

Step Three

“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

PRACTICING Step Three is like the opening of a door which to all appearances is still closed and locked. All we need is a key, and the decision to swing the door open. There is only one key, and it is called willingness. Once unlocked by willingness, the door opens almost of itself, and looking through it, we shall see a pathway beside which is an inscription. It reads: “This is the way to a faith that works.” In the first two Steps we were engaged in reflection. We saw that we were powerless over alcohol, but we also perceived that faith of some kind, if only in A.A. itself, is possible to anyone. These conclusions did not require action; they required only acceptance.

Like all the remaining Steps, Step Three calls for affirmative action, for it is only by action that we can cut away the self-will which has always blocked the entry of God—or, if you like, a Higher Power—into our lives. Faith, to be sure, is necessary, but faith alone can avail nothing. We can have faith, yet keep God out of our lives. Therefore our problem now becomes just how and by what specific means shall we be able to let Him in? Step Three represents our first attempt to do this. In fact, the effectiveness of the whole A.A. program will rest upon how well and earnestly we have tried to come to “a decision to turn our will and

our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him.*”

To every worldly and practical-minded beginner, this Step looks hard, even impossible. No matter how much one wishes to try, exactly how *can* he turn his own will and his own life over to the care of whatever God he thinks there is? Fortunately, we who have tried it, and with equal misgivings, can testify that anyone, anyone at all, can begin to do it. We can further add that a beginning, even the smallest, is all that is needed. Once we have placed the key of willingness in the lock and have the door ever so slightly open, we find that we can always open it some more. Though self-will may slam it shut again, as it frequently does, it will always respond the moment we again pick up the key of willingness.

Maybe this all sounds mysterious and remote, something like Einstein's theory of relativity or a proposition in nuclear physics. It isn't at all. Let's look at how practical it actually is. Every man and woman who has joined A.A. and intends to stick has, without realizing it, made a beginning on Step Three. Isn't it true that in all matters touching upon alcohol, each of them has decided to turn his or her life over to the care, protection, and guidance of Alcoholics Anonymous? Already a willingness has been achieved to cast out one's own will and one's own ideas about the alcohol problem in favor of those suggested by A.A. Any willing newcomer feels sure A.A. is the only safe harbor for the foundering vessel he has become. Now if this is not turning one's will and life over to a newfound Providence, then what is it?

But suppose that instinct still cries out, as it certainly will,

“Yes, respecting alcohol, I guess I have to be dependent upon A.A., but in all other matters I must still maintain my independence. Nothing is going to turn me into a nonentity. If I keep on turning my life and my will over to the care of Something or Somebody else, what will become of *me*? I’ll look like the hole in the doughnut.” This, of course, is the process by which instinct and logic always seek to bolster egotism, and so frustrate spiritual development. The trouble is that this kind of thinking takes no real account of the facts. And the facts seem to be these: The more we become willing to depend upon a Higher Power, the more independent we actually are. Therefore dependence, as A.A. practices it, is really a means of gaining true independence of the spirit.

Let’s examine for a moment this idea of dependence at the level of everyday living. In this area it is startling to discover how dependent we really are, and how unconscious of that dependence. Every modern house has electric wiring carrying power and light to its interior. We are delighted with this dependence; our main hope is that nothing will ever cut off the supply of current. By so accepting our dependence upon this marvel of science, we find ourselves more independent personally. Not only are we more independent, we are even more comfortable and secure. Power flows just where it is needed. Silently and surely, electricity, that strange energy so few people understand, meets our simplest daily needs, and our most desperate ones, too. Ask the polio sufferer confined to an iron lung who depends with complete trust upon a motor to keep the breath of life in him.

But the moment our mental or emotional independence

is in question, how differently we behave. How persistently we claim the right to decide all by ourselves just what we shall think and just how we shall act. Oh yes, we'll weigh the pros and cons of every problem. We'll listen politely to those who would advise us, but all the decisions are to be ours alone. Nobody is going to meddle with our personal independence in such matters. Besides, we think, there is no one we can surely trust. We are certain that our intelligence, backed by willpower, can rightly control our inner lives and guarantee us success in the world we live in. This brave philosophy, wherein each man plays God, sounds good in the speaking, but it still has to meet the acid test: how well does it actually work? One good look in the mirror ought to be answer enough for any alcoholic.

