

Seamus 3

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

(Audience): Hi, Seamus!

So, before we move on, there's an old, wise saying in AA - you can hardly go very far unless you take Step One thoroughly. So, I want to correct the record from last week. I put something on the board here that may have made it seem that Step One was only about craving and obsessing over alcohol and drugs. I want to hereby correct the record.

It is true that the first part of the step deals with the two aspects of *powerlessness*; namely, the insanity (mental obsession) that precedes the first drink and the craving (allergy of the body) that follows upon ingesting it. The second part of Step One is about the *Unmanageability* of our lives, both internally (our emotions) and externally (how we conduct ourselves).

Back to the insanity that precedes the first drink for a moment. In the course of my work in treatment centers over the past thirty years, I have found that most clients have been completely underestimating the power of this insanity. They imagine that sincerity and motivations - such as loved ones and careers - will be enough to overcome any urge to relapse. Unfortunately, as many of us have discovered, these are not adequate defenses against the first drink. One of the ways of looking at this sober insanity that I have found to be helpful is this (draws triangle on board): Think of the mind as a penguin that's riding on an iceberg and the iceberg is heading south (draws an arrow in front of an iceberg). But the penguin sees only this little triangle that is sticking out above the water (draws waves that leave most of the triangle below the surface). The mind (penguin) imagines that it is going south because it wants to go south and that it can start going north any time it feels like it. It thinks, "I'm going in this direction here and I'm now going to change and go in this, the opposite, direction; thus" (erases an arrow indicating south and draws one pointing north). It imagines that it's just a matter of becoming sincere enough or strong enough and determined enough. So, just as with the penguin, the alcoholic imagines that if he just remembers all the bad things that happened as the result of drinking, those mental tools of sincerity and determination should be enough to correct this very bad and destructive "habit". It is sad to see the denial that is unaware of the great subconscious forces that are at work, compulsively destroying the alcoholic's life, and the poor alcoholic unaware that the tools of the conscious/thinking mind are no match at all for these forces. The poor little penguin can turn around and push on the tip of the iceberg till it gets a hernia and it is not changing the direction of the drift one bit. (Laughter)

Another way of understanding or at least looking at this most difficult aspect of the First Step is this: what we have is an obsession, and an obsession is the mental half of a twin-obsession/compulsion. An obsession fulfills itself in compulsion, as in OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder. Obsession is the mental part and compulsion is the behavioral part. An obsession will try everything and anything to fulfill itself - satisfy or release itself - in a compulsive behavior.

And so we have the power of obsession/compulsion working in us with alcoholism. And, of course, that's what they mean when they say, "Alcohol is cunning, baffling, and powerful. It's really the obsession that is cunning, baffling, and powerful - alcohol is just a dumb cleaning fluid, a solvent. And when we get support in recovery, it is to help us resist the power of the obsession that is trying everything it can, every mental trick and device, so we will allow it to fulfill itself in compulsive behavior - drinking.

"Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic." What this really means is that my obsession is back there somewhere in my mind and it remains back there. If you're as alcoholic as I am, you've got a weird relationship with alcohol. It doesn't matter if you're more than 30 plus years sober. For example, I'm the only one at the table that can't understand not finishing that bottle of wine. (Laughter). And it ... really! My wife is not alcoholic and she and some friends will have a bottle of chardonnay or some stuff like that and they'll leave this much in the bottle. How can you possibly be so fine tuned that you won't finish two inches of wine? For tidiness sake even? (Laughter). I'll have almost 39 years sober and I still have an obsessive idea about alcohol. To me it's still some sort of precious liquid. (Laughter). How can you just pour something that precious, that magical, down the sink?

So the obsession remains and my only reliable defense against it is the program. I must remember that the obsession is in my mind and if I am relying on this same mind to defend me against drinking thoughts... If I am relying on the very seat of the problem to protect me. You begin to see the problem, right? And if I let the obsession talk me out of this defense, the program, it has its way with me. Of course it will be protesting that it is not doing it with a view to drink - maybe because the meetings are boring and repetitive or because I'm so busy. It's cunning, alright. Remember it used to be that the meetings were smoky? And that from people who spent their evenings in bars or cocktail lounges smoking... "It would be so unhealthy, sitting in those smoky AA meetings." (Laughter) I need to cut back on such health risks.

