

Seamus, Step 10

Hi, my name's Seamus and I'm still an alcoholic.

Hi, Seamus.

Tonight we're on the 10th step. I always make a disclaimer before I start: these are just my opinions and don't quote them to your sponsor and, furthermore, as Father Joe used to say: they don't represent the views of my sponsor either.

We have some people here who have not been here for the whole series. So for them I would say we got to the 10th step from the 1st step. The first step was where we arrived at a conclusion after quite a long period of trial and failure. I don't see the first step — despite the numbering — as a beginning so much as an ending. It's a conclusion. It's where I ran out of other options. Many of us had tried everything we could think of to stay stopped and nothing had worked consistently. I was still messing up my life after working on the problem my own way for some time. I, personally, was still killing myself compulsively with alcohol and drugs and on three occasions I had attempted suicide as a way of getting the agony over and done with.

I turned finally to the last house on the block, Alcoholics Anonymous, and they told me that they understood what I had been through, for they'd been through similar failure and discouragement, too. The men and women I met at the meeting said they had been told about a solution; they'd tried it and found that it worked for them. They had no reason to mislead me and nothing to gain

by lying, so what the hell! It couldn't work any worse than what I'd been doing up till then.

Something like this got most of us started on a path. We weren't on a crusade to be good people or saints or anything like that. We only wanted to stop feeling so bad and to stop killing ourselves. I can assure new people that it came as a bit of a shock to most of us when they told us that what we needed to do was walk a path of steps and, they promised that somewhere along that path we'd have what they called a "Vital Spiritual Experience" or "Psychic Change". In the Doctor's Opinion. (page xxix which would be page 29, if I remember my Latin), the doctor says that, *"Once a psychic change has occurred, the very same person who seemed doomed, who had so many problems he despaired of ever solving them, suddenly finds himself easily able to control his desire of alcohol."* Well just that was what I was looking for - they could call it anything they liked. I had already seen the bit on page 45 about a lack of power being our predicament. It described me to a tee. And the remedy seemed just what the doctor ordered, this *vital spiritual experience or psychic change.*

I call the vital spiritual experience the active ingredient in the cure and there are enough medicators here who know what I mean by the active ingredient in a medicine. If you don't know, ask the person beside you because they've maybe had some experience with recreational medication. Actually my father, who wasn't a junkie but knew his alcohol, used to tell me, "You have to know that it doesn't matter how much liquid carrier you put alcohol into,

whether it's beer or whiskey, the alcohol is still the active ingredient. You could put an ounce of whiskey into a bucket of water and drink the bucket, and you've had an ounce of whiskey."

I recommend you read the Doctor's Opinion at the beginning of the Big Book for there you'll find the observation of a medical man who's been observing the transformation of alcoholics happen before his eyes. Neither he nor any other doctor had seen this happen until AA came on the scene. The great Karl Jung even admitted that he'd never had any success with people like us. Doctor Silkworth goes on to report: "Something more than a human power is needed..." And Doctor John F. Stauffer, Chief of Psychiatry at Philadelphia General Hospital, writes (*The Big Book*, Appendix III, p.570) he says, "We observe a profound change in personality. You would hardly recognize them."

When I first set out on this spiritual path I didn't really 'get' it. People, including my poor sponsor, tried to educate me but I could let nothing in past what I thought I knew. My head was still filled with old ideas, one of which was that "God helps those who help themselves." I took it so literally that I thought I had to be in charge and if I did that God would be my assistant. I've been waiting all these weeks for an opportunity to tell this Irish Alanon story. If you tell it you must tell it about your own sub-set of Americans. I can use racial stereotypes of the Irish but God help anyone else that has the nerve to try such a thing.

