

Step Twelve—Introduction:

Why we have to carry the message:

On page 59 the Big Book tells us: “Half measures availed us nothing.” Eleven-twelfth measures avail us nothing either. We can do the steps from One through Eleven, but if we don’t get active and carry the message, we will die. It’s that simple.

Let me start with quoting Doctor Bob in “Doctor Bob’s Nightmare”, the first story after the text of the Big Book. Doctor Bob, as many of you know, was the co-founder of AA:

I spend a great deal of time passing on what I learned to others who want and need it badly. I do it for four reasons:

1. Sense of duty.
2. It is a pleasure.
3. Because in so doing I am paying my debt to the man who took time to pass it on to me.
4. Because every time I do it I take out a little more insurance for myself against a possible slip.

The Big Book expresses this last thought very clearly. The beginning of Chapter 7, devoted entirely to Step Twelve, says at page 89: “Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail.”

If you look at the Step Three and the Step Seven prayers, you will see that they are really all about becoming fit to help other people. Look at the Step Three prayer at page 63: “Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness *to those I would help* of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life.” We ask that our difficulties be taken away not for our own sake, but purely so that victory over our difficulties will show those whom we want to help the power of our higher power. And the Step Seven prayer at page 76: “I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of *my usefulness to you and my fellows*.” We ask that those defects of character which hinder us from helping others be taken away from us.

Remember that at page 63 the Big Book tells us that when we follow the path of the steps, we have “a new Employer”.

Chapter 7 is basically a manual on how to do our job. Our job description is actually found on page 102: “Your job now is to be at the place where you may be of maximum helpfulness to others.”

We are disabled people. Other—“normal”—people don’t have to do what we have to do. They don’t have addiction problems. They can spend their spare time doing things they want to do for their own comfort and enjoyment.

But we cannot afford to do that. If we don’t help others, we will relapse. We will go back to eating. And if we go back to eating, we will surely die. If you don’t believe that by now, go back and think about Step One!

Dr. Bob says something else. He says it’s a pleasure. He’s right! We find that carrying the message gives us a sense of purpose, a sense of direction, and a sense of usefulness, all of which we need in our lives.

Some Step Twelve Promises:

Here are some promises of Step Twelve:

Life will take on new meaning. To watch people recover, to see them help others, to watch loneliness vanish, to see a fellowship grow up about you, to have a host of friends—this is an experience you must not miss. (page 89)

Follow the dictates of a Higher Power and you will presently live in a new and wonderful world, no matter what your present circumstances! (page 100)

So even though we HAVE to carry the message, it turns out that carrying the message becomes, for us, one of the most significant things that we do.

I know that is certainly true for me. I’ve done a lot of things in my life that other people would and have said should be fulfilling; but I never felt fulfilled doing them. I was always judging myself against impossible criteria and finding myself wanting.

But when I carry the message, I don’t even have to be good at carrying the message to feel good about myself. I know I’m giving of myself without hope of reward or gain. It is the giving that is important, not how well the recipient is receiving the message.

And the most awful things that have happened to us or that we may have done to others now become a

means of carrying the message of recovery to those who still suffer. One of the Promises is that “we will see how our experience can benefit others.” And at page 124, the Big Book says:

Showing others who suffer how we were given help is the very thing which makes life seem so worth while to us now. Cling to the thought that, in God's hands, *the dark past is the greatest possession you have*—the key to life and happiness for others. With it you can avert death and misery for them.

Meaning has now been given to our suffering or to the harms we've done others. We are different from what we used to be. The suffering we have undergone, or the harm we have done, were things that happened to someone we used to be, not to us.

We have the ability to say to those who still suffer that recovery is around the corner for them, that they can overcome whatever hands the past has dealt them!

We must not forget, however, the Big Book's statement on page 164: “you cannot transmit something you haven't got.” It's important that we recover in order to be ABLE to carry the message!

With all that in mind, let's first of all look at the Big Book's instructions for carrying the message.

How to carry the message the Big Book way:

If you look at the early history of AA, you will see that carrying the message was almost a full-time occupation for AA pioneers. They would go to psychiatric wards or to hospitals for alcoholics and talk and talk and talk to the alcoholics who still suffered. And after those alcoholics were released, they would take those alcoholics home and talk and talk and talk.

