

Seamus, Step Five

I try to remember to begin each of these sessions by saying something like the following, “The opinions expressed do not represent the views of my sponsor nor are they in any way an official interpretation of AA. They are just my thoughts and experience over the period of my sobriety.”

I also always like to put the step-of-the-week - we're at the Fifth Step tonight - I like to put each step into context: show where they fit into the program. For, as I never tire of saying, a step is nowhere in itself. It is a stage we pass through on the way from one place to another place, as on your stairs at home. You would never think of camping out on the third step when you're tired and have a nice bed awaiting you upstairs. Similarly, I like to always talk or think about a step within the context of the journey along a path of steps towards a spiritual destination.

Spiritual paths are not a new thing, not something discovered in 1935 by Bill W. For thousands of years people have walked spiritual paths of various kinds always with the goal of achieving freedom from preoccupation with things of the world and from self. Buddha called it

Enlightenment, AA calls it Spiritual Awakening. In the AA steps we have this very effective spiritual path made accessible to us who are alcoholics and addicts, people who are killing ourselves compulsively. We've tried willpower; we've tried all of the things that were in our toolbox, things that worked for solving other problems: determination, sincerity, remembering the pain and suffering – and none of them worked to keep us from picking up. So, for want of any other options, feeling hopeless, we admitted we were powerless and surrendered.

About then, we heard from other people that they'd found a solution to exactly the same problem. And when we heard this, it was the first good news we'd had in a long while. It may not have felt like such great news right away at the beginning, but it was at least good news to hear that I didn't have to die on skid row. I was sure this was my fate, once I had admitted I was an alcoholic. I just knew that my life was over and I'd never get to fulfill any of my dreams.

And that was the fate of alcoholics before AA. Carl Jung talked about it in just those terms. He told Roland H. (Big Book, page 26), that the only hope he'd have for any extended life is to be institutionalized or for his family to hire a bodyguard to keep him from compulsive self-destruction. And the guy said it felt like the gates of

hell had slammed shut behind him. That's exactly how I felt when I first described myself as an "alcoholic" and I've heard from many others that they'd felt the same sense of doom.

You people told me you'd found a way out. At first it didn't make sense to me, but I did believe that you folks were not lying to me - you had nothing to gain. And that was Step Two. Trusting this, I decided that I had little option but to do what you people said you had done. And that was Step Three.

I love that part in the fifth chapter where it says, "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." That sounded so optimistic I could hardly believe what I was reading. "You mean it? Really, really? You wouldn't kid me about something like this, would you?"

And then I had people tell me some very sensible things about the spiritual life. That was a surprise, given where I was coming from. I had been a priest for 11 years at that time, maybe not a very good one (laughter), but I'd had lots of theology and heaps of philosophy. I even had a doctorate degree in it and yet I knew nothing about the spiritual life nor about a spiritual experience.

I came across something the other day that illustrates what I'm trying to explain. "Trying to explain an experience is like trying to describe a tangerine to somebody who's never eaten one."

We could imagine how hard that would be. I'd probably start with something like: You see a tangerine is this thing that looks sort of like an orange. It's maybe a little orangier, or maybe it's a little redder, definitely smaller and it tastes...let me describe the taste: it's like an orange but then a bit like... whatever." It just gets sillier the further I push it.

That's theology, it's like trying to describe a tangerine, while in the program of AA you have an experience - you taste it. In the program you peel the skin off and you pop the tangerine in your mouth and you chomp down on it and the juice squirts out and floods your tongue with an absolutely amazing flavor. *Now* you know what a tangerine tastes like, right?

I hadn't had any experience of this spiritual life, none at all, not in seminary, not as a priest, never until I almost died and then began to walk this path - then I began to get a glimmer.

I work with a lot of new people particularly those in treatment centers and often when I tell them about this spiritual experience

being the only known remedy for their condition, they go, “Oh, man! You gotta be kidding. What does that, that spiritual stuff, have to do with drinking and using?”

And it's as though they'd come into treatment or AA expecting to be taught some sort of mental tricks, or be given some incredible insight that would remove the problem. It's really hard to get across to some of them that anything they'd understand would probably be of no use to them.

In an effort to reach them, I ask them to try for a scientific or open-minded approach to the issue - an empirical approach, in other words. To illustrate what I mean, I ask that you listening or reading come with me on the following little fantasy.