So, Paddy has a bad drinking problem, well, of course, since he's Irish, and Maggie is very religious, of course, since she's Irish. The story is that Maggie is up in the church this day and she's praying to the Lord and she's getting more and more pissed off at him the more she thinks about all the praying she's done about her man's drinking. D'ye get the picture? She's going over all the stuff she's tried and she's reminding God for the umpteenth time how hard she's been working at it. "I don't know what else I can do," she says. "I've dragged him to the priests umpteen times. I've had him swear off alcohol, take pledges by the half dozen, pledges for 3 months, for a year, for 2 years. It was all in vain. Nothing works. I've bought him alcohol and I've poured his alcohol down the drain. Times I've just bought some for him thinking maybe being nice would help." And she went on with her list, "I've had the nuns saying *novenas* for him. I've done the nine Fridays myself so many times I've got blisters and welts on me knees. I've done every damned thing I can think of, Lord," she says. "What more do you want me to do?" There's a sudden rumbling in the church, followed by an ominous pause. Then a booming voice comes down from high up in the sanctuary and it says, "Maggie, if you'd take your hands off of him for about five minutes, I'd have a chance." (Laughter).

Myself, even being around the program for a number of years, I never "got" the connection between not having my prayers answered and self-centeredness. I just never understood the absolute connection between these things. I didn't know that as long as I was living behind this false ego, there was

no way I could be reached by any spiritual power. In attempting to protect my individuality and survive as a separate entity, all I'd get was a busy signal when I'd pray. I could never understand how that was. I kept getting, "Your call is very important to us," and the endless Gregorian Muzak but never even an operator let alone an answer to my prayer.

And then I found out the secret that millions of people have known for thousands of years. The secret was already common knowledge for thousands of years before Buddha (2500 years ago), before Jesus (2000 years ago) by all sorts of people who discovered that the beginning of a meaningful life was getting rid of the false self. Until that happened their lives could not be touched and transformed by all the power that was around them and in them.

The 1st clue for many of us was in Chapter 5, *How it Works*. "*Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly...people who cannot and will not completely give themselves to a simple program, a program that demands rigorous honesty*". Three times in the first paragraph of *How it Works* it specifies honesty. It even says, "*There are those too who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders...many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.*" Somehow that sort of honesty, I'd never thought about – let alone practiced. I thought honesty was about not telling lies, about not stealing, that sort of thing. I didn't realize that honesty was about being in the world as I truly "only" am. This sort of honesty required having faith that what I am is enough. It requires faith that I don't have to get

into the business of holding up a mask, a persona, in front of myself so I'll appear more than I am.

And when I reflected on the Third Step prayer, I realized what the prayer actually said, "*Build with me and do with me what Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage (this imprisonment) of self that I may better do thy will.*" I cannot even know what that will is so long as I am a prisoner behind this phony mask. I am not living my own real life. I am trying to live some other life that I think would be better, more respected, more successful.

In Steps 4 and 5 we begin to take the risk of standing in the world and being seen as we "only" are. And of course the irony is that what we authentically are turns out to be so much better than this false thing we thought must be greater, more respected, more successful. Everybody that knows us sees that false thing more as a blemish on us than as an asset. "He'd be great if he'd just drop that silly pretention," they say of me. Our perspective on ourselves has changed completely: that which I thought was greater, was actually a blemish and that which I am authentically intended to be, is more effective and capable of being an instrument "...*useful to God and my fellows*" [Step 7 prayer].

Once we begin to "get" this about the false self, we are on our way to a recovered authenticity; to the life we are meant for and in which we will produce our proper and unique contribution as surely as an acorn produces an oak tree. We have begun to realize what wise folk have known all along and have tried to pass down to us in books of recorded wisdom: "*What does it profit a man if he were*

to gain the whole world but suffer the loss of his soul?" Until we had become teachable we were the prisoners of invincible ignorance, those "*...who had ears but could not hear and eyes but could not see.*"