Yet the Big Book's instructions are actually quite different. Here's the outline of the directions:

Pages 89 to 91: Finding the alcoholics to give the message to. Remember that the Big Book was written when AA was only in New York, Akron, and Cleveland. It was written as a textbook for those who did not have contact with AA and who did not have meetings to go to. So there necessarily had to be instructions for finding the right person. We're lucky in OA and in the other twelve-step programs—people come to us, and we don't have to find them. But if I moved to a place where there was

no OA, I would follow the instructions on these pages. I won't discuss these pages any more, but for those of you who don't have OA in your area, these pages might come in very handy!

Pages 91 to 95: The first meeting. The actual instructions for explaining the program to the person who still suffers. I'll analyze this in some detail below.

Pages 96 to 98: guidelines for dealing with a sponsee. I'll spend a bit of time dealing with this.

Pages 98 to 100: general issues and the family of the person who is working the steps. I'll only deal with a few points here.

Pages 100 to 102: what recovery is like for us. I want to emphasize this area.

The first meeting (91 to 95):

The instructions are quite clear. (I'll translate them to compulsive eating.)

Tell your eating stories in such a way that the other person understands. Don't say anything about what you did to stop. Just tell your stories.

I will often start off by saying that I appreciate the opportunity to tell my story, because it helps me in my program. I then tell stories similar to the ones I told back in the first step—the hand going from food to mouth, from food to mouth, and not being able to stop it; my most disgusting eating stories; and my various attempts to lose weight, always undercut by my return to overeating.

Then describe yourself as a compulsive eater. Never comment on the other person. I will often say something like, “You're probably nothing like me, but I realized that I was a compulsive eater.”

You talk about this from the basis of recovery. I talk about how freeing it has been to be able to have ice cream in the house and not to want to eat it, to watch other people eating foods that I used to binge on and be happy for them and not regret the fact that I can't eat that stuff.

Then talk about “how you finally learned that you were sick.” (92) Talk about how you tried to stop but couldn't. I go into details on the many reasons I always slip. “I'm standing up so it doesn't count. I feel depressed. I've been good the last year or month or week or day or hour. I'll never have this taste again. It'll go to waste. Etc., etc.”

Ultimately, talk explicitly about the allergy of the body and the obsession of the mind. I have worked on

telling my story that way. I now tell my eating stories in such a way that they illustrate the two-fold nature of the problem. I first tell the stories of my uncontrollable binge eating and my complete inability to stop once I've started. Then I tell the stories of my yo-yo dieting and my complete inability to stop from starting again. These are the two problems—my physical cravings (allergy) and my mental obsession.

At this point the person will almost certainly be sharing his or her stories.

Then "begin to dwell on the hopeless feature of the malady." (92) This is extremely important. You tell your story in such a way that the other person understands that you—not him or her but you—were in the grips of a hopeless illness. So I will say something like, "I don't know about you, but I began to see how hopeless I was on my own, how I couldn't ever solve this problem on my own. I couldn't stop once I started to eat my binge foods, and I couldn't stop from starting again even if I'd managed to stop for a while. That explained my yo-yo dieting. It explained why I felt so defeated."

If the other person doesn't show interest, don't try to convince him or her. Just tell your story the best you can, thank the other person for letting you tell your story, say that if you can ever be of help, you're available, and then leave.

We don't try to recruit anyone. We don't tell everyone that OA is for them. It may not be. Nor should they come if they don't feel desperate. They'll come to meetings as hangers-on, but not as real members. They have to feel desperation, and it's our job to talk about that desperation.

So if the other person isn't interested, just leave.

But if the other person has ANY interest, that person will ask you how you recovered. *Then tell that person about the steps and how they worked for you.* The Big Book is clear that you don't hold anything back, that you don't sugar-coat the steps.

The Big Book talks about how to deal with the higher power issue with both agnostics and religious people on page 93. It's pretty blunt stuff.

For the agnostics you tell them that's no problem—it's their own conception of a higher power.

For the religious people you tell them that their religion certainly hasn't helped them at all, and they'd better remember that "faith without works is dead". And you go into detail about the inventory.

Here are some very important words on page 94:

Outline the program of action, explaining how you made a self-appraisal, how you straightened out your past and why you are now endeavoring to be helpful to him. It is important for him to realize that your attempt to pass this on to him plays a vital part in your own recovery. Actually, he may be helping you more than you are helping him.

"He may be helping you more than you are helping him!" Of course that's true. I get something out of talking to the other person whether or not that person gets anything out of me. So I'm thankful for the opportunity to talk, to tell my story.

