

POCKET POWER

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SURRENDER



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SURRENDER

"Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil — until we let go absolutely," is from Chapter Five of The Big Book and is read daily at thousands of A.A. meetings.

The same idea is repeated in different ways at other Twelve Step recovery group meetings. The basic message is that we recover only by completely giving up attitudes and practices that create problems.

Surrender is what's needed to let go. It doesn't come easily for most of us. Many of us have difficulty accepting a recovery program, while others make half-hearted attempts to recover only to relapse later. And even those among us who achieve sobriety have trouble surrendering bad habits and ideas which create problems in our sober lives.

Resist it though we may, *surrender* is the only door to recovery. It is also the door to growth in sobriety. Real surrender includes a powerful desire for change, as well as a complete readiness to part company with our old ways. It is a realization that change is necessary even though it includes risk and pain. People have stayed sober in A.A. for years; however, after having slips

they've admitted they haven't really surrendered the old ideas that led to drinking.

Every Step of the A.A.* program includes surrender. The biggest hurdle, of course, is the First Step, which means surrendering our badly misplaced belief that we can handle alcohol. The Second and Third Steps call for surrender to a Higher Power. Along the way, there is also the Sixth Step, which takes up the matter of becoming "entirely ready" to surrender one's defects of character. All of the Twelve Steps can be difficult challenges for alcoholics and other compulsive, rebellious people.

Why Is Total Surrender Necessary?

In dealing with other problems and shortcomings, we may try to avoid total surrender by hanging on to things which still seem important to us: a little gossip, a resentment now and then, hidden excursions into sex, a few dishonesties, etc. We are dismayed and bitter when such things backfire on us. We may even discover we have to make the same *total* surrender of other problems as we did when we gave up alcohol. The middle ground in anything can

*Or any other Twelve Step program.

often be a bed of quicksand for the chemically dependent person.

We hear proof of this problem in personal stories at meetings. Here are a few examples:

On Temper—

"Sure, I got sober and stayed sober. But I had an ugly temper that got even worse after I quit drinking. I made everybody pretty miserable with it. I didn't want to live the program because a bad temper was useful to me, in a sick way. I could use it to put an end to an argument I was losing. I could blow my top and intimidate the kids. For a while, I even conned my wife into thinking it was her fault when I got mad. I finally started to deal with the problem when other people refused to take my s— any longer and I was forced to look at what I really was!"

On Resentments—

"Anybody who thinks you get over resentments just by staying dry is nuts. I had to get sober just to learn how *bad* my resentments were. I heard right away that you can release resentments by praying for the people who injured you and by wishing them well. I didn't really want to do that, and I kept on hurting. Finally it dawned on me that I secretly felt it was cowardly to forgive, and that if I had any

real backbone I would try to get even. When I gave up this phony idea, I could also release my resentments, though it still comes hard.”

On Low Self-Esteem—

“I was embarrassed to learn that low self-esteem helped make me a show-off in the bars. Even before finding A.A., I hated myself for buying drinks for everybody when the family was going without things they needed.

“I wish I could say my self-esteem improved dramatically when I found A.A. But there are times I still find myself saying and doing things simply to get approval or attention. I am still struggling with the strong belief that people won’t like me if they really know me. And I have to learn that my real self — the person God created — is okay and doesn’t need approval or attention.”

Barriers to Surrender

But even when one has been battered nearly to death, there may be formidable barriers in the path to surrender. The ego barrier, according to the late Dr. Harry M. Tiebout, is the most formidable block. A pioneer in the treatment of alcoholism, Tiebout insisted the inflated ego has to be surrendered before one can recover from alcoholism. He believed people under the

sway of the inflated ego show three marked traits; namely, 1) the belief they are special or omnipotent; 2) an inability to accept frustration; and 3) an excessive drive with a need to do things quickly. With such people, selfish considerations always come first, and there is also an insensitivity to the needs and opinions of others. “I want what I want when I want it,” is the guiding motive.