I have used the analogy of a canister full of fetid water sitting in the middle of a crystalline river; the water inside unable to benefit from the cleansing and renewing power of the river. Knowing that the Higher Power which I seek to participate in is already "*that in which I live and move and have my being*" (Acts, 17:28]) gives me a clue that it is a matter of letting down my barriers (dissolving the canister) rather than of finding a God. We've talked about the reasons we think we need the damned canister at all is my fear that I'll lose my identity; "*...there'll be nothing left but the hole in the donut.*" When, in fact, dropping this allows the power that is all around me to "*... build with me and do with me what it wills (thou wilt).*"

In Steps 8 and 9, we're trying to heal our relationship with our fellows and hence with the god that is present to us in the form of our brothers and sisters. "*So long as you do it to one of these, you do it to me.*" We're trying to mend the tears, the rips, we've caused as we've gone tearing through the world and its people as a tornado. We've injured and damaged the lives, the emotions, and well-being of those who've loved us, who depended on us, who had business dealings with us and even those who've come in contact with us in traffic and other minor social interactions. We've done damage to the unity that is the basis of all spirituality. In 8 and 9 we try to heal our relationship with our fellows so as to unite us with

our source of living water. In *12 By 12*, under Step 8 it says, “*This is the beginning of the end of our isolation from our fellows and from God.*”

The *12 By 12* tells us that Steps 1 – 9 are the preparation for an adventure in a new life. That’s how it introduces Step 10. Listen to *The Big Book*, on page 84 speaking of where we are at Step 10: “We enter the realm of the spirit.” A Spiritual Awakening, [Enlightenment], the goal of all spiritual paths, is the psychic change by which we begin to see the people of the world through different eyes. This new life, it says, endows us with the glimmerings of understanding and effectiveness we have not even imagined before. It has been described by Chuck Chamberlain in *A New Pair of Glasses*, as an unforeseen change of perspective on people and our role in the world. We start to see our fellows not as rivals in a zero sum game competing for status, sex, security, but as incarnations of the same Higher Power that we’ve unleashed from within ourselves by casting off the false self and its agendas.

This is the “spiritual life” as we are told in *The Big Book*, Appendix II (p.567): “*With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power Greater than themselves.*” It’s a life in which we allow ourselves to be the instruments of that authentic spirit unique to each of us; that unsuspected resource that’s been pent up waiting to be tapped into. The spiritual life is not about becoming holy, spending all our time in church, wearing sack cloth and ashes, or getting calluses on our knees. Nothing like that. It’s about

empowerment arising from the Great Reality which "*we found... deep down within us. It is only there He may be found.*"(Big Book, p.55)

While Step 10 tells us, "*We enter the realm of the spirit,*" it also tells us to watch out for backsliding. There's practical advice here, things that you and your sponsor should be talking about - in my opinion. For example, it says to watch for things that can lead us and our minds away from the spiritual realm, such as *selfishness, dishonesty, resentments* and *fear*. Such are the enemies of this new way of life and because they are long-entrenched habits, we can easily slide back into them. It suggests in the *12 By 12* that we do spot checks throughout the day. A spot check. I think with practice we get a heightened awareness of things that violate the spiritual attitude. I think I know when I've been a jerk, right? It rings a bell somewhere inside. I don't have to wait until tonight to examine my conscience and discover it. Most of us with any sensitivity at all, blush inwardly when we've been a jerk. Competitive driving on the streets and highways is one of my great sources of blushing. Somebody who cuts me off or passes me and then wants me to let them in at a merge, brings up the old me and that me wants the death penalty. Then I shake my head, take a breath, and have a little talk with myself. Most of us know this is not how we want to be in the world, so petty and adolescent in our reactions.

Maybe someone has done something that is blatantly offensive and by objective standards they royally deserve punishment, still it is not our job to be the avenger. The spiritual life suggests that we admit our faults and forgive the

faults of others. Admit ours and forgive theirs. That's not easy; it's not the way of the world, but it is the way of the spirit.