Just for the moment, I want you to imagine we have somebody with us here from the 16th century, the 1500's, and he's from England. Henry the Eighth, Anne Boleyn and all of that good stuff would be part of his world. But, lo and behold, he's suddenly been transported here to our world. He's very intelligent and very curious about life in the 21st century. He's looking at everything, like how you dress and the fact that these are chairs and those are lights and out there are amazing carriages without horses, all sorts of astounding stuff he

going to tell them about when he goes back this evening to the 1500's.

I'm convinced he would be fascinated by something we take for granted as being insignificant because to us it's really low-tech. Does anyone have a cigarette lighter? Can I have that for a second? Can you imagine how intriguing that would be for him (ignites the lighter). He sure as hell would want to take this gadget back with him tonight! (Laughter). Can you imagine how much trouble it was making fire in his day? It was so much trouble that if you let the fire go out, you'd either have to spend hours with a flint or go out and buy live coals from a fire-seller in the street.

He's fascinated by the lighter, flicks it in amazement. "This is really rad," he says (or whatever a cool guy would say in Tudor England). But then, as it starts to get dark in the room and he wants to read something, someone suggests we turn on a light. And our visitor all up on the new technology, very excitedly insists.

"Oh, let me," he says. "Let me be a truly modern, 21st century kind of guy." He's flicking the lighter as he struggles to get up to what we'd told him was the lamp.

Seeing this, you call out, “No, no, no, no!” He looks at you puzzled. “See this thing over here on the wall?” you say pointing to the switch.

But he says, “No, no, no. I want to light the lamp!” And you say, “I understand that you do, but... See the thing on the wall? Just move it.”

“I don’t see why.” He protests. “What’s that got to do with lighting the lamp over here. I see no connection.”

So, what’s happening here?

Here’s a man who lives in a world that’s lit only by fire – you have to set fire to something like a candle or a wick in oil in order to get light. He’s very intelligent but he is trapped in this long-outdated mental model for the production of light. He’s using modern technology but still within the old mental understanding. You’re telling him to do something that to his understanding is not connected to making fire and hence not going to produce light. He has in his hand a very modern way of making fire and he’s determined to use it his way.

So, here’s a bright person stuck in one paradigm, as they call it, and you’re telling him that we have become aware of another

paradigm... another way in which light is produced and that this one does not involve even this new technology he's just discovered, the lighter.

Something similar happens when we come into the program. We just want to stop drinking and we think this will be accomplished by gaining more insights, understanding alcohol and drugs better, resolving our emotional conflicts, getting stronger willpower and being more sincere. These are the tools we are aware of and are determined to use. It is only when we find they do not do the job, that we finally, like our friend from the 1500's, follow the instructions and do something that we do not understand. So we send him off with someone's cigarette lighter and he becomes a big hit in court - till Henry VIII decides he wants to have it.

It is when we finally become willing to go out beyond our present understandings that we can have a new experience. Until then, we experience frustration at repeating the old experience. And, if we persist long enough in our old way, we come to that condition the Big Book characterizes as "incomprehensible demoralization." This is where humility of mind is a definite asset and where holding on to our old ideas is a definite liability.

We begin the walk really on Step Four which we talked about last week. I left out one of the really good parts of Step Four last week. I talked about resentments and fears (writing on board)... but not, SEX!! Yeah, sex! The fun part of Step Four!

There's a really good part in the *Big Book*. It's around pages 68, 69 where it talks about evolving for ourselves a sexual ethic appropriate to an adult life. I think that's a very important point to make.

Many of us are going through life with sexual ethics given to us when we were children and which were appropriate for a child's life. As we've talked about with regard to religion, we need to develop understandings and ethics about sex that work for an adult life. If we were to do the same thing in other matters, we wouldn't cross the street without holding somebody's hand.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I bet you quite a number had to drink or use something in order to overcome sexual inhibitions at first. There's also a good chance that you felt some guilt afterward, because it was such a taboo. Oh, the naughty bits! Touching, down there. Any Monte Python fans? One of the things we often hear around the program is how guilt is a very bad thing and

a symptom of something being against your conscience. I've got some good news and some bad news. Actually, yes, guilt is telling me that I'm going against my conscience. But, and here's the good news, my conscience may be infantile in its content. So, I do need to heed flickers of guilt but then I need to honestly examine the ethic that I am violating to see if it is an appropriate ethic for conducting an adult life. In order to grow emotionally, oddly enough, we have to incur guilt - else we'd be tied to mummy's apron strings still.

