

May 1975

How It Works

*Do we really listen
when we hear it read?*

IN OUR CIRCLE of AA groups, the reading of "How It Works," from Chapter Five of the Big Book, is traditionally included with the Serenity Prayer and the Preamble in opening our several weekly meetings. Therefore, in my less than two years' sobriety, I have heard "How It Works" several hundred times — but did I *really* hear it?

Today, in retrospect, I can begin to understand the wealth of wisdom and tremendous significance so highly distilled in that less-than-three-page epistle to the embryo AA member.

I think all of us with a few 24 hours of sobriety realize that we, the sober alcoholics, are among the very few who, by the unquestionable grace of our Higher Power, have been blessed with this wonderful gift of sobriety. Both our own membership estimates and the statistics of all types of organizations and agencies engaged in the fight to arrest alcoholism make clear the pitifully small percentage of suffering alcoholics who find a new way of life. Yet we of AA claim that only "rarely have we seen a person fail

who has thoroughly followed our path." An audacious statement? Perhaps not, if we consider for a moment the happy faces and inner peace of mind evidenced by those who read these words of hope for the newcomer.

But there is a qualification in this implied promise of sobriety: "*thoroughly* followed our path." And this call for thoroughness, as I heard it being read at meetings, was to be emphasized over and over again. To me, to do a job thoroughly meant to do it completely. And that was the very thing the readers told me with their next breath — that those who do fail either "cannot or will not *completely* give themselves to this simple program."

As you might expect, in my jittery early days of AA exposure, I did not hear the part about giving myself completely. I heard only the reference to "this simple program." *Simple* program? How could such a program be simple? Today, I think I can see why it did not seem at all simple. If we are not willing to give ourselves *completely* to the goals of the program, if we are not willing to

be completely honest in our appraisal of ourselves or our previous way of life, then it is quite understandable that the AA program would not appear simple in our eyes. The program is hardly compatible with a dishonest and conniving mind. But my sobriety today tells me that I am "developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty," and I say this with gratitude. Now — how grave had my "emotional and mental disorders" become? I will probably never know, but the AA readers told me that I could recover if I could develop the capacity for honesty.

Next, as they prepared to relate their stories of what they had been like, what happened, and what they were like now, they told me still again that if I wanted what they had, I would have to be "willing to go to any length to get it." They warned me, before they read to me those wonderful Twelve Steps to recovery, that they, too, had balked at some of the Steps; that they, too, had tried to find easier and softer ways. And, yet again, they begged me to be *thorough*. They cautioned that holding on to my old ideas would only result in failure, that I must "let go" of my *entire* self and all my old ways of life, absolutely.

At this point, with the reminder that I had been unable to help myself, they told me that God could help. Today, I finally see the short sentence that followed as their prayer for me: "May you find Him now."

Even once again, they emphasized that same condition of thoroughness. "Half measures availed us nothing," they said. I must approach the God of my understanding "with complete abandon." Only then, after these many pleas with me to give up my old way of life completely, did they read to me the Twelve Steps and the subsequent acknowledgments of our inherent human failings, which would not permit us to achieve perfection — only progress in that direction.

Like all Monday-morning-quarterback sessions, this one seeks to place a finger on the critical or turning point of the game. An alcoholic at the turning point must decide whether to continue on the path of devastating drinking, or to seek the beautiful road to recovery. I reached my turning point when I "came to believe" that the God of my understanding could and would show me a better way of life; when I came to realize that my old way of life was leading me irrevocably to the gates of a hell on earth; when I became thoroughly and completely ready to surrender my egotistic goals, my false pride, my illusory image, and all the many other distorted traits of my personality; when I was finally willing to trade all the things that made up the old me for all the things that they had.

Today, I can joyously say to the newcomer, "Rarely have I seen a person fail if he or she has *thoroughly* followed our path."

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