Those of you who are familiar with the books, you'll have noticed that *The Big Book* places nighttime inventory under Step 11, (p.86). A minor puzzlement! In our daily/evening check we look at what we have done that day that is not compatible with our new way of life, who we've screwed over, put down, disrespected, ignored, raged at, etc. Each of us has his or her own recurring behavior habits that need watching. The book suggests that "*when we retire at night, we constructively review our day, when we were resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid.*" "*Do we owe an apology? Have we kept something to ourselves that we should discuss with someone at once? Were we kind and loving towards all?*" So, if you want to see a very good suggestion for working Step 10, look at Step 11 in *The Big Book*. It also says you probably did something good during the day, and you might want to look at that too... or not.

The Big Book then suggests what we might do with these things when we spot them in ourselves. It has four suggestions: (1) You ask God right away to help you. (2) You discuss what you've done with someone. (3) You quickly make amends, and (4) Then you turn as soon as possible to see who you can help.

I may have mentioned that my sponsor, Father Joe, was a practical sort and he'd read the book. I called him one time about my problems with that Safeway store they have at the beach in San Francisco. They tore down the

beautiful, sleazy Playland-at-the-Beach, where I'd had lots of drunken fun, and they built a Safeway store. I'd never forgiven them for that, I think. Now you must understand that this was the Safeway store we went to all the time when we lived out there in the Richmond District of San Francisco.

I had a terrible case of impatience with the checkers in that store. I remember what he told me, "The only way you're going to get rid of this habit is to - before you leave the parking lot - walk back into the store and you tell the checker that you have no right to speak to her that way." I had to do that and then go up to St. Thomas the Apostle, at 40th and Balboa, and put five bucks in the poor box. My arguments usually had to do with something that was supposed to be on sale. So, even if I'd win with the checker, I'd wind up losing five bucks. Took some of the motivation out of the fight. It was so humiliating walking back into the store, waiting until she was finished with the next customer, telling a very wary person I was sorry. And you can just imagine what she'd be thinking when she saw me coming in again, "That jerk. What does he want now?" And then parting with five bucks in the St. Vincent de Paul box at Thomas the Apostle. Habit breaking is not easy.

What happens with that is that when you're standing in line like that and you're beginning to get annoyed, you get a pause and it's the pause that Viktor Frankl talks about. "*Between the incident and the response,*" he says, "*there is a pause. The response I select in that pause tells me of my growth and my freedom.*" My problem was that I didn't get a pause and therefore I had no freedom to select

the response. My mind was just a pass-through that never played a role in my response. "Lack of impulse control" this is called and it is the major factor in many crimes. You've probably discovered for yourselves what will give a person a pause: it is doing something like I described - immediately going in and admitting you're wrong and paying five bucks to the needy. I found that that gave me a pause. And in that pause, standing in line, I selected a different response. And that is exactly what is suggested in Step 10, "*...when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*"

It says, "Watch for resentments." Resentment is anger, but it is anger that repeats on us; something that lurks deep within us, influencing our reactions and at any provocation it can re-generate the same anger. It will do this again and again. There are certain stupid resentments we've all had - silly misunderstandings, disagreements, prejudices - these stupid ones are relatively easy to get rid of. They're embarrassing and demeaning to us and we know it. The real challenge is letting go of resentments that are or seem justified by objective wrongs done to us or our loved ones. If you have a justifiable resentment, it's going to take some focused work to rid yourself of it.

Some resentments we grow up with and don't even think of as personal resentments. I didn't realize until I was sober a number of years - like maybe 15 - that I was harboring in my heart a justifiable resentment against our neighbors, England. I could rattle off 700 years of historical justification for how I felt. I would have told you that I had a right to feel that way. Furthermore, not to feel

that way I regarded as unpatriotic. Somebody finally confronted me on that and said, "Don't you think you're harboring a resentment?" "Oh, no!" I protested. "These facts are not in dispute. They did do those things to us!" I said it as though it couldn't be a resentment if it was true. After I cooled down and got over my resentment at him, I opened my mind to what he'd said. I dragged up some more Latin: **sentire** means to feel, and **re-sentire** means to feel again. So it's anger you feel again and again and again and again. Resentment.