We hear a lot about the inflated ego in recovery programs. It can make any of us squirm to review Tiebout’s listing of the marked traits. In recovery, we can admit we thought we were “special” and that the ordinary rules and restrictions of society did not apply to us. We leaped into the bottle rather than accept frustration, and we often did things quickly (and perhaps sloppily) because our duties involved discomfort and boredom. We lived in a fantasy world and wanted to be relieved of the tasks and responsibilities others have to face. And even in sobriety, the inflated ego can reassert itself and lead us into problems. A “special” person who didn’t follow rules while drinking can also become restive about the need to follow the Twelve Steps. A person who had trouble with frustration while drinking may still struggle with it in sobriety. And the need or drive to do things quickly always carries the possibility of trouble,

because it can make us careless and inattentive. If there is any answer to these problems, it's probably in realizing the inflated ego and its traits always have to be surrendered anew.

Counterfeits of Surrender

Tiebout and other experts also identified false forms of surrender that lead both victims and their counselors astray. Perhaps one of the most deceptive counterfeits of surrender is *compliance*. It is especially deceptive because it can appear plausible and convincing.

People who find sanctuary in compliance fool themselves and others because they show outward signs of meeting the requirements for recovery. They will attend meetings, say the right things about their drinking or other drug dependency, will appear interested in the principles of recovery, and honestly seem grateful to be living a sober life.

But the deadly shortcoming of compliance is that it takes place only on the surface. Compliance does not really touch the roots of the victim's problems. With compliance, thoughts and feelings that contributed to alcoholism remain intact, ready to break out with renewed bitterness. And by appearing to be so plausible and sincere, the complying person disarms those

who might help penetrate the ego barrier. The victim neatly blocks any real examination of the thoughts and feelings that feed the insanity of alcoholism.

Yet the real problem with compliance is not that it deceives professionals and support group people who could otherwise be of help. The worst part of compliance is self-deception: the complying person may actually think he or she has really surrendered and that no further self-honesty is needed.

There is no foolproof way to tell whether another person has truly surrendered or is only practicing compliance. But there may be a few clues which show how a person really feels. One clue is any tendency to blame drinking on people, places, or circumstances: "I can't stay sober as long as my wife insists on serving drinks at parties!" Or, "Who wouldn't have to get drunk every night, living in a crummy town like this?" Or, "No wonder I developed a drinking problem, living with a man (woman) like that!" Another revealing clue is anything that shows getting drunk as a reward: "Getting my first college degree at age 35, I had a right to celebrate!" And compliance is usually evident when we tailor our behavior to the expectations of others but quickly revert to the old patterns when nobody is looking.

Compliance is not all bad, and it can serve a useful purpose by exposing the person to ideas and suggestions which may prove helpful later on, after true surrender occurs. However, the complying person is somewhat like the college student who attends classes but resists the learning process; the real message does not get through.

A second counterfeit of surrender is *submission*, which is similar to compliance. While drinking, we alcoholics tend to find protectors or strong people who will serve as enablers and help us continue drinking. In recovery programs, some alcoholics also seek out strong people who run their lives for them, sometimes without either party realizing what is happening. In submitting to another's direction, the person avoids real soul-searching and takes on, for a short time, the sponsor's attitudes and opinions. This means no real personal change is taking place. As with compliance, the person is merely making a surface change for the purpose of getting approval and acceptance.

Submission appears to work for a time, but it is likely to end in rebellion, with both people bitter and disillusioned. The rebellious alcoholic voices indignation and resentment over the way the sponsor has exercised dominance; while the sponsor, in turn, is bitter about the

protege's eventual rejection of the program: "I did everything for that guy but spoon-feed him, and he still got drunk on me!"

A third counterfeit of surrender could be termed the *blanket self-indictment*. This is a sweeping admission of total guilt and is usually accompanied by a statement such as: "When I came into A.A., I was bankrupt in every respect — physically, financially, and morally." This statement is then used to imply that all problems, including character defects, have been surrendered and dealt with.

