
BY THE BOOK

WHEN I FIRST began "carrying the message," I had no message. I had not worked the Steps myself, and therefore was totally unprepared to show anyone else how to work them.

When I talked to a prospect, I did none of the things Dr. Bob is described as having done in the tenth story in the original Big Book. Titled "He Sold Himself Short," the story contains one of the best illustrations I have ever read on how to sponsor someone.

In it, the writer, who had only been sober two weeks, describes how he met Dr. Bob on a Wednesday afternoon after Bob had closed his office. Together, that afternoon, they worked the first seven Steps, including an inventory, a Fifth Step, and the writing out of a list of those people the writer had harmed.

"We spent three or four hours formally going through the Six-Step program as it was at that time. The six steps were: (1) Complete deflation, (2) Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power, (3) Moral Inventory, (4) Confession, (5) Restitution, (6) Continued work with other alcoholics.

"Dr. Bob led me through all of these steps. At the moral inventory, he brought up some of my bad personality traits or character defects, such as selfishness, conceit, jealousy, carelessness, intolerance, ill-temper, sarcasm and resentments. We went over these at great length and then he finally asked me if I wanted these defects of character removed. When I said yes, we both knelt at his desk and prayed, each of us asking to have these defects taken away....

"Dr. Bob then led me through the restitution step, in which I made a list of all the persons I had harmed, and worked out ways and means of slowly making restitution."

The need for a sponsor who has worked the Steps himself can sometimes be desperate. In my own case, I had been a sober member of AA for ten years, but had never worked the action Steps of the program. By then, I was depressed to the point of suicide, almost immobilized by my fears, and had been recently fired from an excellent job which my mental state had made impossible for me to handle. I was living proof that going to meetings and staying sober is not enough.

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Until that time, I had not figured out on my own how to work the Steps, nor had anyone shown me how to work them. Fortunately for me, I met a man in the program who told me that I would find relief from my depression and fears if I began working the Steps — a rather startling claim from my standpoint because I had been seeking such relief in self-help groups, sessions with psychologists and psychiatrists, and through reading countless pop-psych books.

That man, who became my sponsor, told me to read two chapters in the Big Book — "How It Works" and "Into Action," and then to start immediately writing out a Fourth Step in the actual format outlined in the book. I did this reluctantly, sure that it was not going to relieve my "psy-

chiatric" symptoms, sure that there was no connection between those symptoms and working the Steps.

After I had finished writing out my Fourth Step, I met my sponsor to take the Fifth Step. He went first with his Fifth Step, making it vastly easier for me to be as honest as possible with my own. Then he asked me to make a list of the people I had harmed, and in the weeks after that he prodded me again and again to make face-to-face amends to the people on that list.

Over time, as a result of continued and repetitive work with all of the Steps, the depression lifted entirely, the fears greatly diminished, and my ability to work returned.

Having personally seen the results that can be obtained by continuing work with each of the Steps, I try to sponsor people in the same way. I urge the man I am sponsoring (men should sponsor men and women should sponsor women) to read "How It Works" and "Into Action" in the Big Book, and Step Four in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. If necessary, I help the man write out his Fourth Step. Then we exchange Fifth Steps and together we write out an Eighth Step list.

After that, I follow up, encouraging him to make direct amends and to make at least preliminary arrangements for monetary restitution where necessary. All of this, of course, presumes willingness. The Big Book, in the chapter "Working With Others," cautions that "to spend too much

time on any one situation is to deny some other alcoholic an opportunity to live and be happy."

I have met quite a few people during my twenty-six years in AA who have figured out from reading the Big Book that the Steps *are* the program, and that each one of them must be worked. But for me, and I think for most of us, the help of a sponsor is crucial.

What should a sponsor be? Most importantly and obviously, he or she should be one who has "had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps." He doesn't have to be a scholar, a philosopher, a raconteur, or even an exceptionally charming person—just a person who has worked the Steps, and is now carry-

ing the message because the Twelfth Step calls on him to do that.

Nowhere in the Big Book or the "Twelve and Twelve" does it say that he should be a psychologist, that he should "care and share," that he should be a good listener or available at all hours to discuss personal or job problems. The sponsor's function is simply to show another alcoholic how to work the Steps.

My only regret is that I did not meet my sponsor — or a sponsor like him — within the first few days of coming to AA. If I had been guided through the Steps, and into the habit of working them on a regular basis, I might have spared myself ten years of unhappy, painful sobriety.

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