It acts as sort of spiritual poison, embittering relations with some person or group and ultimately undermining our spiritual condition. It keeps us imprisoned by these negative feelings and attitudes and is diametrically opposed to the spiritual awakening spoken of so many times in the literature dealing with spiritual experiences from any tradition and the "*...profound alteration in (our) reaction to life, referred to in The Big Book (p.567) and again as described by Dr. Jung (p.27). "Ideas, emotions and attitudes that were once the guiding force in the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them."*

I've talked before about that Hot Grudge Sunday, the English-speaking AA meeting that friends of mine go to in Paris. Resentments, that's the focus of the meeting or, rather, how to be rid of resentments. They take a marble from a bowl, tell the group about their resentment, then each week they report on how they're doing on their resentment. They continue this until the week when they can come back and say they truly have gotten it purged from their hearts. They

then return the marble to the bowl. I think it's a great plan for a meeting when we understand how poisonous resentment can be.

Some of the other things the chapter speaks of:

Practicing restraint of tongue and pen. Isn't that a great one? Now with emails - we can dash one off without even a stamp; get ourselves into a pickle instantly. "Between the incident and the response there is a pause," Frankl said. Really? Watch me create chaos on a keyboard. Look ma, no pause! "Your email has been **Sent**," the screen says. I wonder if I should have done that, I bite my lip.

It talks about sulking. "What's the matter?" "Nothing." (Laughter). Right? There's never anything the matter.

Silent scorn.

Big shotism and self-importance. "What do you mean I have to wait 15 minutes. I have a reservation. Don't you know who I am? I'll have you know I'm a big alcoholic... baby." (Laughter).

There's a funny part in the *12 By 12*. Really! We don't often look to the *12 By 12* for humor but when it talks about the change in attitude that begins to happen around Step 10, it warns us to be patient. "*Such a radical change in our outlook may take time, maybe a lot of time. Not many people can truly assert they love everybody. Most of us must admit that we have loved but a few, that we have been quite indifferent to the many, so long as none of them gave us trouble and as for the remainder, well, we have really disliked or hated them.*" Is that not a perfect description of the

cynical, self-centered people we are? It's so scathingly honest as to the attitude of most of us towards our fellows.

We have loved a few, we're indifferent to most - those who didn't piss us off - and thirdly, those who pissed us off we want dead. What a great way of dividing our fellows! I just think it's wonderful and funny and very sad – because it's so true. *“And these attitudes are common enough in all of society but we in AA are trying for a better relationship with our fellows and with God. We need something much better than this in order to have a spiritual life. We can't stand it if we hate deeply. The idea that we can be possessively loving of the few, ignore the many, and continue to fear or hate the rest will not work for us.”* So that's sort of the practical stuff.

Since we read something we call *“The Promises”* at most AA meetings, new people can be excused for thinking that those are *all* the promises talked about in the book. Actually, those may not even be the coolest promises. I think that the further on we go in the book the better and more profound the promises. The Step 10 promises are on page 84, last paragraph, *“And we have ceased fighting anything and anyone - even alcohol. For by this time sanity will have returned.”*

I don't think I have ever been at an AA meeting in 40 years where I heard somebody mention that sanity has returned. You'll hear people going on and on about how insane they still are. They think that's really cool to say they're still insane. But actually Step 10 says that if you have worked these steps, by Step 10 sanity will have returned. They promised us that in Step 2: *“Came to believe that a*

Power greater than ourselves could rest us to sanity.” And, by golly, at Step 10, right on schedule, just as promised: “...by this time sanity will have returned.”

