

CONVERSations

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION



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Conversations
PO Box 292378 ♦ Kettering, OH ♦ 45429
800-607-4410
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Comments & Questions:

Conversations ♦ McCarty Building
2055 Mount Paran Road ♦ Atlanta, Georgia ♦ 30327
800-607-4410
conversations@richmont.edu



INTENTIONALITY OF THE HEART: WILLING TO CHANGE

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**REAL
PEOPLE**



**REAL
PROGRAMS**



**REAL
CHANGE**

WHAT
TWELVE STEP
HAS TO SAY ABOUT
TRANSFORMATION
(AND WHY WE
SHOULD CARE)



BY JAN
JOHNSON



First, a confession: I gulped when the editorial team assigned me this article. They spoke bluntly: “Every church lobby should have a sign that says, ‘Go downstairs for change; stay upstairs to stay the same.’” When I winced, they explained that while real change happens in twelve-step programs, there seems to be a lack of change happening in the sanctuary. Finally one editor said, “We want to focus on the fact that there’s real honesty and acceptance in the basement (where Alcoholics Anonymous, otherwise known as A.A., meets) as well as an understanding that transformation has to be worked out.”

I’ve believed these things for decades, but I never expected a Christian magazine to address this topic. So hold on to your hat while we examine the grace-drenched content, approaches, and methods of the twelve-step movement that facilitate a radical change of life for narcotics users and neurotics, online gamers and embezzlers, and those who manage pain by eating too much, drinking too much, or chasing women. In a twelve-step program’s safe atmosphere, these people and many others come face to face with their inner selves and throw those selves on the mercy of God day after day.

GRACE-DRENCHED CONTENT

A.A.’s philosophy that alcoholism is a disease and that alcoholics need to be restored to sanity has been hotly debated for decades, but it has nonetheless worked for transformation. This approach conveyed a practical sense of grace that was otherwise absent in a 1930s culture in which being an alcoholic was a public disgrace¹, much like being a sex offender is in today’s culture. A.A. acknowledged that alcoholics, in their heart of hearts, did not want to abuse alcohol. It lifted the blame and shame enough to provide hope that healing could occur. It empowered alcoholics to believe it possible to be freed from alcoholism as their destructive pattern of pain management and their source of comfort, companionship, and celebration.

This dynamic of grace (encompassing both pardon and empowerment) also played itself out in twelve step’s approach to God and to community. In that era of denominations competing and condemning each other, A.A. offered God “as we understand him”² to all faiths and even those with no faith. It gave people a place to start without insisting on any doctrine.

This space that twelve step gives people for their understanding of God to grow usually results in an image of God that resembles the father running down the trail to embrace the wayward child, capable of reckless

generosity and astonishing mercy (Luke 15:11-32). Such grace leads to obedience (sobriety or abstinence) as well as truth and justice as members become rigorously honest about their faults, able to forgive others, and willing to make amends to those they’ve harmed. Twelve

step also promotes grace by disavowing all thoughts of simply trying harder. Instead, we are “powerless” over our addiction, and the only possible help is surrender to God.

Such theology is communicated not only through twelve-step literature, especially the Big Book³, but also in the groups. When I first went to twelve-step meetings, my view of God was like that of many Christians—when God thought of me, God was disappointed because I struggled to stop eating all day in the midst of a troubled marriage and feelings of failure in ministry. But in meetings, I acquired a new way of seeing God that was different from the alcoholic family in which I’d grown up. Every week I shared, with my bowed head buried in my hands, confessing the latest selfish thing I’d done and how I’d binged afterward. When I looked up, I saw nodding heads and grinning faces, not horrified expressions; sometimes, there was laughter. I became able to hear God say, “Yes, I know about this. I forgive you. Now, what can you and I do next together?” This grace along with other twelve-step elements began healing not only my distorted eating behaviors but also my behavior in marriage and ministry and created space for my life with God to grow in ways I could never have imagined.

Within healthy twelve-step groups, grace is played out among members. The recovery slogan—“I stay on my side of the street; you stay on yours”—indicates that the other person’s sin isn’t my business. I don’t go on his side of the street to judge him. I understand that I can’t see his heart. In fact, my side of the street is so cluttered that I need to stay there to get some help myself. Likewise, the central role of grace in spiritual formation cannot be underestimated. It’s needed to have a vision of what life in the kingdom of God can be (I *can* change!) and how the possibility of grace allows us to use spiritual disciplines as experiments, not rules. Indeed, a spiritual formation program of The Leadership Institute, The Journey⁴, makes fleshing out grace a core theme throughout the two-year process. They have discovered that Christian leaders often need to join a practiced experience of day-to-day grace to their theological understanding of grace.

