

Seamus

Steps 6 & 7

My name is Seamus and I'm an alcoholic.

Audience: Hi, Seamus.

Seamus: And I need to remember that every day. I also need to always say at the beginning of these talks that what my remarks are just my impressions and opinions drawn from my walk along this spiritual path that we're all on. I've agreed to share my thoughts because I believe we all need to contribute to the on-going conversation that is the AA program. The founders of AA set an example of humility when they tell us on page 164, "*We know but a little. More will be revealed to you and to us.*" What I see as important in that statement is that they do not intend that revelations about recovery not end in 1939 with the writing of the book. In other words, all of us have insights that we contribute by sponsoring, sharing at meetings or in a series of talks like this.

When I first came into the program what I wanted was a way to stop drinking or even less than that: how to avoid getting in trouble with drinking. I was not seeking any of the spiritual or life-changing

effects I found in AA. I was looking to learn from experts the tricks they used for staying sober and out of trouble. I knew I had to stop drinking but, beyond that, I wanted to be left alone. And when you said, "Keep coming back," I was thinking, "Only long enough to learn your tricks." I was sure that if I could just stay stopped, everything in my life would be fine. The way I looked at my life's course was that I was doing great until alcohol began to interfere. So, when I stop drinking, I'll get on with doing my life just fine; no need for all this AA stuff.

I've heard lots of people since then try to warn other newcomers, "If you want to know why you're drinking, stop drinking for a while. You'll see." I heard this back then too and thought they were just being dramatic in a prophets-of-doom sort of way. I was sure they had an agenda of converting me to something that I wouldn't like. I continued to think this until I had been sober for a while. See what a miracle AA is that it could still work in spite of my paranoia!

When I first stopped drinking for a considerable period of time, I became this incredible control freak. This was control that involved every aspect of my life, from compulsive exercise, jogging and weight

lifting, to dietary purity (no sugar or white bread), to obsessive work – even on weekends. I was the only priest in The Chancery on Saturdays and Sundays. I had my car detailed almost weekly and I never re-wore a suit without having it cleaned. I had a black suit for every day of the week. You should have seen me: perfection itself in my French cuffs – the most perfect priest in the Sacramento diocese. I was so perfect I squeaked, I couldn't stand it, I felt so superior. I would have a stack of Dictaphone belts (those were like a fore-runner of the c.d.) waiting for the secretary on Monday mornings when she got in. The poor woman started every week behind the 8 ball. As I look back on my condition, I think I needed to drink again for all of that brittle façade to collapse.

When I was drinking, this here (points to the outer circle), this act of mine, would fall apart and next morning I would be horribly embarrassed that people at the party might have seen me as I was. I might have let them have a glimpse of myself. And sobriety at first meant I could now put the act back together again; I would never again, ever, let anyone see what it was covering. Mornings, after a bad night, I would tell myself and anyone who would listen, that I needed “to get my act back together”. I wanted so badly to get sober

so I could get the act in place and keep it there. My frightened ego felt it needed that protective shell, for it did not believe I – being myself - was enough.

Somebody asked me the other day after last Friday's meeting, "Where did you get that idea of an outer circle? Did you make it up?" they asked? No, I really didn't make it up. The Big Book talks about the idea on page 73. Well, they don't exactly draw a circle outside another circle as I have on the board, but they talk about this act, this shell we hold out to the world. Actors. The word, "person" comes from the Latin for a mask, *persona*, as worn by actors in the open-air theatres. (There is speculation that this may actually have come from the fact that these masks, often made of clay, had a small megaphone where the mouth hole was, to help project the voice, thus *per sona* – "sound through").

But more than most people, the alcoholic leads a double life. He is very much the actor. To the outer world he presents his stage character. This is the one he likes his fellows to see. He wants to enjoy a certain reputation but knows in his heart he doesn't deserve it. And then the inconsistency is made worse by the things he does on his sprees. (p. 73)

(I love the language here, so 1930's. A "spree..." When has someone last used that word to describe "getting wasted"?) The paragraph continues:

He trembles to think that someone may have observed him. We have seldom told anyone the whole truth nor have we followed their advice.

"Phonies Anonymous," Hugh M., my Washington, D.C. sponsor, used to call us.

For as long as I am hidden behind this shell, just so long will it be impossible for me to be, (a) either acted on by the Higher Power or, (b) to discover what his will for us is. In the Step Three prayer we ask, "Relieve of the bondage of self." not so as to become a saint or a perfect human being, but "so I may better do thy will."

