. If I let God take over my thinking I will begin to enjoy little daily trials and tribulations, finding “Wonderments” in large difficulties.

I read the Eighth Step with relief. “Thank God,” I thought, “I’m finally working on an easy step.” The Fourth through Seventh Steps required such a lot of effort. It looks as though I can coast for awhile. Hell, this is so cut and dry I don’t even need to consult with my sponsor. I’ll just spend a week or so writing the list at my leisure, and then review it with him so he can tell me the best way to begin making amends.

I had a routine each morning of meditation and writing, so for the next ten days I got up, meditated for five minutes, and then wrote on my list a few names of people I had obviously harmed. I listed my immediate family, relatives, certain business associates, and so on. It was a good time because I reflected about the path of destruction I had left behind me, without the overpowering guilt I was so used to feeling. I was coming face-to-face with the truth, knowing that I could do nothing about what had happened except

begin to make amends. As I read each name I would resolve to do whatever I could to restore the financial or emotional situation that existed before their involvement with me. The list finally included over thirty-five names, and I had a burning desire to begin making amends to them all. I called my sponsor and made an appointment to bring my list over the next day. I was excited and was sure he was going to tell me what a thorough job I had done on my Eighth Step. He would recognize that I was no longer a novice, and that I was beginning to understand the meaning of working the Twelve Steps. I was sure he would be impressed by how I had begun to acquire some good daily habits. I felt I could now interpret a part of what was needed to be done, on my own, without his direction. I was coming to a place where I wanted to give away what I had learned, rather than always be the taker.

His old kitchen table had become so familiar that I kidded him that he used it as a psychiatrist uses a couch and that whatever magical powers he had would dissipate without it. He laughed, looking at the old heavy wooden table with fondness, remarking that I had one thing right; quite a few people had sat where I was sitting over the years. I was quite sure that most were still sober, both physically and emotionally. My sponsor was an extraordinary man.

In this light and gay mood, I reached over and presented him with the Eighth Step list I had written over the last few days. I had given a lot of attention to the names. I had spent a great deal of time thinking about what I had done to each person, and was thoroughly convinced that I was willing to make amends to them all. I could discuss everyone listed so easily, eliminating the guilt I had associated with each one for so long. I felt elation that for the first time I was able to discuss my past life with the hope that soon the mess I had created would be eliminated.

After completing the list, he frowned and said, “Well, Frank, this is a great job as far as it goes. It seems to me that you have barely cracked the surface though.”

“What!” I protested, “How can you say that? I was very careful to review most of the people that I could remember; meditating first to try to have my Higher Power show me the right direction. I admit I did not include nickel and dime things, as I thought I was trying to clean up the major people I had harmed.

Where do I draw the line? It felt as though I did a pretty thorough job.”

“Well,” he said, “the people I don’t see listed are the people you believe did something to you, the people you carried a major resentment against during your lifetime.”

“But, Step Eight is very clear,” I stammered. “The list is about people I have harmed, not ones that have harmed me.”

“That’s just my point. If you believe someone has harmed you, then you are not only very dishonest with yourself, but you are creating harm for them.” He said.

I became frustrated and objected to his statement.

“If someone has done something to me, and I have done nothing in return, how can you possibly say I have harmed them? All my life I’ve had people hurt me financially and emotionally. Usually I’ve done nothing. That’s been especially true since I have been working the Twelve Steps.”

“Let me ask you something,” he asked, “When someone does something to you, but you don’t respond, do you just simply forget the matter, then and there?”

“Well, no.” I had begun to calm down.

“Do you usually discuss with another person how you’ve been harmed?”

“I guess, well sure, most of the time.” I answered tentatively. “But you don’t understand

“Oh, but I think I do,” he cut me off short. “You believe someone does something to you, but you neglect to do any work on what your part was in the scenario. You don’t even think about finding the exact nature of things. Your Higher Power is okay for most things, but when you have resentment, you don’t need his help. You have it all figured out by yourself. Then you run around telling others how this person has harmed you. Even the times when you don’t tell others about your resentment, you let it smolder inside; treating that person, and usually most other people around you, with indifference rather than love. That’s totally dishonest. Now, you innocently try and tell me how you can’t figure out how you harmed that other person?”

I found myself wanting to argue. He had struck a cord in my being. Resentments for me, as I guess for most people, seemed as natural as breathing. Blame my problems on someone else, so I

don't have to take person responsibility. I was fighting to hold on to that last stronghold of self-will. Like alcohol, resentment created addiction and obsession. They let me avoid facing life on life's terms. But because of the work I had already done with the Twelve Steps, I knew I should be dealing with my problems as they should be dealt with. Bringing God into my life I recognize that whatever happens, I play a part, and therefore become responsible. If I honestly live my life that way, my Higher Power will always protect me.

