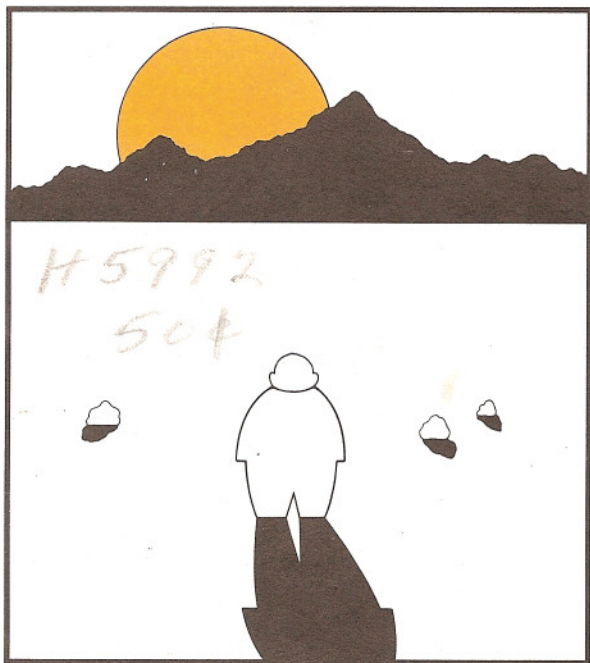


POCKET POWER

HUMILITY



Hazelden

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The logo for Hazelden, featuring a stylized, large letter 'H' on the left, followed by the word 'azelden' in a serif font. The 'H' is partially overlapping the 'a'.

Editor's Note:

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HUMILITY

Humility is a frequent topic at meetings of recovering people, and is often difficult to talk about. This pamphlet will discuss some ideas about humility that may help us understand its role in recovery, and make it easier to talk about. Through understanding humility, we will learn to live and cope with sobriety and recovery.

Low Self-Worth/Big Ego

Let's take a look at the relationship between humility and low self-worth and what is commonly known as "big ego." Harry Tiebout, a close friend of Bill Wilson's and an early supporter of Alcoholics Anonymous, characterized the alcoholic as "king baby." By this, he meant that drinking alcoholics demand what they want when they want it and believe the universe revolves around them and their needs. Therefore, he concluded that continuing recovery, depends upon maintaining awareness of our powerlessness over alcohol and the unmanageable quality of our lives.

The king baby quality of drinking alcoholics is readily apparent in grandiose behavior. Alcoholics who spend money they don't have on people they hardly know or on things they don't need manifest grandiosity. Fantasizing future

greatness or giving a gift instead of love are characteristics of the grandiosity in an alcoholic.

What may not be so apparent is that extreme low self-esteem is also a manifestation of the king baby quality of alcoholism. In a grandiose phase, an alcoholic considers him- or herself to be above others. However, extreme low self-esteem places one below others. In both instances, the alcoholic's attitude is "but I am different." Low self-esteem can also be a means of justifying self-centeredness, manipulating others through one's self-hatred, and constantly putting down oneself. There is the attitude of "I can do everything," and at the same time, "I can't do anything." Humility cuts through these two extremes with the recognition that "I can do something" with the help of a greater Power.

A Willingness to Learn

The ego state manifested in big ego or in low self-worth is in some ways a refusal on our part to admit we need help or that we can learn from others. No matter how long we have been in the program, we can continue to learn more about ourselves, others, and our Higher Power.

Believing a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity is an acknowledgment that we are not experts on how to stay sober or how

to live with an alcoholic. In short, we need help in order to live and grow. We needed others to help us begin recovery. And as we continue to grow, even after years in the program, we still need others to help us maintain recovery.

In recovery, willingness to learn can expand beyond learning how to stay sober or how to live with an alcoholic. Willingness to learn can become an ongoing acceptance of our limitations. If we let go of our prejudices, we can discover that learning how to live is not limited to experts or to people of our own race, sex, or socioeconomic class. Our ability to learn in life and to grow in recovery may be facilitated by anyone we meet in the program or outside of it.

Willingness to go to meetings, read literature about recovery, and spend time with a sponsor in honest sharing are helping us stay humble and sober. But we must also acknowledge and be willing to learn from our mistakes. The sadness that results from making mistakes is that often we fail to learn from them. As we grow in sobriety, we learn more and more to accept responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Willingness to learn from mistakes can turn catastrophes into opportunities.

