

Step Two

I recall many years ago listening to a radio program whilst driving. The person on the radio was discussing at what point does an infidelity start? Did it start at the point of climbing into bed or at the first stolen kiss, maybe it was at the first confiding laugh, or perhaps with the first fleeting thought that accepted the possibility?

Looking at the problem of drink in a similar way, at what point does the first drink occur? Is it actually taking a drink? Did it start perhaps at the opening of the bottle, or when we took the careless stroll down the booze aisle at the supermarket, or perhaps in the first fleeting thought that accepted the possibility?

When it comes to manipulating our emotions the illness can play a “waiting game” and set us up for a fall a day, a week, or even months in advance of the event. If we review our behaviour, we can often trace the drink back to dangerous thinking a long time before the event occurs.

It is strange that we can be intelligent and controlled in much of our lives and yet keep finding ourselves in a mess. We sometimes have an impulsive urge to “press the destruct button”. Our job might be going well, but we suddenly have to take our manager to task over something we consider a transgression of acceptable behaviour. We might have a loving partner, but abruptly decide that the relationship is wrong and they are not treating us the way they should. We inappropriately explode on these unsuspecting victims unleashing a deluge of ill feeling and venom that swamps the trust we have established.

There are times when we hurt people and we are surprised at their reaction. It seems that we don't fully grasp the normal “rules” of social interaction, or we believe that they don't always apply to us. We might claim to have been acting for their benefit and that it's not our fault that they misunderstood our intentions. Whilst alcohol is not directly involved, it is never far away. Because of “what we've just been through”, we justify taking our emotions for a drink, losing sight of that fact that we triggered the situation that we are now bemoaning.

An alcoholic's life is full of reasons to drink. We think it's a virtue that we don't accept things tolerated by other people. We go to battle for our rights and the rights of others and we sometimes needlessly stir people up just to get a reaction. Although we have heard people mention serenity, we rarely listen to what they are really talking about.

If we are happy, we drink to make us happier, if we are sad, we drink to cover the sadness, if we are angry, we drink to calm us down and if we are frightened, we drink to bolster our confidence. Is there any other drug relied upon to answer so many situations? We might think we are special and different, but this fact alone indicates that we have an addiction. Any addict will tell you that they cannot function without their drug of choice.

When we accept that we suffer from alcoholism, we are accepting that the voice of the illness mingles with our own thoughts and where drink is involved draws us away from rational thinking. If we cannot trust our own thinking, we can accept the label “insane”.

Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Within this step, we are facing two highly contentious issues. Masked behind the huge idea of a power greater than ourselves is the proposition that we are insane. Our “Intellect” screams that this is too much to consider and that we should not proceed any further. However, step two doesn't demand that we accept a “Higher Power” or even accept that we are insane. It is about considering ways to move out of our self-destructive rut and start to recover.

For some, the issue of accepting the existence of a power greater than us is a problem. Others arrive at AA confident that they have a strong faith, but the illness can even use this to trick us.

Because I had been involved with the church for years, I had looked at the program and quickly ticked off the steps I didn't need to do. I assumed that living a Christian life would cover most of the program. Step two looked easy, because I had no problem accepting a Loving God.

After a few months, I was floundering and I met up with my sponsor in a local café to talk. I thought I had done the program, but I felt lost. I assumed he would tell me it was normal to feel lost at this stage and we would laugh and have a coffee. Instead he produced the Big Book and asked me to read out the steps working backwards to ascertain where I was having a problem. As I reached step two I said, “Came to believe- been a Christian for years, done that.”

He stopped me and asked me to read it again, I repeated myself, cursing the fact that he had obviously not been listening and he asked me to re-read it again.

Finally, to placate him, I read the entire step word for word and suddenly saw what he wanted me to acknowledge- that I was insane and unwilling to accept help. It seemed that "been a Christian for years" wasn't even close to addressing this step.