If we just consider this for a moment: What is guilt? Guilt is a conflict in which my behavior and my principles clash, right? If my principles are infantile, then my adult behavior is going to create a great deal of guilt. There'll be a clash. When we drank and used drugs, we didn't bother about evolving an adult ethic, we just drank the guilt away - put the old judge to sleep. Of course, in the morning he was awake and banging his gavel and pronouncing us guilty. Part of my worst hangovers was guilt over what I'd done, or been afraid I'd done, the night before. In sobriety then it is an important task to consciously evolve an adult ethic or morality that will reliably guide us as to what is permissible and honest and that will be appropriate to our sober, adult way of life.

This business of guilt is one of the biggest problems one meets as a psychotherapist who works with people in recovery. To resolve this is essential for newly sober people adjusting to a healthy sexual life.

In Step 4 what we're asked to do is to examine the hurt we caused anyone as a result of our sexual behavior. Mostly those hurts are really vivid in our minds. Sometimes it's so vivid that you can't get a sponsee to stop thinking about it. They play the movie in their heads again and again.

I find it helpful in working this part of the Fourth Step to try and view our behavior as it relates to the unity that is the spiritual framework in which we are attempting to live. Did my behavior knit closer relations or did it tear the fabric of this spiritual unity? So to examine our sexual behaviors, our resentments and fears, our emotional and other demands in this context helps us stay away from sliding into the way of thinking that involves such concepts as sinfulness, salvation, God's forgiveness - matters that are the realm of religion.

As we write about these behaviors and how they have disrupted the unity we believe to be the essence of spirituality, we

also look at those characteristics and drives - the craving, clutching and clinging - that drove the behaviors. Often then, we will see the fears, neediness, dependencies, and other egotistical demands that perhaps have affected many areas of our lives.

I recently came across a rather nice list of very common impulses of the fearful ego that can tear the fabric of this spiritual unity we need if we are to be sober. Many of these are so common that they often do not make it into the Fourth Step inventory but are only noticed down at Step Ten.

They are: selfish, competitive, comparing, boasting, controlling, manipulating, envying, resenting, grasping, craving, clinging, rejecting, isolating, shaming, neglecting, gossiping, ignoring, suspecting, deceiving, objectifying, seducing, dominating.

So, this is how I have come to see the goal of the Fourth Step: discovering how I have hurt or injured others in the past and what characteristics in me are likely to continue tearing the fabric of spirituality.

And then we arrive at Step Five.

Remember how the other day we talked about this feeling that who we “only” are will not be enough, in whatever ways we are

insecure about this? Maybe we don't think we're educated enough, or handsome enough, or rich enough. Maybe I feel insecurity about whether you'll get more of whatever than I will, or that I'll not get enough of whatever it is, food, sex, love, money. This is a terrible fear and it has me build this false self which I begin to think is who I am - except that I cannot keep the act together. It keeps falling apart and the "me" that is inside is dying - killing itself off.

If we represent who we really are by this inner circle and the mask or false self by this outer circle, we begin to realize that the space between the two circles is filled with fear. The false self is a creation of our fear. The importance of this understanding to the Fifth Step process is that we begin to see that our fear tries to prevent us taking the Fourth and Fifth Steps. To avoid facing and admitting our shortcomings, insecurities, and the behaviors they have caused, our fear puts up obstacles such as: procrastination, denial that we have secrets and resentments, angry protest against the invasion of privacy, lack of time, the list is endless and driven by egotistical fear.

So as long as I continue to show to my fellows a self that is not who I really am, just so long am I going to be cut off from the spiritual experience and the power I so desperately need in my life. The water

in this canister is becoming more and more fetid while I thirst for the water of life. Jung, it is said, has described our addiction as a desperate spiritual thirst. St. Augustine (born 354 A.D.) says: "You have made us for yourself, Oh, God; and our hearts will remain restless until they rest in thee."