Humility and Humor

Humility and a sense of humor are closely

related, but not in the sense that one can laugh at a cartoon or a funny story. It is an ability to laugh at oneself, and not take oneself too seriously. Before recovery began, many of us had suffered humiliations and saw nothing funny about them. But in the process of recovery, we began to laugh with others at some of our weaknesses and foibles. It is always easy to take ourselves too seriously, no matter how long we have been sober. A.A. friends who continue to puncture our balloons of grandiosity or lift us out of the depths of self-pity with their humor, are an important part of humility.

A person caught up in grandiose behavior may cause others to laugh. But you can be sure that person will be taking his or her actions very seriously. Likewise, someone who is in the throes of self-condemnation, self-hatred, and guilt will find little or nothing funny about his or her situation. In the process of recovery, as humility becomes one of the foundations of our lives, we begin to laugh at our past and even our present. This does not mean we are being irresponsible. It simply means we are seeing ourselves in perspective, and our actions, thoughts, and feelings may not be the center of the universe.

A Characteristic of the Program

Humility is a characteristic of the Twelve Step program and touches on each of the Steps. However, if we look at the Twelve Steps as a whole, we begin to see that working the program leads to a new way of perceiving ourselves in the world. We are no longer focused on alcohol or other drugs. The escape from this was not a decision made on our own. I know of no one who woke up one morning and said, "It is a beautiful day. I have lots of money in the bank. My spouse and children love and respect me, and we have a fine relationship. I have good friends and meaningful work. I think I will stop drinking and start going to meetings."

For most of us the program becomes an escape from a life characterized by pain, fear, frustration, anger, and an attempt to have things our way. The Twelve Steps are a process of de-centering and re-centering our lives. As we know, self-centeredness in its various forms is at the root of our problem. The Steps give us a way of getting off dead center where our own desires, feelings, and demands are the focal point of our lives.

In living the program with the help of others, we continually make the discovery that the less self-centered we become, the more full our lives are and the more rewarding sobriety is. The

process of re-centering our lives on what we can give to others and how we can share what we have received is indeed a quality of life that can be called humble. It does not mean we are unconcerned about ourselves. However, the remarkable thing is that the more we re-center on other people and their needs, the more we receive.

It seems to be true, however, that this re-centering process means we also need to re-center our lives in relationship to our Higher Power. As we do this, we are more able to let go of others and serve them without trying to control and meet our own demands under the guise of helping. The re-centering of our lives in relationship to our Higher Power gives us a new freedom regarding others. Humility in this regard helps us maintain the perspective that reminds us we are not God, but are free to become fully human beings. In this sense, the program of the Twelve Steps leads indirectly to humility. Humility cannot be bought. Nor can it be directly decided upon. Humility is acquired indirectly through working the Steps, and leads to a healthy acceptance of self.

This may be a phenomenon of the Twelve Step program. It does not belong to a school of spirituality that says, "Are your spiritual muscles flabby? If so, take our special ten-day

course and develop those muscles so that you are a spiritual or emotional giant or a very together person, and then you can take credit for it." The paradox of growth in working the Steps is that we cannot do it alone, yet no one can do it for us. Working the Twelve Steps not only leads to and requires humility, it also leads to a deeper and more secure sense of self-esteem. It is then that the joy in living we had originally sought becomes a reality.

Patience and Self-Acceptance

Humility looks different on different people, and often we have a false picture of what it is. We think of people walking with downcast eyes, never having anything good to say about themselves, and never acknowledging they are capable of anything. This is an erroneous picture of humility, although it is one that we frequently find ourselves believing. Instead, humility will differ for each of us, and we will become more humble as we become more who we really are.

Becoming who we truly are is not the same thing as asking ourselves the question, who am I? Frequently we think "identity crisis" means a close examination of our past in a very analytical way. The tendency to search for our uniqueness (as though it were some sort of reality we could find through continued self-searching), is

the result of a mistaken idea of what our identity and humility really are.

Humility helps us recognize that we are both unique and ordinary, sharing all things that are important with the rest of humanity. The search for identity does not go back into the past as much as it goes forward into the future. This search asks who we want to become and how we can get there. Likewise, humility is not a continual dredging up of our past behavior, but rather a simple acceptance of our past, and a realization that we do not have to behave as we did before.

Perhaps some examples will help. Consider the accomplished musician who has worked very hard learning to play an instrument and then denies that he or she is good; or the man who has worked at his golf game and then continues to put himself down; or the person who gives a very good speech but continues to deny that he or she has a gift for speaking. Such a denial of gifts makes others as uncomfortable as being with someone who exaggerates his or her talents. Denial of our gifts and the inflation of the importance of our gifts are not characteristic of humility.