Anyway, after we've become convinced that we are powerless to resist the first drink, then we discover, as we talked about last week, that there is one known remedy for this condition as described on pages 25-27 of the *Big Book*.

That one remedy is what the *Big Book* calls, *a vital spiritual experience*.

A vital spiritual experience is described on page 27 by Carl Jung and he speaks of its effect on the person who experiences it, the changes it brings about. He gives a very specific and very accurate description of these changes.

Many of us, when we first hear about these changes that will happen to us, are inclined to think it sounds too much like pixie dust or some magical, wishful thinking; something not something likely to happen to a person like me - an intelligent skeptical person.

And yet, changes in attitude as great or greater than these have happened to all of us. If you just think about how your values and perceptions were altered when you fell in love - things that were not interesting to you at all became very interesting to you almost over night. You passed a high school maybe every day, then you learn that it's the one she or he went to and suddenly it takes on special significance. We're very, very changeable, our emotions can do massive shifts. The song from *My Fair Lady*, the musical, captures this in the song, *On The Street Where You Live*. We see the love-sick man enchanted by the very ordinary street where his love happens to be living.

There's an expression you've probably heard, it is even in the New Testament, "casting pearls before swine." I was reminded of this since I've been in the program and remembering some of the wisdom the poor professors tried to communicate to me when I was a young man in seminary. It's amazing how a person can be intelligent in one way, do well academically, yet have absolutely no insight into the spiritual or even philosophical matters he's studying. At least a half a dozen times every single day in seminary we recited a prayer before lectures, before meals, first thing in the morning and last thing at night. And this prayer, because this was back in the time of the Flintstones, we said in Latin (everything was in Latin back then in seminary). I still have the little book it came out of and, because it's so long since I last read Latin, I need to read it to you. It goes like this:

"Deus, qui corda fidelium Sancti Spiritus illustratione docuisti, da nobis in eodem Spiritu recta sapere." "God, who has taught the hearts of the faithful with the light of the Holy Spirit, give us in the same spirit" ...listen to this... *"a taste for things that are right."*

This is so profound but, being a 20 something-year-old moron, it went completely over my head. "A taste for things that are right." And if you just think about how profound that is and how different that is from asking God to help me and keep me from doing what I want to do. It means what Martin Luther meant when he used to advise his followers: "Just love God and then do whatever you want to do." I was so unable to fathom the profound depths of such a concept that I thought it was giving permission to be immoral.

What they are talking about in AA and in the prayer and what Luther meant was that we would experience "a change of taste." Just think about that: a change of taste. When we were first married, Diane could not stand the taste or smell of blue cheese and I loved a bit of Danish Blue in the evening. I couldn't understand someone not liking it. I would do that thing of trying to have her taste just a wee bit. "Oh, come on. You'll love it!" And Diane would say, "Don't make me taste that stuff. Yeach!" Have you ever had that between you and a friend, one of you likes something and the other one doesn't and they go, "Don't make me taste it again," and you go, "Oh come on. Just this little bit?"

So, we had this tug-o-war: "Don't make me taste it" about blue cheese, avocados, various other foods. Well, oddly enough about two years after we were married, I came home one day and my precious bit of foil wrapped blue cheese – it was always foil wrapped to keep it from contamination the rest of the refrigerator. (Laughter). Suddenly, there was only about half of it left. She had been eating it – voluntarily. And this was the same woman who used to say, ""Don't make me taste it."

She simply explained, "I've found that I've developed a taste for it." This is what I mean about the vital spiritual experience. It involves a change of taste so that instead of fighting what we are inclined to do, we actually prefer doing what is right. We get a taste for things that are right. The Latin words for it are *recta sapere*, taste for the right things.

