In the Face of Alcoholism: Embracing Powerlessness

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We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

This, the first step of Twelve for Alcoholics Anonymous, is admittedly the most difficult. All subsequent steps are based on this one. While the tenor of A.A. is “progress, not perfection,” this step is the only one that insists on being done perfectly. “Total abandon” is how some old-timers put it. Yet, in a culture that places a premium on individual accomplishment, there is phenomenal resistance to this idea. “Who cares to admit defeat?” asks the opening sentence of A.A.’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions.

Step one takes its roots in personal experience. Intolerance of pain in everyday ordinary life, the obsession for “relief,” and the chaos that results bring alcoholics to this step. They come to recognize that alcohol has become not an object but an essential part of their very being. Becoming convinced of this is called “hitting bottom.” It is an emptying of one’s self-concept, a total draining and surrender. The New Testament word for this is kenosis, a deep spiritual truth enunciated by the life of Jesus and the New Testament writers. It was highly prized by the Desert Fathers in the fourth century, but fell out of favor in western Christianity as the need for institutional hegemony superseded biblical spirituality.

In the twentieth century, A.A. reclaimed a secular version of this vision of kenosis. The first step lays a foundation for a vital spiritual life. Spirituality, not religion, is key, because there is a difference. As used here, religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell, spirituality is for those who have been there and don’t want to go back. Ernest Kurtz observes that A.A. came into being during the trauma of the great depression—when our culture hit bottom—and probably could not have arisen in any other era.1 When the Twelve and Twelve speaks of complete “bankruptcy,” it uses economics as a metaphor for the alcoholic’s life. A.A. recaptured in very American terms the ancient tradition of powerlessness, of limitation.

And what is that limit? That we are not God. The Big Book (Alcoholics Anony-

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In the Face of Alcoholism: Claiming Power

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FOR SOME PEOPLE WHO ARE ADDICTED, ADMITTING POWERLESSNESS IS A USEFUL first step toward healing. For others, focusing on powerlessness only piles on more guilt and reinforces the self-defeating, negative behavior and attitudes that led to the need to cope with life’s problems with alcohol or drugs in the first place.

The Women for Sobriety “New Life” Program provides an alternative to methods of dealing with addiction that insist that the addict is powerless. The program is designed especially for women who abuse alcohol or other substances. The program is a guided journey from self-defeating behavior and attitudes to feelings of confidence, power, and self-worth. By practicing the program’s thirteen statements of acceptance, women form a secure base of well-being that withstands the stress of everyday living. Among the statements of acceptance are the observations: “Negative thoughts destroy only myself”; “Happiness is a habit I will develop”; and “I am a competent woman and have much to give life.”

The process can be described in six levels of growth and change. At the first level, we accept our alcoholism (or other addictions) with the knowledge that we have a physical disease and that abstinence from alcohol (or other addictive substances) is necessary. We recognize that alcohol has damaged our bodies and minds, and special care and time are required for recovery. We begin with the recognition that “I have a life-threatening problem that once had me.”

At the second level of recovery, we are ready to examine our attitudes and our approach to life and its dilemmas. This is a time to write down our concepts, experiences, difficulties, and feelings. We may believe that we are well aware of these, but only after we have written them with total honesty do we know what they really are—not what we thought them to be. Most women are surprised by this revelation. At this stage we must also recognize the distorted, negative, and self-destructive patterns that we have developed and resolve to change. This level is difficult and takes time. During a later period of stress we may need to return to these exercises (or review any level). This is not a failure, but an opportunity to grow and change again in times of crisis.

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*Jean Kirkpatrick, the founder of Women for Sobriety, died in June 2000. This article is adapted from her writings by Women for Sobriety and printed with their permission.
mous, by Bill W.) says, “We had to quit playing God. It didn’t work.” Connected to this admonition to resign from deity status is the Big Book’s observation that “our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot.” It is no coincidence that Kurtz’s definitive history of Alcoholics Anonymous is entitled Not-God. In a very profound way the first step is the observance of the first commandment. To recognize God as God is to admit that we are not.

Fundamentally the admission of powerlessness is the recognition of imperfection and finiteness. It is also the rejection of self as an object of trustworthiness, since we got ourselves into this mess in the first place. Luther’s insight (“that to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God”) is the focal point of step one. Alcoholics know by experience that through their own will they cannot stop drinking, even though their life depends on it. Only through absolute surrender can the reality of another power be possible.

This A.A. spirituality does not lead to self-enhancement; it does not assume that every day in every way we are getting better and better. Rather, this spiritual journey leads towards a commitment—the decision of step one—to something outside of ourselves: God, or in A.A. vernacular, “a power greater than ourselves.”

Step one opens the door to the remaining eleven steps and a whole new way of life:

- release from addiction itself—from obsession with alcohol and its effects
- release from the “root of all our troubles—self-centeredness” (Big Book)
- release from denial

Release from the chains of alcohol begins when alcoholics admit the presence of those chains and their own powerlessness to release themselves. Again, the Twelve and Twelve: “The average alcoholic, self-centered in the extreme, doesn’t care for this prospect—unless he has to do these things [the 12-step program] in order to stay alive himself.” It is the staying alive that is the miracle. No human power can create it; we can only witness it.

Daily across the globe thousands of people gather in meetings to share their experience, strength, and hope, and to remind each other again of the ultimate strength in powerlessness. The words prayed at every A.A. meeting are at the same time surrender and hope:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; 
The courage to change the things I can; 
And the wisdom to know the difference.

What a miracle, indeed!*
Having discovered our irrational, negative attitudes, we are ready to exchange them for realistic, positive thoughts about ourselves and our lives. We realize that our thoughts are responsible for our feelings and not the events, people, or situations themselves. This level can be a happy time of growth and change. One unpleasant incident need not ruin an entire day. A mishap can be “unfortunate” rather than “awful.” A mistake can be a learning experience, not a wretched blunder. We can make our environment pleasant, uncluttered, and attractive. Our thoughts and attitudes create the world around us.

Level four involves becoming aware that we do not need to wait for or seek enthusiasm and happiness—all we need do is reach out and grasp them. We can accept a happy and enthusiastic outlook on life or we can choose a gloomy, pessimistic, and cynical approach. It is up to us. This level leads to the next level’s recognition that much of the joy in life depends on sharing with others; happiness and enthusiasm are reinforced by those to whom we are close.

Yet level five can be difficult for many women, for here we trade overdependence on others for mature, loving relationships. Our culture has taught us to attach our self-esteem to our relationships and to look for approval from others. We often see our value as people as dependent on our relation to others and not on our intrinsic worth. We fear and dread rejection and hurt. Even so, we must take risks, be open about our feelings, and balance giving and receiving. Mature, loving relationships can bring us the greatest happiness of all, and their success depends primarily on how we feel about ourselves.

The last level in the healing process involves continuing knowledge of ourselves, our connection to others, and our place in the world. We find a unique and personal spiritual home. We nurture our own spiritual growth and reach out to encourage self-responsibility and self-worth for others.

The New Life Program may be summed up with the WFS motto: “We are capable and competent, caring and compassionate, always willing to help another, bonded together in overcoming our addictions.” As a woman grows in strength and understanding in this program, the need and desire to cope with life’s problems with alcohol or drugs are removed. Her destructive behavior and emotions are replaced with self-acceptance and confidence. She is no longer just a woman with an addiction problem; she is liberated and at peace with herself and her world. Thousands of women have found this new life through the WFS program.*

*For more information, see www.womenforsobriety.org.