The promises continue then: *“We will seldom be interested in liquor. If tempted, we recoil from it as from a hot flame. We react sanely and normally and we found that this has happened automatically.”* And furthermore, there’s no point in strutting up and down saying things like, “I’m sober today because I did this and I did that.” No. This whole thing has happened behind my back. I came in looking for a cure for my addiction, they sent me off to find a vital spiritual experience and before I knew it, the obsession was removed. *“We will see that our new attitude has been given us without thought or effort on our part.”*

This is that clever bait and switch they’ve pulled on us, you see. We come in here all obsessed with quitting alcohol and drugs and what do they do? They send us off down a spiritual path of steps looking desperately for a Vital Spiritual Experience! When we’re halfway down this path, it dawns on us, “But this isn’t why I came in here at all. (Laughter.) I came here for something else and I can hardly remember what it was. Oh yes, there was that obsession that occupied my every waking moment. Hmmm? What happened while I wasn’t looking?” I’m not making it up, it’s here in *The Big Book*. *“We will find that this has happened automatically. We will see that our new attitude toward liquor has been given us without thought or effort on our part. That is the miracle of it.”*

If you’re new in the program, I want to tell you that all these drunks here were new in the program once too and this same thing happened to them. They

can tell you that they're not going around fighting alcohol day after day after day. Most of them actually haven't thought about alcohol or drugs in weeks or months - maybe even years. That's because sanity actually does return - contrary to all of my expectations and I'm sure all of yours. Something happened that absolutely was beyond what I thought could happen in the realm of reality. I thought that at best the program might help me fight alcoholism, give some tools, tricky things to do when the urge came over me. And then I assumed I would constantly be asking some being - someone I wasn't sure even existed - to help me fight alcoholism.

My old understanding of a spiritual program was that it involved me asking help to fight what I still craved. That was as far as my mind could go in visualizing the process. By my close-mindedness - which I thought was scientific realism - I was condemning myself to only experiencing what I had already understood. It excluded any experience that might lie beyond my present limited understanding. I was like the Director of the US Patent Office in the 1890's who recommended to Congress that the office be closed for, as he said, "...everything has already been invented."

I did not realize what lay ahead beyond the beam of my headlights. I never imagined that I would get a taste of things that are right; that I would have a personality change such as it described in Appendix II, or the vital spiritual experience of page 25. This is so profound a change that it is both sufficient and necessary for a full recovery from alcoholism and addiction. This is the

experience for all of us who have walked the path seeking to shed the false self and making ourselves available for a life directed by a power greater by far than my limited intelligence can imagine.

So, you see, there's powerful stuff ahead as we walk the path - and it gets easier. *"We are not fighting alcohol. Neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we have been placed in a position of neutrality, safe and protected. We have not even sworn off. Instead the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us. We are not cocky nor are we afraid. That is our experience. That is how we react as long as we keep in fit spiritual condition. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent upon the maintenance of our spiritual condition."*

I want to come back now to the part of *The Big Book* where it says we have entered the realm of the spirit. For a long time I drifted over that, my mind would not grapple with the idea of "realm of the spirit". It seemed too other-worldly, something reeking of the unreal and I wanted nothing to do with superstitions or those who believed in them. But then I began to realize that there was profound significance to some of the things they were describing. I had listened to Chuck C's tapes from the beginning of my exposure to AA. In the fidget farm in Sonoma in 1968 they played them after every meal and I'd learned a lot of practical stuff from him. When he talked about seeing things with a new pair of glasses, I could accept that. I knew from philosophy that I could come to have a different view if my circumstance were different. And I couldn't help but recall St. Paul's statement: "When I was a child. I spoke like a

child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. But when I had become an adult, I put aside childish ways.” I realized that what you in the program were talking about was maturing spiritually and when I had some spiritual maturity, I would start to see things differently.

