



## The Fourth Step “Taking Out The Trash”

Reposted from [Recoverytoday.net](http://Recoverytoday.net) | April 2012 Edition | by: Tim Cheney

*“Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”*

You must be kidding me! I have to do this? The thought of taking on this step made my blood run cold through my core and literally paralyzed my recovery. I stood still. The old timers said that if you don't do this step you will drink or use again. I intuitively knew that this was my last shot. I doubted that I had another run in me. I had been at death's door when I arrived and had been spared countless times. I knew I was emotionally disfigured and spiritually bankrupt. I felt like a disposable leper who had left pieces of himself along the way. Over the years, I had been able to repress the horror and, at that juncture, saw no value in grave digging. Nevertheless, I told myself, I was not your typical, garden variety alcoholic or drug addict. I was different, I was worse. I was a heroin addict by age 15 and homeless. I had 43 admissions for addiction and behavioral disorders over the course of twenty years. I had had been institutionalized in rehabs, mental hospitals, jails, therapeutic communities and had spent over a decade on methadone maintenance. (The inventory was starting...)

But were those crusty old timers right? My problem was that I had an oppositional defiant streak and had never excelled in taking direction especially if it exposed myself to me. I kept telling myself that I was different. I had latched on to “constitutionally incapable” in “How it Works” and decided that my years of opioid, sedative and alcohol abuse and addiction were a result of an endorphin deficiency that was genetic and which precluded a typical recovery. Yes, I thought, I was unique. I was terminally unique and I was terminal. Once an addict, you were always an addict and you would die an addict. This fourth step certainly did not apply to me. It was just too simplistic. Furthermore, I told myself that I had tilled this soil again and again while in treatment. Let sleeping dogs lie was my motto. I felt like Attila the Hun sitting in Sunday school watching the kids eat hostess twinkies or Pol Pot at a campfire roasting marshmallows with the scouts. My soul burned with the conviction that I had committed moral atrocities that were unforgivable and should never see the light of day. I didn't understand that I had (still have) a disease and two of its primary characteristics were isolation from humanity and alienation from God. In essence I had sentenced my soul to exile. I was an outsider to the human race and I did not deserve redemption.

Over the past several months, I have written articles on the first three steps. I can't, He can, and I think I will let Him. In each of these steps my disease met with fierce resistance. Each step seemed impossible. Yet, each step I took produced the results promised. My life depended on listening, taking direction and being willing and teachable. I was told to keep an open mind because something might fall in there. Furthermore, what options did I have left?

Therapeutically I had exhausted all routes other than electro-convulsive therapy or a lobotomy and the other three alternatives were jails, institutions and death.

So the words of the old timers continued to haunt me. If I did not embrace the fourth step, I would drink again. I would use again. And I would surely die or end up brain dead in the back ward of a state mental hospital. There are “agains” and “yets” and singular events. I had had my

again, exhausted the possible “yets” so I didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that there remained only two alternative, rather final destinations. Every time I sat in a meeting and the fourth step would come up I would feel shame and fear. There was this nagging feeling that I was masquerading because I was stalling. But I would also hear truth and the truth was that I had to look under the rotting wood of a house about to fall and expose those termites that had ceaselessly devoured my soul and propelled my addiction to the point of no return.

An old program adage states that an addict alone is in bad company. Truer, more profound words have never been spoken. For years I had lived alone in my mind and in my heart. There was no consistency in my relationships, my behavior (other than using) or my activities. I was like a piece of crumpled paper discarded in the gutter. When dry, it blew aimlessly down the street and came to rest in yet another gutter and when wet quietly disintegrated. The fragmented thoughts and memories contextually became disproportionate to reality and I lost all sense of self. I no longer had a sense of normal and the only emotions I felt were fear and anger. Exposing all of my true self on paper and then disclosing it in the fifth step to one person was unthinkable. Over the years I had only disclosed parts of my true self to any one individual but no one, not even I, knew the full story. Since the age of ten, my life had been a fragmented blur consisting of a series of fight or flight situations fueled by a cocktail of fear, adrenaline, desperation and existential loneliness.

Like any typical addictive personality, once I had made the decision to proceed I was determined to do the most comprehensive fourth step known to humanity. What I learned was basically what any sixth grader knows. God doesn’t make junk and that I was not unique. I learned that everything I had done had been done before and therefore I was not unique nor was I exempt from recovery. I learned that my behavior was a maladaptive coping mechanism for defending and perpetuating my disease. But most importantly, I learned that I had a disease and that my behavior and thought processes were part of the disease of addiction. I learned that I was accountable but not responsible before sobriety because I had a disease. However, after doing the fourth step, I realized that from that point on I was responsible and accountable for my sobriety, my words, my actions and my behavior. I had no more alibis for I had a choice.

Today I refer to the fourth step as taking out the trash. Most normal people empty their waste baskets into some container several times a week and take it to the curb. They do that because they don’t want the mess or the odor that trash and garbage produce. For years I had hoarded my garbage and trash and was ashamed of it. I had no idea that while I was hiding my trash and closing my windows because of the vile odors that were toxic to my soul that others were merrily dragging their junk out to the curb twice a week. They even have special containers with wheels and names for them.

What an epiphany.

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## About the Author

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