Then basically, after pleasantries, you leave! You don't continue the conversation, you don't try to be a friend, you've conveyed information about yourself and told the other person that if he or she is interested "you will do ANYTHING to help" (page 95).

If the other person is interested, you give him or her some homework—read the Big Book—and let that person initiate the next meeting. The Big Book cautions us against pushing the person at all, trying to rush that person into the program.

The Big Book thus describes a pretty short conversation—maybe a few hours at the most. Then it's up to the other person. Page 96:

We find it a waste of time to keep chasing a man who cannot or will not work with you. If you leave such a person alone, he may soon become convinced that he cannot recover by himself. To spend too much time on any one situation is to deny some other alcoholic an opportunity to live and be happy.

This is pretty different from other methods of carrying the message I've experienced in OA, and actually quite different from what AAers did for the years prior to the publishing of the Big Book.

Basically, the initiative is up to the other person. You've made yourself available, and it's up to the other person to make use of your knowledge, IF he or she wants!

Other issues:

Once we begin to sponsor a willing sponsee, the Big Book makes it clear what our role is. We're there to share our experience on how to do the steps. That's

it. A person who wants to follow the path we took is not following us, he or she is following the path we were taught by others.

The Big Book cautions us about having the other person become dependent on us. Page 98:

The minute we put our work on a service plane, the alcoholic commences to rely upon our assistance rather than upon God. He clamors for this or that, claiming he cannot master alcohol until his material needs are cared for. Nonsense. [For Big Book trivialists, this is the shortest sentence in the Big Book!] Some of us have taken very hard knocks to learn this truth: Job or no job - wife or no wife - we simply do not stop drinking so long as we place dependence upon other people ahead of dependence on God. Burn the idea into the consciousness of every man that he can get well regardless of anyone. The only condition is that he trust in God and clean house.

This is an important message. It's not up to us to help the individual. We have to make certain that the people we sponsor do the steps. We have to make certain that they don't rely on us. I take that very seriously.

I sponsor by working through the Big Book. I don't do much phone-call sponsoring. I meet with my sponsees face to face. I don't REQUIRE them to do anything. They don't phone me every day, they don't check in with me. I'm there to help them work through the steps, and they can work through those steps however quickly or slowly they want to. (I caution them from my own experience how dangerous it is to work the steps slowly, because relapse is just around the corner.)

I work with them to develop a plan of eating that makes sense to them. I tell them that between the time they adopt a plan of eating (become abstinent) and the time they finish Step Nine, they are in a race to finish Step Nine before their mind persuades them to relapse. I tell them I'll do anything to help them keep abstinent. If that means they phone me every day, or phone me at 4:00 a.m. BEFORE they eat that doughnut, they can do that. And they can be assured of getting from me as much support as necessary. But whether they do phone me every day, or whether they phone me at 4:00 a.m. (no one ever has!) is up to them.

They do the work. I don't. I'm just there to share my experience. They sink or swim on their own, and I don't feel guilty if they sink. That's their problem and their responsibility, not mine. If they sink, maybe they'll get more desperate the next time and work harder.

That makes for pretty efficient sponsoring. Since I've been in recovery beginning sometime in May, 1993, I don't think I've ever turned down a sponsee. (I turned one down once before I really studied the Big Book, I think.) It has made for some work, but generally it works itself out, because I don't end up spending a great deal of time with my sponsees. I show them the way I was taught, and let them do the work.

When you come down to it, this method of sponsoring really means having the sponsee read the Big Book, and then meeting with the sponsee and leading the sponsee through what he or she has read, pointing out the directions contained in the book, and having the sponsee follow those directions.

Depending on the individual sponsee's ability to read and to retain what he or she has read, the actual total meeting time can vary between five and fifteen hours, spread over three to six meetings. The longest time is usually spent on Step Five, but even then the approach I've described doesn't usually take more than three, maybe four, hours.

I'm not suggesting that everyone should sponsor the way I do, but I am suggesting that, if you find yourself overloaded as a sponsor and unable to sponsor other people, you begin to analyze how you sponsor to see if there is a more efficient way.