When I was a seminarian, just out of high school, first day in first philosophy year, the first lecture was on a part of philosophy called epistemology. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that seeks to understand how we perceive things. Since it was back in the Stone Age – Fred Flintstone was in my class, met Wilma, wasn’t ordained – everything was in Latin: lectures, exams, everything. After sitting through this first day hardly understanding anything he said, we were sent back to seminary to learn a bunch of definitions in Latin. The professor threatened to call on us the next day to see we had learned them. The one definition I still remember from that awful night learning stuff I didn’t understand happens to be relevant to this and many other things in life and learning. Here it is after 50+ years: *Quidquid recipiter, recipiter per modum recipientis*. And what that says is in English : whatever is received is received according to the condition of the receiver. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, if you like. If we have the eyes of the spirit, we see things with spiritual eyes. Otherwise, I am blind to the spiritual depth, to the unity of us all. That’s the new pair of glasses.

Another point I believe worth making is that AA is not a specific, some sort of medicine, for the cure of alcoholism. It is not like insulin for diabetics or

anti-depressants for depression. So when social workers and judges tell people to go to AA, it often sounds like “go take AA, it’ll clear up your drinking.” “You’re drinking too much, go to AA.” I wonder what they’d do if they really knew that what they were prescribing was a profound change in personality as the result of walking a spiritual path. Just a thought!

How many of you went to Sunday school of one sort or another? Lots of hands. Then from back somewhere in the distant past you may remember hearing this passage or something like it: “*The Lord God bestowed upon him wisdom, understanding, prudence, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of God.*” Any of you remember hearing that? (That is, Isaiah 11:2. It’s also in 1st Corinthians. (Paul copied it.)) This list, many of us learned in Sunday Schools, both Jewish and Christian, and the items listed are known generally as The Gifts of the Spirit. When we are considering the Realm of the Spirit it is interesting to note that many of these are mentioned as appearing in our lives as the result of a spiritual awakening. So this is not new stuff nor something discovered by Bill Wilson in 1935. [Isaiah lived about 600 BCE, about 100 years before Siddhartha (Buddha)]. Had it not been for alcoholism we’d have, most of us anyway, missed out on the wisdom of the ages.

Wisdom is often composed of knowledge and humility;

Understanding means our minds are open and insight becomes possible for us.

Prudence is when we act wisely and with fore-thought, with impulse control.

Fortitude means we persevere through adversity. We are able to stick to something because we no longer have that craving for immediate gratification.

Knowledge, we know how little we know and we have some insight into ourselves. We see ourselves with some clarity.

Piety is one that if you grew up in a church, you probably think of it as being really holy. What it actually means is not that at all. Piety means respectful. [One of the books we had to slog through in Latin in my boarding school was *The Aeneid* by Virgil. And the hero of *The Aeneid* is a man called Aeneas, the founder of Rome, according to this version. They always refer to him as *Pius Aeneas* – he was respectful always to the gods. So piety is respect].

Fear of the Lord probably refers to the state of awe in which we approach the infinite mystery to which we give the name God.

Chuck Chamberlain says that with spiritual glasses we see people all connected to one another. Gandhi wrote that there's one thing he knows beyond all else without any doubt and that is the singleness of the human race – we are all one.

I wanted to end up with a practical recommendation. I mentioned this at the retreat back in the spring and many of you have told me how helpful it has

been. There's this Roman philosopher who was born in 55 A.D. called Epictetus. And Epictetus was a rather brilliant and, at the same time, a very practical thinker. What he writes is not some high-fallutin' mental gymnastics. It's stuff that every single one of you here can get your teeth into it at first reading. There's nothing obscure about it and yet it is maybe the most profound material you'll read all year. His book - the English translation of it - is called *The Art of Living*, by Epictetus. I'll read you a few excerpts from it - sort of a sampler - after I tell you just a very little bit about him.

He was born in 55 A.D. He was born to a slave family but he became one of the powerful philosophers in Rome. He was the tutor of Marcus Aurelius who was one of the greatest Roman Emperors.