It is vital for our recovery, then, that we take the risk of dropping this mask so that we may come to trust who we "only" are. (I use "only" here for the purpose of isolating the authentic creature, distinct from the "act". It does not imply that my authentic self is less. Quite the opposite is in fact the case.) The first experience of stepping out from behind this façade for a lot of us is when we take our Fifth Step. It's a very vulnerable condition, having another human being know

and see this authentic being (points to inner circle) unprotected by the act, letting them see the unadorned, un-enhanced me.

I had an experience of this sort early on - long before I was really in AA. My sponsor-to-be took me to this drying out place up in Sonoma County - we called them: "fidget farms" back then. This one was called Truman's and run by Truman Harley - a very scary individual to a young drunk like me, frightened of my own shadow and suicidal. I was still a Catholic priest then, in graduate school for my doctorate and thought of myself as something of an intellectual. Truman even appeared to recognize this about me the day we arrived as we're still standing in the front patio, Father Joe and Truman chatting. Me? I'm trying to look calm and to not shake. He was telling Joe, "I think we have an intellectual here. Intellectuals can be difficult."

At first, I was gratified that I had been recognized for what I was, but there was something a bit off, something about his tone of voice that didn't ring true. I asked him what exactly he meant by an intellectual and how were we intellectuals more "difficult" than the ordinary. I had walked right into it, up to my boot tops. He explained - to a grinning Father Joe's delight - that his definition of an

intellectual was: "A person educated beyond his capacity."

(Laughter.)

So, picture this pompous, pious(odious), young drunk, shaking in his clerical shoes, entering a fidget farm used by lay people and run by someone without proper respect for the clergy. I decided that I was going to hide out in the wooden cabin they'd assigned me - maybe for the entire four weeks. I had just thrown myself down on the narrow bed hoping not to see snakes and spiders, when a knock came on the door and someone said, "You're to come down to lunch." And I said, "I don't feel like lunch. I will maybe be down for dinner." And he said, "You don't have a choice. Truman says you're to come down for lunch." I was already terrified of this Truman - a big bear of a man, and grumpy - and beside, it was quite clear from my encounter that he hated priests.

I followed this guy down to the main house and he sort of led me to a place at this long, farm table with about 20 people seated at it - Truman at the top, presiding. My escort kind of pointed me to the one empty seat. I was like a horse with blinders on, not daring to look at anybody.

I sat down and of all things, they had served soup. #@&*%!!

Now, if you were like me, soup was the one food I avoided eating in public at all costs, because, any public attempt to eat soup would result in public humiliation. My hand would start to shake about a foot above the plate and I'd jibble every drop of the damned soup. Talk about humiliation. Sitting at lunch in the cathedral rectory having lunch with the bishop and other high mucky mucks, sprinkling my soup all over the table cloth. Not good!! I'd always get it up to about here, the shakes would start and it would spill all over the place.

So, I knew not to even attempt to eat soup with 17 or 18 strangers all looking at me. And I knew too that they were all sizing me up and wondering what a young, intellectual like me was doing in a place like this, slumming. So I'm sitting there staring into the plate and after 10 hours of agony, Truman says, "Seamus, eat your soup." "I don't feel..." I started to say. "Eat your soup." He was emphatic.

So, I tried it and, sure enough, the shakes started right on schedule - right about shoulder level - and I let the spoon collapse back into the plate again. What was the use? I was humiliated and they were probably all snickering behind their hands at me. Why should I stay in a place like this?

Just then, the guy next to me on my right said something that nobody had ever said to me as a priest before, something so rude and impolite I could hardly believe my ears. "You've got a pretty good shake there, Seamus." Even if they had seen me shake in the cathedral, they wouldn't have commented, they were better brought up than this fellow. I was flat out mortified - and in front of all these strangers too. I was highly offended until the next thing out of his mouth, nudging me with his elbow, he said, "Mine is almost gone."

At this, I looked over at his hand and he did have a bit of a shake. I glanced at the person on the other side then and noticed that he had a bit of a shake too. Then the first guy says, "You see that old fart across the table there?" I looked over and there was this old guy, brown as a berry, wrinkles and age spots, grinning from ear to ear. My neighbor said, "Would you believe it, he's been here nearly a month and he's still putting the soup in his ear." I looked over and the old guy's lifting a spoonful of soup and sure enough it was splashing all over the place. And he's grinning at me. What sort of place is this where it's normal to have the shakes?