The Promises of Recovery:

The Big Book's promise of recovery is quite clear and quite unconditional:

Assuming we are spiritually fit, we can do all sorts of things alcoholics are not supposed to do. People have said we must not go where liquor is served; we must not have it in our homes; we must shun friends who drink; we must avoid moving pictures which show drinking scenes; we must not go into bars; our friends must hide their bottles if we go to their houses; we mustn't think or be reminded about alcohol at all. Our experience shows that this is not necessarily so. We meet these conditions every

day. An alcoholic who cannot meet them, still has an alcoholic mind; there is something the matter with his spiritual status. (pages 100-101)

THIS is what the compulsive eater who still suffers wants to hear! There is no longer any fear. This is what distinguishes a Twelve-Step program from any other program that deals with addictions—the actual freedom to be around the addictive substance or behavior and not want to indulge in it!

And the Big Book gives us guidelines for going to places where there is eating. We ask ourselves if we have “any good social, business or personal reason for going to this place?” (page 101) If we do, then we attend to that reason. If we don’t, then we’re shaky and we’d better find another compulsive eater to talk to!

Questions:

Here are a few questions for those who are ready to carry the message:

- Imagine that after a meeting you’re talking with a newcomer who has only a few minutes to spend with you. How would you carry the message to that person?
- You may be the only example of the program someone who still suffers ever meets. How do you impart your recovery?
- How do you sponsor? Are you overwhelmed and aren’t available to those who still suffer? Are the people you sponsor more dependent upon you than upon the steps and their higher power?

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Tradition Five tells us that the primary purpose of every OA meeting is to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer.

A proper study of that tradition would put an end to a lot of debate that goes on in OA about “Tradition Violations”.

The real issue in so many of those debates is whether or not something helps or hinders carrying the message.

We don’t need “Traditions Police” in our program. We need people who work hard to figure out how to carry our message well. We can’t carry it well if we go against the traditions that provide us with unity. But that doesn’t mean that every time someone does something different it’s automatically a “violation” of a tradition!

Step Twelve Continued:

As the Foreword to the First Edition says, “we have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body.” And the promises of this recovery are the freedom from the bondage of self and the freedom from the bondage of food.

As the Big Book reminds us, however, “it is easy to let up on the spiritual program of action and rest on our laurels.” (page 85) Although we have recovered, “we are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.” (page 85)

The first two bulwarks of this reprieve are continuing to clean house (Step Ten) and trusting in our higher power (Step Eleven). The last bulwark is our job in life—to “be of maximum helpfulness to others” (page 102). That’s what Step Twelve is about.

In this chapter I might be kind of provocative. If I am, please just remember to take what you like (and maybe what you don’t like!) and leave the rest. Take a Step Four through Nine and call me in the morning!

It’s all fun from here on in! We’ve recovered, and we’re happy, joyous, and free.

The responsibility for achieving a healthy body weight:

If we are to be of maximum helpfulness to others, we must carry the message to the compulsive eater who still suffers, and we must carry that message to the best of our abilities. What kind of a message are we carrying to the newcomer in our room, or to the person who has been coming for some time but hasn’t yet worked the steps, if we are not working towards a healthy body weight?

The compulsive eater who still suffers wants one thing—normalcy. Now normalcy has two parts.

The first is the practical one—the certainty that working the steps will allow that person to look normal, to lose weight if he or she is overweight, and to gain weight if he or she is underweight.

The second is the one the compulsive eater who still suffers has never had from any other diet program—the spiritual sanity that provides freedom from food.

We have to model both of those if we are to be of maximum helpfulness to others. We should neither be living in fat serenity nor be white-knuckle abstaining

We don’t have to be thin to sponsor. Not at all. A person who has 300 pounds to lose/release and who has recovered within months, and is losing weight, is a tremendous inspiration, even if still morbidly obese. And there are people whose medical condition is such that they can lose no more weight, but if they have recovered, they can sponsor beautifully.

What I am talking about, however—and I have myself been an example of this—are people who talk about how they have been members of this program for a long time, how they have recovered, how food is no longer an issue for them, but who do not appear to have a healthy weight.

The question they must ask themselves—as I asked myself—is how *well* they are carrying the message. Are they carrying the message to the best of their ability? I know when I was among them I was not carrying the message well.

On the other hand, having a healthy weight does not necessarily provide the message either.

We have to have recovered from the freedom of the bondage of food and of self. We can use OA as a diet support group without doing the steps. We can be the OA equivalent of dry drunks—white-knuckle abstainers. That isn’t a very effective message either.

Recovery from compulsive eating is a product of the spiritual awakening we have received from the Twelve Steps. It is certainly *not* weight loss without the steps. And it’s my experience that neither is it the steps without working toward a healthy body weight.

