Journey of Recovery through 12-step Spirituality

When we enter this world through birth, everything we do is a “first.” Our first smile, first squeeze of a finger, first roll-over, first distinguishable sound, first effort at crawling and yes, even our first step is recognized with satisfaction as growth and maturity. Our first efforts at everything, like learning to play, sip from a cup, riding a tricycle or the first day in kindergarten comes, not without great effort, in arriving at a feeling of success and satisfaction. Our relationship with our world requires the first step that must be taken to accomplish anything we value as important to us.

And so it is in the world of 12-step recovery. The journey of recovery requires taking the 1st step: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol-- that our lives had become unmanageable.” * The feeling of success and satisfaction that permeates the 1st step enables one to begin the journey of surrender to a life that leaves behind, like the wake of a boat, the frustration, anxiety, fear, anger, depression, and desperation of active addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, compulsive eating, or any behavior that results in loss of self-esteem and quality of life. Once the 1st step is integrated into a lifestyle that had been plagued with alcoholism or any other addiction, there begins a promise of “a new freedom and a new happiness.” * And so the journey of recovery begins by drawing one into honesty about life that has been medicated through addictive use patterns and consequences. Past fears, traumas, abuse, or hurts cannot be addressed or healed until there is a completion and integration of the first step. Once the 1st step is taken, the exciting spiritual journey of recovery begins.

The 1st step of Alcoholics Anonymous is the only step that mentions the word alcohol. It is precisely the same for all other addictions and compulsive behaviors that integrate the 12 steps of AA into the recovery process. The additional 11 steps manifest a guide to wholesome daily living by integrating an understanding of humility, forgiveness, gratitude and reconciliation of all the residual “fall-out” of addictive use and accompanying past behaviors.

Steps 2 and 3 are all about surrender to a Higher Power. As reported in the AA Big Book, “any life run on self-will can hardly be a success.” * Step 2 suggests that the recovering individual “came to believe that a power greater than our selves could restore us to sanity” *, followed by step 3 to make “a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.” * Receptivity to surrender is a key ingredient to the success of the spiritual program of recovery. Using steps 2 & 3 as the tools of surrender transitions one from feeling controlled in life to bridging into a receptivity that is rooted in acceptance. The integration of step 2 & 3 is the spiritual surrender and gateway to forgiveness and reconciliation leading to recovery and sobriety.

Making a “searching and fearless moral inventory” * with steps 4 and 5 while becoming willing to admit “to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs” * is a process of recognizing personal character defects. Steps 6 & 7 promote redemption of old hurts and behaviors that not only identify how the individual
inflicted pain on others, but also how personal woundedness went unattended. It is the rigorous work of identifying personal flaws and making amends essential to recovery through forgiveness. The recovering individual sees these behaviors as wounds. Others see them as obnoxious behaviors where one simply acted inappropriately. This behavior is usually the result of a childhood wound of abuse or trauma that is still felt that has gone untreated for years. Using alcohol, drugs, or compulsive behaviors of any kind is the unhealthy attempt to medicate deep hurt, which usually resulted in anger and inappropriate behavior. The spiritual journey of recovery utilizes these steps to seek forgiveness with a firm commitment of making amends. The individual is encouraged to pray with their Higher Power to be transformed into a mature individual with an authentic sense of self-esteem. Critical to the journey of recovery through 12-step spirituality is acceptance. The most quoted paragraph in the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book is on acceptance. “And acceptance is the answer to all my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation – some fact of my life – unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God’s world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life’s terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and my attitudes.” * Parallel to acceptance, forgiving others is part of the process, and there are people who cannot get off the fact that twenty years ago their husband or their wife left them. Who’s the real enemy? The person who left you twenty years ago or the force within yourself that’s let twenty years go by and still hasn’t gotten over it? Forgiveness isn’t easy, but it is imperative in order to emerge into a healthy and invigorated next chapter in life.

In making direct amends, “except when to do so would injure them or others,” * forgiveness and acceptance is essential. Steps 8 & 9 move an individual along the journey of forgiveness with humility, as well as assuredness. These two steps are crucial steps in the recovering process but cannot be addressed until there is an integration of authentic recovery through working the program. People attempting the spiritual journey of recovery frequently never get to this plateau, because they have not surrendered to the importance of the 1st step. Typically, there has been unfulfilled dreams and broken promises left behind in the proverbial wake of drinking. There has to be the supportive strength of AA and the 12 steps shoring up the individual who has become willing to make amends.

Sponsorship in AA is an absolute necessity for the guidance and sharing from which one learns. The sharing of strength and experience is what one who is in significant recovery (at least one year but more frequently with 5+ years of sobriety) does. A sponsor encourages sponsees to stay away from all near occasions of drinking and learn to listen to wisdom and experience demonstrated in AA meetings for how to manage difficult situations. A sponsor encourages the integration of the promises of AA that includes a “new freedom and a new happiness…that feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear…self seeking will slip away…our whole attitude and outlook on life will change…we will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us.” *
The final three steps on the journey of recovery through 12-step spirituality encourage continued self-scrutinizing through personal inventory, praying “for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out” * and movement toward “having a spiritual awakening carrying the message of recovery to others, while practicing these principles in all activities and affairs.” * The journey of recovery through 12-step spirituality is a very slow and naturally difficult process. People often believe that simply putting down the addictive substance or behavior will cure or fix the problem. It has usually taken many years for an individual to realize that there is a problem. I believe that for every year of addictive use, it takes at least one month of actively working the 12-step program of recovery with a sponsor to achieve what is initially sought after, which is peace of mind and life as normal. Within the first six months of abstinence, Post Acute Withdrawal symptoms emerge, which almost look like the personality characteristics which had been attributed to drinking. It takes many, many months and years to reclaim what was lost. It takes surrender, willingness, patience, humility, gratitude, and forgiveness. Integration of the spiritual nature of 12-step recovery heals the hurt and opens up the doors of a new life.

The conclusion about the 12-step spiritual program of recovery is that if you surrender to the process, you will likely get sober and maintain a sobriety-based value system that will provide for a better life. All that is required for membership is the willingness to admit to powerlessness over alcohol, and the unmanageability of life due to its use.

(*) Alcoholics Anonymous: Referred to as the “Big Book” hosting the 12 steps in How it works and Into Action.

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