

The Proactive Side of Step 10

Or...The Proper Use of Will Power to Maintain Fit Spiritual Condition

God knows what He's doing and let me tread water in AA for 25 years, trying this, trying that, going nowhere. I read AT the Big Book and went to meetings. I didn't drink, but other, disturbing addictions controlled my will and life and I did a lot of damage to people around me.

A little over six years ago in 2016, I got tired enough, scared enough, and desperate enough (*i.e. Step One*) to actually do the remaining eleven Steps with a sponsor who stuck to the Big Book instructions and gave me deadlines. And whaddaya know, after making my second amend—to a man who wasn't even on my 4th step inventory (*thank you Step 8*)—I had a spiritual awakening.

The experience led me to believe the Big Book has all the answers, that if I look carefully at what it says and follow its suggestions, I will establish and maintain a new “relationship with my Creator and will have the elements of a way of living which solves all my problems”. I'd like to suggest one reason—though not the only one nor the most important—why some of us are not getting this result from “working the steps”, this what the Book calls a “Spiritual Experience” or a “Spiritual Awakening”.

A friend of mine, Herb K., whom I have not met, asked this question in an article he wrote titled: “How does the Twelve Step program really work?”¹ Herb wrote (*my emphasis added*):

“Could it be the classic “human problem”: loss of focus and the complacency of an easier, softer way? Has there been a gradual growth of an AA culture that perpetuates the misunderstanding of what is the “program of recovery”? Does most of the AA membership believe that meetings are the program? How relevant to the majority of AA's membership is the application of ALL the Steps as contained in the book Alcoholics Anonymous? Has the spirit of fellowship replaced the Fellowship of the Spirit?”

The answer to these questions is "Yes". And PART of the problem in every fellowship based on AA's Twelve Steps that I've seen is a wide misunderstanding of what the Book says about Step 10. I'd like to suggest that our general misunderstanding of the Tenth Step has led us to turn the Big Book's program of “There-is-One-Who-Has-All-Power—that-One-is-God” into a “I'll-Fix-Myself—Thank-You” program. We may be wrecking the spiritual experience in Step 10.

About Step 10 Herb wrote² (*my emphasis added*):

“In Step Ten the Big Book confirms that “We have entered the world of the Spirit. (TRUE) This is “Our Way of Life” (TRUE), which we commence at the same time we start making our Step Nine amends (TRUE): a commitment to continue the personal changes of one's self (PARTLY TRUE / HALF TRUE) and the repair of historical damage to others (TRUE).”

The idea that Step 10 is about fixing ourselves is Half-True—i.e. it's not ALL of ALL the instructions of Step 10—in two ways:

- 1) The attitude that we continue to change ourselves turns Step 10 inside-out, from a process which is all God focused in Steps 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 into a process which is self-focused, self-centered, and self-will powered in Steps 10, 11, and 12.
- 2) It ignores the clear-as-a-bell cut instructions from the "Proactive" Side of Step 10.

¹ Herb K. “How the Program Really Works”, <http://herbk.com/> (write for it there; I couldn't find it listed on the site.)

² Ibid.

It's this self-centered, "I-will-fix-myself" attitude that directly results in that "loss of focus and the complacency of an easier, softer way" Herb wrote about. What could be more complacent than selfishly watching all day for selfishness? It's like wading into the ocean wondering with each step how much further I can wade before I get wet...watching for the water to get "wetter".

We won't go into the other steps here, but Steps 6 and 7 represent them in the following respect: these sentences (*my emphasis added*)...

"Are we now ready to let God remove from us all the things which we have admitted are objectionable?" and

"Can He now take them all—every one?" and

"If we still cling to something...we ask God to help us be willing (willing to let Him remove them [implied])." and

"I pray that you (God) now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows."

...make it very clear that God is the one who does the fixing, that it's His power and His choice about what "defects of character" get fixed, as well as how, when, and for what purpose. Herb's statement above was Half-True because though I do play a part in the defect removal, my only part in the process is to be willing OR if I'm not willing, to ask Him to help me be willing for Him to do the fixing. In other words, "There is One who has all power..." and that ain't me.

But, huh? What is the "Proactive" side of Step 10?