So, we hear about this vital spiritual experience thing that would remedy my condition. I compared it last week to hearing about somebody who could fix my Saab, remember that? And I found out that ... (Oh, for those of you who were not here. I had a Saab. It was a pain in the butt. I got it in 1975 or '76 and I was ready to kill myself. And my next door neighbor had one, too, and he found somebody who could fix it. So this is how profound and simple Step Two can be: I heard about a solution to my problem).

I came to believe that Sven could fix my Saab. You see, I don't for a moment think it's a good idea to get all religious in this step for the simple reason that it makes no sense spiritually to imagine I can talk myself into Faith in God. I've mentioned how some treatment programs give the impression that if you're in your second week, you should have already acquired faith.

No matter how well-intentioned a person is they cannot just buckle down and give themselves faith. We talked about what kind of bootleg faith that would be whereas the real thing is a theological gift from God. Imagine God, so to speak, scratching his head in bewilderment when we've told him, "Thank you very much, but I don't need you to give it to me. I just gave it to myself." (Laughter). So, whatever the AA program is, it is not so spiritually silly. That's one of the important things to remember about it, in fact. It's not a silly program and if I am doing something that involves spiritual silliness, then I may have misunderstood something.

So then, we can be sure they never meant Step Two to mean that I give myself the gift of faith. Nor does it recommend that I make up a little picture of God in my head and then tell myself, "That's the creator of the universe." Harmful and very silly stuff like that. In the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish faith there was a strict prohibition against depicting God and even saying the sacred name.

How wild off the mark, then, that in some treatment centers they have people draw pictures of their God in the second week. I can just imagine somebody from the Hebrew bible hearing about that and going, "Draw a picture of your God"? We were told in the commandments: "No graven images!" How wise that was, Only God is God and as The Big Book says on p.53, "God is either everything or else he is nothing" and definitely not some creation of my hands or my mind.

Step Two - came to believe... In the same way as... I believe in Crest. Do you believe in Crest toothpaste? Yeah. You come to rely on something. It doesn't mean you think Crest should be worshipped nor that it is God. It is something you have come to rely on. Or, you come to rely that a statement is true as in the case of hearing that the Swedish gentleman was clever with Saabs. That's what belief is.

It comes actually from an old English word that means "dear" or "desire." If you've read Shakespeare, you'll probably have come across some statement like, "I would as *lief* you didn't go there. I would as *lief*." The same word in German is *lieben* and the English word *love*. And so *belief* means I rely upon a statement as being true.

So, Step Two, then, is: I came to believe that Sven could fix my Saab because I'm told it by somebody who had the same problem that I had. How do I come to believe that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity? Because you guys told me and I

know you are not lying. You were as screwed up as you said you were and you have no reason to lie about that. I rely upon the fact that you say you found a solution. And that gets us to Step Three. We stood at a turning point and we made a decision.

Step Three says, *"We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the power of God as we understood Him."* We made a decision to do something. Of course, not having read it carefully, I spent probably a year repeating the Third Step prayer compulsively trying to turn my will and my life over and I kept doing it. "...bombarding my problems with will power," the *12By12* calls it. And I would share at meetings, "I turn it over and before I know it, it's back again. I say the prayer and 10 minutes later, I'm back running my life again – worrying and obsessing."

I kept on doing this, as I said, for about a year into this sobriety, and people in the program would look at me, people who had worked the steps, and they'd just shake their heads. This one guy finally said to me, "You know something, Seamus, if a person could do this turning over in Step Three with the prayer and sincerity, what would we need the rest of the steps for?" So finally I got it: this is a program that does not have us do silly stuff like taking inventories and making amends just for exercise. So they hadn't just gone and added a bunch of other steps at the end for completion sake – or to round out an even dozen. (Laughter).

Finally, I got it through my head. You made a decision. You made a decision.

I've mentioned this guy in Sacramento that used to scare me so much, the one that ran the recovery house – Walter from Philadelphia. Walter was a kind of a sponsor of mine, even though I never asked him to be. I would go into a meeting at the recovery house on a Monday night and he would say, "Hey, come over here. What step are you on now?" And I'd tell him, "I'm still working Step Three, Walter. Okay!"

