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LIVING
"EASY DOES IT"

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LIVING "EASY DOES IT"

The Speeders

A year after she quit drinking, Mary still felt a long way from serenity. Her meetings were the most peaceful part of her week. The rest of her time was spent in a flurry of activity. She said no to no one — not to her friends, her family, or neighbors.

Yet her meetings were gentle reminders that quiet time is an important part of recovery too. Every time she heard Step Eleven, "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God. . ." she felt this tug at her heart to make time for such contact. She listened to fellow members speak of special times listening to music, taking long walks, meditating.

Mary began to talk about her struggle to slow down and saw many heads nodding in agreement. Slowly, quiet time became a priority for her. By learning to enjoy still moments and saying no occasionally, she began to reap the harvest of feeling more centered and peaceful. She was thinking, "Easy does it, I don't have to do

everything I think (or someone else thinks) I should do.”

Those of us who grew up in dysfunctional family systems learned the roller coaster approach to life. Moods among the adults in our lives vacillated frequently and by large degrees. A father who was kind one day could come home raging the next day.

We learned how to adjust to these extremes and to expect them. As we grew into our adult lives we recreated them. By then, the roller coaster was normal, familiar.

Those of us in recovery know that we took our alcohol or other drug use to an extreme. No longer using has been the first step toward leading a saner life. But there remains the challenge to learn a sense of balance in the rest of our lives. Weaning ourselves from the habit of constant crisis is also an important element of recovery. At first, this is harder to do than it seems, for it seems as if we don't know what to do if there is no crisis to focus on.

We learned how to live life at 80 miles an hour. We are often the kind of people who take stairs three at a time. We think we need to be Superman or Wonder Woman for others to see us as okay.

Easy Does It is a slogan that can help us with this part of ourselves. It simply means we

should slow down and ease up on the way we push ourselves. It is an invitation to slow down to twenty miles an hour at least once in a while. It means letting ourselves enjoy life and accepting it one step at a time, one day at a time, one minute at a time.

When we slow down, we are more able to listen to our Higher Power. We can also get a clearer sense of our own inner wisdom. Easing up on ourselves creates the space for receptiveness, into which all sorts of gifts will come. Above all, such receptiveness encourages a gentle and deep self-growth.

Recovery — Truly a Step at a Time

Mary was surprised to find she still felt very awkward in social situations long after she quit drinking. She had thought her uneasiness around groups of people was due to trying to hide her intoxication. She felt discouraged when her social skills did not automatically improve. Often she felt tongue-tied and awkward. Yet, she noticed that after months of going to meetings she was no longer tongue-tied at them. She knew a few people she could easily talk with, and she was beginning to feel comfortable speaking to a large group.

Mary began to apply the same process to the

rest of her life. On coffee breaks at work she made herself talk to one person each day. At a friend's party she set a goal of talking to two people. In the past she would have berated herself for not being the life of the party.

Very gradually, she noticed it was not so hard and it was even fun to socialize. There were still days when it was difficult to socialize, but more and more she could relax and enjoy being with people. By taking small steps and accepting her own pace of progress, she was slowly able to make the changes in herself that she desired.

Many of us have a tendency to push hard at whatever we do. We will likely approach our recovery with the same drive. This can be good up to a certain point.

Once we stop using alcohol and other drugs, our recovery becomes a combination of working and unfolding. Meetings are a place where we both give and take. Both are important elements for the inward journey.

There is no concrete method for when or how to do the Steps. Nor is there any concrete way to be a more loving, self-confident person. Spiritual growth is not an event that can be arrived at tomorrow — it is what evolves by how we live each day. Those of us who are at home in rigid rule systems and with controlling people, may find this lack of “the one right way” disconcerting.

The program encourages us to do what is right for us when it is right for us. The Twelve Steps cannot be done in twelve weeks, but we can keep going to our meetings and learning something new every time. We can nurture the qualities we are seeking by being around others who have created more fulfilling lives for themselves. Like Mary, we all have our own time-tables. The longer we are in the program, the easier it is to see that when the time is right, we will take the next Step.

Easy does it. The seasons do not change overnight. In the early spring we see tiny buds. Brown grass shows spurts of green. The buds grow a little bit greener each day. Yet the daily growth is hard to see. Then one day it seems the trees have turned from a light feather green into a full-fledged dark green foliage. Spring, in its fullness, is here.

Self-growth is like that. For many days there is slow, imperceptible movement. We make small, steady changes in our attitudes and behavior. Sometimes the changes are so small they cannot be seen. Then something will happen and we can see how we handled it differently than we would have just a year ago. And suddenly, the change is obvious. And just as we need to take time to notice the greenness of spring, so do we need to notice, and have others

notice, our own blossoming.

Recovery is a combination of working the program and letting the program work for us. Overachievers, relax. The spirit is not something that can be fitted into a schedule. Gaining personal strength and self-love requires reflection and receptiveness, as well as action. The rewards are bountiful. Into our receptive spirits will come a stronger sense of a Higher Power than we have known before, and a very special love from our fellow group members. Such rewards will extend to all parts of our lives.

Perfectionism

Len, a successful businessman, had quit drinking but was still having trouble with his wife and children. He had a tendency to deal with them in the same way he dealt with customers — a hard-line pitch, high expectations, and top-speed efficiency. He had expected things to clear up fast at home once he quit drinking and was very hard on himself when that didn't happen.