We both sat at that old kitchen table for two or three minutes, quietly calculating the stakes, while I fought a raging battle within me. I had come too far. I had seen the results that the Twelve Steps had made in my life and I could not quit now. I knew I had to say it out loud, although I was sure my sponsor would not require me to do so. It required my vocal commitment. I hated it, because resentments were my last hiding place from my God. I knew I had to be willing to give them up. I could no longer continue, unhindered, the self-pity and self-bondage they created. The jig was up, so I mustered as much honesty as I had in me and said:

“You're right; no one does anything to me. My problems are created in my own head, and once I let go and give them to my God they will simply disappear. Damn, I want to live that way, and I'm sure it will take me a long time to get there, but there's no question that it's the truth. Please help me.

“You've just gone a long way toward helping yourself, Frank,” he replied.

I returned home and spent the next two weeks making a long list of the resentments I was carrying, going back to when I was a child. I was absolutely amazed at the nonsense that I had been carrying around with me. In every case I found my part, and became willing to make amends. It was a thorough housecleaning.

I had completed the Eighth Step.

THE NINTH STEP: DIRECT AMENDS

“MADE DIRECT AMENDS TO SUCH PEOPLE WHEREVER POSSIBLE, EXCEPT WHEN TO DO SO WOULD INJURE THEM OR OTHERS.”

Direct amends appear to be simple enough on the surface, and as I look back, in most cases they were. Most of the people on the list cared far less about what had taken place than I did. They were happy to see that I had been able to stop drinking, and that I was beginning to put my life in order again. Still, at this time, I was financially and emotionally unable to try and complete an amend immediately. I could only acknowledge what I had done. I was informed that an amend is completed only when you have left the person you are making the amend to in as good, if not better position, especially emotionally, than they were in before you harmed them. Time served as a natural ally, letting me more fully develop the exact nature of my previous actions.

It was necessary to also develop a feeling of humility –which to this day does not come easy – in accomplishing my task. Rising from the gates of death to live again; paying the emotional debts due my family, and the financial debts due the outside world, had a nice ring of high drama to it. I found it easy to contemplate how I would tell others my version of how I made amends, under the most difficult of circumstances, even while recovering from an incurable disease. Of course, that would only serve to feed an already over-inflated ego. I was told, in no uncertain terms, that this was to be a spiritual undertaking – the amend performed out of inspiration, not self-will

I approached former business associates by first calling and making an appointment, so as not to embarrass them by just showing up at their office. This was a prudent course to take because two people did not want to see or hear from me. I apologized for disturbing them, and hung up. Several months later, one of them called me. We have become friends once more. I left the other one alone.

I had no money to repay anyone, so the best I could do in each case was to honestly relate to them what I felt I had done, apologize, and tell them that I would do my best to repay what I owed. I'm sure most of them said to themselves, “Yeah, sure, you do that, but I won't stake my life on it.” That attitude was quite

satisfactory. In their place I would have thought the same. I understood that at that point I had not made the amend, I had only acknowledged that one needed to be made. Little by little, over the years, the financial amends were made.

My family was a different story. After twenty years the process of amends continues. I see my actions before sobriety so much differently now. I do not feel guilt today, but I recognize more fully the wreckage of my past, and what is required to untangle the destruction, returning everyone to a happier relationship with me.

This was most apparent in the case of my children. Instead of making the proper amends due them, I acted on misguided feelings of fear for their well being; attempting to make amends for the past, yet trying to control their lives to assure they would not end up in the same situation as I had. This, of course, was nonsense. My feeble attempts at amends with them was based completely on self-will – do what I tell you to do so you won't have the problems that I experienced – the end result of this was that everyone was left more angry and confused. It is only over the past few years that I have recognized my error, and I attempt on a daily basis to be their advisor rather than their ruler; the father they love rather than the manipulator they loath. As usual, the advice I was given in the beginning was correct. Amends are a spiritual undertaking, only to be performed through the inspiration of a Higher Power.

In the beginning I was convinced my amend with my wife would be taken care of as soon as I got back on my feet financially, and could properly take care of her and the children. Through my drinking she had lost all the material possessions in her life; big house, cars, money, prestige, and so on. She divorced me, and since we were no longer living together it appeared that all that was required was restoration of her lost material world. That was a start, of course, but far from adequate. The experiences had drained her emotionally also. Restoring emotional stability to her life was the key, but I kept denying that fact to myself. As years went by and I became financially sound, I would attempt giving her more and more material gifts, always thinking at the time, "This should certainly complete my amend to her." Then, upon

reappraising the situation, I would realize in my heart that more was required, and would ask God to show me the proper thing to do.

Three and one-half years after I had gained sobriety my wife and I got back together and moved to Lake Tahoe with the two children that were still in school. Reconciliation was difficult, but determination on both our parts prevailed. What began as a storm, fiercer than the occasional blizzard experienced in the Sierra Nevada Mountains where we lived, eventually settled into a spiritual relationship we had never before experienced. Yet, all the time I knew that I had not found the proper combination of love and material items to complete the amend required of me that she so justly deserved.

