

TWELVE STEPS IN TWENTY YEARS
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Contemplation: “Transcendental Etude,” by Adrienne Rich

No one ever told us we had to study our lives
Make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history or music,
That we should begin with the simple exercises first and slowly go on
 trying the hard ones,
Practicing till strength and accuracy become one with the daring to leap
 into transcendence.

And in fact we can't live like that:
 we take on everything at once
 before we've even begun to read or mark time,
 we're forced to begin in the midst
 of the hardest movement,

The one already sounding as we are born.

Reading: The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Sermon

In 1982, twenty years ago this spring, I was drinking night and day, nearly always under the influence (from practice, fairly good at masking it), or suffering an awful hangover. At the same time, unbeknownst to myself, I was close to taking the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I would wake up at the 3:00 a.m. dark hour of the night and the soul, shaking and anxiety-ridden. I would be blearily emerging from the passing-out phase of being drunk, dreading the next couple of agitated hours until the stimulant phase passed. I would acknowledge in anguish that I was an alcoholic. My life was certainly unmanageable, trying to teach high school drama and English in my severely impaired condition, unable to spend normal time with my family (and fiercely pretending, from the closedness of my fearful heart, that everything was OK).

I would swear to myself, "Tomorrow, I won't have anything to drink."

A couple of hours later, I would get up and have a glass of wine. Hair of the dog. Then I'd take aspirin and Vitamin B and C, packing my purse with breath mints (for all the good they did).

I knew, in my bones, that I was powerless over alcohol, but I hadn't admitted it to anyone else. I just kept on self-destructing, miserable beyond my powers to describe. Faith and hope and love were absent, banished by the demon alcohol, which had me by the scruff of the neck, shaking violently.

Inklings of the second step—the one about a Power greater than myself—came along in the shape of my daughter, Betsy, then 24 years old. About the middle of June, she came over to my house. Neither one of us sat down, so we sort of wandered awkwardly—she, because she was so dreading the confrontation, I, because I sensed something big and not fun was afoot. She asked, with a fake casualness, "Mom, have you been drinking during the day?" She was the only family member to whom I would have replied honestly, and I did. "Yes."

"Doesn't it scare you?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever thought about a treatment center?"

I looked at her in amazement, my poor heart's door opening a crack. Hope flooded my sodden brain, and I replied, "No. No, I haven't!" Up to that point, I had despairingly acknowledged to myself that I couldn't do it. I was a fifteen-year Unitarian Universalist, true to the most rational of our venerable tradition, and was nowhere near entertaining the idea that some spiritual force could rescue me from the mess I was in.

But a treatment center?!?! Maybe I could get away from the terrifying chaos of my life and maybe I could stop being an alcoholic. There were professionals in treatment centers, people there who knew stuff about alcoholism.

A pretty secular Power greater than myself—but you gotta start where you gotta start. On Tuesday, June 29, 1982, I entered the CareUnit Hospital in Kirkland, WA.

There, although I didn't know it at the time, my job was to make steps one, two and three part of my being. *Powerless* over alcohol. A Power greater than myself. And the dreaded Step Three: "Made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God *as I understood Him*." That sounded to me like surrender of my precious individual will, even my self esteem. "Surrender" sounded to me like the humiliation of defeat, the giving over of my hard-won strength to something else. A Something Else of which I did not entirely approve, as a matter of fact.

All the rest of the steps—obligatory for the ongoing spiritual progress of recovery—happen out of order or simultaneously; they need constant revisiting; they flow in one's life in greater and lesser measure at various times. Steps Four through Twelve are part of a complex process, much like Adrienne Rich's "Transcendental Etude": "we take on everything at once, before we've even begun to read or mark time."

But the first three steps must be taken first, and must be taken thoroughly. They must be taken in humility and heart-felt acceptance. They are hard, and we Unitarian Universalists make them particularly hard.

I recently re-read the extensive journal I kept during my 28 days at CareUnit. I note how miserable I was, those first few days, "terrified, lonely, ...disoriented and just plain sick."

Miserable—terrified—yes. And also arrogant, superior, and critical. On Day Four, barely even sober and still doopy from Librium, I responded in my journal to a lecture on the biochemical nature of chemical dependency: "I'm still not entirely convinced." As though I knew anything about it.... On the same day, I referred to an activity—written and conducted by professionals—as a "relatively intelligent exercise." (I'm sure they would have been relieved at my approval.) My brain was very definitely open for business, my heart still closed for repairs.

My superiority extended—did it ever—to my attitude about AA meetings. After attending one on the evening of Day Six, I wrote, "Still have reservations—some interesting things are said, but lots of others are rambly and not very profound." There is almost no sense of love and compassion—for myself or for others—in those early entries.

It's not that I was uncooperative. I was genuinely relieved to be getting help, and threw myself into the program with all the frenzy of a student obsessed with graduating *summa cum laude* (and being valedictorian!). On Day Four, I softened one of my arrogant-critical journal remarks by adding that I had "...every intention of behaving precisely according to the rules." I could do it. I was in control—or getting there. I was smart enough to understand what it took and to do it. It was about me, putting forth enough effort to get the job done.

But control and smarts are not what it takes to travel the spiritual path, at least for a pilgrim with my ways of approaching the world. Education, analysis, exerting influence: these can be of assistance at intersections on the path, where decisions must be made and boundaries maintained. But they are ego-oriented and can be prideful, and thus not conducive to the mysterious process of turning one's life and one's will over to

Something Higher. I complained to my family about all the “God talk” in AA meetings, entirely sure I knew what each person meant, sure I knew what the founders meant, never mind the phrase “as we understand [God].” (Usually italicized for emphasis.) I wrote on Day Eight, “It all gets to sounding so damned Bible-thumping, I get mighty uncomfortable.” (10)

Perhaps, then, this Day Nine entry should not come as a surprise.