This was my first experience of a spiritual connection based upon a shared weakness. Something that I had been desperately

ashamed of - my shameful shake - all of a sudden was not something to be embarrassed about. It was amazing! As I look back on it now, it was like a promise of what was to come in the program, the sense of fellowship. I went on then with my lunch and jibbled about half of the soup into my mouth, unashamedly, ate some bread and cold cuts, looked around at all the smiling faces at the table. Everyone introduced themselves and had no idea that I was anyone special. I was relieved to discover that to them I was just another drunk. They had not been thinking about me at all, as it happens. They'd all been talking about someone who was leaving that day, someone they were preparing a surprise party for.

We went out after lunch and sat around on the patio and we talked about our drinking, about lying about drinking, about driving drunk and being pulled over by the police. I was amazed to find I was not the only one who'd had a problem hiding bottles and disposing of empties. I felt like a Martian, who'd been trying to pass as an Earthling up until then, who accidentally stumbles across a colony of his own people. Here was a place where I could let my antenna up from under the hat. I didn't have to pretend to be from France or whatever as did the Coneheads. I didn't have to pretend anything, for

these people already knew more about me than my family ever had - just by the shared condition. I was just an alcoholic and they were too. This is the basis for the spiritual connection we have with each other in the fellowship.

A brief catch-up for those who haven't been at these talks before or who are new to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous: We start out on this path, not because we wanted to be good little boys and girls, but because we have a hopeless condition. There is nothing I can do to keep myself from engaging in my self-destructive behavior. I will surely continue to use alcohol and drugs till they destroy everything I value and then drink or drug myself to death.

We find out there is one known remedy for this: something called "a vital spiritual experience" (pages 25, 26, 27 in the Big Book). Somebody pointed this out to me, that this was the active ingredient in our recovery. This is the medicine, this vital spiritual experience and the steps are the way in which we get it. Thus, in Step 12 we say, "*Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps...*" Somehow, once I saw this connection clearly - almost like a syllogism - the program made sense. The steps were not just boxes I had to

check to become a good AA member. They are steps of a path. If I wanted to live I needed to walk the steps to the spiritual goal.

Having gone through seminary and been a priest for over a decade, I'd had lots of religion, but no access to the power I needed to change my self-destructive behavior. I would pray and pray in desperation but I never got an answer. I never seemed to get through to the Power. Jokingly, I'd say that I kept getting the answering machine: "Your call is very important to us, but all our operators are currently busy with other customers, etc." Somehow I was not able to access the power that I believed was there and I couldn't understand why. I was frustrated; incomprehensibly demoralized, even. "*Lack of power that was (my) dilemma*" (p.45) described me perfectly.

I now see that I was stuck in an old idea, a misunderstanding of my relation to God. I'm sure it's the one I picked up as a child. In this version, I was down here walking the earth while God was up there - somewhere with all the power. I had to beg for assistance that might or might not come. I never was clear under what circumstance I would be assisted and when the answer would be "No."

As childish as this notion was, it had somehow survived my years in seminary, through philosophy and theology, and the years as a priest. In fact, much of theology did more to reinforce this picture than to correct it. God was somebody or something out there and the clergy were the link between humans and their God. It may even have been a heresy to believe that the god lived within us and it was almost certainly heresy to imply that god was incarnate in each of us, as Ralph Waldo Emerson taught. Why, such an idea as that would put the clergy out of business. So, until I came to AA, I had always felt that somebody out there or up there was watching me and keeping a score card of good and bad things I had done. And then there would be this dread day of reckoning. As far as I could make out from the lack of assistance I was getting, this God did not think much of my effort at living.

When I first came into AA and read the steps, I saw the inventory and the confession steps followed by the amends steps, and my first reaction was that I had done all this many times since childhood and it hadn't helped. In fact, going back to confession and the sacraments with great sincerity was among the first things I had tried - a number of times. "Don't they have any better suggestions?" I

grumbled to Father Joe. Ever-patient as with a difficult child, he suggested that since I had no better suggestions, maybe I should try doing it their way - see what happened. I shrugged mentally and decided, "What the heck. Maybe they had stumbled onto something, some different wrinkle - maybe something Protestant - that worked better than the Catholic way." That's how desperate I was.

(Laughter).