In Step Five I am taking what my fear tells me is a very risky step, I am admitting to God, myself and another human being who I "only" am. Finally pulling the cover off and facing the world and my fellows as I really am without pretence or protection of the mask.

Interestingly enough, one of the things that often happened when I was drinking was that I would drop the mask. You remember those late nights when the party's over, a few friends are standing around the kitchen still, you're Getting Down. The honesty, the self-revelation, the vulnerability - sometimes the delicious trouble - that made these the best of times and, in the morning, the worst of times. Remember how fearful and embarrassed we'd feel the next morning about what we might have said or revealed. "Did I look silly, what did I reveal? They'll think less of me. I probably looked a fool." Dropping the mask was a very scary thing.

When I first attempted to get sober, I used to talk about “getting my act together.” What I meant was that without alcohol and drugs there would be no danger that I’d reveal who I really was or what I really felt - the mask would never slip inadvertently. I could now be the consummate actor. I was leading a double life, talked about in the Big Book (p.73). But, trapped in this shell, not only was I out of touch with the Higher Power, I was also incapable of improving how I felt about myself. When someone complimented me on something I’d done none of the compliment reached “me”. I knew they were just buying the act.

The very thought of standing in the world as “who I only am” is very scary to someone used to hiding behind the false self.

At Step Five we take this risk, we step out in front of God, ourselves and another human being and we say, “This has been my phoniness. This has been who I am not. Here is who I am. I am scared and insecure. I am angry and resentful and envious and jealous. I am greedy for financial security and emotional security. I am greedy as to lust and gluttony. I don’t care about people in need and I am lazy when not being observed. I am so fearfully proud that I am afraid to reveal these things to you. But, I am so determined to

be no longer trapped that I am taking the risk and stepping out from behind this false self.” I believe it is only because we believe those who have taken the path before us that we are willing to do this - to take this risk.

People have been trying for thousands of years to tell us how valuable this casting off of the Self is. “He who would save his life shall lose it.” “He who would lose his life shall save it.” “You shall come to your salvation through fear and trembling.” In taking the Fifth Step, I understood for the first time what this last prediction of Jesus meant. Sitting in a scripture lecture or kneeling in a seminary chapel, the expression “coming to salvation through fear and trembling” seemed as remote as climbing Mount Everest. But getting into the car with Father Joe, clutching my composition book, I was prepared to take my Fifth Step while he drove around Sacramento, but filled with fear and trembling. I knew though that my sobriety depended upon my revealing to this man everything about me that I had carefully hidden from my fellows and even from myself. It felt so risky I wondered if he’d tell me to get out and leave me to walk home across town.

As I told him who I really was and what things I had done that had hurt others and myself, he helped me feel a bit more at ease by sharing some of his life, some of the things he had found it hard to talk about in his recovery. Gradually over the next couple of hours, with his encouragement, I read the entire mess to him. As I came out from behind the shell I was scared still but I felt safe with him. I'd made it and then he said something I never expected, he asked me if I had time for a cup of coffee and a piece of pie. He would have coffee and pie with me? After everything I'd told him?

Over coffee, he asked me, "How do you feel?" And I remember thinking about it. How did I feel?

"It's a funny thing," I said finally. "But I feel very ordinary."

"Is that good?" He asked.

"It's somehow a great relief to feel very ordinary."

He smiled and said, "Imagine how much energy it took to keep that false front in place." He paused then and I remember exactly what he said next. "Who were you trying to be if it is a relief to only be a human being?"

Much later it occurred to me that I was far more terrified of talking to Father Joe and telling him this stuff than I was of telling it to

God. Now, doesn't that seem ridiculous? Another human being was scarier than God? Was it perhaps that I couldn't control Father Joe's mind? (Laughter). I was telling a totally independent mind that was free to think whatever it liked about me. It was this disparity in my own experience that really got me in touch with my need for a power truly greater than myself, a power whose mind was independent of my mind.

I came to realize that something I had created out of my thoughts, something I could trot out when I felt like praying and have it be what I wanted, was not really a power greater than myself. I would use this for my purposes: "Today, it's going to be a really, nice forgiving God." And then, "Oh, it's going to be a punishing God today because I've been a bad boy. I'll be very repentant before I put it away in the closet again." This is what kids do with dolls, right? They have them play the part they want them to play depending on their mood. Maybe that's why doing this is called "i-doll-atry". Bad joke? I know!! Sorry!