During those years my wife resumed painting. She had foregone her art while the children were small. Lake Tahoe was the perfect setting and the more she worked the more she became involved. At first she just began taking brush-up classes at the University of Nevada, but soon realized that she would like to study at one of the famous art schools in the Bay Area. Although I never connected her art with the making of an amend, somehow I knew intuitively that I should support her both financially and emotionally in this undertaking. It was difficult because it required establishing proper housing for her away from our home which created additional financial burdens, and the acceptance that she would be gone a good deal of the time.

She continued to study in the Bay Area for a year or so, and then stopped for awhile. We moved to Sacramento and she resumed painting. She encouraged our daughter, who found that she also had a talent, and now has made a career teaching art. This benefit alone would have been worth any sacrifice made on my part, but I did not regard what was taking place as a sacrifice. I always believed I was receiving a gift, so I felt little animosity for what would seem to be an apparent hardship for me. I can remember thinking how wonderful it was to share in a small way in her enthusiasm, rather than my old way of becoming angry and filled with self-pity. It was definitely a new experience.

My wife had a studio in our Sacramento home, with beautiful lighting, overlooking the pool and gardens. One Friday evening I returned from a business trip. I entered the house, walked through the kitchen, and peeked into the studio. What I

saw left me dumbstruck; there was an easel holding one of her half finished paintings, next to it was my daughter happily painting too, and around the room stood little easels with grandchildren painting both the canvas and themselves. One of them had his tongue in his cheek, trying to determine the next splotch of color to throw at this wonderful scene that only he could interpret. Another intently listened to my wife as she knelt to explain the proper way to mix the desired color. Another child was trying seriously to paint, constantly being interrupted by her more playful, and less artistic cousin.

I had a wonderful spiritual experience, being sober now for eleven years, realizing that without my knowledge, or even any planning, the amend to my wife had been made. I stood watching her happily moving around the room, secure with those who meant the most to her in this world. She was emotionally restored by whatever God that exists for us both. I could never, on my own, have created that scene. I realized once again how insignificant my attempts at amends were. Once again I was happy I had waited for God's time.

I knew I had completed my amends to my wife.

Any meaningful amend that I ever made was made in God's time.

THE TENTH STEP: EMOTIONAL SOBRIETY-A WHOLE PERSON

“CONTINUED TO TAKE PERSONAL INVENTORY AND WHEN WE WERE WRONG PROMPTLY ADMITTED IT.”

I am my worst enemy. I am more destructive to my well-being than going to war, going to prison, surviving disease, or any of the innumerable problems that might lie in my path as I move through life. I think of myself as a warm, caring, loving human being, so it's hard for me to understand that concept.

When I experience problems I sometimes think, “Why me God? What did I ever do to deserve such shabby treatment from this world?” Feeling this way, it infuriates me to hear my intuitive voice tell me, “You alone are the cause of whatever happen in your daily life.” I answer without hesitation, “But you don't understand,” hoping that my aggressive attitude will drive the voice away. Then I proceed to explain how everyone around me has taken advantage of my warm, caring and loving nature.

The voice answers back, “Oh come on, give me a break.” No one will ever believe how mad I become at that voice at those moments! Still, if I have the good sense to become quiet and meditate, I soon realize that I'm mad only because I know that what the voice is telling me is the truth, and I must, once again, begin to take a new personal inventory so that I will eventually discover the exact nature of why I feel the way I do.

So I continue to take a personal inventory on a regular basis, each time discovering more and more of my alcoholic nature. Each time I become closer to being a whole person.

Since becoming sober, I have had the occasion to spend a short time as an inmate in a famous maximum security prison. I was assigned a cell that was completely enclosed by thick granite walls like a tomb, with a steel door containing a few holes to provide air. My cellmate did very little else but watch television, using earphones so as not to disturb me. The time I spent in the cell was pleasant enough; it contained a bunk, sink, and toilet – all the comforts of home – and it was quiet, giving me time to write. I was quite comfortable, needing little else. I found a certain solitude. Aside from the obvious problems that arose from residing in a maximum security prison, it was on only very few occasions that I can truly say that I was lonely or unhappy. One of the

projects that I had assigned myself was to get a better prospective as to why my life was serene in such an atmosphere.

As I reflected, meditated, and wrote, I realized that my natural tendencies were always to isolate myself from society in one form or another: alcohol, overwork, and now prison. Even though all through my life, before entering prison, I saw myself as a warm, caring, loving human being that did not have the slightest clue how to function in society. I had always tried to show those around me the good things that I had to offer, but when I fell short of my, or their, expectations, I would begin to isolate. Over the years isolation became a way of life to me. Even though I had many people who loved me; a lovely wife, wonderful children, good friends and associates, being alone appeared to be an easier way to live. As I look back, the thinking and meditation I did in that cell was the first glimmer I had that perhaps I had not been working the Tenth Step correctly during the years of my sobriety.