So I tackled the house cleaning that was recommended with the assistance of the Big Book and Father Joe. It was about this time that he, (after listening to my latest theory about how the program worked), suggested that maybe these steps 4-7 were not about forgiveness of sins at all. He suggested I re-read the Step Three prayer and see if I could discover the purpose of these next steps. I did read the prayer several times and eventually I got it. The steps were about relieving me of the bondage of self because "*selfishness and self-centeredness... were the root of the problem.*" So, this was about becoming less self-centered, self-willed, self-directed, even self-improving. And why did I need to be relieved of these? So that I might better do the will of God. AH! HA! Now I saw it: I couldn't

possibly become one with the Power so long as I was imprisoned by this false self.

Step Six confronts me with the challenge: Am I entirely ready for God to remove all my self-involvement as expressed by my defects of character? Am I ready to clean house completely? What does that mean? If cleaning house didn't simply involve confessing my sins, what else was involved in it? I have come to believe that it means I must be willing to live without the mask, without the image I hold out to the world and my fellows; this image which I use to protect myself from being seen by you. To refer to the diagram with the concentric circles, the step asks if I am willing to live without this outer ring or shell.

I was struck by how in the first paragraph of Chapter 5 of the Big Book, *How it Works*, the emphasis is on honesty: "...a program that demands rigorous honesty, ...being honest with themselves, ...capacity to be honest." It seemed clear then, that I could not be touched by the power I so desperately needed unless I was willing to present myself to my fellows as I am - not as some enhanced version of myself.

Was I entirely willing to be authentic? Am I willing to let go of the fearful demands for status that may cause me to lie and pose, compare and judge; the craving for more financial, sexual, emotional security, more food and drink; the envy of what another has and all comparisons; the vigilant anger and resentments by which I cling to what I have; and the sloth by which I no longer care for others or for God?

So, to be entirely ready to have God remove all these “protections” seemed a lot to ask. Giving up this much seemed to be giving up a great deal of who I thought I was – giving up much of my personality. How am I to survive in the world without these instincts? I’ll be taken advantage of, run over by the ruthless, underestimated, undervalued, unnoticed. It seemed a lot to ask of someone so fearful already.

And the funny part of this is that in the *Big Book*, Step Six gets only one paragraph on page 76. You know the one that talks about when we go home after taking our Fifth Step? We examine whether we have done a thorough job, right? And then we turn the page and then we are on Step Six. I wonder why it’s given so little space in the book. Could it be that the book was written largely by people who

were still early on their path? In the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, there's a lot of information on Step Six.

(Have you read the *12 By 12*? Some people really dislike the *12 By 12*. They feel it's just Bill W's ideas and he was just another flawed drunk. But I think there's a lot of really good stuff in it.)

In Step Six it talks about why doesn't God remove all the defects as he removed the obsession to drink. Why aren't all the defects of character removed? It explains that our self-destructive behavior in alcoholism is contrary to our survival, whereas the other instincts that we are asking to have removed are congruent with our survival. Our desire for security, for prestige, for reproduction, for nourishment. These things are all congruent with our survival, i.e. they help me survive; we just tend to do them to excess. So letting go the excesses and asking God to remove the excesses of congruent instincts is the subject of Step Six.

I love this Chapter Six - *Into Action*. Some people treat it as though it was entitled, "*Into Thinking*." (Laughter).

Noel B. from County Cavan the other day told me his mother used to say to the boys: "You'll never plow the field if you only turn it over in your mind." This perfectly describes many of us in our

approach to the program. We make a decision to walk the path of steps and imagine it's already done. We make a list and relax as though we've accomplished the items listed.

If we answer the question to our satisfaction, "Have we been thorough so far?" we then get to Step Six. We have emphasized willingness as being indispensable. Can he now take them all, every one? If we still cling to something we will not let go of, we ask God to help us be willing. (Big Book, p.76)

Father Joe would have me use the seven deadly sins as a way of looking at my instincts and see how I was at times considering them even as assets. Many of you are familiar with this very ancient list: pride, avarice, lust, gluttony, envy, anger, and sloth or acedia.