Should his own image in the mirror be too awful to contemplate (and it usually is), he might first take a look at the results normal people are getting from self-sufficiency. Everywhere he sees people filled with anger and fear, society breaking up into warring fragments. Each fragment says to the others, "We are right and you are wrong." Every such pressure group, if it is strong enough, self-righteously imposes its will upon the rest. And everywhere the same thing is being done on an individual basis. The sum of all this mighty effort is less peace and less brotherhood than before. The philosophy of self-sufficiency is not paying off. Plainly enough, it is a bone-crushing juggernaut whose final achievement is ruin.

Therefore, we who are alcoholics can consider ourselves fortunate indeed. Each of us has had his own near-fatal encounter with the juggernaut of self-will, and has suffered

enough under its weight to be willing to look for something better. So it is by circumstance rather than by any virtue that we have been driven to A.A., have admitted defeat, have acquired the rudiments of faith, and now want to make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to a Higher Power.

We realize that the word “dependence” is as distasteful to many psychiatrists and psychologists as it is to alcoholics. Like our professional friends, we, too, are aware that there are wrong forms of dependence. We have experienced many of them. No adult man or woman, for example, should be in too much emotional dependence upon a parent. They should have been weaned long before, and if they have not been, they should wake up to the fact. This very form of faulty dependence has caused many a rebellious alcoholic to conclude that dependence of any sort must be intolerably damaging. But dependence upon an A.A. group or upon a Higher Power hasn’t produced any baleful results.

When World War II broke out, this spiritual principle had its first major test. A.A.’s entered the services and were scattered all over the world. Would they be able to take discipline, stand up under fire, and endure the monotony and misery of war? Would the kind of dependence they had learned in A.A. carry them through? Well, it did. They had even fewer alcoholic lapses or emotional binges than A.A.’s safe at home did. They were just as capable of endurance and valor as any other soldiers. Whether in Alaska or on the Salerno beachhead, their dependence upon a Higher Power worked. And far from being a weakness, this

dependence was their chief source of strength.

So how, exactly, can the willing person continue to turn his will and his life over to the Higher Power? He made a beginning, we have seen, when he commenced to rely upon A.A. for the solution of his alcohol problem. By now, though, the chances are that he has become convinced that he has more problems than alcohol, and that some of these refuse to be solved by all the sheer personal determination and courage he can muster. They simply will not budge; they make him desperately unhappy and threaten his new-found sobriety. Our friend is still victimized by remorse and guilt when he thinks of yesterday. Bitterness still overpowers him when he broods upon those he still envies or hates. His financial insecurity worries him sick, and panic takes over when he thinks of all the bridges to safety that alcohol burned behind him. And how shall he ever straighten out that awful jam that cost him the affection of his family and separated him from them? His lone courage and unaided will cannot do it. Surely he must now depend upon Somebody or Something else.

At first that "somebody" is likely to be his closest A.A. friend. He relies upon the assurance that his many troubles, now made more acute because he cannot use alcohol to kill the pain, can be solved, too. Of course the sponsor points out that our friend's life is still unmanageable even though he is sober, that after all, only a bare start on A.A.'s program has been made. More sobriety brought about by the admission of alcoholism and by attendance at a few meetings is very good indeed, but it is bound to be a far cry from permanent sobriety and a contented, useful life.

That is just where the remaining Steps of the A.A. program come in. Nothing short of continuous action upon these as a way of life can bring the much-desired result.

Then it is explained that other Steps of the A.A. program can be practiced with success only when Step Three is given a determined and persistent trial. This statement may surprise newcomers who have experienced nothing but constant deflation and a growing conviction that human will is of no value whatever. They have become persuaded, and rightly so, that many problems besides alcohol will not yield to a headlong assault powered by the individual alone. But now it appears that there are certain things which only the individual can do. All by himself, and in the light of his own circumstances, he needs to develop the quality of willingness. When he acquires willingness, he is the only one who can make the decision to exert himself. Trying to do this is an act of his own will. All of the Twelve Steps require sustained and personal exertion to conform to their principles and so, we trust, to God's will.

It is when we try to make our will conform with God's that we begin to use it rightly. To all of us, this was a most wonderful revelation. *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 intention for us.* To make this increasingly possible is the purpose of A.A.'s Twelve Steps, and Step Three opens the door.

Once we have come into agreement with these ideas, it is really easy to begin the practice of Step Three. In all times

of emotional disturbance or indecision, we can pause, ask for quiet, and in the stillness simply say: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Thy will, not mine, be done.”