Almost every Monday night he would ask me the same question, "What step are you on?" "I'm still working Step Three, Walter." And after about six months of this, he said to me, "Seamus, if every Monday night for the last six months you had come in here and asked me, 'What are you doing, Walter?' and I had said, 'I've decided to go down to San Francisco.' And the next Monday I said with renewed enthusiasm, 'I've decided to go to San Francisco'. And for six months, every Monday I told you the same thing, 'I've decided to go to San Francisco'. He paused and looked at me, "Don't you see anything wrong with that?"

What could I say? It did seem to make no sense.

"How would you know you've taken the Third Step?" he asked.

Now, this is the 70's, so I gave a 70's answer, "I guess I'd get a *feeling* (laughter) like of, you know... completion?" One of these bullshit things you make up in your head that you think is going to convince somebody. And he was not convinced.

"How would you know I had really decided to go to San Francisco?" he asked.

“If I saw you heading over toward Davis – on the Yolo Causeway?”

He nodded, “How will you know you have taken Step Three?”

“When I’ve start writing?”

“Or, at the very least if I saw you buying a composition book and talking to your sponsor about how to go about the inventory.” (Laughter).

So, one of the things I think is really important is this word “decision”. A lot of people went to a lot of trouble getting the meaning of it into my head because when I got sober I had to make decisions – some really big decisions. And I wasn’t very good at any kind of decision, let alone the Step Three decision. All you had to do was look at how I never decided what to do with my life, never decided to leave seminary, never left the priesthood till I had tried to kill myself several times through hopelessness.

[Historical side-bar.]

(Back in those days, the Stone Age, there was a series of books and phonograph records called *The Golden Books* that helped many members of the program. Some of you may be old enough to remember *The Golden Books*. They were written by a priest called Father John Doe. His name was Ralph Pfau – the first priest who came out publicly and said he was an alcoholic in recovery. He had written a book called *Shepherds in the Mist*. It was very big in the 50’s and 60’s because it was so revolutionary that a clergyman would reveal something like that. This was before cassettes and CD’s, maybe even pre-vinyl – probably Bakelite or something heavy like that – and they would carry the whole set around in this little case of 78’s with about 10 records. Each one had a different topic.)

At the instigation of my sponsor, I’m quite sure, one of the men in the program invited me over to listen to Father John Doe talking about making decisions. And, much to my surprise – for I was hard-of-listening – I found it to be very useful. So, what I learned was that the word... if you look at the center of the word *decision* you’d see the word *cisio*, which in Latin means, “I cut.” We use this word all the time: we talk about having an *in-cisio-n*, we talk about an *ex-cisio-n* and we actually talk about a...

Audience member: “Circumcision?”

Seamus: “Ouch! Right, circumcision also!” (Laughter).

So a ... *circum-cisio-n*. And, we also get the word “scissors” also from this much used Latin root.

So then, we know that a decision is has something to do with cutting. It is actually the word “to prune,” as in cutting a branch off a tree - something done all the time with fruit trees to concentrate the energy of the tree into fewer branches and thus, produce better yields, better fruit.

As it relates to Step Three, a decision is what we should do when we come to a fork in the road. As the *Big Book* says, "We stood at a turning point and we made a decision." If we don't cut off the options we find ourselves stalled. The only way we can move forward is by *de-cisio-ning* - by cutting off - the other ways I might go, such as using more will power and self-discipline, seeking psychological insight to get control back, becoming holier in a religious sense, etc.

It was also helpful to be reminded that we human beings are energy systems. We produce energy. And where the energy goes depends on where my mind sends it. If my energy comes to a fork in the road and I cannot resolve the dilemma, then I am "of two minds," meaning I am not going anywhere or at least only half-heartedly. Half measures...

The next very cool thing I learned from Father John Doe was that once I have eliminated all but one road to send my energy down, then I was capable of something called *co-mitt-ment*. More Latin. Sorry about that! But so much of our language comes from Latin and words are nothing if they are not carriers of meaning, so... This is what the words "decision" and "commitment" mean.