I discovered that I used one of them to correct the excesses of another one. You look in the mirror and you see this thing in front has been getting way too big. Looking fat and out of shape offends my pride, so I use my pride to curb my gluttony. Likewise, I use my avarice to curb my sloth. "Really, how can I let go of such useful defects?" I ask. "How would I be motivated to remedy a bad situation if it wasn't for playing one against another?" It takes willingness and

trust to walk out beyond what I have previously known in the hopes of finding a new source of motivation,

Sometimes, however, I think that we get a little carried away with the concept of perfection. I hear people even say that their sponsor, on hearing they'd been angry, diagnosed the problem as: you haven't worked the steps thoroughly enough. I'm not sure that this is always the cause. It may just be human nature. We are not going to escape the human condition no matter how many times we do the steps, nor how thoroughly we work them. We are going to remain members of this wonderfully imperfect and diverse and frustrating species until the breath leaves us - until we ex-spire. I think I am becoming reconciled to that - most of the time.

One of the original sins they talk about in the Jewish tradition is described in the story of Lucifer. Lucifer, we are told, was created by God as the brightest of all the angels, hence the name, Light Bearer. Now, his sin was he wanted to be even better than what he'd been created. He didn't want to be some damn angel, with the limitations and weaknesses (whatever they are) of that condition. He wanted to be perfect as God was perfect. He was discontent with his state. For this ambition, perceived as rebellion, he and his followers were cast

into Hell and became what we call the Devil and his angels. So, the message one might deduce from this ancient story seems to be that spiritual ambition arising from discontent with our human condition resembles this Luciferian pride.

It would seem then that spiritual growth does not involve spiritual ambition or spiritual dissatisfaction. At times we can find ourselves impatient to be rid of our human defects entirely - out of a misplaced desire to become perfect in a way that would be gratifying. But what is it we would be gratifying? Perhaps it is exactly the same false self we are trying to get rid of that wishes to have us remodeled according to its image and likeness. It is easy to forget that the only reason for any of this defect removing is so that we may do the will of our Higher Power without injecting our own agendas.

I think achieving spiritual growth without spiritual ambition is one of these conundrums people have wrestled with down through the ages. The best insight I got about the topic was from listening to and reading the lectures of Reverend Phil Hanson. Phil Hanson was a Lutheran pastor and for a time the chief chaplain at Hazelden Treatment Program in Minnesota. He went on to Lutheran General Hospital in Chicago and served as chaplain there. He was a very

wise and very thoughtful man who opened a window on spirituality, certainly for me, and I'm sure for hundreds of others.

He put it this way. At first sight, a spiritual program appears as something that will lead us along a path to greater and greater perfection; we expect that we're going to get better and better and better and better - ever ascending. But, he explained, if this were to be the case, then I could look back and know that I was more perfect than those newer to the path. But that's not how spiritual growth goes. How spiritual would it be to feel, "I'm better than these people who are only starting"? Even if you don't say it, going, "Ah, shucks, t'warnt nothin'" is hardly right either. On the other hand, when we read about people who are spiritual giants, they claim to see themselves as the "...least among my brethren." Are they lying or merely being modest about their accomplishment?

"Neither," Phil would say. They actually mean that because spiritual growth, as he explained it, is where we get a deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper realization of how little growth we have. He compared it to the person who doesn't know very much but thinks he knows a lot, whereas Einstein was awestruck and overwhelmed constantly by how little he understood. He described

the universe as this massive library with millions of volumes in thousands of languages. And, he said, we know merely a smattering of one of those languages.

So, as far as I can understand it from reading the masters and mistresses of the spiritual life, spiritual growth is a process where we become more and more and more aware of how much we depend upon a Higher Power and how little we actually can rely on ourselves. I see the work of the Sixth Step as our attempt to move from a spiritual self-improvement program (with the *assistance* of God) to a spiritual pilgrimage where the increase is given by an in-dwelling Higher Power.

That quote I've mentioned a couple of times already, God, "in which I live and move and have my being" seems to more accurately describe my relation to the God of my adult understanding. I am nothing without this power living and working through me. The Higher Power is not some separate thing or person out there somewhere but, as stated in Appendix II, "*...an unsuspected inner resource which we presently identify with our conception of a Power Greater than ourselves.*" The Big Book, (p. 55) speaking of the God says, "*He is*

as much a fact as we were. We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there He may be found.”

An eye enlightened by such a spiritual awakening sees the God in every one of us. It looks down deep behind the surface appearance of us, beneath the flesh and bone of us, and knows it is in the presence of many and various manifestations of The Great Reality.

We all are familiar with the St. Francis prayer, but they tell a story about St. Francis of Assisi, about how desperate he was to know more about God. One day walking in the fields out of frustration at his ignorance he asked this almond tree, “What,” he asked, “can you tell me about God?” And the story is the almond tree suddenly burst out into a dazzling array of blossoms.