Have some very serious things to think about. In feedback session today, Milly [my counselor] said the one thing the staff is worried about is that I’ll intellectualize instead of getting all this stuff inside of me, and the comment stuck in my craw rather seriously, I’m afraid. It is, in fact, a lot easier to act more like a student or even a counselor/therapist than a patient, but I’m not really sure how to go about curing the problem. (11)

(Milly and staff were concerned about my heart, but took pity on my poor beleaguered brain, too. She gave me a paper to read, entitled “Surrender vs. Compliance in Therapy.”)

On Day Ten, I note that I ask my small group if they would start honestly pointing out for me the kinds of things I did when I was intellectualizing. That sounds easy enough, but it wasn’t for me: “I guess I really don’t like admitting at a gut level that I’m wrong, because I was really near tears when I was trying to start talking about it.” (12) I had made a tiny step toward giving up all the control, and it tore me up to make it. There was grief and weeping behind the so-resolutely-closed door of my heart, as well as joy and healing. The idea of letting go was terrifying, threatening to take away all I had fought so hard for all my life.

The next few days moved along. I kept on trying. I did. I really did.

It didn’t seem to be working. On Day Fifteen, I write that it is a blue day, that I am frazzled beyond reason by everything—the meetings, my family visiting (my very supportive family visiting). I refer to myself as fragile, not a term I often use about myself. I recall that cohorts in my group have called me “Miss Exuberance,” described me in group exercises as intelligent, a good leader, vivacious, fun to talk to. I tell my journal, “. . .I don’t feel much like any of those things. I don’t feel like anything except low.” (20)

On Day Seventeen, I experienced a life-changing event, typically noted merely as “something kind of important.” My group had been on me (again) for trying too hard, and I was just furious—what in hell did they expect, anyhow? Walking down the hall afterward, I said to myself, “To hell with it, I *won’t* try anymore!!!” As on cue, my shoulders were hugely lightened, as though a giant pack had flown off. And I started to laugh. Somehow, it all seemed so simple, and I seemed so silly and preciously human for acting like it was all my show. So I giggled, my tensions and angers and oh-such-a-good-student efforts just leaking out of me onto the institutional tile of the CareUnit treatment center, a trail that evaporated as I moved on. My heart peeked out of its opening door and laughed.

It took me years to admit that it was a “spiritual experience,” thinking as I did that only “Bible thumpers” had them. (How arrogantly presumptive is a phrase like that!) It took me years to realize that a Power Greater Than Myself was being manifest—so what

if it was through a case of the giggles—and that I was forever changed. It took me years to understand that I could probably take a little credit, for my honest willingness, but that mostly something a good deal larger than I was operating.

I couldn't know then that I would never again feel a compulsion to drink, but that has been so (at least up to June 2, 2002!). More importantly, the opening of my heart eased my pride and rationalism and judgmentalism and convictions about control. (Those of you who know me well will be noting that the experience didn't *take away* all that, just eased it.) I now know that the differences began to be apparent very quickly, although I wasn't aware of them at the time. Listen to me blithely describing AA meetings the day after the giggles, as though I'd never criticized them: "Funny thing about AA meetings is that I always seem to get something from someone, even if it's not the best meeting in the world." (27)

Less than a week before my time was up, Day Twenty-three, I wrote:

A word about spirituality... The subject, even in the terms AA is wont to use, no longer bothers me, and I'm falling into a lot more comfortable peace and harmony with the Higher Power. ...[at a Step Two meeting]—this was a day after that "shrugging off the burden" feeling that overcame me—I was able to feel that a Higher Power has something to do with letting go and being in harmony. Milly said, 'Maybe you were handing it over—I hope so.' Me, too. Since then, I've increasingly been finding that the creek is my friend, and have been spending an awful lot of time just lost in its ripples and bubbles and smoothness and curves, always going someplace, always staying the same

Been reading *Siddhartha*—much truth seeking. (42, 43)

I, a confirmed UU, steeped in rationality and idolization of the individual will, had—through a gift of grace outside my ability to conjure—managed to catch a glimpse of mystical oneness. I was able to take into my whole being the paradox that surrender brings great strength. From having "let go"—miraculously, it seemed—I discovered peace and inner strength.

I left CareUnit sober, sobered, rejoicing: reborn, filled with hope and fear.

I went to 90 meetings in 90 days, as recommended, settling into a couple of meetings a week for the next half dozen or so years.

From the foundation of Steps One-Three, I have worked the rest of the steps, over and over and over. The "listing" steps—a moral inventory of myself and a list of those I've wronged—I've only done once. But the process of maintaining contact with The Great Process (sometimes nicknamed God) never stops. Nor does my proclivity for making mistakes, so the need for atonement and asking for forgiveness. Nor does my understanding that only by a continual process of surrender will I be able to hear the call to right behavior.

When I am in tune with this ongoing process—founded on surrender—I can look realistically at my shortcomings, and can thus appreciate my competence and my humor and my ever-helpful brain. When I cherish the certain knowledge, within myself, that there is a Harmony in which I can participate, I am able to muster the generosity and the strength and the courage I need to open my heart. When I carry the pulsing, fragile,

braveness of an open heart—at least some of the time—I find the forgiving toughness of compassion, for myself and others. With an open heart, I can celebrate my faith in human potential and Divine rightness. With an open heart, I can affirm the hope that carries us through those inevitable dark times, the hope that all will be reconciled and healed. Above all, with an open heart, I can experience the love spoken of by all great faiths, the humble compassion that gives such strength, the universal understanding that all is One.

May it be so.