

The 12 Steps for Anyone: How to Say More-with-Less About God

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Speaking as an admirer of *Alcoholics Anonymous* and the spiritual wisdom embodied in 12 Steps—developed with a laser focus on helping alcoholics who wanted to gain sobriety to do so. Soon found to be helpful for gaining sobriety in wide range of situations

Motivated by nearly lifelong admiration of Jesus-of-gospels, who gained a reputation (via law of guilt-by-association) as a glutton & drunkard. He had a particular fondness and non-condescending compassion for people who drank too much. I think he probably shows up at a lot of AA meetings—anonymously, of course.

12 Steps have their power in a context: a fellowship of recovering people, including sponsors with a little more experience, available to assist 1-on-1. It's a **one-step-at-a-time** spirituality **in the company of others**, with **1-on-1** help as needed (usually is.)

TRIAGE WISEOM WHEN HURTING: Don't let your search for total solution blind you to often-more-helpful thing: what's the next step? And don't try to face it alone—look for a company of others, and if possible some 1-on-1 help (next step/company/1-on-1)

STEP 1: *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable*

When faced with something we can't beat through normal efforts, we **hear a voice with a certain** tone: finger wagging, you-need-to, you-should voice. Our own voice, or well-meaning voice others.

That tone/mood/voice, is completely absent in these steps, beginning with Step 1: *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable*

[that weave **finger-trap** thing]

Step 1 is not telling us what to do. It's only reporting what others have done and found **surprisingly** helpful.

Not a hint of moralism: No shaming or should-ing. Descriptive term of the people in view is "**powerless**" not "immoral, corrupt, bad, perverse, stupid." Even then it's limited powerlessness"—not over everything, but this one thing, alcohol.

Result? "lives become **unmanageable**"—not objectionable, reprehensible, just unmanageable. No blame in that. Is what it is.

Note: verb/action-word, thing they did as a first step: “admitted.” To admit something is to let it happen. (Hosting PT event, wanting people to come, inviting, exerting, etc. At 6:50 first guests arrived, all I did was open door when doorbell rang to let them in.)

To admit something is not even to strain to see what’s hard to see. It is simply to acknowledge what’s staring you in the face. We can only admit those things regarding which we are already aware.

Word for admit/confess in NT is Gk. *allelo*—a playful- sounding word means “to say the same thing as” [Wedding prep, Lyle-Melissa: vows: memorize or repeat after me]

What’s our resistance to admitting certain things? Fear it will become more real. BUT IT’S REAL ALREADY!

And admitting them often comes with a sense of relief. 9 years trying to make space in Evangelical brain, church, denomination, for a new, fully-inclusive approach to LGBTQ. Wanted it so bad, worked so hard. Early hopeful ... discerned a possible path.

Became clear: at this point in history, can’t be inside Evangelical circle and not play by Evangelical gay-rules. May want to, think it ought to be possible, but not. If ride **evangelical church bus**, it’s a bus your gay friends can only ride in back of. Took me a year to admit because I didn’t want it to be so.

Once I did, surprising relief. I had placed myself under PRESSURE, and when I made admission—not possible—pressure evaporated

[Acknowledging reality is the only way to any real God.]

STEP 2: *Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

Again, lack of moralism—“**restore us to sanity.**” Not a moral condition: Latin, *sanitas*, meaning *health*. Modern connotation: mental health of a particular kind: **capacity to discern what’s real**. Can be anxious and sane, depressed and sane. But insane = symptoms that detach you from reality. No **moral virtue** in being sane, **no moral vice** in lacking sanity.

“**came to believe**”... a process that takes place over time...a day, week, month, year, decade? Unspecified.

Believe what? This and only this: “**that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.**” A very limited step of faith.

Strictly speaking, doesn’t mean we know for sure such a power exists, only that if such a power exists, it could restore us to sanity.

Back to the first word of 12 steps: “we.” No singular pronouns in any of 12 steps (just we/our/ourselves)

This case, we “came to **believe.**” Older I get, more I think we can only believe most things in company of others who believe them

If you are around people who believe you are bad, you will believe come to believe you are bad, contrary to evidence. You will come to believe otherwise when you are in contact with others who believe otherwise. **Faith, in that sense, is like language:** can be known with others. Yes, you can make up your own language, but you can’t use it, unless others also know it.

A tricky thing about believing: As we grow up, ask, “why do I believe thus-so?” Usually, because we grew up in a family that believed thus-so. Then we go on a quest to see what we believe for ourselves. But we rarely go on that quest in isolation: we consider what others believe. Connection with others is an essential aspect of our humanity. We live, survive, make meaning, and believe with others.

Wishing it were otherwise doesn’t make it so. I think it’s just how we are, how we work. Oh well!

STEP 3: *Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

Forgive unnecessary use of the masculine pronoun “Him” to refer to God. Written in 1930’s by a man. AA itself would say nobody has to understand God as a “Him.” Time for a rewrite:

Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

Not AA altar call. Not AA preacher saying, “Give your lives to God!”

No one in this step is telling anyone what to do. Just: “*We made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.*” Another report of what people did to find sobriety.

In fact, nobody tells anybody what to do in any of the 12 Steps.

AA is a **one-step-at-a-time** spirituality and it is a **no-pressured**, “each person is always in charge of deciding what they will do for themselves” spirituality. For most people today, I think that’s the only approach to spirituality that actually works and I like it.

Some say this is “**spirituality-lite**” (God as we understand Him, wow that’s not saying much about God is it?)

I don't think it's spirituality-lite, I think it's spirituality-real. We can **intellectually define** God in very elaborate-systematic ways. But we only ever *engage-interact w.* God (turn our lives over to, etc.) as we subjectively **understand/envision** God—understanding is about feeling as much as thinking

Also, it's a big move: turning our lives over to the care of God as we understand God—big, significant,

but it's not labored.

James Alison, my latest favorite theologian (Emily and I met him and had a little Eucharist with him, just to name drop) is the first person I heard describe this a “**relaxing into God**” I think he would say faith in the sense of surrender or trust is a form of relaxing into God. Like a fussy child relaxes into its mother's arms. Or like a dog gets all excited when you come home, and once that's out of his system, he lies down as close to you as possible and falls asleep.

Come to think of it, falling asleep is not a bad image because every time we fall asleep except in the case of sheer exhaustion, we have to believe that it is safe enough wherever we are to do so.

Most nights, that's how we fall asleep—we don't “make ourselves go to sleep”. We make a decision: its time to fall asleep, I'll let that happen now. That's the minimalist approach of...

Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

We can only do what we can do—and making the decision is what we can do.

QUIET REFLECTION

AA slogans for reflection—the one for steps 1-3: LET GO, LET GOD

It's not for every situation. Not for when you're **driving**, except when idiot cuts you off...or you've flipped over in a ditch and no way to get out without help, then LET GO AND LET GOD might fit.

Because our sense of control is often exaggerated, we miss many opportunities when LET GO AND LET GOD is a great slogan.

Communion is weekly reminder: keep it handy. God as I understand God mysteriously revealed in a Jewish rabbi of the first century who became more famous after his death than before it,

His manner of dying revealed deep things about our humanity: he was **powerless**, unable to do anything for himself, **naked/vulnerable** in a culture in which that was shameful.

Disappointed with God: “God, why have you forsaken me?”

Then he made a dying move: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

He had been making this move toward God all his life, this act of surrender: LET GO AND LET GOD.

First minute, identify a situation or aspect of your life in which you think this slogan applies. Then 90 seconds to sit with “Let go and let God” which I will repeat at 30-second intervals. Are you ready?