I think the story is intended to convey the very ancient truth, that each of us is a unique expression of the God. The consequence of which is that in order to live a fulfilled life I must be united with the Oneness of God. A life separate from God and my fellows is a life without power.

I think that Step Six is where I become willing to live without those fear-driven instincts to which I have been clinging for security. I

am going to live as an honest and vulnerable child of God and I will find that I draw to me likeminded others. We will connect with each other and therefore with God.

Some of you may know Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk sometimes up here at Deer Park, Escondido. One of the things he writes about is illusions we mistake for reality. Just as the physicist knows that there is no such thing in the universe as time - that time exists only in the human mind. This idea of a sequence of past, present and the future - this arrow travelling from the past to the future - is just our way of thinking about it. As Einstein said, "We invented time so that everything doesn't happen at once."

In a similar way, Thich Nhat Hahn says to the egocentric mind there is an illusion of separateness. But separateness is only an illusion that disappears with the coming of a spiritual awakening. With enlightened eyes one sees the God in all and all as One. What is most exciting about this or any other spiritual path is the opening of the eyes. *A New Pair of Glasses*, Chuck C. called his book about the process. That the person still lost in the illusion that we are all separate comes awake and is able to perceive the colors and oneness of mankind and life for the first time. *De Colores*, we sang in

the '60's and 70's at spiritual renewal weekends called *cursillos*, expressing our joy at being an incarnation of the Life force. This path we are walking is not some dreary fourth rate religion we're condemned to for our sins, but the pursuit of the most exciting reality there is, becoming the fully alive and empowered beings we have the potential to be.

I came in contact with a long-time, very respected member of the fellowship in Washington, named Buck D. This guy had been through World War II, a Flying Tiger, one of General Chenault's main men. He was someone I, this young wimpy priest, looked up to not just for his 25 years sobriety but mainly for the exciting life he'd led.

One night a bunch of us youngsters in the program were laughing it up noisily in the Marriott coffee shop after a meeting, having fun, when I felt these hands heavy on my shoulder. I looked up and Buck Doyle was standing over me. God, I thought, what have I done? This was my sponsor's sponsor. He leaned over and whispered to me, "I just want you to know this is spirituality. What is happening here at this table with your friends, this is spirituality." I said nothing and he added a final comment before letting go his grip on my shoulders. "Spirituality. It's not some droopy drawer shit you

do in church.” This, from the great Buck Doyle? From the person the Archbishop in Washington, D.C. sent his priests to when nothing else had worked for them!

What Buck knew then and I discovered painfully over the years, was that I had a completely screwed up idea of spirituality - what it was and what it looked like.

It pains me when I hear people in the program who are fairly new speak as though they’ve been condemned to this way of life. “How long do I have to do this?” they ask. I totally understand what that feels like. I asked my sponsor the same question and he said enigmatically, “You have to do it until you want to do it.” Oh, God....that means forever? (Laughter). It’s very hard for us at first to get it. It’s hard to imagine what we’ve never seen or experienced. We’re on this path and at Step Six we’ve become entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. We have become willing to drop the actor.

An analogy that worked for me in getting this concept of oneness was to see myself as a finger that decided it doesn’t want to be stuck with this body, going everywhere the body goes, dependent on it. I was a finger that marched to the beat of a different drummer

and, by golly, I would lead my own life, do my own thing, so to speak. So this finger has itself amputated and arranges to have itself cared for: the best lotions, regular massages, exercises - everything. It's sitting there and it's getting all this attention and it's puzzled. It can't figure out why it has started to smell. (Laughter). I got it. I have to be connected to the body. "I'm the vine, you are the branches." "The branch that is cut off withers and dies." These wisdoms have come down to us for thousands of years.

C. S. Lewis writes that most of us soon after we're born go into business for ourselves. It's only when that business goes into bankruptcy that we turn to our maker and say, "Oh, was there something that you had in mind for me to be doing?" Unfortunately, we mostly cannot learn from wisdoms and warnings, so we are doomed to drive our lives into bankruptcy regardless. Those who do pick themselves up and take this path are the fortunate ones.

We move on from Step Six into the really fun part of the program. "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings." My sponsor was a big believer in Step Seven. As you have read in the *Big Book*, it too is given very little attention. It says, once you are

willing to have your defects removed, you are ready to say something like this and it launches into the Seventh Step prayer.