Humility looks different on different people because we have different gifts. To be humble is not to deny that one is gifted, but to acknowl-

edge that our gifts make us a part of humanity rather than setting us up as superior to others. Nor do our limitations set us apart, they join us together, and we experience them as a source of unity rather than barriers of separation.

Steps Six and Seven

One of the most important insights of the Twelve Steps is that a chemically dependent person is a good person. Step Six acknowledges very realistically that we have defects of character. This is quite different from feeling we are defective characters. Even in moments of grandiosity, many of us have had the feeling there is something deeply wrong with us, that we are fatally flawed human beings, created somehow different and slightly out of place. This idea of being defective at the very core of our being is contrary to the Twelve Steps. However, we may have many defects of character that have been a source of disharmony and pain in our lives. If we look closely, we may discover our defects of character hurt ourselves more than anyone else.

We sometimes hear it said when we are making a list of people we have harmed by our drinking or using, that we should put ourselves at the top. This may be true, but the best way we can make amends to ourselves is by allowing the defects of character to be removed. Envy,

greed, anger, jealousy, gluttony, pride, and lust may have blocked us from a more effective life. They have denied us a harmony with others, our Higher Power, and ourselves. As the defects of character are removed, we become more who we really are.

In Steps Six and Seven we first become ready to have these defects removed, and that means we have acknowledged they exist. The "Big Book" and "Twelve and Twelve" from Alcoholics Anonymous suggest that what is meant by *entirely ready* is not necessarily to be interpreted as *wildly enthusiastic*. Rather, it means we are willing to undertake the difficult but rewarding path of spiritual growth, and to do this we need help from God as we understand Him. *Entirely ready* means we will "never say never" about any defect.

Perhaps the main point Steps Six and Seven make regarding humility is that we need to continue to ask for help in the process of recovery. They also remind us that, although a defect of character may be removed, the capacity for it is not removed. If we are viewing defects of character as patterns of behavior which are a source of pain in our lives, then we must remember that even though the behavior may change, we retain a capacity for that kind of behavior.

For example, developing a way of life that

demands rigorous honesty is a difficult and lifetime process. No matter how long we have been in the program or how honest we have become, this defect of dishonesty may continue to hinder our growth. At times we may have used honesty as a means of being brutal with other people, or we may find that we are being dishonest in our words, actions, gestures, or in the way we look at someone.

Around this defect of dishonesty, we see that we tend to use the same rationalizations as we always have. If we do not continue to take personal inventory and ask to have these defects removed, they can block our growth in recovery. We retain the capacity for our defects just as we retain the capacity to choose to use or drink again, even though the desire to drink or use may have been lifted. We should not be surprised when even after years of sobriety, defects of character continue to be a part of our lives. Remember Steps Six and Seven remain available to us as a way of continuing to make amends.

Achieving Humility

The Twelfth Tradition of A.A. also provides an important insight into another aspect of humility. It says anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our traditions, reminding us to place principles above personalities. The tradition of

anonymity protects the group, as well as the individual. If we begin to apply the Twelfth Tradition to ourselves, we may see values in terms of personal growth.

A kind act done for someone which nobody finds out about, not even the person for whom it was done, can be a good way of checking where we are in terms of humility. If we find ourselves resisting doing those things for which there is little or no credit or expression of gratitude, we can begin to work on doing them and help our recovery process.

Developing gratitude as a way of life helps us grow in humility because we see life from a different perspective. We begin to notice in our lives all of the things we have to be grateful for on any given day. Also, by learning to be continually grateful and seeing not only sobriety but other things in life as gifts, we recognize more fully what has been given rather than what has been achieved.

Another avenue to humility is the development of a sense of awe. This is closely related to gratitude but not quite the same. Some of us may live in places that are awe-inspiring, and yet we have taken them for granted. The sunset, a night sky in the winter, really looking at our children or lover, perhaps simply taking time to allow ourselves to appreciate the face of a

friend, can help us develop a sense of awe. Awe takes us out of ourselves in a healthy way. Also, going to meetings, becoming involved in the service work of A.A.*, making coffee, being a greeter, going on Twelfth Step calls, listening to and sharing with others are all ways in which we can develop a sense of service to others and grow in humility and recovery.

These simple practices of gratitude, awe, real participation in meetings, listening and sharing, all help us toward a healthy and happy sobriety. Along the way they give us a better perspective on who we are and who we can become. They also help us cut through the grandiosity and low self-worth of an ego-centered life and lead us toward growth in humility.

* Or any other Twelve Step program.

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