Mittere means "to send" and "co (or com)" means "together" - *co-mitt-ment* means sending all together - my energy that is.

You'll often hear people saying that men have a problem with commitment. You may have heard that, right? (Laughter). Yeah. Once or twice? A hundred times? Well, it's wrong. You know what men - and some women - have a problem with really? It's with decision. Because decision means you have eliminated the other option (laughter). You never know who may be coming around the next corner (laughter). So, when somebody tells you they have a problem with commitment, they don't. They need to look a bit further back, ontologically speaking. They have a problem eliminating options. A guy may be wanting to keep his options open, right? (Laughter).

The problem is, though, that unless you have made a decision, you cannot make a commitment and as a result, you can't accomplish or build anything worthwhile. There's a kind of a false wisdom about keeping your options open but it often means the poor sucker who buys into it often is left with the booby prize of life: options that have *ex-pired* - which we know from the last session means the breath has gone out of them or they've kicked the proverbial bucket.

In the program, if you have a sponsee who is determined to keep his or her options open it is often fatal. What happens is they come up to the decision point - the fork in the road - because they're in a lot of pain and very scared, they may start down the road of recovery for a bit; they may seem to have erased the possibility of their old way of life; and they sound like they have made a commitment to the program. But then...have you ever pruned a branch off a fruit tree? Next thing you see, where you cut that branch off, you get these little sucker growths, right? And in the mental process, sucker growths are what we call "stinkin' thinking". And what happens is: another branch, or maybe six other branches, spring up and tell us things like, "Weed never was my problem," "I think I could probably once in a while do beer" - these little thoughts that grow where you cut off the options. And what these sucker growths do is weaken the energy that

may have been going down the recovery path single-mindedly. Now going to meetings, working steps, doing service become a burden. I start thinking that I need to have more time in the evenings for work or family or physical fitness - often something worthy. It's hard to emphasize how important that decision to go down that road is. And it needs to be consciously renewed daily.

I come from a small town in Northern Ireland in County Tyrone. And in the town I come from, my father's cousins, the Deerys, were the millers. It was the only mill for miles around and the farmers brought their grain there to have it ground into flour and meal. It was one of these water driven mills with a 20 foot mill wheel and up behind it there was the mill dam - a large reservoir of water. As a little kid I found out something about this decision business because of my fascination with this huge contraption. When this thing was running and the stones were grinding away at the oats or barley, the rattle and noise was awe-inspiring to a little five or six year old boy.

Well, one day when the mill was rattling away and I was standing gawking, Joe Deery asked me if I would like to know how to stop the mill.

"Are you kidding? Could I?"

I thought there would be some sort of complicated engineering business involved - and I loved machines. But instead, he led me outside the mill to where there was this wheel with a wooden handle and he said that if I started turning the wheel I should watch what happened. So I started turning the wheel and after a few turns I noticed that a wooden gate was rising slowly and allowing water to flow out and down into a by-pass. Also, amazingly, the mill wheel looming over me was beginning to slow down because the water that had been driving it was now being allowed to run off instead of being channeled over the wheel. In about five minutes you heard this massive groaning and the wheel and the grinding mechanism in the mill all lurched to a stop. I learned that day from Joe Deery that energy always follows the line of least resistance. You stop the mill by giving the water an option that is easier, softer, so to speak. You open this bypass gate and the water runs downhill.

Our mental process is very similar. If I open one of those mental options, I have begun draining the energy out of my commitment. One of the ongoing maintenance jobs related to my recovery commitment is keeping those sucker growths cut off. When I say: "I've made a decision to turn my will and my life over," what I've really done is I've eliminated in my mind the option of returning to my pre-recovery life or any other way besides the spiritual path of steps.

There's another aspect of Step Three I would like to talk about for a moment. It's found in a great little passage in page 40 in the *12 By 12*. It's in italics, naturally (laughter). I don't know why - my eye now goes to things that are in italics, it's a sickness (laughter).

