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A Time-Tested Program of Recovery

*The Twelve Steps
are the best
treatment for
our disease*

GOING TO meetings and not drinking do not treat my alcoholism. Working the Twelve Steps treats my alcoholism. If all I do is go to meetings and not drink, eventually I'll suffer from untreated alcoholism. Untreated alcoholism comes out as depression, anxiety, fear, hostility, apathy, boredom, despair, and other unpleasant symptoms.

With unfortunate frequency, I've seen men and women with varying amounts of sobriety beset by those crippling conditions. Some of them have had ten, fifteen, twenty, or more years of going to meetings and not drinking. Some wind up drunk. Others end up in the hospital with "nervous breakdowns." Some kill themselves. Many try to solve their problems with mood-changing drugs provided by doctors who should know better but obviously don't.

In the foreword to *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, we read: "AA's Twelve Steps are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature,

which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole."

In my experience, that is 100 percent true. Precise, specific, and definite, the Steps offer a path to growing mental, emotional, and spiritual health. They provide direction for lives of expanded joy and usefulness. Anytime I take a drug to treat my depression, anxiety, fear, or inability to sleep, I'm wrong. Those symptoms are signs that there's something within me that's not right. I've seen enough AAs led back to drinking by the prescription pad to be sure the answer is not to try masking the symptom with a mood-changing drug. The answer is to look within myself and then do what's necessary to correct the problem.

Perhaps, my sleeplessness is caused by something as simple as too much coffee. Possibly, my anxiety or uneasiness can be relieved by a program of exercise designed to drain off tensions accumulated during the day. On the other hand, my symptoms may be the inevitable result of untreated alcoholism. Once again, going to meetings and not drinking do *not* treat my alcoholism. The Twelve Steps treat it. Meetings and sobriety create a climate where my alcoholism can be treated by working the Steps. If I don't use the Steps, I'm eventually going to develop all those painful and unhappy symptoms because of my failure to do enough with the pro-

gram to get what AA offers.

Six years ago, an AA I knew was deep in depression and riddled with fears from untreated alcoholism. He put himself into a treatment facility. He had been sober eleven years and had never worked the Steps. That's right! Eleven years of sobriety—and suffering so severely from untreated alcoholism that he put himself in an alcoholic treatment hospital. He went through the three-week program for a few thousand dollars, got

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out, entered another treatment facility, and went through its three-week program, taking part in psychodrama, group therapy, individual therapy, counseling, testing, evaluation, etc.

Both of those facilities speak highly of AA and describe its important role in their treatment approach. However, no one in either place told this man that if he worked the Twelve Steps, he'd get rid of his depression and fears. Although the facilities employ AA members as counselors, no one seemed to understand that the answers for a drunk at any stage of sobriety are to be found in the Big Book. Not surprisingly, when the man began to take Fourth and Fifth Steps and make amends,

he found freedom from his symptoms.

Another man I know was sober sixteen years and had been acutely depressed and afraid during the last six years of that period. Then, he ran

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into some people who explained to him that, while sober sixteen years, he had managed to miss most of the AA program. He had never worked the Steps. Now, he began. He, too, found his fears disappearing and his depression lifting.

"When you've been sober for years, it's hard to believe that your answers still lie in the Big Book," explained a man who had a similar experience after a number of years without drinking. "I started to think I needed psychotherapy or hospitalization. I suffered from untreated alcoholism, because I hadn't done enough with the Steps. When I got busy with them, it was like walking into a large room with only one small light. As I continued to take inventories and Fifth Steps and made more amends, the light gradually became brighter.

"One of the problems of getting fouled up with a substantial amount of sobriety is that a person finds it

almost impossible to understand that his answers still lie in working the Twelve Steps. I didn't drink during this time, but ultimately would have without the freedom that came from using the Steps. This is the point where pills become attractive; we're willing to do almost anything to get rid of the psychic pain within us."

Both the Big Book and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* point out with powerful clarity that the AA program is not just for staying sober. Sobriety is the beginning, not the end. The AA program is a transforming prescription for a life of growing health, usefulness, and joy. By working and reworking all of the Twelve Steps on a continuing, lifetime commitment, we experience the promises spelled out on pages 83 and 84 in the Big Book and the guarantee quoted earlier from the foreword of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

Those guarantees, telling what you and I may expect as a result of working the Steps, speak of wholeness. They don't describe alcoholics who traded drunkenness for sober terror or dry despair. The Big Book and the "Twelve and Twelve" promise us the capacity to live soberly, confidently, usefully, and joyously — *if* we treat our alcoholism by working the Twelve Steps. If I haven't experienced the program's promises, it is because I haven't fulfilled the program's conditions.

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