1. Michelle Huneven, “Sober—and silent,” *LA Times* also: http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-huneven6-2009sep06_0,3650686.story

2. The actual Twelve Steps use the wording, “God as we understood him.” See http://www.aa.org/en_pdfs/smf-121_en.pdf

3. *Alcoholics Anonymous*. New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, many editions.

4. <http://www.tli.cc/journey/index.htm>

Twelve-step programs have also developed various approaches that make God and grace more accessible for participants.

In twelve-step groups, experience of God is understood to be normal, but in churches having an experience of God is generally considered unusual or only for the elite. If you ask the typical Christian how he or she has been hearing God lately, you often get an odd look. But if you ask a twelve stepper, you'll probably hear laughter and a funny or tearful story. While not all twelve steppers' theology is orthodox, more often than not their experience of God is genuine. "In the Twelve Steps, one's idea of God is entirely subordinate to the experience of a Higher Power as real in one's life," notes Keith Miller, a Christian who has embraced and taught extensively about recovery.⁵ While other Christians are concerned about newcomers getting their theology right, twelve steppers experience God even with diminished theology. The informal education of listening in meetings, reading literature, and working with a sponsor often deepens members' theology over time closer to a biblical approach.

It's not unusual for twelve steppers to talk about mystical moments ("God-shots"): a favorite bar was unexplainably closed; a credit card with plenty of credit didn't work. "The experience of the Twelve Steps, like that of the Christian church, is based on the assumption that God is in fact real, 'alive,' and capable of revealing himself as he truly is through personal relationships with people in a community of faith."⁶ Where divine encounters seem foreign in the sanctuary, downstairs not only is God active, but God's activity is openly acknowledged.

Another transformational approach of twelve-step programs is that members are well acquainted with anguish of soul, and they say so. That's because those who take significant time out of their lives to go to twelve-step meetings know their neediness of soul and are convinced that transformation is their only hope. They understand Archbishop William Temple's words: "The worst things that happen do not happen because a few people are monstrously wicked, but because most people are like us.... Our need is not merely for moving quietly on in the way we are going; our need is for radical change, to find a power that is going to turn us into somebody else."⁷ For example, by continually saying, "My name is Nathan, and I'm an alcoholic,"⁸ Nathan keeps in front of himself the

"worst things" that have happened even though others also do them. He understands the need for radical change and for connecting with a Power who will turn him into someone else.

The spiritual formation community finds the echoes and patterns of this anguish of soul in the devotional masters. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux's understanding of the war of the mind resembles the Big Book in many places: "When I am at rest, I accuse myself of neglecting my work; and when I am at work, of having disturbed my repose. The only remedy in these uncertainties is prayer, entreating to be shown God's holy Will at every moment, that He may tell us what to do and when and how to do it."⁹ Jeanne Guyon teaches us not to beat ourselves up when we fail: "Don't be surprised at your faults or your failures. Seeing that you have such a desperate need of God, you will press toward a more intimate relationship with God."¹⁰ By including the psalms of lament in spiritual exercises, by creating confidential authentic communities where people can safely confess the hidden, unattractive contours of their journey, and by leaning on the spiritual classics that point to the truth of soul anguish, the spiritual formation community can make room for the much-needed authenticity no matter where Christians are found.

Transformation occurs more easily when it's understood to be a process. This understanding of process is expressed in the twelve-step slogan, "Progress, not perfection" (closely echoing Paul's words: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already been made perfect, but I press on..." [Phil 3:12, NIV]). In a typical meeting, we hear from people on various points of the journey. Beginners just want to stop using nicotine (or cocaine, or stop viewing everyone they meet as a potential lover). But meetings also expose us to transformed people who have not only abstinence but also a serenity of life that attracts others. Twelve-step meetings are home to a full spectrum of change, which encourages the process of transformation and in turn creates room for hope and underlines the truth that progress truly is enough.

Bite-size goals are encouraged. At first, coming to meetings is enough. Then we learn to use the tools (means). Along the way we hear others verbalize their great desire for sobriety or abstinence (intention) and want it as well. In those "old timers," we see a life of recovery and wholeness (vision).

In the same way, the spiritual formation movement needs to honor even minor progress on the journey and bite-size versions of disciplines. The disciplines are done "as we can, not as we can't."¹¹ We start small with fasting,

5. Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing*. San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, xii.

6. Miller, xiv.

7. William Temple, *Christian Life and Faith*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publications, 1994, no page cited as quoted in *Spiritual Formation Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corporation, 1999), 308.