The more I dealt with this problem over the next couple of years, the more I realized that even though I no longer used alcohol, I had never achieved emotional sobriety.

I was not whole.

I began to reevaluate my understanding of the Tenth Step. The first part “Continued to take personal inventory,” seemed to mean exactly what it says. I had taken my first personal inventory when I worked the Fourth Step, and now I should continue taking additional personal inventories on a regular basis. Doing so even before I completely finished acknowledging the amends required in the Ninth Step.

Understanding the second part was a bit trickier, “and when we were wrong promptly admitted.” The word “admitted” began to take on a new meaning for me. All my life I believed I was wrong in everything I had done. In the past when something out of the ordinary happened, I would try to take a personal inventory – usually without meditation or writing since I was upset and was sure I was wrong anyway – promptly telling myself how awful I was. I would go to the person I now figured I had harmed, admit my wickedness, then I would stand there while the person usually became terribly righteous and called me a jerk. (In most cases a proper definition, I must confess.) As I would leave those scenes, I

could never figure out why I did not feel refreshed and filled with my Higher Power. I had done exactly what the Tenth Step told me to do, or thought it told me to do. Yet, as time pasted, I started to become angry about having to admit I was wrong all the time, while admitting that everyone else was right. It was easier just to isolate than to become angry. I finally came to the conclusion that more attention should be given to my own spirituality before confronting others when working the Tenth Step.

Sitting in prison, I slowly began to understand what my sponsor had said to me while preparing to start my First Step years before: my mind creates good, bad, right and wrong. When I believe I have done something that has harmed another, it is only the truth as I perceive it. I should first determine the exact nature of what has taken place. Not on my own, but with God and another person. Then I should try my best to rectify the situation as to the exact nature of my wrongs, how simple! When I took my Fifth Step I had been taught that the truth is told to me by God, as I understand Him, and my thought are only as I perceive them. I realized that the second part of the Tenth Step was a continuation of the Fifth Step, as the first part of the Tenth Step was a continuation of the Fourth Step. I was first required to admit to God, to myself, and to another human being the exact nature of my wrongs before I took any action to resolve the matter.

Now in my life, after I have taken a written personal inventory, and believe that I have done something that I am uncomfortable with; I meditate and write about it. Then I contact my sponsor. I share my perception of the situation with God and him. In almost every case I find that I walk away with a completely different prospective. Without the wise counsel that I receive, I remain too emotional over the situation, and am unable, on my own, to sort out what has taken place because of all those angry and guilty emotions that engulf me. I am unable to rectify whatever has happened.

After finding the exact nature, if an amend is required, I acknowledge it to the person and let God take it from there. In most cases I remain friends with whoever I am dealing with. I no longer need to isolate myself and sulk. My Higher Power is showing me how to live with emotional sobriety. Living life on life's terms.

The quality of my relationships with others has improved significantly, especially with my family. My children comment on the emotional change in me, and my marriage is at a level reached by very few couples. I am truly blessed.

In that prison cell I began to experience emotional sobriety.

Although, in that little room in Mill Valley, I was given the gift of sobriety, I am now beginning to understand that as precious as that gift is to me, I retained, over the years, the emotions of a ten year old boy running around the ghettos of San Francisco during the Depression. Those emotions were probably just fine for a ten year old boy, but not for a grown man. I realize that my emotional level did not change much with physical sobriety. Taking regular personal inventories, and admitting what has happened to God, me, and another human being, gives me the ability to monitor my emotional progress.

I am becoming a whole person.

THE ELEVENTH STEP: THE SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

“SOUGHT THROUGH PRAYER AND MEDITATION TO IMPROVE OUR CONSCIOUS CONTACT WITH GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD HIM, PRAYING ONLY FOR KNOWLEDGE OF HIS WILL FOR US AND THE POWER TO CARRY THAT OUT.”

Even in the beginning it was quite clear that to ever complete Step Eleven, and to proceed to Step Twelve, it would be necessary for me to have a spiritual awakening. The first line of Step Twelve is specific – “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps ...” It is quite obvious from reading that line, if I had not experienced a spiritual awakening before beginning work on Step Twelve, then I had not done the first eleven steps correctly.

I also realized that to ever have the spiritual awakening, I must thoroughly complete the first eleven steps. By the time I had reached Step Twelve I believed I had done a very thorough job, and actually had the spiritual awakening, but the sad truth was that I was deceiving myself. By then I had returned to my search for financial success: paying little attention to the work that makes me happy – working with others. Still, I kidded myself that I should leave Step Eleven and go on. Because of my involvement with working for money I was no longer working the steps or working with others with the same passion that I had done in the beginning of my sobriety.

