

POCKET POWER

LIVING THE

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# PRINCIPLES



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## LIVING THE PRINCIPLES

*Alcoholics Anonymous*, The Big Book, tells us on page 60, "No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection."

Some of us should be excused for the vast relief we felt when we first read this statement in the Big Book. After all, it follows the Twelve Steps, which can sound very righteous to a person just coming off a drunk. "It was great to learn that I didn't have to become a holier-than-thou in order to stay sober," is a typical reaction. "I wanted to get well by tomorrow, but I was willing to wait until next week for sainthood!"

Although we won't become saints, the Twelve Step program does give us principles that bring dramatic change in our lives. Even without "perfect adherence," every person who is really successful in recovery follows a few key principles with deep conviction and great understanding. How does this happen, and how *do* we go about living the Twelve Step principles?

Judging from what we hear at meetings, living a Twelve Step program is not always a smooth process for some of us, nor do we approach it with the same gusto we once displayed toward drinking. "I looked at the principles very suspiciously and resentfully," a member recalls. "It was only after I suffered a lot more and made additional mistakes that I became really willing to give the Steps a chance. And it was a long time before I could really appreciate the full value and depth of this program."

In other words, the Twelve Step principles only become important to us after we realize we need them, and often the need has to be desperate. We live or practice our principles if we really feel it's required for our recovery and self-improvement. This may seem selfish to some, but it is also positive and realistic. Outsiders sometimes resent it when A.A. members declare, "This is a selfish program." But those selfish reasons also ensure that we will try to practice a principle when we really value and understand it.

### **First We Surrender**

It is difficult to rank the various principles of Twelve Step programs according to importance. Very little ever happens, however, until the indi-

vidual surrenders the problem. In the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill W. notes on pages 21 and 22: "The principle that we shall find no enduring strength until we first admit complete defeat is the main taproot from which our whole Society has sprung and flowered."

Admitting complete defeat is a very high hurdle, not only for the alcoholic, but for victims of other addictions. Since we can easily deceive ourselves about our true motives, the safest approach is to think of surrender as something that should be affirmed frequently. Many recovering alcoholics think of a slip as something that starts occurring long before the person actually takes a drink. "What really slipped was my thinking," a returning person will say. "I started to look at the bright lights and to think something exciting was going on in my old haunts. Pretty soon I stopped remembering how bad my drinking had been. Before long, I had convinced myself I could handle a drink or two."

When a slip occurs, we can ask ourselves: Did it happen because we withdrew our earlier surrender, or was our surrender never truly complete in the first place? All we need to know is, the compulsion to drink is so powerful and persistent that the price of freedom from alcohol is constant vigilance. The stakes are so high that

solid A.A. members make it a principle never to do anything that might put their sobriety at risk. Perhaps for this reason, the surrender principle has sired a number of sayings which are often heard at meetings. "Walk in Dry Places," "Stay off the Slippery Slopes," and "Don't Drink and Go to Meetings" are sayings which help make this principle an enduring part of our lives.

### Let Go and Let God

Another great principle of Twelve Step programs is surrender to a Higher Power or "Let Go and Let God." Each person finds his or her own effective way to benefit from it. This was something the pioneering A.A. members discovered through trial and error in their early years of struggle. It was known, for example, that profound religious or spiritual experiences had enabled some people to recover from alcoholism. But because of such things as temperament and childhood experiences, many of us found it impossible to accept such beliefs, even while knowing we desperately needed the help it might bring.

We should always be grateful to those who discovered it wasn't necessary to accept another's concept of God in order to make con-

scious contact with a Higher Power. "That was great news to us," the Big Book says on page 47, "for we had assumed we could not make use of spiritual principles unless we accepted many things on faith which seemed difficult to believe." The Big Book authors discovered that the "Realm of Spirit," as they called it, is broad, roomy, all inclusive, and open to all who seek it.

As recovering people, how do we find this Realm of Spirit in our lives? This is an intensely personal matter. Some people combine this searching with formal religious activity; others say they have no need for this. A few say they must pray on their knees, while others say they have beautiful spiritual contacts as they go about their daily work. The guideline for progress seems to be, whatever works for you and brings lasting benefit must be your right way.

Some people insist we should not expect guidance from our Higher Power on personal matters like job changes, marriage plans, financial troubles, and purchase decisions. But how can they say that these are *not* proper matters for prayer and meditation? We can easily make serious mistakes in any of these areas that will threaten our happiness and well-being. If we truly practice sound principles in *all* our affairs, this may include seeking guidance from our

Higher Power for any decision that concerns us. Members frequently say, however, that they have little success with “gimme” prayers. But they often do fairly well when they are able to “turn things over” without trying to dictate the outcome. And the reason may be that we often do not really know which answer will bring us the most good or benefit.

### See God in the Situation

Emmet Fox, whose writings were immensely important to A.A.’s pioneers, said we can bring our Higher Power into any negotiation by seeing God on both sides of the table. “Claim that God is working through both of you, through yourself and through the person with whom you are dealing,” Fox wrote in *Power Through Constructive Thinking*. “Do not seek by will power to get your own way, but affirm that God’s will in that particular matter is being done. Remember that your own way may not be at all good for you. The very thing that you want today may turn out next week to be a nuisance or even a misfortune.”