I was indignant. I had harboured fears for my sanity, but I had never shared them. I opened up and out cascaded a torrent of things that I had been trying to ignore. I rapidly acknowledged that regardless of my proclaimed acceptance, I didn't want to look at my behaviour and I didn't believe "outside" help could work for me.

It is now obvious that the step had ceased to exist, because I smugly assumed I knew what I was doing.

The program is a set of written instructions to get us from misery to miracle. Similar to the written instructions to get anywhere:

Leave home and turn left. At the end of the road turn left. Pass a road on the left and one on the right, turning left at the school. Follow the bends, but stay on the main road. At the end, turn right and turn right again. After the small warehouse turn right and go to the end. Pull into the car park on the right.

If we are following the instructions above and skip the occasional right or left turn, we won't end up turning into the correct car park. By attempting the program in isolation, we can easily trick ourselves into skipping over parts of it. It is safer if we accept guidance because this achieves three things. It keeps us safe, it teaches us how to speak honestly about our hidden feelings and helps us achieve a level of humility.

Came to believe...

These words seem to jump out and suggest a soapbox preacher demanding that we "see the light", but this is not the intention. It is as simple as, "came to believe that water would flow when we turn on the tap," or "came to believe that the kettle would boil when we switched it on."

We simply accept this to be true, but these are not common amenities for a person living in the heart of Africa. They would find it difficult to believe that these things would happen. They would need to try them repeatedly and be amazed that they worked before they finally came to believe.

Would it matter if they had used other words? Regardless of the exact wording, the step is challenging us to consider difficult concepts. The suggestion is that we need to look at a new idea and like the person in Africa who had never experienced having tap water before, we probably need to test it a few times before we start to accept that it works.

...that a power greater than ourselves...

What constitutes a power greater than we are? Gravity itself seems to be such a thing. Regardless of will power, we cannot hover even a short distance above the ground. Like King Canute, we cannot forbid the sea to flow around our feet, or command the sun not to rise tomorrow.

Do these examples seem silly and pitiful? More pitiful than:

Drinking, knowing that we will take our car onto the public highway threatening life and livelihood.

Passing out whilst we are minding our young child.

Continuing to take the first drink knowing that once we start we cannot stop.

The drink itself proves to be a power greater than we are. We continually used will power or situations to control our drinking and failed. We are outnumbered, surrounded by a vast number of powers greater than ourselves.

All we need to accept is that there are powers greater than us that can influence our lives. We are often self-opinionated and stubborn in our belief that "our way is right". This step is about shattering this viewpoint and accepting that "something" greater than us can help us in ways that we don't yet understand.

...Could restore us to sanity

Imagine for a moment the classic cartoon scene of an asylum. A room full of men and women each with their hand thrust inside their jacket. They are all dressed as Napoleon. They look at each other, they can see the insanity around them, each knows that the others cannot be Napoleon and are therefore mad. They know, because they are the real Napoleon!

Few will get any identification with this, because it is almost impossible for us to see our own insanity until we have moved away from it. Are we insane we ask ourselves? Surely, all those other people are wrong.

Stopping drinking or understanding step two doesn't restore our sanity. The practice of the entire program and changing our lives does this. All that is required, is to open our minds to the fact that we can allow change to occur.

The answer to "must I change?" Is yes, we need to allow radical change to occur in our life. Returning to a state of sanity will be a fundamental transformation, what is unknown is what this will involve. Actively seeking change comes later in the program, now is not the time to worry about what is going to change as we return to sanity.

Summary Checkpoint

In summary, this step is a preparation for what is to come. We have lived our lives based upon our own ideas of right and wrong. In the past, we have had a great deal of difficulty with the idea that anything outside of us is going to be of any help. By admitting that we are not the central power in the universe, we are making a tentative start towards humility. This step merely asks that we give up trying to fix ourselves and accept that something else can.

- Looking at the behaviour identified in step one - does it seem insane?
- Can we accept that something outside us could help us to recover?

If we can't answer yes to these, it doesn't mean that we cannot continue. We can come back and see if anything has changed after step three.

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