

An Amazing Gift of the Spirit

by Richard Rohr

St. Bill W.? Not unlikely considering the overwhelming spiritual fruit that his “Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous” is now bearing throughout the world. It was only 50 years ago in 1939 that Bill Wilson codified his program for recovery from alcoholism. It has been so successful that it is now used by overeaters, gamblers, neurotics, and those addicted to religion, drugs, sex, money, shopping, relationships, and worry. Without a doubt, beneficiaries of these programs are some of the most spiritually open and religiously mature people that I meet.

While denominations haggle over metaphysics and mental belief systems, argue about who is saved and righteous with God, defend their sacramental and scriptural turf, Bill Wilson and his 50 years of followers have moved forward with a humble realism that is both rare and convincing.

They begin at an honest place and end up at the same. No arguing, proving, defending, or empty religious jargon. They come together not as a gathering of the saved, but wearing their “scarlet letter” on their shoulder for all to see. They don’t have to be talked into some salvation theory or need for God-out-there. Their broken and powerless humanity is all that they are sure of -- like parched and weary earth waiting for rain.

God is a felt-need, no sugar-daddy answer giver, but the very ground of their being. To be redeemed, “brought back,” is a daily gut and heart experience, not a theology about which you can be liberal or conservative. People in Twelve Step programs, without knowing or intending it, have every likelihood of renewing the meaning of gospel in our time

In general I would say that each of the Twelve Steps, and the spirituality behind them, can be solidly founded in the scriptures and tradition. They are clear, practical distillations of centuries of religious wisdom, presented in a way that avoids all smokescreen piety and soft devotion.

In other words, it is pretty hard to be a legalist, an attendee, a pharisee, or a protector of self-image in the Twelve Step Programs. You can be a backslider, a loner, not ready to quit, still in denial, but there is no point in hanging around the group (in fact, you won’t) unless you want to change your life. I wish we were as blessed in most churches.

At a time when individualism has almost totally blinded the spiritual perception of most church goers, A.A. is unafraid to begin its Twelve Traditions (almost as wise as the Twelve Steps!) with a clear emphasis on the group and its quality of common life: “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on A.A. unity.”

Even the second tradition sees God as one who is known in the community. No private me-and-Jesus here: “For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority -- a loving God as he may express himself in our group conscience.” Brilliant theology! Inspired teaching!

And while the clergy and ministers debate about who has the true ordination, which sex can represent Christ, and appropriate vestments, the Twelve Traditions return quietly to the teaching of Luke 22:24-27: “Our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern.” Or, “Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.”

And finally the common sense wisdom of the famous 11th Tradition: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion." If it is truth, you do not need to advertise or sell. Truth, like beauty, sells itself. The spirituality behind the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions are, in fact, very similar to the phenomenon of the base communities in Latin America. It is a "low church" approach to evangelization and healing that is probably our only hope in a suffering world of five-and-a-half billion people. Do we really need to verify belief in atonement doctrines and the Immaculate Conception when most of God's physical, animal, and human world is on the verge of mass suicide and extinction?

The Twelve Step meetings are probably the First World answer to base communities. Our suffering is psychological, relational, and addictive: the suffering of people who are comfortable without but oppressed and empty within. It is a crisis of meaninglessness and the false self, which had tried to find meaning in possession and prestige and power. It doesn't work. So we turn to ingesting and buying to fill our empty souls.

The Twelve Steps walk us back out of our addictive society. I would say that there are six clear movements at work in the famous Twelve Steps:

First and Fundamental: The acceptance of *what is*.

Second: The acceptance of a limited self, a limited world, with limits demanded of all would-be brothers and sisters. Only One is limitless.

Third: A clear commitment to truth, truth about myself, truth about how I have hurt other people.

Fourth: A concrete commitment to fellowship and community. Meetings, apologies, responsibility for relationships are mandated with a courage that we are now afraid of in churches. Sponsorships are taken with total seriousness.

Fifth: An unapologetic commitment to a personal God. Steps 2, 3, 6, 7 and 11 are a commitment to ultimate wonder and meaning outside of myself, to a primary relationship from which all other relationships are ordered.

Sixth: A commitment to loving service. Spirituality is largely a narcissistic trip, a useless illusion, if we just soak it up like a sponge and keep it for ourselves. The Twelfth Step requires that you go out to help others as you have been helped.

Specifically, I would apply these twelve traditional words to the Twelve Steps. Are they not the same as we were always taught? 1) Humility, 2) Trust, 3) Surrender, 4) Repentance, 5) Confession, 6) Self-emptying, 7) Dependence, 8) Accountability, 9) Responsibility, 10) Honesty, 11) Discipline, 12) Service.

Maybe a lot of institutional religion has become lost in group pride and illusion, but in its cellars it still holds the wisdom of the ages. Bill W. has shown us the steps back into the cellar. Like all steps toward truth, they lead downward.

It is a "downward" movement for all of us. If we are attached to our self-image, positive or negative, we have to let it go. If not for suffering, we would probably not do it. If we are "good" and religious, we have to join the unwashed masses who are satisfied with faith. If we are cold and loner types, we have to share and cry and mix.

If not for the intolerable pain, most of us would never change. If we are conservative and self-protective, we will have to admit that law and structure cannot save us. If I am a liberal New-Ager, I have to accept that most of the tradition was absolutely right. I cannot just love "energy" and surrender my life to ideas.

Bill Wilson has *shown* us that the real power is when we no longer seek power, need power, or abuse power. The power is not at the top, but at the "bottom." Those who "admit they are powerless" have the only power that matters in the world or in the church. St. Bill W., pray for us.

REFLECTION STARTERS

1) What is your major addiction? Alcohol or other Drugs? Smoking? Food? Consuming? Sex? Worry? Why do you have this addiction? Can you get over the addiction by yourself?

2) What are the major addictions of our society? Why does our society have these addictions? Will we, as a society, be able to overcome these addictions by ourselves?

3) Suggested activity: Attend a Twelve Step meeting.

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