On page 43 of the Big Book it says, "Once more, the alcoholic, at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink." By the way, for those who haven't been here before, I'll

repeat that it does not say, "...against the *second* drink", which is what I thought it meant for the longest time. So, we have no effective mental defense against the first drink. It goes on, "Neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power."

I thought about "higher" - I taught high school English for a short time in Sacramento, so I know things like: high, higher, highest. Positive, comparative, superlative. Higher is the comparative form of the adjective. So I'm looking for a comparatively higher power. High, higher, highest. We keep talking in the program about a "Higher Power". Obviously the writer of the Big Book must have thought about using "Highest" and decided against it. They agreed to describe what we are seeking as a power that was "Higher" than what I had previously been using to overcome alcoholism. "...the alcoholic... has no *mental* defense against the first drink." So maybe, for those of us who are seekers, we humble our minds and head out on a path along which we are told we will experience a power that is Higher or Greater than our minds.

I see people new to the program who sometimes torture themselves over issues of belief. They feel they have to believe in

God before they set out on the path. If we are rigorously honest, most of us will discover that when we came to the program we relied on drugs and alcohol to get us through our days. If that is not belief I don't know what is. Our actions said we believed in drugs and alcohol while our minds lied and told us we believed in God. Sanity and spirituality both require us to have our minds in contact with the reality of our actions. Chapter Five, How It Works, tells us that for the program of recovery to work I need the capacity to be honest with myself.

I would assure the person new to sobriety who has difficulty believing in God or the Higher Power or any of those high-minded concepts, that they are not alone. There has crept into the program at times an implied "orthodoxy" as to what one is supposed to believe and I find it un-helpful. If, as I do, one knows that something real has happened to us as we walk the path, then that self-hype - that attempt to talk one's self into believing in something not yet experienced - is grating and reeks of lack of faith.

It talks about in The Big Book about being scientific and it says we are not at all scientific if we reject things before we try them. It recommends that we adopt an empirical approach to the program.

Does it work? Try it and see. Follow the steps we took and see for yourself. We have a program that is one of attraction and not promotion.

Early on in my sobriety when I was into promoting people to believe, Doctor Ed, a good friend of my sponsor laid a little story on me - possibly at Father Joe's suggestion. It illustrates the point though.

Imagine the reaction you'd get if, having heard of some remarkable discovery by a scientist in Germany, you rushed over and asked a scientist at the University of California in the same field, "Dr. So-and-So in Heidelberg has discovered such and such. Do you believe this is true?" Do you for a moment imagine that the local scientist is going to proclaim, "I believe. I believe." I don't think so. He's far more likely to say, "Well, if I get his laboratory notes and I can duplicate the experiment exactly, then I'll believe if I get the same results." That's what being scientific means: that I can duplicate the results by duplicating the methodology. "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path."

If we can set out on this path without talking ourselves into believing ahead of time, then when something happens we will know

that it really happened - that it was not something we'd talked ourselves into. True faith involves doubt. In fact, faith without doubt may not even be faith but delusion. As with true courage - which necessarily includes fear. Courage that does not include fear is probably found in a sociopath only. I'm sure some of you guys and gals here have been in combat in one war or another, have experienced this. I've worked with an awful lot of Vietnam vets and one of the things they told me really scared them was the man who had no fear. They did not want a sociopath walking point.

When we're talking about a person with faith, we're talking about somebody who walks out along a path yet cannot see where the path is going. Like driving a car at night, you have faith that out beyond the headlights there is a road. We are walking it *con-* fide (dently), i.e. with faith. That word, oddly enough, has come to mean "with certainty," but it actually implies that we are walking it with faith because we do not see what is ahead.

Another point I want to make at this juncture is that our minds - wonderful as they are - are not the guides to this spiritual process. The mind will try to put itself forward as the guide, the one who can lead you, but this is not the realm of thought, this world of the spirit.

The poor mind sometimes tortures us with its befuddlement as we go along the way. It will spin out and be full of confusion because something is happening that it is not controlling. At times like this - and be assured, there will be such times - it is important to remember that we are on a path seeking to be acted upon by a “power greater than the mind.” So, it may be helpful to remember how powerless the mind was in describing the tangerine. It was only by the experience that we “knew” about a tangerine.

