

AA Big Book in Plain English

by Anonymous

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Chapter 6 - Into Action

Having made our personal inventory, what are we going to do about it? We've been trying to get a new attitude, a new relationship with our Creator, and to discover what's blocking our path. We've admitted certain defects; we've come to know in a rough way what the trouble is; we've put our finger on the weak items in our personal inventory. Now these are about to be thrown out. This takes action on our part, which, when completed, will mean that we've admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our defects. This brings us to *the Fifth Step* in the program of recovery mentioned in the chapter before this one.

Maybe this is hard--especially talking about our defects with another person. We think we've done good enough by admitting this stuff to ourselves. Maybe, maybe not. When we're trying to do the deal, we usually find out that looking at ourselves by ourselves isn't enough. A lot of us thought we needed to go a lot farther. We'll be more okay with talking about ourselves with another person when we see good reasons why we should do it. The best reason first: If we skip this crucial step, we may not conquer drinking. Time after time newcomers have tried to keep some facts about their lives a secret. Trying to avoid this humbling experience, they've tried easier ways to stay sober. Almost always they got drunk. Having gone right along with the rest of the program, they wondered why they fell. We think the reason is that they never finished their housecleaning. They took inventory, sure, but they hung on to some of the worst items in stock. They only *thought* they'd lost their egoism and fear; they only *thought* they'd humbled themselves. But they had not learned enough humility, fearlessness and honesty, like we find out we need to, until they told someone else *all* their life story.

More than most people, an alcoholic leads a double life. He's really an actor. He shows his stage character to the world outside. This stage character is the one he likes other people to see. He wants to enjoy a certain reputation, but knows in his heart he doesn't deserve it.

The double life is made worse by the things he does on his binges. Coming to his senses, he's disgusted at certain things that happened, things he kind of remembers. These memories are a nightmare. He's shaken at the thought that someone might have seen him. As fast as he can, he pushes these memories deep inside himself. He hopes they'll never see the light of day. He has constant fear and tension--that makes for more drinking.

Psychologists tend to agree with us. We've spent thousands of dollars for evaluations. We know just a few instances where we've given these doctors a fair break. We usually haven't told them the whole truth, and we haven't followed their advice. These men were caring, and we weren't willing to be honest with them, and we weren't honest with anyone else. It's no wonder that a lot of doctors look down on alcoholics and don't think alcoholics have much chance for recovery!

We have to be completely honest with somebody if we expect to live long or happily in this world. It's right and natural for us to do some good thinking before we choose the person or persons who we're going to take this step with, this intimate and confidential step. Some of us belong to a religious denomination that requires confession. They have to, and of course, will want to go to the properly appointed authority whose duty it is to hear it. Even if we don't have any religious connection, it could still be good to talk with someone ordained by an established religion. We usually find out that this kind of person is quick to see and understand our problem. Of course, we sometimes meet people who do not understand alcoholics.

If we can't do this, or feel uncomfortable about doing this, we think about the people we know and we look for a friend who is understanding and who will keep their mouth shut. Maybe our doctor or psychologist will be the person. It may be someone from our family, but we can't share any secrets with our wives or our parents that will hurt them and make them unhappy. We don't have any right to save our own skin when it'll harm someone else. We tell those parts of our story to someone who will understand, and won't be hurt. The rule is we have to be hard on ourself, but always considerate of others.

We really need to talk about ourselves with someone, but we might be in a situation where we can't find anyone who is right for the job, and who is available. If that's the case, this step can be put off till later, but only if we keep ourselves completely ready to do it when the first opportunity pops up. We say this because we really need to talk to the right person. It's important that he's able to keep a secret. It's important that he completely understands and approves of what we're trying to do. And it's important that he won't try to change our plan. But we can't use this just as an excuse to put this step off.

When we decide who's going to hear our story, we don't waste any time. We have a written inventory and we're ready for a long talk. We explain to our person what we're about to do and why we have to do it. He should realize that we're on a life-and-death mission. When we go to people this way, most people will be glad to help; they'll be honored by our trust.

