



The Third Step

Sometimes I have a difficult time remembering past events. It's not the event itself that is the difficulty, but how I thought or felt about a particular event. For instance, my wife and I have very different memories of the chronological order of our courtship and subsequent marriage. They are similar enough to make the whole episode understandable, but different enough to make the recounting of the story by both of us relatively entertaining. When I look backwards I often apply my feelings or thoughts of today to an event, and they might have little or nothing to do with how I really felt at the time.

I remember my first encounters with AA. Everyone has their own experience and, although mine is indigenous to me, I don't think that it's by any means unique. Please, keep in mind that it took me nine years to get sober. It is my understanding that some people come to the program, look at the 12 steps, and become paralyzed as they grasp the meaning of a fearless and moral inventory and making amends for past wrongs. I never had that experience. I couldn't grasp the meaning, but I thought I did.

I would go to meetings with every intention to quit drinking, and I would look at the 12 steps with almost no emotion or thought. They seemed perfectly logical to me, probably because of my seminary training. They made sense. But, they didn't apply to me. I couldn't imagine what I could possibly write down on a fourth step inventory that would be upsetting to me, and certainly there was no need for me to amend my life other than a need to stop drinking. In my mind I was a very personable, very intelligent young man who needed to be understood, and if everyone would just take the time to examine how well I was dealing with my miserable life, they would easily understand my actions and attitudes.

Once, I managed to stay sober for three months. My sponsor at the time asked me to speak at his anniversary meeting. I couldn't do it. I got physically sick. I couldn't tell my story simply because I didn't know my story. Something deep inside told me something was wrong with that. So, I didn't show up at the meeting and soothed my anxiety with some expensive cream sherry and very poor company.

I continue to drink for six more years. My forays into AA were frequent but of very short duration. I love to talk about the 12 steps. I would analyze and proselytize, but I did nothing. It was as if when I made any attempt to look at myself a cloud would come over me and I would see nothing worth correcting or changing.

In 1979 there was change. I went back to AA, and this time I definitely knew something was wrong. I didn't know what it was, but I knew that something had to change I would die a drunk. I was not in least interested in what I thought or how I felt. I wanted to know, desperately, what I need to do to stop drinking and stay stopped. My new sponsor had a novel idea. He said, "let's work the steps." I told him that after nine years of analyzing and proselytizing, I knew everything that needed to be known about the 12 steps. He laughed and said, "this time you will do them."

He asked me if I ever took a third step. I said yes, and told him how: I wait till no one is home, sit quietly, and say, "God, I'm turning my will and life over to you — Now." "And what happens?" he asked. "Nothing," I replied.

He made me agree to take a third step with him which meant that I would kneel down with him and say the third step the prayer. Even though everything in me seem to rise up and scream "NO!" I did it anyway. And nothing happened.

However, on the ride home I sat in the back seat looking up at the night sky. My thoughts were fleeting and then I remembered that I loved my mother. I hadn't felt that way about her in years. As I realized how much I loved her, I also realized how much I had hurt her; not buy anything that I had done, but by the way I had lived my life. (She and I had only one argument and it was over the phone. The discussion ended with me saying, "mom, I'm 21, I know what I'm doing, leave me alone!" She said, "you know what you're doing?" "Yes!" I replied. "Well, your 25." And she hung up.)

As I sat in that car thinking about her and the way I had been living my life, my story became clear. I couldn't think of myself as a personable, very intelligent young man. I began to see that had taken this gift of life and turned it inside out. I began to see that I was angry and afraid most of the time; that I didn't live life, I reacted to it. There was nothing uncomfortable about these thoughts or feelings. They were shown to me in the light of love; first my mother's love and then God's love. I would compare it to struggling with a math problem, one that is baffling but, nonetheless, must be solved. As I was shown mistake after mistake, the solution not only became apparent, but seemed to come alive.

The question had always centered around changing people and circumstances to suit me. Now it became obvious that it was I who needed to change. Interestingly enough, this did not appear to be difficult. In fact, it seemed as though direction I needed was clear and the help was available and ready. All I needed to do was avail myself of it. It was a simple act of the will: a change in direction – from the shadows to the Light.

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