Herb, myself, and everyone else I've heard talk about Step 10, focus entirely (I would say "almost entirely", but it's not almost, it's entirely) we have focused entirely on the "Reactive" side of Step 10—this one-half of one paragraph that talks about "watching" for a relatively few specific things that might "crop up" to interrupt our life in the "world of the Spirit" all the while thinking we know what to do to fix ourselves just in case something unexpectedly does crops up.

In his article, Herb has a great analogy about (not) getting a Spiritual Awakening by reading AT the Big Book and going to meetings. His analogy: taking a drive somewhere by sitting in the car in the garage reading the automobile owner's manual.

May I offer an analogy for focusing only on the reactive side of Step 10?

It's like driving down the freeway watching the dashboard for the warning lights to come on...rather than watching the road ahead and watching for the road-signs that tell us where we're going. It's like watching for "Engine Oil", "Tires Low", "Engine Overheating"—which might appear—rather than watching for road signs which say "Houston, Next Left", "I-45 North, Keep Right", "Dallas, 240 miles." In reality, we do not have to worry about seeing the dashboard lights; we will see them when they "crop up", they will get our attention—they are designed to do so. But, we do have to watch for the road signs if we intend to go to Seattle instead of Miami.

Besides the reactive instructions for getting back on the highway after an "Engine Oil" light, or back into the World of the Spirit after a crop of selfishness, Step 10 offers instructions for living in the World of the Spirit, for maintaining a "fit spiritual condition" rather than just repairing when selfishness, etc. "crops up". The Instructions for living in the World of the Spirit are right there, plain as day in the 3rd paragraph of the four Step 10 paragraphs (*my emphasis*):

"What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition. (*And how do we maintain—not just repair—"fit spiritual condition?" [see next sentences, the clear-cut directions for the Proactive10th Step.]*) Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of God's will into all of our activities. How can I best serve Thee—Thy will (not mine) be done. These are thoughts which must go with us constantly. We can exercise our will power along this line all we wish. It is the proper use of the will."

We're instructed to constantly ask God to show us where we're going and what we're to do when we get there. It's constant and proactive; it's the proper use—as opposed to the selfish use—of will-power. Yes, we're watching for the warning lights, but our focus is on the road ahead: "OK, God, what do you want me to do to next—Thy will be done."

Steps 11 and 12 take on new meaning in light of the Proactive Step 10 directions.

The evening review in Step 11

-- is a frank evaluation of how well we practiced that Proactive Side of Step 10 all through the day in all activities.

-- It's not just, "Was I thinking of myself today?", but also, "Or was I thinking of what I could do to help others, what I could pack into the stream of life (pack into the stream to help others [implied])?" This is Proactive not Reactive: (*my emphasis below*)

"Our very lives...depend on our constant thought of others and how we may meet their needs" or in other words: "How can I best serve, Thee—Thy will be done." This same idea appears in the paragraph that introduces the Third Step: Our new Employer will provide everything we need "if we keep close to Him ("How can I best serve Thee?") and perform His work well" (This is "Faith with Works").

-- Finally, we ask God for forgiveness (*see Step Four's, "falling short" instructions—sorrow—admitting objectionable behavior, Step Six*). Then we ask God what corrections to make which takes us back to Step Eight and willingness to make those corrections.

The morning meditation in Step 11

-- is the prep work we do in the morning to launch into our constant, proactive, Step 10 Prayer which Step 10 suggests we practice "every day in all activities" (unless! selfishness, etc., "crops up" to knock us out of this proper use of our willpower—then we employ the instructions of the Reactive side of Step 10 to get back to the Proactive side of Step 10...or as we're instructed in that last Reactive direction, "We resolutely turn (proper use of the will) our thoughts to someone we can help (*i.e. How can I best serve Thee?*)."

-- Specifically in the morning meditation and thinking about our day:

-- 1st, we ask God to "direct our thinking".

-- 2nd, knowing we may face indecision during the day, we ask God here to grant "inspiration, an intuitive thought, or decision" (i.e. guidance) when we face indecision.

-- 3rd we ask God also to do this for us

a. to show us all through the day our "next step" (not our next fifteen steps),

b. to grant whatever we need to take care of whatever problems may arise, and

c. especially to keep us out of selfishness (freedom from self-will) in the first place.