In sort of a similar way this happens in the spiritual path. The remedy - the only remedy we know for our condition - is a vital spiritual experience.

We have all sorts of people coming into the program seeking recovery. All sorts of people in the program and all sorts of people who stay sober through working the program. I know for a fact that there are many, many sober agnostics in the program and I’m quite sure there are sober atheists in the program. In San Francisco there was a group called Atheist Agnostic Non-smoking. And in the 70’s, the one thing everybody wondered at was the “non- smoking?” Everything else seemed possible in the ‘70’s, so long as we could still smoke.

I hope that those who are agnostic or atheist here tonight take courage. This is not a church or a temple. AA is very emphatic that no one can require us to believe anything - despite what some of our bleeding deacons at times imply. And, by the way, the word "atheist" just means that one does not hold a *theistic* (belief in a personal God) theology. There are many very spiritual people who perhaps have a *deist* (not a personal) notion of God. (Confusing I know, since *theus* is god in Greek and *deus* is god in Latin.)

Yet again, many spiritual paths such as Buddhism do not seek a deity of any sort.

The topic of God is like the topic of spirituality. It is one of those things that our people (*homo sapiens*) have wondered about and speculated about from the earliest times, from back in those caves - thousands and maybe hundreds of thousands of years ago. They have tried to get their minds around it - tried to have some way of relating to this power they felt was somehow behind everything and empowering everything from pregnancy and birth to planting and crops, from the sun and moon and the stars in the heavens. In more recent millennia, as in ancient Greece, they had Zeus and Jupiter and a whole colony of gods. The Greeks and the Romans had hundreds

of gods, major gods, minor gods and gods responsible for every single aspect of life. And then the Israelites, whom we read about in the bible, had a kind of novel idea. They had only one god who was responsible for everything and it is from this notion that most of our ideas about God have evolved. Some of the things these Israelites taught about their God are very important, I think, for us in the program of AA.

One of the things they were careful not to do was to capture God in any way. In fact they didn't even say the name. You hear people today calling the god Jehovah and others calling it Yahweh. Actually, they're only guessing at the pronunciation because the word was never written with vowels. It was written with four consonants only and it's kind of a guess by the modern scripture scholars how it would be pronounced — because they didn't pronounce it. It was too sacred. It would be like capturing the God to say his name. They called the god Elshadai, lord of the hills. They called their god, Elohim, which is the creator god or simply Adonai - Lord. They called God by a number of different names, but the name of "God" (I am who I am) was too sacred to pronounce. They also did not have graven images of god, no pictures or statues. All the pagan people

had graven images, idols of this kind of god and that kind of god. The Greeks and Romans had pictures and statues of their gods. In the early Christian era, they didn't picture God either. They pictured Jesus, they pictured saints, but they didn't picture God, not till the Middle Ages and the great Renaissance (the Rebirth of Europe after the Dark Ages).

Most of us have seen depictions of Michelangelo's God in the Sistine Chapel: God the Creator. You know who it is? Zeus. Because up until then there was no image of God the Creator. It was not thought to be respectful of the awe due God. It was regarded as reducing this immense power to something that could be captured in the image of a man. We talked about this in the first session, how the little vial of water was useless and even massively misleading if used to illustrate the Pacific to somebody who has never seen the ocean. "This gives you an idea of what the Pacific Ocean is like and its power. You can see how when it is riled up by a storm it can tear whole cities apart. Oh you should just see a tsunami in this!" An idea of God, as Tolstoy, Leo Tolstoy said, "...has to be one of the silliest concepts imagined by man." Capturing God in an image I have

created out of my ideas - even if I call the ideas “theology” amounts to the same thing.

I don't know if any of you recall a book called *Your God is Too Small?* It was very big in AA back in the 60's and 70's — written by a minister called J.D. Phillips. It was practically required reading for us then. The idea of it was that it would be hard to enlarge our spiritual lives if we clung to an infantile idea of God. So the author suggested we don't reduce God to some ferocious schoolmaster god, or a punishing god, or the hit-man god who'll get you, or the mega manager god who does our will. The reason being, that these often well-intentioned notions actually are reducing or attempting to capture God in a human image, thus making it something that will be of no use to us. God, the big Book tells us, is *either everything or nothing at all*. The notion of a person up there with a big register keeping score of our good and bad deeds is not far removed from any other form of “false god” whether created out of gold or plaster or carved out of wood – or made from ideas. They are all human creations that reduce the infinite to a finite idea and thus depriving the human mind of the humble awe that the infinite mystery inspires.