Even though my sponsor continually gave me the definition of a spiritual awakening, somehow I never did hear the truth of what he was trying to relate to me. He told me that each morning I should begin my day with meditation, then write on a specific step. Right from our first meeting he told me to read the passage (from the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous) about when I face indecision. I should ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or decision, relax and take it easy while waiting for the right answers to come. It was just too simple. How could that bring me to the point of spiritual awakening? I realize now that I had missed the whole point of Step Eleven. I never fully embraced the concept that my Higher Power would take care of all my needs if I would only stop worrying and turn any problems I might feel I had over to Him, putting myself in the right frame of mind each morning to listen to the answers I would receive from Him.

As I reflect on what took place when I initially worked the Twelve Steps: I did stop drinking and found God, as I understand Him, but, as time went by, I stopped seeking my Higher Power through prayer and meditation. I became too busy to try and improve my conscious contact with Him. My daily meditation dwindled to nothing, and my work schedule left little time to spend helping others. After eight to ten years of sobriety I became complacent and returned to self will, ignoring, for the most part, God's will. I do not believe I ever experienced a spiritual awakening as I understand it today.

It was not that I was miserable during those years, far from it. Living life without alcohol was infinitely more desirable than death, insanity, or living at the gates of Hell, which was all that alcohol had to offer, especially at the end of my drinking. I realize now that there was much more to my life. I just never found the emotional sobriety so necessary to ever finding true peace, the return to sanity referred to in the Second Step. After fifteen years of sobriety I began to search once again, and turned to Step Eleven.

What I found was the keystone to all the other steps. I began to understand the Eleventh Step's simple message: searching each day, through prayer and meditation, for a conscious contact with my Higher Power. Trying to live my life inspirationally and intuitively has changed my prospective dramatically. For some strange reason, I had never considered that the only thing I should pray for is my Higher Power's will for me, and the power to carry it out. It had always seemed that I should be praying for someone or something – that is the way I was taught – or at least understood what was taught to me since childhood. It suddenly dawned to me that true spiritual discipline is the ability to do nothing, asking God to guide me without question. The ultimate discipline is giving up control completely, even when I believe I am doing something good. It is not up to me to decide what is good or bad.

The Eleventh Step made me realize that after all is said and done, I have absolutely no conception of what truly transpires in this universe around me: that **what is essential is, in fact, invisible to the eye.** I am completely dependent on my Higher

Power. When I stop struggling to solve problems and difficulties, they will simply disappear. My sponsor had told me this very thing when I first met him while sitting around that old kitchen table, but it was beyond my comprehension. It was just too simple. He told me not to worry, that I did not understand what he was saying to me, but keep listening and eventually I would understand. I never dreamed that it would take fifteen years.

Knowing that I should do nothing and the ability to wait for direction from my Higher Power has enhanced my relationships with others immeasurably. Everyone needs to seek their own Higher Power in their own way, and most of the time that is not my way. I can give counsel when requested, but when it is not taken, I try to let the other individual find his or her own path, even if I think the course they are taking will harm them. When I do give counsel I still try to follow my sponsor's advice to meditate for five minutes beforehand; encouraging whoever I am talking with to do the same so as to eliminate, as much as possible, any three-legged dog conversations, hoping that their God will see fit to use me as a channel to show them His will for them.

The Twelve Steps provide a pathway for discovering our own personal God, and as I reflect back over my own experiences, I am thankful that the sponsor I worked with had the good sense to let me find mine without demanding I do it his way. He would nudge me in a direction, but when I floundered, did not castigate me. He was always there, loving me unconditionally.

Today I feel I am working towards becoming whole. I am discovering that fulfillment that comes from a continuing and active search for my God. I know that I will discover only a minuscule portion of His will for me, yet the happiness comes from the seeking. The Eleventh Step molds all the other steps together, and brings to me the spiritual discipline I need to achieve emotional sobriety, giving me the opportunity to live life in a joyous manner.

I now believe I have finally completed Step Eleven, and have truly experienced a spiritual awakening.

THE TWELFTH STEP: THE MESSAGE AND THE PRINCIPLES

“HAVING HAD A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AS THE RESULT OF THESE STEPS, WE TRIED TO CARRY THIS MESSAGE TO OTHER ADDICTIVE OR OBSESSIVE PERSONS, AND PRACTICE THESE PRINCIPLES IN ALL OUR AFFAIRS.”

CARRYING THE MESSAGE

The only true message I have to share is my own experience, and the personal experiences of others who have shared theirs with me while trying to help me. I have experienced the misery of obsession and addiction and would like to become a channel to ease, somewhat, the pain I see in the faces of others still caught up in the madness.

I want desperately to help everyone, but I know that's impossible. Still, I realize the tremendous satisfaction I continue to have working with only a few, God's will in this matter becomes difficult to follow. Standing by watching another addict, alcoholic, or other obsessive person destroy themselves, unwilling to search for help, tests my spiritual discipline to its absolute limit. I want to reach out, hold them giving them soothing advice, but that's only my ego. All I have to share is my own experience, and at times that seems inadequate. Still, I continue to try, following in the footsteps of those who continued to try to help me.