But this might be just a smoke screen to hide the really painful things that bother us. The blanket self-indictment is unsatisfactory because it does not focus on the *specific* problems and *exact* wrongs which cry for attention. We can actually be terribly sick in certain areas of our lives and still healthy in others, just as a person may have a weak heart and good lungs. It simply is not enough — and it is not true surrender — to say *everything* is wrong. We have to know just *where* and *why* we are hurting before we can really get well.

There may be other counterfeits of surrender. What we need to deal with, then, is the realization that only *true* surrender can carry the day for us — and it's our responsibility to let it happen. One surprising fact about surrender is

that it takes place selectively, on the person's own time schedule. A person may have astonishing success in surrendering the drinking problem, and yet fail repeatedly in surrendering another difficulty. We should not be too hard on ourselves when we fail. But we should not let ourselves off the hook by blaming our failure on mysterious forces rather than our own unwillingness to make a complete surrender.

Drawing Near to God: The Spiritual Surrender

Perhaps the highest hurdle in the recovery program is the idea of surrendering to a Higher Power, God as we understand Him. "Let Go and Let God," a slogan we often hear, is really a suggestion that we surrender our problems to a Higher Power and let this Power work in our behalf.

The strange thing about this phase of surrender is that most of us will admit it works for some people, and yet we may not be willing to let it work in our own lives. We know, for example, that people experience amazing and beneficial transformations as a result of religious conversions. This fact was a key point in advice the distinguished Carl Jung gave to a man in 1931 — advice that led to the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous four years later.

We might admire another person's spiritual experience or religious conversion, and yet be unable to accept the same ideas for our own lives. How can we pass over this barrier, which may be a very real one for us?

We can do it by striving for open-mindedness and a willingness to believe. A person can even stake out a position by accepting this statement as a sort of personal goal: "I know other people have been changed for the better by their belief in a Higher Power. I want the same experience for myself and for my own recovery. If it is possible for others, recovery is also possible for me. I am willing to surrender any preconceived ideas that might keep me from having a spiritual awakening, or what some call a spiritual rebirth. I am willing to listen to the experiences others share with me. I am willing to try prayer and meditation, or such other exercises that may help me in making contact with a Higher Power. And even if nothing happens for the time being, I will attend meetings of recovery groups and maintain an open mind about the possibilities of growth along spiritual lines."

This is all that's needed or expected in the early phase. No person should be expected to make a real surrender to a Higher Power if he or she is not really convinced that it makes sense for them. Some of the early A.A.s, for exam-

ple, asked people to pray with them on their knees, apparently in the belief that this induced the needed spiritual surrender. This practice was soon abandoned, probably because the A.A. pioneers realized true surrender happens differently for each person.

Surrender to Win

Whatever it takes, surrender is the doorway to victory over alcohol and other compulsions. In some mysterious way, our bad habits lock themselves in, so efforts to defeat them only push us deeper into the mire. Willpower and mental effort usually make things worse in dealing with compulsions. Try as we will, we don't have what it takes to overcome these devilish problems.

Although the path of surrender seems hard and difficult, it is easier in the long run than the methods we have been using with such disastrous results. It is painful to admit one is an alcoholic and needs help — but it is more painful to be a practicing alcoholic and to face further battering at the hands of John Barleycorn. It may appear humiliating to become affiliated with a recovery group where people share their thoughts and feelings so openly. It is more humiliating to continue in the failure and degradation that come to alcoholics. It also requires

self-discipline and a firm resolve to attend meetings and to pay attention to the things necessary for growth in sobriety. But this self-discipline is nothing compared with the vicious bondage we live under as slaves to alcohol and other compulsions. We find true freedom, in fact, only when we surrender.

We surrender to win. The prizes are sobriety, true freedom, self-respect, serenity, confidence, health, and growth in happiness. With so much to win, the only mystery is why it took some of us so long to give up!

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