Fox went on to say that by seeing “God on both sides” of a negotiation, the outcome will always be successful for both parties. This will be true even if we do not get the arrangement we

sought at the outset; a better one would appear shortly.

One A.A. member had startling proof that this principle works. He wanted to purchase a small business. He had even been praying for guidance in the matter. Just as he was about to close the deal, it fell through and he became terribly discouraged. Other members reminded him the disappointment could be the hand of God working in a mysterious way, and God never closes one door without causing another to open. He was urged to believe that God was in charge of the situation.

He admitted that he found these statements annoying, but at the same time they were comforting. Impatience — “we want what we want, and we want it now” — is a false principle that can lead to serious blunders. But he accepted the disappointment and after a few days even began to believe the business disappointment may have been for his good.

It worked out beautifully. Within weeks another business opportunity appeared, and he moved easily into it. It was a much better situation than the first. He also realized that if the original deal had gone through, he wouldn’t have been in the position to take advantage of the better opportunity.

This kind of experience, which happens in

many people's lives, suggests that a Higher Power is working on our behalf. Sometimes the results appear to be coincidental, but many people who experience spiritual guidance insist they don't believe in coincidence. As one person puts it, "Coincidence is when God sends a beautiful message without signing His name!"

### **Walk the Walk**

Although they are far from saintlike, most solid members in Twelve Step programs will agree that success in recovery includes the effort to live up to high standards in their lives. It is very damaging in A.A., for example, to be viewed as someone who "talks the talk" but does not "walk the walk." Since recovering people are not expected to be saints, what are the minimum standards that are considered in living the program?

Most of the time, honesty and fairness seem to be expected of people in Twelve Step programs. At one meeting, a young A.A. member confessed to shoplifting even though he hadn't been drinking or using other drugs. While shoplifting had been accepted in his old peer group, there was a general agreement at the A.A. table that shoplifting violates the principles of the program; it is indefensibly wrong.

At the same time, other A.A. members seemed to understand the pressures and desires that may have led to the crime. Some members admitted dishonesties of their own, while others offered constructive opinions. The entire discussion actually ended on a high note by underscoring the importance of positive actions.

Sometimes we can benefit from following principles which appear to have no direct bearing on a problem we are faced with, yet these principles can make us feel better about ourselves. Here is an example:

An A.A. member was driving to an important anniversary meeting where he was the guest speaker. He was on an interstate highway and still 50 miles from his destination, when he passed a woman and her two children stranded in their disabled automobile.

An inner voice told him he should turn back to help. Another voice argued he was almost late for the meeting, the state patrol would probably arrive any minute to help, or some other motorist would stop.

But he turned back at the next exit. Experience had taught him he wouldn't feel right about himself if he ignored the first voice.

His assistance to the stranded family delayed him only fifteen minutes, and he arrived just as the meeting was starting. His talk went espe-

cially well — the result, he believed, of following the right principle in responding to the family on the highway.

Sharing is another basic principle of every Twelve Step program, although it can be expressed in many forms. An A.A. member in Nebraska has an unusual way of practicing sharing principles in his hobby of candy making. He has been making candy for ten years and says, “I try to be a little better each time.” He distributes hundreds of pieces of candy each week to the local treatment center, to nurses at the hospital, and to residents of a senior citizen home. He also mails boxes of candy to friends.

“I have one principle connected with this hobby,” he says. “I never sell any candy. I have a few principles like this that I use for practice, so that I can become adept at ‘practicing these principles in all my affairs.’ ”

There is certainly nothing wrong with selling candy, as this man did years ago when he operated a grocery store. Today, however, making and freely sharing his candy adds something special to his long years of sobriety.

### **Using Principles at Work**

Many people in recovery programs suffer from feelings of fear and inadequacy at work.

An early A.A. member, who felt threatened by pressures and problems on the job, used a basic A.A. slogan to meet the challenge.

His job was to regulate traffic flow from a small tower over a busy railroad intersection. Automobile traffic sometimes became jammed in all four directions while express trains pounded in on crisscrossing tracks. He had scary moments when collisions seemed imminent.

But he had a simple plan for handling traffic jams at the crossing. First, he would stop traffic in all directions. Then he would study the situation, without letting himself be intimidated by horn blasts from angry motorists. Finally he would let the trains pass; then he would release each line of traffic until the crossing was cleared. It always worked for him.

“I just think about the slogan ‘First Things First,’ ” he says. “It’s a piece of the program you can apply to your work or anything you do.”

### **We are Guided to Action**

Guides to progress is a fitting way to describe the Twelve Steps. These principles are generally defined as “fundamental guides to action.” For most of us, the action must lead to progress in

the form of recovering sanity, living at peace with the world, developing our own talents and abilities, and taking responsibility for our own lives. "Growing along spiritual lines" is another way of saying our principles come from God and are part of the universal system. As one spiritual teacher says, "We do not create laws and principles but discover and make use of them."

For most of us, continued success in overcoming our major problems proves we are living our principles. We should also notice progress in other areas: more happiness, better relations with others, improved self-understanding, and growth in maturity — all of these can happen in the program. If we are on the path and moving forward, we are doing well.

When our progress seems to be temporarily delayed, we can remember we are not expected to become saints by next week. Even the saints had to wait centuries for their sainthood!

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