Anyhow, the passage I'm thinking about sort of sums up Step Three. It says, "*It is when we try to make our will conform to God's that we begin to use it rightly.*" To all of us, this is a most wonderful revelation. And here are the italics: "*Our whole trouble had been the misuse of willpower. We had tried to bombard our problems with it instead of attempting to*

bring it into agreement with God's intentions to us." And here's the kicker: *"To make this increasingly possible is the purpose of the AA steps."* The purpose of the AA steps is to bring my will into harmony with the will of a power greater than myself.

So, in Step Three, we made a decision and we say the great Third Step prayer, these both clarify for us what we are aiming to reach. We do not reach the goal, the spiritual experience, before we walk the path of steps that prepare us for the gift.

Something about all this escaped me for the longest time even though people all around me were trying to tell me about it. The part of the spiritual path I didn't get - didn't understand - was the connection between "relieve me of the bondage of self" in the Third Step prayer (p.63) and the "...lack of power, that was our dilemma" the book speaks of on page 45.

I knew I lacked power over alcohol and many other things in my life but I didn't understand how to get power. They told me the steps were the way to get in touch with power. How do the steps give me power? I just didn't get this. If you work with newcomers a lot they come in and they go, "Yeah. I want to quit drinking. But what's all this spiritual stuff got to do with quitting drinking?" And once they get it that their will power doesn't seem to work to keep them off alcohol they'll readily admit a lack of power but still, why this spiritual path? I don't see it. I had the same problem connecting the two concepts.

(Not to nit-pick, but it's not technically a "dilemma"actually it's a predicament since a di-lemma means a choice of two things. Uhm...uh...I know, I know! Father Joe used to call me an unrecovered smart ass).

So, a lack of power, that is our predicament. I had to find a power by which I could live and it had to be a power greater than myself. How do I get a power greater than myself? In page 53 - I'm giving these pages out for the Protestants so... They will probably look them up just to make sure that I didn't make it up just to sell them something - and then they'll remember them forever. That's what's so good about Protestants...and they keep you honest as a speaker. The Catholics are all sitting there going, "It's probably close enough. Why would he make something like that up?" (Laughter.)

On page 53 the *Big Book* says, *"When we became alcoholics crushed by self-imposed crisis, we could not postpone or evade, we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or He is nothing."*

We talked a week or so ago about how an "idea of God" was such a limiting notion. An idea...like the vial of water from the Pacific was a pretty limiting notion of the ocean...didn't give you much of an idea of the Pacific, really. Well, it says in the book that we had to face the proposition that God is either everything or He is nothing. God is, therefore, not some little construct that I make up of my ideas and images. God is not a creature of my mind...a creation of my imagination. God is not something built of my thoughts and my ideas. That's why, I think, it is the thought of telling another person our inventory that scares the hell out of us. It's because that person has a separate mind

that is not controlled by my mind whereas the God I have made up is really a tame thing I have created. So, in order to have a God that is any good to me, I cannot have a god that is a tame little creature of my mind. It must be an independent mind that thinks what it wants to think. The program is pretty emphatic when it tells us about the decision we must make there too. God is either everything or else he is nothing. The Bible (Acts of the Apostles, describes God as that in which, "*we live and move and have our being.*" This is real power - the power I need so badly if I am to get and stay sober and lead a useful life. What is my decision: everything or nothing?

And then the *Big Book* tells us where to look for the god... on page 55. This is one of the wonderful things about the program. It tells me what years of philosophy and theology never told me: where the God is located.

It says that if I look down through the flesh and blood of you; through the externals, the flesh, the bones, the molecules, the atoms, the quarks...down behind and beneath all of that, there I will find the higher power. It is not some old guy sitting up there in the sky with a beard. The man upstairs, we all have heard of him? Concepts such as that are the concepts that we had introduced to us in kindergarten. They may have served us in kindergarten. But, just as we would never dream of going through adulthood with kindergarten arithmetic or kindergarten English, we must realize the limitations we are up against when trying to "enlarge our spiritual lives" while clinging to infantile notions that border on superstition.