We put our pride to the side and get to it, shedding light on every time where our character was twisted, shedding light on every dark little corner of the past. Once we've taken this step, not holding anything back, we're pretty happy. We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone at perfect peace and ease. Our fears fall away from us. We start to feel the closeness of our Creator. We may have had certain spiritual beliefs, but now we start to have a spiritual experience. The feeling that the drink problem has disappeared will usually come strongly. We feel like we're on the Wide Highway, walking hand in hand with the Spirit of the Universe.

Going back home we find a place where we can be quiet for an hour, carefully looking back at what we've done. We thank God from the bottom of our heart that we know Him better. We take this book down from our shelf. We turn to the page that has the twelve steps. We carefully read the first five steps. We ask if we have left out anything, because we're building an arch that we're going to walk through to freedom, finally. Is our work solid so far? Are the stones correctly where they should be? Have we been stingy with the cement put into the foundation? Have we tried to make mortar without sand?

If we can answer and be satisfied with our answer, then we look at *Step Six*. We've strongly made the point that willingness is key. Are we ready now to let God remove from us all

the things we've admitted are bad? Can He now take them all--every one? If we still hold on tight to something we won't let go of, we ask God to help us be willing.

When we're ready, we say something like this: "My Creator, I'm now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. There are character defects in me that stand in the way of me being useful to you and others. I pray that you now take every single one of these character defects out of me. Give me strength, as I go out from here, to do what you want. Amen." Then we've completed *Step Seven*.

Now we need more action. If we don't have more action, we find out that "Faith without works is dead." Let's look at *Steps Eight and Nine*. We have a list of all persons we've hurt and who we're willing to make amends to. We made it when we took inventory. We allowed ourselves to undergo a fearless and searching inventory of ourselves. Now we go out to other people and fix the damage done in the past. We try to sweep away the trash, the wreckage that has built up out of our effort to live on self-will and run the show ourselves. If we don't have the willingness to do this, we ask until it comes. Remember it was agreed at the start *we would do anything for victory over alcohol*.

Probably there are still some doubts or fears. As we take a look at the list of business associates and friends we've hurt, we may feel uncomfortable about going to some of them on a spiritual basis. Let's be encouraged. We don't need to emphasize the spiritual stuff the first time we go to them, and we probably shouldn't. If we emphasize the spiritual stuff, we might set them up for feeling negative about it. Right now we're trying to clean up the mess of our lives. But this is not the real goal. Our real purpose is to make ourselves able to be of maximum service to God and to the people around us. When someone still hurts from a wrong we've done to him, it usually isn't smart to go to him and announce that we've turned religious. In the prize ring, this would be called leading with the chin. Why should we open ourselves up to being labeled crazy or religiously boring? We might kill a future opportunity to carry a message that's good for them. But the guy will definitely be impressed by us sincerely wanting to set right the wrong. He's going to be more interested in us showing good will than in us talking about spiritual discoveries.

We don't use this as an excuse for shying away from the topic of God. When it'll do any good, we're willing to announce our beliefs with care and common sense. The question will come up about how to approach the guy we hated. Maybe he's hurt us more than we've hurt him and, although maybe we've gotten a better attitude toward him, we still don't like the idea of admitting our faults. Even though this is the case, with a person we dislike, we clench our teeth and do it. It's harder to go to an enemy than to a friend, but we find out that it's a lot better for us. We go to him in a helpful and forgiving spirit, confessing the ill feeling we used to have, and telling him our regret.

Under no circumstances do we criticize a person we dislike, and we don't argue. We just tell him we'll never get over drinking until we've done our best to straighten out the past. We're there to sweep off our side of the street, realizing that nothing worthwhile can be accomplished until we do this, never trying to tell him what he should do. His faults are not talked about. We stick to our own. If our attitude is calm, frank, and open, we'll be pretty happy with the result.

Nine times out of ten something happens that we don't expect. Sometimes we go to the guy and he admits his own fault, so fights that have been going on for years melt away in an hour. It's rare for us to fail to make progress, progress that satisfies us. People who were our

enemies sometimes talk highly about what we're doing and wish us all the best. Sometimes, they'll offer help. It shouldn't matter, though, if someone does throw us out. We have shown good will, done our part. It's water over the dam.