Even though I am unable to help until someone reaches out, I strongly believe that I must always try to offer my hand to anyone that is suffering. It is too easy to tell someone that I will only provide help when they ask. This philosophy seems to have become prevalent as the number of various twelve step programs have increased over the years. The third member of the original first twelve step program found sobriety only when the original two members visited him in the hospital, their presence not requested. They simply related their own experiences to the sad wretch strapped to the gurney, and as they left he invited them to return. All three walked, arm in arm, from the hospital a few days later. Hearing their experiences about how they became well gave him hope once again.

All twelve step members have the ability to spread hope with their own experiences. If someone has been in a twelve step

program for one month, there is someone who has one week, and would like to know how someone else was able to get one month. If someone has been in a twelve step program for one week, there is someone who has one day, and would like to know how someone else was able to get one week. If someone has been in a twelve step program for one day, there is someone who has one hour, and would like to know how someone else was able to get one day. Everyone has an experience to share.

As I reflect on the first few days of my own sobriety in that little room in Mill Valley, I recall how easy it was for me to help someone, even with my short term of sobriety.

The man and the woman who brought me to my first twelve step meeting returned the next evening and brought me to another meeting. I had one seizure that day, and had begun to hallucinate once or twice. However, I had, somehow, refrained from drinking alcohol. Even though I was sick from the effects of alcohol abuse, and my body ached from the seizures, I felt a great deal better than I had the previous day. At least I was able to walk on my own. I was beginning to have hope that I would actually recover. In the meeting that second night, everyone clapped to see that I had made it the first 24 hours, and although I was embarrassed, I knew in my heart that had I not made that telephone call and asked for help, I would probably be dead.

After the meeting people crowded around me; offering words of encouragement, giving me their telephone numbers, telling me to call anytime, night or day. Four or five men took me to a coffee shop close by, talking constantly about what I should do to get through the next 24 hours. I was overwhelmed. Before we left they had decided that I needed a sponsor right away, so they appointed the man sitting next to me to serve temporarily. I just nodded my head affirmatively, as I had no idea what they were talking about. He was about my age, nice appearance, and it was easy to see that he worked in the construction industry. Actually he was an excellent carpenter, turned handyman, to allow himself more time to work with others. He was quiet and unassuming, but you could see passion in his eyes when he spoke.

As we drove home he spoke a great deal about how to stay sober during the first few days, then in a very casual manner, glanced at me and inquired if I had seen anyone sitting in the meeting that evening that might need my help. I must admit that I

was startled at his comment and answered, “My God, I felt so sick and was shaking so badly that I had trouble seeing across the table, it took every bit of effort for me to even hold a coffee cup. If anyone in that room needed help tonight, it certainly had to be me.”

“Oh, but you’re wrong.” He replied, “Your problems were obvious so you were receiving a great deal of attention. If you had been observant, and not so consumed with yourself, you would have realized that there were two or three people there that had only a week or so of sobriety. Although they did not have the physical problems you have, they required as much attention as you.”

I had no idea where his conversation was leading, but kept quiet and he continued. “Tomorrow I want you to start looking around that room for those people, or others like them. After the meetings, no matter how bad you personally feel, go to them, put a smile on your face, and give them a hug. Ask them how they’re doing and listen with compassion when they tell you their problems.”

I was totally confused. Why would he want me to do such a silly thing? With all the real sober people around, why would anyone new want to talk to me? I would have just a couple of sober days by then, be physically sick, and be shaking like a leaf and scared to death. The idea sounded ridiculous, but I kept quiet about my reservations. I tried to smile, and said, “Okay, if that’s what you want, I’ll do it.” I left the matter at that.

He picked me up the next evening to go to a twelve step meeting. I had another seizure that day, but the shaking had subsided somewhat. I was eating again, sleeping most of the day, and had gone to the doctor for a vitamin shot, at my new sponsor’s suggestions, so I wasn’t feeling quite so sick. I was actually looking forward to going to the twelve step meeting, seeing some of the new friends I had made, and especially talking with my new sponsor – whatever the word sponsor meant.

While driving to the meeting, he mentioned nothing about looking around the room for new people, but I was determined to do what he told me to do. He had such a great smile, and seemed so caring, coupled with the fact that I had no illusions how I had been snatched from certain death a few days before, so I figured I had better not press my luck. It was obvious that he knew how to

stay sober – apparently being happy while doing so – and I wanted what he had.