Excerpts: Here's one that will strike all of us, I think. *"Happiness and freedom begin with the clear understanding of one principle. Some things are within your control and some things are not. It is only after you have faced up to this fundamental rule and learned to distinguish between what you can and cannot control, that inner tranquility and outer effectiveness become possible."*

And here I thought that Lutheran minister invented the serenity prayer from scratch in the 20th century. It's pretty much all here...around 90 A.D.

"Within your control are your opinions, aspirations, and desires. You always have a choice about the content and character of your inner lives. If you think you have free reign over things that are naturally beyond your control or if you attempt to abduct

the affairs of others as your own, your pursuit will be thwarted and you'll become frustrated, anxious and a fault finding person."

"Think about the people you cherish, but remember they have their own distinct character which is quite separate matter from how we happen to think of them."

"When something happens, the only thing in your power is your attitude toward it; you can either accept it or resent it."

And I'll finish with this one:

"What really frightens and dismays us is not external events but the way in which we think about them. It is not events that disturb us but our interpretation of their significance."

That last quote is credited by Albert Ellis as giving him the idea which led to the development of Rational Emotive Therapy and is really the basis of much of Cognitive Therapy. Cognitive therapy tells us that we have a choice as to how we describe situations: will I describe this or that event as presenting a challenge or will I go all dramatic and start to "awfulize" it to myself and anybody who'll listen – thereby flooding myself with the stress chemical, cortisol. People have been on this path trying to figure out how to live for thousands and thousands of years. We are fortunate who will allow ourselves to benefit from their insights.

To finish up (I'm indebted to Patrick B. for this). Some of you may be familiar with the Gospel of Thomas. (It's one of the so-called Gnostic Gospels.) Back in the early days of Christianity, there were so many stories of Jesus around that the hierarchy decided they would put a certain number of them into the

book now regarded as the Canon of the Scriptures. The rest they sent off to monastic libraries in different places. The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in some Coptic monastery in Egypt where it had been preserved for some 1500 years. This Gospel of Thomas has some very interesting ideas in it, particularly for us in a spiritual program.

Let me try to explain what I'm getting at. A very credible theory as to why we as alcoholics and addicts are so self-destructive is that we have such a powerful life force churning away within us - **just busting to get on with its proper work**. That life force at a certain point of frustration delivers an ultimatum to us. It says in effect to our intelligence, "Either I get to live what I came to do or I'll destroy this whole enterprise right now." We don't get to ignore it and divert its energy into some other job. It won't allow us either, to leak it out like toothpaste one inch a day. If you have this powerful a life force it either gets to come out and do its work or else it tears the whole damn thing down.

That said, here's the Gospel of Thomas - probably written around 100 A.D.: *"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."* That pretty much gets us to the wisdom behind the 11th step admonition: *Praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*" It's where the whole thing leads to, just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in the passage I quoted

before: *"The question (in the spiritual life) is not, how shall I become good, nor is it even how shall I do good; it is rather, what is the will of God for me."*

When I was in my first fidget farm, drying out, the guy who ran it was actually a very spiritual and bright man. I remember he asked us what thought was the goal of the steps. Of course we all said, "It's to get sober and stay sober and help other alcoholics." And he said, "No. You're talking about the primary purpose of AA. The goal of the steps is to find out what to do with your life."

This then is what recovery means. It is bringing to the surface that which was lost and hidden. You're a diver bringing gold to the surface from a Spanish wreck, you call what you do the "recovery process." You're a lawyer getting someone's property or money back, that's called "recovery." This recovery we're involved in is finding - maybe for the very first time - the life we came on earth to lead. And if we had not hit the point of "incomprehensible demoralization" we might never have lived our proper lives. Again, that quote from C.S. Lewis, *"Most of us when we were born went into business for ourselves; and only when that business hit bankruptcy did we say to our Maker, 'Oh, was there something you had in mind for me to be doing?'"*

I find it frightening to think of having missed my life - to have spent my years trying to be someone I could never properly be and miss out on being the one person I could be with enthusiasm. For this reason, I am truly grateful that I am an alcoholic who found recovery.

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