Most alcoholics owe money. We don't dodge people we owe money. Telling them what we're trying to do, we are open about our drinking, they usually know it anyway, whether we think so or not. And we aren't afraid of telling about our alcoholism, afraid because we think it'll cause harm to our money situation. When we go to people we owe money, the most ruthless lender will sometimes surprise us. We arrange the best deal we can. We let these people know we're sorry. Our drinking has made us slow to pay. We have to lose our fear of people we owe money, no matter how far we have to go, because we'll probably drink if we're afraid to face them.

Maybe we've committed a crime that might put us in jail if the police find out about it. We may be short in our accounts and not able to make good. We've already admitted this privately to another person, but we're sure we'd be put in prison or lose our job if people found out about it. Maybe it's just a petty offense like padding the expense account. Most of us have done that kind of thing. Maybe we're divorced, and have remarried but haven't kept up the alimony to the first wife. She's resentful about it, and has a warrant out for our arrest. That's a common kind of trouble too.

There are these acts of making amends, and although these acts come in a lot of different forms, there are some general principles that guide us. We remind ourselves that we've decided to do anything to have a spiritual experience, we ask that we be given strength and direction to do the right thing, no matter what might happen to us. We might lose our job or reputation or face jail, but we are willing. We have to be. We've got to take anything that comes at us.

But usually other people are involved. So we shouldn't be the person who rushes into something foolishly, willing to sacrifice, who would sacrifice others without needing to, in order to save himself from the alcoholic pit. A guy we know had remarried. Because of resentment and drinking, he hadn't paid alimony to his first wife. She was furious. She went to court and got an order for his arrest. He had started our way of life, had got a job, and was getting his head above water. It would have been a huge act of a hero if he had walked up to the Judge and said, "Here I am."

We thought he should be willing to do that if needed, but if he were in jail he couldn't provide anything for either family. We suggested he write a letter to his first wife admitting where he was wrong and asking forgiveness. He did, and also sent a small amount of money. He told her what he would try to do in the future. He said he was perfectly willing to go to jail if she insisted. Of course she didn't, and the whole situation has been fixed for quite a while now.

Before taking drastic action that might get other people in trouble, we get their permission. If we've gotten permission, have talked it over with others, asked God to help and we get the definite sense that we should take the drastic step, we have to use courage.

This brings up a story about one of our friends. While drinking, he accepted a bunch of money from one of his business competitors who he bitterly hated. He didn't give him a receipt for it. Then later he denied having received the money. He used what happened in order to

make him look bad. So he used his own wrong-doing as a tool to destroy the reputation of someone else. In fact, his competitor was ruined.

He felt that he'd done a wrong he couldn't possibly make right. If he went public with what actually happened a long time ago, he was afraid it would destroy the reputation of his business partner, disgrace his family and he would lose his source of money income. What right did he have involving the people who were dependent on him? How could he possibly make a public statement clearing the name of his competitor?

After talking it over with his wife and business partner he came to a conclusion. It was better to take those risks than to stand in front of his Creator guilty of that kind of destructive bad-mouthing. He saw that he had to put the outcome in God's hands or he would start drinking again soon, and everything would be lost anyway. He went to church for the first time in a lot of years. After the sermon, he quietly got up and explained the truth of what happened. Pretty much everyone approved of this action, and today he's one of the most trusted citizens of his town. This all happened years ago.

Chances are that we have marriage problems. Maybe we're mixed up with women in a way we wouldn't like to be widely known. We doubt if, with this kind of stuff, alcoholics are much worse than other people when you get down to it. But drinking does complicate sex relations at home. After a few years with an alcoholic a wife gets worn out, resentful and not wanting to communicate. How could she be anything else? The husband starts to feel lonely, sorry for himself. He starts to look around in nightclubs, or whatever, for something besides liquor. Maybe he's having a secret and exciting affair with "the girl who understands." In all fairness we've got to say that she might understand, but what are we going to do about something like that? A guy who's involved in something like that often feels very guilty sometimes, especially if he's married to a loyal and brave girl who has literally gone through hell for him.

Whatever the situation, we usually have to do something about it. If we're sure our wife does not know, should we tell her? Not always, we think. If she knows in a general way that we've been unfaithful, should we tell her in detail? For sure we should admit our wrong. She might insist on knowing all the details. She will want to know who the woman is and where she is. We feel we should say to her that we don't have any right to involve another person. We are sorry for what we've done and, God willing, it won't happen again. We can't do more than that. We don't have any right to go further. Although there may be okay exceptions to this, and although we don't want to lay down any kind of rule, we've often found that this is the best way to do it.