On page 53 of *The Big Book* it said, "We could not postpone or evade when we were crushed by a self-imposed crisis, we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing." That's pretty strong language. And it goes on to say, "**God either is or He isn't.**"

This Higher Power and this vital spiritual experience either are real or they are not. If we have faith worthy of the name, we don't have to sell it compulsively as a person with a bogus remedy will sell his snake oil. We walk the path at first believing the word of others who have no reason to lie, nothing to gain by deceiving us. Then, when the spiritual experience happens for us, we proceed calmly and surely in service to God through our fellows. I believe that it is not a good idea at all to dwell on the natural relief we get when we first make the decision of Step Three. It is not uncommon for new members to confuse this with the spiritual awakening we get as the result of working all the steps. Not to denigrate that first wonderful feeling of relief, but it is something like the relief one gets when he has made a list of things he has to do and the list seems to make the project seem manageable. This is not to be confused with the feeling of real accomplishment when we have actually finished the tasks.

Similarly, with Step Three, we are told in the Big Book that this good feeling we get at making the decision has no lasting effect if not followed by a vigorous course of action, namely the steps 4-12.

So, we don't have to talk ourselves into the awakening through well-intentioned self-talk or prayers nor do we try manufacturing some sort of bootleg faith. Faith is a gift from God and there seems no better way to prevent getting the real thing than by claiming to God that we already have it, that we gave it to ourselves because our sponsor was on our back for not having any.

If you have a mind that is even a bit skeptical, speaking as one who was and is, I suggest that you set out and walk the path of steps with an open mind, a mind humble enough to know it does not know everything and willing to following someone else's suggestion long enough to test what they are telling you. In this approach, you will never be beset by that most awful middle-of-the-night dread: Did something real happen, did I have a spiritual awakening, or did I want it so badly that I just talked myself into thinking it happened?

This is an amazing spiritual program. It introduces us to wisdoms and truths that have been around for thousands of years but that we have somehow never understood or even heard about.

When we do open our ears and minds to these concepts they sound new and even revolutionary. It was the same phenomenon 2500 years ago when Siddhartha taught them or 2000 years ago when Jesus spoke of them. “Those who have ears to hear let them hear,” he said; but he knew that there would be those who “hearing could not hear.”

To be ordained a priest back in the Stone Age, you had to do a degree in philosophy and then do four years of what was called divinity. I then had five more years getting a doctorate. The point is, that in all that time I never heard where God was to be found or, at least, never understood it – if it was mentioned. (Laughter). It was not until I became a hopeless alcoholic, a “condemned man” so-to-speak, and was forced to read a stupid blue book written by a hundred alcoholics who probably didn’t have a degree in philosophy or theology between them that I was told where to look. “We found the Great Reality... (in capital letters Great Reality). We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis, it is only there that he may be found.”

Wow! Isn’t that amazing? And I was looking everywhere else, out there, up there, gazing at the heavens or at the altar, looking

everywhere but inside myself. Not only was this not mentioned in church, I don't think I had ever heard that passage spoken about in an AA meeting. I think that's a pity because I know that an awful lot of people are looking for God and what's really sad, you'll even hear them say things like, "One thing I know for sure, it's not in me." Sad, isn't it, when all the time God was in us and with us. We do such stilly stuff, we human beings. Is it that this seems just too good to be true, that we can't let ourselves believe it?

Do any of you watch the TV show *Bones*? I love Doctor Brennan's attitude. Because her partner, Seely, is a very religious Catholic and she's totally the opposite - she was never raised in any religion. He'll talk about "the man upstairs" and she'll go, "Who?" She is completely befuddled by the idea that an adult would be walking the earth thinking there's some man upstairs watching him.

I hate to say it, but a lot of theologians down through the ages weren't a whole lot better than Seely Booth. You'd be surprised. And especially, if you've walked this path of steps and had some spiritual experience as a result, when you hear some clergy person preach about how to find God. It probably will involve filling out collection envelopes.