In the *12 By 12* there is a great dissertation on humility. It says right off: humility is the foundation of every one of the steps. And, if you think about it, that's a great insight that had totally escaped me. It takes humility to say I am powerless, my life is unmanageable. To listen in Step Two to other people who say they have found a solution takes humility. Similarly, to decide that I'll do something their way, not my way - even if I don't understand why. And to follow a path that other people have laid out; this path of the steps again requires humility at every turn; it is part and parcel of the whole walk.

I didn't realize until I got into the program that my prayers, though deeply sincere, were not humble. Have any of you found yourself asking that reality be rearranged so you're not inconvenienced? That was the content of so many of my prayers: do this, do that, don't let this happen, make this happen. (Laughter). I think I had praying-to-God confused with writing-to-Santa Claus. I came to realize, very slowly, that if God were to rearrange reality so I wouldn't have to deal with it, then I wouldn't have to develop any character. Neither would I have to acquire any of the moral virtues,

such as patience, perseverance, fortitude, that can only be acquired by dealing with reality on reality's terms.

Human nature, it seems, has not changed greatly over the centuries. St. Augustine, he lived in the 300's, after a rather colorful life had a spiritual experience that completely changed his life - got a taste for right things and became a bishop in North Africa and one of the leading thinkers of his day. He is best remembered for his book *Confessions*. In this he makes a statement that puzzled me for a long time: "Belief without humility is presumption." (i.e. not "faith"). I think I finally got it when trying to wrestle with the problem of bad things happening to people living good lives. So, often when we hear ourselves saying things like: "I am on the spiritual path and God won't let this or that misfortune or tragedy happen to me." Well, why not me? (Laughter).

Maybe, if we're on this path, we have been given access to support and spiritual and mental tools another person has not been given. I can have this silly expectation, arising from lack of humility, that because I am on a spiritual path and unemployed, I will find a job quicker than someone who isn't so spiritual. Whereas, if I have real, i.e. humble, faith, I should be willing to make twice as many calls as

my poor pagan neighbor. (Laughter). Faith does not grant us some sort of privileged existence. I have a friend up in Marin who just found out she had a reoccurrence of colon cancer and another one on a lymph node, so I said, "How are you doing with this?" And she said, "As my sponsor used to tell me," (her sponsor is dead years ago) "Louise, why not you? It happens all around us, why not to you?" So humility may be the foundation of everything we think of as learning, virtue, character and spiritual growth.

In the *12 By 12* the author points out the difference between a demand and a request. We tend to be a demanding lot, "I want what I want" - whereas a request leaves equal room for the other to decline. In the chapter where it deals with the Third Step it points out that our *old way* was to bombard everything with will power - including the Higher Power. We now strive to bring our will into harmony with the will of our Higher Power. And then the same book reminds us that, so long as we are convinced that we could live by our own strength and intelligence, for just so long, no working faith is possible.

Once I recognize the need to get my self will out of the driver's seat, the picture changes radically. It is no longer one in which I am

the principal with God as my assistant. It's not that I do something "with God's help." Often this sort of pious piffle is passed off as being properly grateful whereas, in reality, it detracts from the dignity owed to the Infinite One "...in whom we live and move and have our being"

"I am sober today with the help of God," they say. "Yes, I shot a really good game today with help from my caddy; gave me a couple of good suggestions, very bright for an assistant. I'm a humble sort of fellow who likes to credit the little people!" Some of you may remember the movie *God is My Co-Pilot*, typical of Hollywood's plastic religiosity. I saw a bumper sticker lately that said: *If God is your co-pilot, consider changing seats.* (Laughter).

Is it any wonder, given this degree of diminishing its role in our existence, that we are unable to be connected to the Power? As the Big Book says on page 53: "...we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing." In other words: God is not my caddy.

And then we come to look at the Seventh Step prayer - perhaps my favorite words in the entire Big Book (p. 76). "*My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad...*" Just think about that for a moment. Our sponsors have had us draw up a

list of defects and assets. (They used to not do the assets list, but a lot of people do one today - possibly some things change for the better.)