Our way of life is not a one-way street. It's as good for the wife as it is for the husband. If we can forget, so can she. It's better, though, that we don't name a person when we don't need to, a person who she can vent jealousy on.

Maybe there are some cases where we have to be totally open with her. No one outside of the husband and wife can make that judgment call, with an intimate situation like that. Maybe both will decide that the way of good sense and loving kindness is to put the past behind them. Each might pray about it, having the other one's happiness at the front of their mind. Always remember that we're dealing with that really terrible human feeling--jealousy. It may be wisely decided that the problem be attacked on the flank instead of risking a face-to-face fight.

If we don't have a problem like that, there's plenty we should do at home. Sometimes we hear an alcoholic say that the only thing he needs to do is to stay sober. Of course he has to stay sober, because there won't be any home if he doesn't. But he's still a long way from making things up to the wife or parents who he has so shockingly treated for years. Mothers and wives have had patience with alcoholics, patience that goes beyond understanding. If this hadn't been the case, a lot of us would have no homes today, would maybe be dead.

An alcoholic is like a tornado roaring his way through the lives of others. Hearts are broken. Sweet relationships are dead. Nice feelings toward one another have been uprooted. Selfish and inconsiderate habits have kept the home in painful chaos. We feel that when a guy says sobriety is enough, he's not thinking. He's like the farmer who came up out of his storm cellar after a tornado and found his home ruined. To his wife, he said, "Don't see any problem here, Ma. Ain't it great the wind stopped blowin'?"

Yes, there's a long period of rebuilding ahead. We have to take the lead. A sad mumbling that we're sorry won't be enough at all. We should sit down with the family and honestly, openly analyze the past. We see the past differently now. We should be very careful not to criticize them. Their defects may be huge and easily seen, but the chances are that our own actions are partly responsible. So we clean house with the family, asking each morning in meditation that our Creator show us the way of patience, tolerance, kindness and love.

The spiritual life is not a theory. *We have to live it.* Unless a person's family shows that they want to live based on spiritual principles, we think we should not urge them to. We shouldn't talk endlessly to them about spiritual stuff. They'll change in time. Our behavior will convince them more than our words. We have to remember that ten or twenty years of being drunk would give anyone major doubts.

There may be some wrongs we can never completely make right. We don't worry about them if we can honestly say to ourselves that we would make them right if we could. Some people can't be met with--we send them an honest letter. And there may be an okay reason, in some cases, for putting it off. But we don't put it off if it can be avoided. We should use common sense, be thoughtful, considerate and humble without being a doormat or crawling. We're God's people. We stand on our feet; we don't crawl in front of anyone.

If we work really hard at this amends stage of our growth, we'll be amazed before we're half way through. We're going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We won't regret the past or wish to shut the door on it. We'll understand the word serenity and we'll know peace. No matter how far down the scale we've gone, we'll see how our experience can be put to good use for others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We'll lose interest in selfish things and have interest in others. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook on life will change. Fear of people and fear of money problems will go away. We'll easily just know how to handle situations that used to confuse us. We'll suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we couldn't do for ourselves.

Are these promises amazingly too much? We don't think so. They're coming true for us--sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They'll always come true if we work for them.

This thought brings us to *Step Ten*, which suggests we keep taking personal inventory and keep setting right any new mistakes as we go along. With intense action we started this way of living as we cleaned up the past. We've come into the world of the Spirit. Our next task is

to grow in understanding and in working well. This isn't an overnight thing. It should keep on going for our lifetime. Keep watching for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God right away to take them out of us. We talk about them with someone right away and make amends quickly if we've hurt anyone. Then we firmly turn our thoughts to someone we can help. Love and tolerance of others is our code.

And we've stopped fighting anything or anyone--even alcohol. Because by this time sanity will have come back. It'll be few and far between that we're interested in liquor. If we're tempted, we draw back from it like we'd take our hand away from a hot flame. We react sanely and normally, and we'll find out that this has happened automatically. We'll see that our new attitude toward alcohol has been given to us without any thought or effort on our part. It just comes! That's the miracle of it. We aren't fighting it, and we aren't avoiding temptation either. We feel like we'd been put in a place where we're neutral--safe and protected. We haven't even sworn off. Instead, the problem's been taken away. It doesn't exist for us. We aren't cocky, and we aren't afraid either. That's our experience. That's how we react as long as we stay in fit spiritual condition.