(In this regard, we sometimes hear at meetings the need for "simplicity" in the program, whereas what they are really advocating is being "simplistic". This is the attempt to explain something that requires us to consider many factors, while ignoring its intrinsic complexity, e.g. remedies for the present troubled economy.)

We are being invited by the program, in my opinion, to get an adult concept of God, spirituality, and of our own species. Page 55 tells us: "*Sometimes we had to search fearlessly, but He was there. He was as much a fact as we were. We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found. It was so with us.*"

If a time comes when my eyes are no longer clouded by the false self, then the hope is that I will see the God deep down inside, beneath the externals, in each one of us - not as something separate from me or you but that in which we live and move and have our being.

In Appendix II, (page 567) it talks about this same amazing discovery of the God. It says, "*With few exceptions our members find they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their concept of a power greater than themselves.*" Where did we find the Higher Power? We found it inside.

I think it sad, that, here we are in the 21st century and we've had religions and philosophy and science and discoveries of all sorts for centuries and millenia. We've had education available to a degree never before in history and media that keep us informed on all sorts of subjects 24 hours of every day. And still we are forced to say that: "...*they have tapped an **unsuspected** inner resource*". Why, after all this time and all this education and all this religion, why is such an important fact still *unsuspected*? The

second appendix deals with the spiritual experience and it is this very spiritual experience that we're trying to achieve by means of these steps.

So, here's where we are. We have a **hopeless condition**. There's one remedy we know called a **vital spiritual experience**. We've heard about it from the rest of the people who have walked ahead of us and **we've decided that we are going to seek the same remedy as they have told us about**. And that's where Step Three leaves us. We are launching out into a path. It's a path of steps.

It's important for us to remember that Step Three is in itself nowhere, it's not a destination. (Laughter).

If you have a nice bed upstairs in your house and you only go up to the third step of your stairs, you're nowhere. A step is something that leads us from one place to another place. It is part of a path leading from one place to another place.

I was the worst kind of impatient alcoholic who just didn't get the fact that growth takes time. When I had three months sober I was at a meeting and saw somebody get a five year chip. I wanted five years sobriety so badly because that seemed real seniority. Then, sitting there in Group Three in Sacramento, it dawned on me that I would have to wait five years for a five year chip (laughter). It was a totally depressing realization. There just had to be some accelerated course by which I could accumulate time faster - like double coupons at Ralph's.

One of the things that I see in people newly in the program and with which I identify, is that they want to get the results of the path when they haven't even set out on it yet. They're trying desperately to get a spiritual awakening in Steps Two and Three. This is like...just to put it in a context in which we are more likely to use common sense (funny how our brains fall out when we start to think of spiritual things as though spiritual is *supposed* to be ridiculous). Anyway, it's in the story of Sven, the Saab mechanic. Remember, I've just heard about Sven who worked miracles on my new neighbor's troublesome Saab and I came to believe that Sven could fix my Saab. I run into the house and announce that I have made a decision to take my car to Sven. Do you think the car will now be running any better if I go back out to it at the kerb? Sven hasn't laid a finger on it yet. He doesn't even know it exists yet. Neither do I have to go down on my knees and swear to my neighbor that I believe in Sven.

So, translating this to the AA program, this is a very sane and sensible program. We must not leave our common sense outside the door when we come into it. I'm in need of a remedy. I hear that something works, from people who have no reason to deceive me; hence, I've decided that I'm going to follow the path they took. That's Step Three. I will know I have, in effect, made that decision when I have sat down with my sponsor, notebook and pen in hand and have started outlining how to go about an inventory.

Most of you here will have done Steps Four and Five already. Yeah? I think that the first time around it's really good that we look at Step Four as our sponsor and the *Big Book* tell us. But as we work the steps year after year we often need and can use some other ways of looking at our lives so as to deepen our program. It helps if we can focus on what we're trying to achieve in the steps, namely what the Third Step prayer states:

"Relieve me of the bondage of self that I may better do thy will. Relieve me of the bondage of self..." The enemy of that spiritual awakening is our false sense of separateness — this false ego by which I hold myself separate from you and therefore from God.