Carrying the Message in Step 12

-- is about doing what we think God would have us do in the way He directs in answer to our 10th and 11th Step Prayers.

-- Step 12 is "Faith with Works", not just works; it's acting on the guidance we asked to receive by inspiration, intuitive thought or decision.

- If Faith without works is dead, Faith with works keeps our Faith in God's care and direction "vital", alive, keeps the spiritual experience alive. God's power keeps me sober, NOT my power, not, for example, my effort to "carry the message" in a way I think will improve my fellowship credentials or please my sponsor.

- This "Faith with Works" is what is meant by "Just to the extent that we do as we think He would have us, and humbly rely on Him...." It may be going to a half-way house; it may be (anonymously) picking up a bit of trash that flew into my neighbor's yard; it's whatever we believe God would have us do every day in all activities.

-- When Bill W. proposed writing the Book, some of the "old-timers" (more than a year!) thought Bill would be wasting his time and they tried to discourage him. They believed

that “carrying the message” meant going to hospitals, jails, and treatment centers, that “the man of Galilee had no press agent, no newspapers, no pamphlets, no books - nothing but word of mouth to carry the spirit from person to person.”³

-- We have to do what we think God would us to do, whatever that is, not what someone else thinks is God’s will for us. The Book says we won’t always be inspired; it says we may do some absurd things, but we do learn to rely on this “plane of inspiration”.

Some see the last four paragraphs of Chapter 6 as the “Through the Day” portion of Step 11; whatever. These four paragraphs are a summary of Chapters 5 and 6 to include a recap of the Proactive 10th Step. They loudly declare the Promise of the Proactive 10th Step—that the more we practice Step 10’s Proactive instructions, the less—not never—we’ll need the Step’s Reactive instructions. “How can I best serve Thee?”—constant, proactive thought of others to help meet their needs—and the constant Faith-with-Works Step 12 doing it. Here is that summary:

"We constantly (proactively) remind ourselves (proper use of the will) we are no longer running the show (God is), humbly saying to ourselves (i.e. quiet prayer) many times each day (every day in all activities) “Thy will be done” (the 10th Step Prayer). We are then in much less danger of (i.e. of needing the Reactive instructions for) excitement, fear, anger (i.e. resentment), worry, self-pity (i.e. selfishness), or foolish decisions (i.e. dishonesty among others). We become much more efficient. We do not tire so easily, for we are not burning up energy foolishly as we did when we were trying to arrange life to suit ourselves (discovering how we have been trying to arrange life to suit ourselves is what Chapter 5 is about; “suiting ourselves” IS the “loss of focus and complacency” Herb asked about).
"It works—it really does (*this constant proactive 10th Step Prayer; see next two sentences*).
"We alcoholics are undisciplined. So we let God discipline us in the simple way we have just outlined (*Outline of the program, see Chapters 5 and 6, Steps 2-11, particularly Step 10’s Proactive instructions with recourse when necessary to Step 10’s Reactive instructions.*)"

The Twelve Step program of the Big Book is a program about establishing, securing, and maintaining a new relationship with one’s Creator (however a person might understand this Power) which will solve our problem. This truth is especially illustrated in the twenty-one personal stories⁴ which were published in the First Edition of the Big Book. Please find and read those stories; compare those stories to the stories in the later editions. If those stories represent the fellowship as it was in early AA, where do you think the emphasis was then compared, for example, to the Fourth Edition stories? Their focus wasn’t on “staying sober” by reading AT the Big Book, going to meetings, or by gazing at their navels; their focus was on maintaining their relationship with their Creator and doing His work.

Step 10 offers two kinds of instructions for *maintaining* a relationship with one’s Creator. Is ignoring the Proactive directions why some of us are not getting this result from “working the steps”, this what the Book calls a “Spiritual Experience” or a “Spiritual Awakening”?

“What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the *maintenance* of our spiritual condition. Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of God’s will into all of our activities. ‘How can I best serve Thee—Thy will (not mine) be done.’... We can exercise our willpower along this line all we wish. It is the proper use of the will.” (Ch6~85.1)[4-9]

Bobby J.
Houston, TX
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³ Wilson, William (1988) “The Language of the Heart”, “The Book is Born”, page 11, 3rd paragraph.

⁴ The 29 Personal Stories of the First Edition might still be found online [here](#) and [here](#).