But having walked the path, we have found the Great Reality deep down within us; we've come spiritually awake. And, if I have in fact found the God within me, then I also am aware - vividly - that it is within you also; that down deep, behind the eyes in you, beneath the flesh and bone of you, down underlying the molecules and atoms and quarks of you, that there is the Great Reality – the Higher Power *in which we live and move and have our being.*

If I could remain aware of this more of the time, how could I act towards anyone out of my uncaring, exploitative, objectifying defects? If I could remain aware, I'd remember that every one of us is a manifestation of that Great Reality. I believe that it is this awareness that is the basis for and motivating power of the spiritual life we are trying to enlarge.

For years I sought God through the study of philosophy and theology and by fervent prayer and scripture study, in other words, I tried to reach God with my mind. I now realize that, at least for me, I cannot find God with my mind. Perhaps the mind is incapable of finding God, I can't speak for everyone about that. But what I do know is this, that I have found the activity of a Power, greater than my thinking mind, at work through my experience of a profound change;

a change I was incapable of bringing about except by walking this spiritual path.

We talked about it early on – the change of taste (*recta sapere*) that happens for us, where we develop a taste for things that are right. I remember in San Francisco one night a young man who had kept coming to our meeting - we called it the San Andreas Meeting because it's nobody's fault – a '70's phenomenon: a non-smoking meeting with a smoking break. We were standing out in this little alley smoking and this young man, who'd been really resentful at having to come to these "goddam AA meetings" told us of the weird thing that had happened to him. He'd found himself looking forward all Friday afternoon to going to the meeting and being there in the alley smoking with us. For the previous five years all he dreamed of at the end of his week was being in Perry's bar on Union Street. To him this was a massive change of taste. To me it was startling in that, listening to him, I realized that a similar change had occurred in me and I had not even noticed it happening. "I don't know how it came about," he said. "But something has happened and I didn't make it happen."

And that's what I think describes the experience of most of us in recovery - "something happened". It isn't that we got willpower or help fighting our impulses and cravings. It is something all together more profound: We got a taste for things that are right.

I was telling a friend of mind in Ft. Lauderdale today that we were talking about God tonight. I told him that last week I'd even promised that he was going to be right here on this stage tonight. He said, "So how are you going to explain that? You could always say there were weather delays on the East Coast and he couldn't make it?" Actually, I hope you now realize that God is here on the stage, in the seats, all around. God is the name for that in which we live and move and have our being.

In the second appendix of *The Big Book*, page 567, there's a wonderful nugget of truth . Starting at the second line from the bottom of that page:

"With few exceptions, our members find they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently come to identify with their own concept of a power greater than themselves."

I think the sad thing - in this, the 21st century - is that the word *unsuspected* is just as applicable now as it was in 1939 or 1940 or in the year 1,500 or 1,000.

We have tapped an unsuspected inner resource. I heard this story from a friend who had gone to Sunday school at her synagogue as a child. It seems that God, very shortly after creating mankind, was having second thoughts about how competent we would be. So he's talking to Gabriel and Michael, the arch angels about his fears. He says, "You know guys, I think I have to be with them. I got to be there somewhere near at hand." But they say, "No, no, no boss. If you're there with them all the time, they'll never grow up, they'll never get any skills of their own." But the boss continued to fret. So one of them says, "If you were maybe on the top of those mountains there, called the Himalayas, you could look down and keep an eye on them." They thought about this for a bit but in the end God said, "No, they'd just kill themselves trying to get up there to talk to me." And they said, "There's a big trench going to be there...there when the plates shift and the ocean forms. You could be down in it." And he said, "I don't think so. They'll drown themselves once they suspect that's where I am. They're not very bright."

The situation went on for a while, with God worried and the Archangels not able to help out. But then one day, God comes in to the committee room and he's smiling and after a little prompting he whispers to them his solution. "I think I've got it. I'm going to hide where they'll never think to look."

We tapped an unsuspected inner resource which we identify with our own concept of a power greater than ourselves. And all that is in the book. You see, I did not make any of it up.

I hope you had contact with the God tonight. I know that I did and I thank you all for coming.

- END -