A way of thinking about this that I have found useful is this: Imagine this infinite river of life and power flowing all around me. And here I am, a container filled with the same water - a container of life. Why, then, am I not participating in the power of the river? Why am I not being caught up and filled by the power of this living river that is all around me? That was the puzzle. Lack of power...

Then I got it finally. Someone finally got through to me what the problem is. It is my very container itself that is actually preventing me from being touched by the power of the river. It's what the *12 By 12* means when it explains our reluctance to surrender: we're terrified to let go of this self for fear *"...there'll be nothing left but the hole in the donut."* It is this false sense of self, this clinging to an imagined separate identity that is isolating me from the power that is all around me.

Sadly, there is much being bandied about under the guise of self-improvement that is little better than teaching people how to be more separate from each other, firming up their boundaries, becoming more in control. By contrast, we who are on this path have found that power comes from surrendering this false self and becoming empowered by the power of the river of life that surrounds us.

A lack of power, that is my dilemma. The answer to that puzzle is in the work of the steps for the removal of the container that I thought was protecting my identity but which was in fact allowing the water within it to become stagnant.

I believe I am a container of this life force, this river, and it's those elements in me that keep me separate from that river that are preventing me from enjoying the power of the river of life.

And when we go through the steps four, five, six, seven, and eight. In fact, Step Eight, in the *12 By 12*, ends by saying, *"This is the beginning of the end of our isolation from our fellows and from God."* I have been protecting my false sense of self by my fearful excesses: by my pride, my avarice, my lust, my gluttony, my envy, my anger, my laziness, my acedia. [Acedia, however you pronounce it, which is really a sense of "I don't give a damn about you, me or God."]

I have been keeping myself from being one with my fellows - an ordinary member of my species - and by so doing I have prevented myself from being part of this powerful river of life. I'm hunkered down inside my little container wondering why I don't seem to have the power that I should have - the power I need so badly.

We ask to be *"relieve(d) of the bondage of self that I may better do thy will,"* then we look ahead to Step Eleven and see that there's only one thing we should pray for at that stage: *"...for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry it out."* In other words, all that's important is to find out, before it's too late, what it is I have come to do in this life of mine. Then, if I have good sponsorship and am working my program, it dawns on me that I will find this out by allowing myself to be caught up by — through surrendering

to — this river of life. This power that is in us and around us, is the Higher Power, the Great Reality, the very God, that we are seeking.

We're invited by the program, I believe, to go out beyond what our imagination can visualize. Out beyond what our minds already know and understand. This can be a scary place for those of us who insist on being in control all the time. It is the wonderful challenge of walking a spiritual path of any kind, that I am walking beyond that which I have previously known or experienced and I must tolerate not knowing long enough to come to know and in a different way and experience what I have never before experienced. I believe the program calls on us to have a surrendered mind, an obedient mind, and a willing mind because the mind is not the guide to this path. It will keep telling us that it is the guide and it will insist that it should pre-understand everything that I'm going to be doing. That's one of the drawbacks on any spiritual path. The mind keeps saying, "I want to pre-understand this. I want to see where it's going otherwise you can be misled." Any path my mind can see is probably one I've been down already. I'm being invited out beyond what my mind can see or even understand. I'm invited to drive out beyond the headlights believing there is a road though I cannot see it.

And so the decision in Step Three, is a very risky one. In many cases you'll hear it referred to as a leap of faith and it really is a leap of faith. We go out into territory we have not been to before but with confidence. Here again, we have another word. I like words, or hadn't you guessed? Con-fide-nce. With faith. Faith is that upon which we rely when we are out beyond what we know. And this is what we're asked to do on this path of steps.

As I've said before, these are just my opinions; merely reflections upon my experiences — thoughts I've had on my walk. Everybody has a different experience and comes to it from a different perspective. Mine should not be mistaken for either wisdom or for an authoritative interpretation of AA. But, I feel deeply honored to have been asked to share them with my fellows and add them to the on-going conversation that is the AA program.

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