What's interesting is the wording, "...*I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad.*" In other words, pay no attention to **my** lists. Consider the source. (Laughter). This is truly the end of **self**-improvement. Think about it. If I kept the self-improvement model going, I would be delivering my lists from Step Four as a blueprint to God to follow in my remodeling project. So I would be asking the God to make me over according to *my* image and likeness. According to *my* ego's blueprint? That is so spiritually silly that it's almost unthinkable. Which I think is what has happened: not enough people *think* through what it would look like if God were foolish enough to follow our directions. I'm not the physician delivering my prescription to God, the pharmacist, to fill.

So Step Seven asks us for the ultimate act of humility. I have dutifully done my Fourth Step and my Fifth Step. I have become entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character from my list. Then in Step Seven, I say I am now willing you should have all of me, good and bad.

And then we go on to what is really a defect within the stated purpose of the program: (Step Three) "*Relieve me of the bondage of self that I may better do Thy will.*" And (Step Eleven) "*...praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry it out.*" The prayer says, "*I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows.*" A defect is something that stands in the way of my usefulness to God and my fellows. It is not necessarily something I have on my so-called "defect list".

Note: (There's no comma. It's not, "*...every single defect of character – comma - which stands in the way of my usefulness.*")

I don't know what those things are, those that stand in the way of my usefulness. They may include things I think are my assets and I may be left with things I think are defects. I may still have to work on these later but they're not getting in the way of my usefulness. I don't know what kind of manifestation of the Higher Power I am supposed to be so I leave it entirely up to that Wisdom.

I am now willing you should have all of me regardless of my lists. Put them all into one barrel and if there's anything in that barrel

that stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows, feel free - remove it.

And then it says, meanwhile, “*Grant me strength as I go out from here to do Thy bidding. Amen.*” In other words: I’ll get on with my business, and I leave God’s business to God. Where my behavior is off, that is what Step Ten is for. But remodeling me...not my job.

If you just think about it for a second, if God were to follow my list (It’s called an argument *ad absurdum* - when you push something to its logical conclusion to see how absurd it is.), imagine that God has actually done exactly what I’ve asked. I bounce out of bed one morning and I have none of the defects on my list and have all my assets from the other list - I’m perfect. That’s what we would probably call “a perfectly self-satisfied jerk” and probably totally unusable for God and my fellows.

One of the other thoughts I’ve had about this over the years, since we have a couple of minutes still, and just for those of you who like to think a little beyond the box. “I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad.”

Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden. Know where I am?
Genesis, first book of the Bible, Chapter 2. *“Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden which was in the east and there he put the man he had fashioned. He caused to spring up from the soil every kind of tree enticing to look at and good to eat with the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden.”*
The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then he makes the woman as a companion to the man for it is not good for man to be alone (God knows). So, he puts these two idiots (our ancestors - what chance did we have?) into the garden; tells them they can eat of the fruit of any tree except for this one tree. What was the tree?

You hear from people telling the story all sorts of things except what it says in Genesis. You'll hear that it was an apple or it was from the tree of knowledge. It wasn't either of these. It was the *fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. The story then gets exciting: *“And the serpent was the most subtle of all the wild beasts Yahweh God had made. It asked the woman, ‘Did God really ask you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?’ The woman answered the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree in the middle, Lord God said, ‘You*

must not eat of it or touch it under pain of death.’ And the serpent said to the woman, ‘No, you will not die. God knows, in fact, that on the day you eat it your eyes will be open and you will be like gods knowing good and evil.’”

I can't help but put that story - or rather the wisdom that can be extracted from it - together with the Seventh Step prayer. The ultimate act of pride was knowing what was good and what was evil; asset and defect. You know how God knew that they'd eaten the forbidden fruit? He didn't find the core of the apple lying around or anything. He came out and he couldn't find them and he said, "Why were you hiding?" And they said, "Because we were naked." And he said, "How did you know you were naked?" And, of course, Adam said, "It was her, she did it." (Laughter). Women!

Whatever your view of the historicity of the story of creation, I think that there is something very profoundly spiritual here about getting out of the business of judging what is good and evil in myself. I think the Seventh Step prayer is an invitation to say, "I know that when my behavior is bad and offends somebody, that it is up to me to amend it. But, when it comes to deciding what is bad in me, that is not really my business. I leave that entirely in the hands of this

Power that flows through me and of which I am but a temporary manifestation.”

From this point of view, this humble prayer might be seen as the unmaking of the story of the Fall of Man - a reversal of that “original sin” of pride - seeking the knowledge of good and evil that would make us like onto gods.

This is just my take on the subject, but, for myself, I find in the Step Seven prayer a rich vein of contemplative meditation.

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