Now that the definition of “abstinence” has been changed by the group conscience of OA to “the action of refraining from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight”, it’s clear that if we claim to be abstinent we must also be working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight.

Service is different from twelfth step work:

Step Twelve tells us we have to carry the message. That is sponsoring. That is speaking at meetings about our recovery. That is speaking to newcomers

would then have finally realized that I was powerless over food, that my life was unmanageable.

The Big Book is clear that we have a duty to be honest and straightforward. And if people are using our meetings as coffee klatsches or pity pots and aren't doing the steps, why aren't we confronting them with love and compassion, why aren't we making it uncomfortable for them just to wallow in self-pity and fat?

There are a lot of groups that offer support for weight loss. We offer something else in addition to that support – the Twelve Steps that give us freedom from compulsive eating. That's different from support. Some people need only some support, only some guidance about what to eat and how much to eat, only some sense of encouragement. That's not what OA is about. It's about the Twelve Steps and it's for people who are addicted.

Sure, Tradition Three tells us that the only requirement for OA membership is the desire to stop eating compulsively. But doesn't each person who attends our meetings owe it to us and to OA as a whole to consider whether he or she REALLY wants to stop eating compulsively? And doesn't each meeting owe to any prospective compulsive eater an explanation of exactly what it means to have a desire to stop eating compulsively?

It isn't enough to want to diet, to lose weight, to be lonely and want a support group. To stop eating compulsively means to be free from the obsession that keeps returning us to eating foods, food ingredients, and/or eating behaviors that cause us uncontrollable cravings. We owe a responsibility to make that clear.

Conclusion:

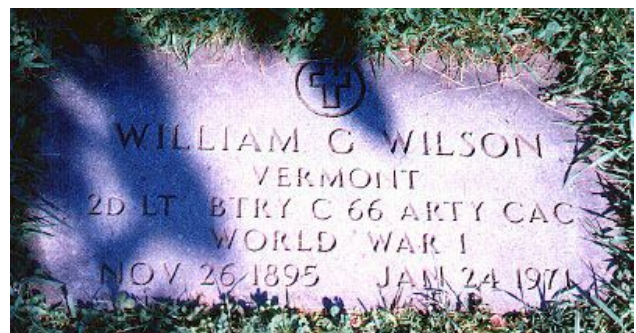
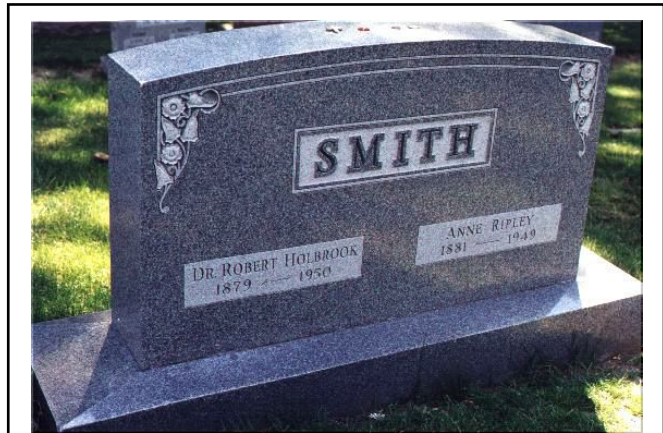
The Big Book is tough. It's down to earth. It doesn't mince words. I once heard something like this in OA: "Truth without compassion is cruel. Compassion without truth is harmful." Certainly everything we say has to be full of love and tolerance and compassion. But we harm people if we don't tell them the truth. And as people-pleasers, many of us in OA may know how to do the compassion bit, but we shy away from the truth bit.

So let's think about how we treat our fellow-OAer who's still suffering. Are we killing that person with kindness?

Questions:

Here are some questions:

- What do you think about the proposition that a recovered OA member owes a duty to reach a healthy body weight?



The headstones of Dr. Bob and Bill W. Neither mentions the pivotal role they played as co-founders of AA.

- What are the strong points of the meetings you go to? What are the weak points?
- Do the meetings you go to make doing the steps a priority? If not, what do they do, and what do you think about that?
- Are you a service junkie? Why?
- Do you know people in OA who are being killed with kindness, who are clearly relapsing or not doing the steps, and who are not being confronted with love? What ideas do you have for talking to people like that?