In the meeting I tried to concentrate on what was being said, while looking for someone in as bad a shape as me. I was having a difficult time on both counts. My powers of concentration were hindered, coupled with the fact that I was sure no one could feel as I felt. All at once my eyes focused on a young man about my age. His eyes were staring vacantly around the room while he was twirling a pack of cigarettes in front of him, around and around and around. He looked gaunt and sick. I knew from long experience what he was thinking. He was wondering how fast he could get out of there so he could find something to drink. The look was unmistakable. The twelve step meeting lasted another twenty minutes. I continued staring at him. He didn't see me or anyone else. It was obvious that his mind was too filled with the bottle he planned to drink somewhere on the outside of the room where he was not sitting. I knew that each minute was an hour to him because I had been in that place more times than I wanted to remember.

The meeting ended and I was out of my seat as fast as I could, determined to talk with him before he left the room. I walked up to him, grabbed him by the arm, and said, "Hi, I'm Frank. I'm brand new to all of this. Could you help me?"

He mumbled something under his breath, while trying to push my arm away, and replied anxiously, "I'm new too. Why don't you try to talk with someone who knows more about what's going on? I'm in kind of a hurry."

"Please," I persisted, "It won't take long. I really need to talk with someone who is new like me."

"Okay," he relented, "what do you need?"

Under the circumstances I wasn't exactly sure what to say, so I said the first thing that came into my mind. "Well, I wanted to know how long you've been sober."

He said, somewhat irritated, "This is my tenth day."

"Wow!" I wasn't putting him on because ten days sobriety sounded like a lifetime to me right then. "How did you get ten days?"

He looked at me in a strange way and then began to smile for the first time all evening. He spent the next ten minutes relating his struggles over the last few days. When he was finished I asked him if he had a sponsor yet, and he answered “No.”

“Boy, I’ve got a great one,” I said. “We’re going to coffee together right now. Why don’t you come with us? Maybe he’ll be your sponsor too.”

He hesitated for a moment, thinking of the bottle that was waiting for him, then relaxed, broke out in a big grin, and said, “Sure, why not? That sounds great.”

The three of us went to a coffee shop, and talked until midnight. He asked my sponsor to become his sponsor and an agreement was struck.

When I arrived home that evening I was ecstatic, floating on a pick cloud. The aching in my body remained, but I no longer felt sick. I had helped someone! It was the greatest high that I have ever experienced. My new friend would have gone back to drinking if I hadn’t recognized what he was about to do, and talked to him. He admitted to that while we were having coffee. Once again, I felt that the world had a use for me.

I also knew that had it not been for my sponsor prodding me the night before about helping someone, I would have sat in that meeting thinking about my own problems. I had a better understanding of the role of a sponsor, and a great deal of respect for the one who had been chosen for me.

My experience shows that anyone has the ability to carry the message.

THE PRINCIPLES

Defining my personal principles required a great deal of thought, but since Step Twelve suggested I practice them in all my affairs, it was imperative that I firmly establish what those principles were. They appeared vague in my mind, so I decided to make a list:

TRUTH

My First Step was based on the truth. Not the truth my mind told me, and certainly not the truth that included right, wrong, good, and bad, defined by my own emotion and life experiences. I realize more and more that truth is the language of my Higher Power. I receive this truth through prayer, meditation, and daily personal writing. I hear it when my Higher Power speaks to me through others. It is revealed to me through a spiritual experience. It is apparent to me when, even though the world is telling me I am wrong, I have a warm glow inside my being that assures me that things are the way they should be. Truth was the first basic principle the Twelve Steps taught me.

HOPE

Hope is what I receive when, after prayer and meditation, I write a list of the wonderments in my life. Trying to comprehend that God, as I understand Him, made a perfect world, and I am on a never ending search for that perfection. Experiencing the happiness and peace that always exists for me if I believe. All things that happen are gifts from that God, and if I'm able to put myself into the proper spiritual mood I will be able to recognize them as such.

FAITH

Soon after I became sober I found a job – my physical problems still existed, but I was slowly recovering. Actually, it was a very good job. Besides an excellent salary, I received benefits and a new car. My wife was thrilled with this new employment opportunity, especially after all the problems I had put her

through. We rented a nice home and started living together once again.

The joy wasn't particularly difficult, but from the first day it became apparent that almost everyone in the company drank a great deal of alcohol, and used a great deal of drugs. Working there each day became a nightmare. After two months I turned to my sponsor for guidance because I was afraid that in the atmosphere of my job I might start drinking again.

Even before I talked to him I was sure what I should do. My sobriety had to come first. Without my sobriety the job meant very little. Still, I was afraid what my wife would say if I quit. After listening to what I had to say, he counseled me to do what I thought best, and have faith that my Higher Power would take care of things. I struggled with it all that evening, trying to believe that this new Higher Power that I had just acquired would make things right with my wife. I came to the conclusion that I wanted to have faith, so the next day I went to my employer and quit. That evening I told my wife what I had done. She became completely upset upon hearing what seemed to be total irresponsibility.