It's easy to let up on the spiritual program of action and rest on the great things we've done. We're headed for trouble if we do, because alcohol is a sneaky enemy. We aren't cured of alcoholism. What we really have is daily relief that depends on our spiritual fitness. Every day is a day when we have to carry the vision of God's will into everything we do. "How can I best work for you--May your will (not mine) be done." These are thoughts that have to go with us constantly. We can use our willpower along this line all we want. It is the proper use of a human's will.

A lot has already been said about getting strength, inspiration, and direction from the One who has all knowledge and power. If we've carefully followed directions, we've started to feel the flow of His Spirit into us. We've become God-conscious, maybe a little, maybe a lot. We've started to develop this important sixth sense. But we have to go further and that means more action.

Step Eleven suggests prayer and meditation. We shouldn't be shy about this part about prayer. There are better men than we are who are using it constantly. It works, if we have the right attitude and work at it. It would be easy to not give specifics about prayer. But we think we can make some definite and valuable suggestions.

Around the time when we go to bed at night, we look at our day, and we do it in a way that's useful. Were we resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid? Do we owe an apology? He we kept something to ourselves that should be talked about with another person right away? We we kind and loving toward everyone? What could we have done better? Were we thinking of ourselves most of the time? Or were we thinking about what we could do for others, about what we could pack into the stream of life? But we have to be careful not to drift into worry, shame, or remembering things in a way that's sick, because that would eat at our usefulness to others. After taking a look at our day, we ask for God's forgiveness and ask what actions should be taken to make things right.

When we wake up let's think about the twenty-four hours ahead. We think about our plans for the day. Before we start, we ask God to manage our thinking, especially asking for it to be not self-pitying, dishonest or self-seeking. When we're in this place, we can use our mental

abilities with confidence, because after all God gave us brains to use. Our thought-life will be put on a much higher plane when our thinking is cleared of wrong motives.

In thinking about our day we may not know what to do. We may not be able to figure out what road to go down. At this point we ask God for inspiration, a thought that just comes to us, or a decision. We relax and take it easy. We don't struggle. We're often surprised how the right answers come after we've tried this for a while. What used to be hunches or inspiration here and there becomes, over time, a working part of the mind. Since we're still not very experienced, and since we just made conscious contact with God, we probably won't be inspired all the time. We might incorrectly think we will be, and we might pay for it, doing all kinds of crazy actions and putting all kinds of crazy ideas into action. But still we find out that our thinking will, as time goes by, be more and more on the level of inspiration. We come to the place where we rely on it.

We usually finish the time of meditation with a prayer that we be shown all through the day what our next step should be, that we be given whatever we need to take care of these kinds of problems. We ask especially for freedom from self-will, and we're careful to not ask just for ourselves. We can ask for ourselves, though, if others will be helped. We're careful to never pray for our own selfish purposes. A lot of us have wasted a lot of time doing that and it doesn't work. You can easily see why.

If with our situation we think we should, we ask our wives or friends to do morning meditation with us. If we belong to a religious group that requires a certain morning devotion, we do that too. If we're not members of religious groups, we sometimes choose and memorize a few set prayers that relate to the principles we've been talking about. There are a lot of helpful books too. We can get suggestions about these from our priest, minister or rabbi. Be quick to see where religious people are right. Put what they offer to use.

As we go through the day we pause, when we're mixed up or when we have doubt, and ask for the right thought or action. We constantly remind ourselves we aren't running the show anymore, humbly saying to ourselves a ton of times each day, "May what you want be done." Then we're in much less danger of anxiety, fear, anger, worry, self-pity, or stupid decisions. We become a lot more productive with our energies, because we aren't burning up energy in stupid ways like we did when we were trying to arrange life like we wanted it for ourselves.

It works--it really does.

Us alcoholics need to be schooled. So we let God school us in the simple way we've just told about.

But that's not all. There's action and more action. "Faith without works is dead." The next chapter is completely devoted to *Step Twelve*.