When Len began talking about it with his sponsor, he had to admit to himself that personal relationships were an area in which he was not very skilled. He set up small goals for himself, spent some special time with his wife every

day, and worked on really listening to her as well as sharing his own struggles and accomplishments. He set aside time to spend with each of his children.

At first it was awkward, but as the months went by Len realized it was beginning to feel natural to be more of a family man. The changes had crept up on him slowly. He had managed to change his attitude from, Why isn't this happening faster? to What can I do today? and Change takes time. For Len, the reward for this attitude change was a sense of peace and deep self-acceptance.

For many of us, perfectionism has been a part of our disease. Because we didn't (couldn't) measure up to our standards of perfection, we resorted to overdrinking, overeating, or overdosing to dull the pain of our lack of self-acceptance. When the addictive behavior is removed, our other patterns of behavior and thinking remain. Like Len, we must work on those.

Our perfectionistic drives are self-defeating for no matter what we achieve we will expect more. At root is a lack of self-love and perhaps also a lack of humility. Humility allows us to recognize our limitations and our needs. For Len it was humility that allowed him to admit that he hadn't been a very good husband or

father. Once he admitted his limitations, he could begin to improve.

Humility allows us to be vulnerable, which does not mean there is something wrong with us, but rather that we are human. If we have it "all together" then why would we need to cry or be taken care of? Yet such needs are basic to the fully alive human being.

As driven people, we often cut off the softer sides of our spirit. Yet gentleness, reflection, and relaxation are all necessary for nurturing our spirits. If love is essential to the spiritual life, then it must begin with self-love. Self-acceptance wraps itself around the belief that we're okay even if we are not perfect.

The habit of demanding so much of ourselves (and probably others as well) needs to be replaced slowly and steadily with patience and compassion for ourselves. Growth and change take time. We are on a road and we might as well enjoy the scenery, smell the flowers, and listen to the people traveling with us. The rewards of such slowing down are that we become freer to enjoy the journey and less focused on the outcome. Consequently, we lead fuller, richer lives by being more involved in today.

Easy Does It

Bill was the head of his law firm. He was a successful, ambitious man, and he had acquired a lot in his life through his competitive drive. He found this drive creeping up on him at meetings. His fellow member, Art, was doing a Fifth Step this week. Bill did not feel at all ready to do one, but he kept thinking he should be as far along as Art.

Bill talked to his sponsor and was encouraged to be at peace with his own time frame. The old-timers in the program could see a larger perspective. Hard as it was, he decided to trust that whenever he truly was ready, he would know it and do it.

A gift of the Twelve Step program is that it encourages us to be ourselves and to develop our spiritual life. The program invites us to focus on a Higher Power and to listen to our own wisdom. By doing so, the program discourages comparison and competition.

There is a built-in wisdom to the circularity of the Twelve Step program. We come around to each Step over and over and over again. If we're not ready to do a Fifth Step this time, it will come around again. Also, each time we study a Step we gain something new from it. There seem to be endless levels to what can be gained from

these Steps.

Above all, we are encouraged to find our own way with the guidance of the Twelve Steps. The Twelve Steps are capable of guiding us through forests full of a painful past and the difficulties and joys of the present.

Easy does it, but do it. We are all invited to keep coming, to keep believing, and to keep becoming better people. Easy does it is an invitation to be gentle but persistent. The process of becoming a more self-loving, spiritual person is a lifelong process. There is no hurry to get anywhere, but rather to do what feels right for us today.

The Art of Being Gentle With Ourselves

Marilyn has a plaque in her kitchen that says "Easy Does It." It's a reminder to her on days when she gets wound up and finds herself on the roller coaster again. In the old days she would work hard all day on the job, then come home and dive into the first of four or five things to accomplish for the evening. She has learned how to come home from work and lay on the couch, or quietly visit with her husband, or take a slow walk with a friend. There are still busy days, of course, but she has learned to balance them with quiet times. When she finds

herself feeling crazy again, she checks in with other people and this helps her to slow down. Above all, she has learned how to pace herself.

Learning to be gentle with ourselves is truly an art. It can be practiced and it can be learned from others. Part of being gentle with ourselves is letting others in. A favorite way we were hard on ourselves in the past was to get tough and go it alone. But we don't have to live our lives alone. We can let God and others help.

Another way to be gentle with ourselves is to set realistic goals. By expecting too much from ourselves, we are set up for frustration and a sense of failure. For the difficult areas of our lives, we can make small goals and work toward them. By learning to create reachable goals, we encourage our own self-growth in a positive way.

Self-forgiveness is an important element of gentleness. If we can forgive ourselves for making mistakes then we can more easily forgive the others around us. When we have handled something in a way we don't like, forgiving ourselves will help us move on so we can handle it better next time. Self-forgiveness requires humility and an acceptance of our human weaknesses.

Self-acceptance is a key in all of this. We are all okay as we are today. The question is, do we believe this? We are where we are supposed to be

and on our way to being all we can be. We have goals we are working on, and we can love ourselves for caring enough to work on being better people.

Easy does it, but do it. Are we listening to our inner voices? Are we listening to the people we trust in our lives? Are we working on realistic goals? Are we allowing ourselves quiet reflective time, time to notice and enjoy the changes we have made? Are we finding a balance between giving and taking? Are we doing what feels right for us today? We can remember every day a thought from the prayer *Desiderata*, "we are children of the universe and we have a right, no less than the trees and the stars, to be here."

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