Before I got sober my wife had filed for a divorce. The mandatory waiting period had passed, so all that was required was for her to go in front of a judge to have the divorce finalized. Thinking I must be completely crazy for quitting such a good job, she called her attorney and two days later divorced me. I found myself out on the street with two dollars in my pocket, no car – the company took back the one I had been driving after I quit – and with no place to live. I slept in the park that night. I must admit that my faith in my Higher Power was wavering a bit.

I went through a period of self-pity for a while after the divorce, blaming my Higher Power for abandoning me after I had put my faith in Him, but that soon passed. My wife and I were separated for three years before we came back together and purchased a home at Lake Tahoe. I realize now that neither one of us was ready to resume our marriage when she divorced me, and our life would have ended in another disaster. I am quite sure that had I continued working in that job I would have gone back to drinking and very likely would have died.

Today, with my wife, I have one of the most wonderful relationships that a man can have with a woman. This relationship would never have blossomed this way had this episode not taken place.

Faith is never easy because if you get what you want, you always get second best.

COMPASSION/SERVICE

I will never close the door to the events that took place in that little room in Mill Valley, or most of the madness that preceded them. They are the truth of my life, and I think of them without regret. Those events remind me of the suffering and pain that addiction and obsession continue to create in the lives of others. I realize that by simply sharing what happened to me, and how I recovered, I might be able to help relieve someone else's suffering and pain.

I have listened to people say that they share their experience, strength, and hope with another to keep themselves free of addiction and obsession, even if they are unable to help the person they are talking with. That is not one of my personal beliefs, much less one of my principles. I try to give help with total compassion for the person I'm talking with, without expectation, and without regard to what gain I might receive. I have nothing to give; therefore, will never receive anything for myself. If I maintain unconditional compassion for another's pain, I have faith that my personal Higher Power will know what is right for me, and will deal with my sobriety in His own way. That is His business, not mine.

HONESTY

I try to be as honest as I am able, but when I listed honesty as a principle I became uncomfortable. I mediated, and then wrote about the uncomfortable feeling in my journal for several days. In addition, a great debate raged inside my head.

"Honesty has to be listed as a principle, right?" I said to myself.

"Wrong," said that intuitive voice.

"But you don't understand," I replied to the voice.

“Oh yes I do.” The voice answered. “Keep meditating and writing about it.”

Becoming exasperated, I said, “But I’ve written all I can, and I’m still at a dead end.”

Suddenly my sweet little inspirational voice bellowed

“Then call your sponsor, discuss it with him and your Higher Power to find the exact nature of your problem, you jerk!”

“Oh, that’s probably a good idea. Why didn’t I think of that?”
(Conversations like that happen all the time in my head.)

After the discussion with my sponsor I realized some very vital information about my personal principles. Honesty, over which I have some personal say, is a virtue in my life. Truth, which I receive directly from God, as I understand Him, is a principle. I can repeat something that I believe to be true, but is not, and still be perfectly honest. I will never be able to say something that isn’t true, and still be truthful.

My intuitive voice won again.

HUMILITY

This very day I am celebrating the twentieth anniversary of finding my personal sobriety. Today I also have come to the place on the list where I am writing about the principle of humility; the one principle I attempt to practice in all my affairs, but always fall short. Since I do not believe in coincidences, but believe all things happen for a purpose, I think I had better not put this writing off until tomorrow when I will be less emotional. I think that inspirational voice is telling me to forge ahead now, saying just what comes to my mind, and live with the results.

I am sitting here this morning with tears in my eyes, unable to explain what the Twelve Steps have meant to me. That is something that I have experienced, and will never adequately put into words. They have served, and will continue to serve, as a beacon down a pathway leading to God, as I understand Him. At times, during those years, the beacon has dimmed, but I will eventually discover that it was me, not my Higher Power, whose eyes had closed. I would be frightened, still, I would force myself to open my eyes, only to see the beacon burning brightly as ever, showing me the way to happiness such as I feel this morning. I would like to always acknowledge the cloak of love my God has

wrapped around me whenever I felt frightened and alone. Although I know from sad experience that I am unable to even acknowledge a minute part of that love. Even so, right now – right this very instant – I feel happier than I have ever been in my whole life. I know that it is due to the love my Higher Power feels for me.

I haven't enough gratitude to fully thank the thousands of people who have helped me along the way – from the man and woman who first found me in Mill Valley, to the newcomer I met yesterday who flushed all his mind-altering pills down the toilet, determined to find a better life through the Twelve Steps – much less express the gratitude I feel for my God who was ultimately responsible.

There is one person that I must mention, though, and that is my wife. She is celebrating her own twentieth anniversary in her own twelve step program. To paraphrase one of the greatest speakers I have ever read:

“She came into the cave to find me, and remained in the dark by my side, until we walked out together, hand in hand, into the sunlight of God.”

It is quite apparent upon reading this list of personal principles that the mortar holding all of them together is love. Unconditional love that let's me become an instrument of my God's will.

I firmly believe that what is essential in my life is invisible to my eyes. All that is right can be seen only with the heart.

The end.

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