8. Twelve step is often criticized for this, however, with critics maintaining that participants find their identity in their addiction. While this might be true for a few here and there, for most this is about living in reality and not minimizing the obstacles. That admission is a way of saying, "I'm no longer my own god," or "Here's how I get tempted, and I'm staying as far away from that temptation as possible." It's about naming the powers that overwhelm us so we're not caught by surprise.

9. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Writings, The Classics of Western Spirituality*. Gillian Evans, trans. New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 26.

10. Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ*. Beaumont, TX: The SeedSowers, 1975, 83-84.

11. John Chapman, *Spiritual Letters*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1935, 25, 109. The actual quotation is "Pray as you can, and don't try to pray as you can't," but the truncated version is repeated most frequently.

just one meal or one day; if confessing aloud to someone is too difficult, we try journaling confessions instead; to get used to silence, we turn off the radio in the car for ten minutes. Instead of focusing on a kind of spiritual perfection—which, while initially attractive, becomes repulsive by its very unattainable standard—the spiritual formation community must provide examples of people “on the way,” people who (like most of us) haven’t arrived yet.

DEALING WITH THE WHOLE PERSON

Faith in many church settings is primarily mental, happening between the ears as people “accept” Christ. Prayer and Bible reading require tough mental effort. Says Miller, “Most religious bodies want prospective members to conform to certain specific beliefs before they are allowed in the group. The primary difference between the Twelve Steps and most Christian approaches lies in how one gets to know what kind of God one is dealing with.”¹² Twelve-step programs engage not only the mind but also the feelings, the will, the body (especially), and the social context through various steps and methods.

The twelve-step movement imitates John Wesley’s method of using various points of entry for people to encounter faith. In Wesley’s system of classes, it was possible to believe one’s way into faith,¹³ behave one’s way into faith, or belong one’s way into faith. People could listen to Wesley preach and believe the message; people could belong to one of the groups and catch faith from that community; people could serve in the groups’ many social justice projects and experience the life of Jesus in their behavior. Believing, belonging, and behaving were neither progressions nor hierarchies. Instead, the different ways of accessing faith allowed for different people to enter in their own unique ways.

The spiritual formation community needs more fully orbbed methods of discipleship than having people read books and listen to talks. For example, Sonya, who had travelled to Ecuador with little to no faith in the Divine, began to trust God on a mission trip. As she helped people in South America, she felt desperate, asked God for help, and saw God supply that help, often through her own behavior. (Apparently the leaders forgot to ask about her qualifications of belief before she got there.) Sonya behaved her way into the Kingdom. Ben, who had been in jail, came to our weekly family dinner for several years and then began attending a recovery church we were working with. The arguments for Jesus’ divinity gradually made sense as he belonged his way into the kingdom at our dinner table and at a church where he was accepted in spite of his past.

12. Miller, xiii.

13. Church historian Tom Albin, *Academy of Spiritual Formation (The Upper Room; Nashville, TN)*, uses these terms to describe John Wesley’s methods.

TRANSFORMATIONAL TOOLS

Recovery only “one day at a time” doesn’t seem like much, but it’s compensated for by the intense focus of that one day. Twelve steppers do whatever is needed to stay sober or abstinent today, including using tools that closely resemble spiritual disciplines.

Such tools help people keep their lives close to reality, to humility, and to God.

See figure 1 (p. 62) for a glimpse of how recovery tools resemble spiritual disciplines.

The steps, traditions, and tools of recovery span the believing, behaving, and belonging spectrum. Prayer, meditation, conscious contact with God, and reading recovery literature are primarily mental; service and sobriety are primarily behavioral; coming to meetings, sharing at meetings, practicing confidentiality, sponsorship, and admission of wrongs are ways of belonging. In addition, the moral inventory, as well as many other exercises and practices, accesses the emotions and emotional healing on a deep level.

Yet the point for twelve steppers is never the tools, but recovery and wholeness instead. This focus can serve as a caution to the spiritual formation community not to emphasize disciplines above life in Christ. Taking retreats, knowing the Bible, or frequent practice of centering prayer is never the point. Tools (sobriety and abstinence) are a means to an end (recovery), just as the disciplines are a means to union with God and subsequent transformation into Christlikeness. Indeed, spiritual formation might consider putting greater emphasis on practices that resemble the following twelve-step tools.

Step 4 invites participants to write (usually) a moral inventory of their lives, spotting character defects such as resentment, dishonesty, self-will, pride, selfishness, fear, jealousy, self-pity, greed, envy, and hatred. This lengthy inventory provides a basis for the daily inventory (like the prayer of examen), which takes notice of those defects. Daily inventories further lead to in-the-moment reflection and confession by promptly admitting one is wrong as soon as it’s realized (Step 10).

Admission of wrongs occurs frequently in group sharing. Because, as twelve steppers say, “we’re as sick as our secrets,” confessed faults no longer have power over us. Sometimes we do this in conversation, as Keith Miller once did with me. We had both been complaining about our mutual book publisher when he stopped and said, “God is yanking my chain. I have to say that the publisher has been good to me...” He looked down in regret while I thought, *So God, this is what it’s like to be truly grateful?! To admit the bankruptcy of our self-centeredness leads us to healing. Likewise, those involved in spiritual formation need to design safe communities where people can confess their sins openly, be forgiven, and be healed.*



TOOLS OF RECOVERY

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES & PRACTICES OF CHRISTIANITY

Prayer (Step 11), especially asking to do God's will (not to drink and to follow the steps)	Prayers of petition, intercessory prayer, lament
Meditation (Step 11)	Scripture meditation (both Ignatian [imaginative] and lectio divina)
Admission of wrongs (Steps 1, 5, 8, 10)	Confession to God, confession to confidants, prayer of examen
Making amends (Steps 8 and 9)	Restitution
Conscious contact with God (Step 11)	Practicing the presence of God, mindfulness, breath prayers
Attending support group meetings	Community, fellowship, submission, spiritual direction, gratitude
Taking chips for time of sobriety and abstinence and telling "how you did it"	Celebration, gratefulness
Sharing at meetings	Confession, fellowship, guidance
Saying the serenity prayer	Submission
Laughter in meetings, not taking oneself too seriously	Celebration
Moral inventory	Reflection, confession, journaling, Week 1 of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola
Daily inventory	Reflection, confession, journaling, gratitude
7th tradition (taking up a collection; newcomers are not asked to give)	Giving, stewardship
Service: setting up chairs, leading a meeting, holding office	Humility, servanthood: Service that is not done in the spotlight and is often menial
Sharing the program with those in need	Service: acts of love done to help those in need; witnessing
Reading recovery literature	Bible study, reading devotional masters
Reading the steps, traditions or tools at a meeting	Liturgy and gradual, even unconscious memorization
Confidentiality, not revealing what I know about others	Secrecy and silence, also fellowship in respect for others and not divulging the details of their lives to others
Abstinence and sobriety	Fasting, frugality, simplicity
Sponsorship, working the steps	Community, guidance, spiritual direction, submission, discipling programs
Saying "I'm grateful to be here" at a meeting after breaking abstinence	Celebration, gratefulness, community
No crosstalk rule (not interrupting someone who is sharing; not commenting on what others say)	Silence
Times of quiet reflection very common at twelve-step meetings and retreats	Solitude
Celebrating anniversaries of sobriety or abstinence dates ("birthdays")	Celebration
Listening to each other share	Silencing the mind, fellowship, guidance
Welcoming newcomers	Fellowship, welcoming strangers
Telephone calls	Confession, sponsorship, guidance

Steps 8 and 9 offer a pattern of making amends by clearing one's conscience, reconciliation, and restitution. It's so painful that it proves to be a powerful deterrent against repeating the behavior. Eventually, we don't want to sin again. Instead we dream: *What would life be like if I didn't yell at my child or exaggerate my circumstances to my healthcare professional or supervisor?* This is similar to gaining a vision of life in the kingdom of God.

Meetings create an important setting for community and fellowship because wholeness and recovery, like transformation into Christlikeness and practicing the disciplines, are more caught than taught. We truly belong our way into both recovery and Christlikeness. That's why Jesus took the disciples on the three-year camping trip. Both twelve steppers and Christians can tell you about the people who have influenced them, even twenty-five years later. That influence occurs when we are part of authentic community, either one-on-one or in groups.

Confession and admission of wrong creates an authenticity that drives community. You know the real person sitting across from you because you know the worst. It allows you to start with the reality of your hurts and flaws in the safety of confidential community. In this way, many twelve-step participants begin to trust another human being for the first time. In addition, the "no crosstalk" (interrupting or fixing) rule prevents twelve steppers from shooting their wounded. The discipline of silence creates room for grace to move instead of the kind of crushing judgment that quickly kills community.

Sponsoring others in twelve step involves guiding them on their path through the steps, listening to them in their worst moments and usually hearing their inventory. My sponsor is someone to whom I can say anything and still be loved. The benefit is mutual. After grudgingly calling back my sponsee, I have often found that what I said to him or her was exactly what I needed too at that moment.

