

## FOUR KINDS OF MORAL INVENTORY (BY JAMES R.)

July 12, 2008, 4:47 pm  
Filed under: [Uncategorized](#)

The fourth step suggests that we take a “moral inventory” of ourselves, which is generally understood to mean that stepworkers must look carefully at their lives and report back honestly about what they see. There is, however, no clear agreement in the 12 step fellowships about exactly *how* one should look at oneself or exactly *what* stepworkers should look for while they are at it.

As with most things in the recovery culture, where there is no clear agreement, there is instead a wide variety of opinions, and the newcomer, looking into the steps for the first time, is confronted with what can feel like an overwhelming number of options. One potential sponsor says the newcomer must write out their life story; another potential sponsor says she must search her heart for selfishness; still another says the only genuine fourth step is one that includes strengths as well as weaknesses.

This choice is not one to be taken lightly, either, for each different style of inventory makes different assumptions about the nature of the stepworkers’ troubles and can influence what they will learn about themselves in the process. Our choice of fourth step will determine how we view our selves, our problems, and what we need to help us recover.

Because this choice is important and not always easy, it might be helpful to look at a few of the styles of inventory. In this article we’ll look at four types: the Four Absolutes, Big Book inventory, the inventory presented in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and the inventory presented in a fourth-step guide published by Hazelden. Although these are not the only styles of inventory available, these four will give us some insight into various trends at work in the recovery culture. Hopefully, our survey of these four will at least give the newcomer some idea of the direction they might like to take in step four.

### FOUR ABSOLUTES

The Four Absolutes are a tool that was used by the Oxford Group, an evangelical ministry that described itself as “a First Century Christian Fellowship.” Because the Twelve Steps were derived from the practices of the Oxford Group, we find the roots of moral inventory in the Four Absolutes.

The Absolutes are Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness and Love. Oxford Group members believed that these four qualities were perfectly expressed in the life of Jesus, and so they represent an ideal for human conduct.

When writing the Four Absolutes, Oxford group members often folded a piece of paper into quarters and then wrote one Absolute at the top of each section. Group members then examined their own lives against the example of Christ and wrote down, to the best of their ability, all the ways in which they came up short. The Four Absolutes were meant as a guide to help members discover their sin, which in Oxford Group understanding meant anything that kept the soul separated from God.

Writing the Four Absolutes brought about a sense of conviction. Oxford Group members discovered themselves to be sinners; they were dishonest, impure, selfish and unloving. They were broken people in need of a savior. The Four Absolutes helped them to expose the fact that their way of living was not working. After writing the Absolutes, members turned their lives over to the care of Jesus Christ. In Oxford Group belief, God provided guidance to the fully surrendered soul. This guidance served in place of selfishness and self-will as the driving force in a member’s life.

As Oxford Group members turned to God rather than to themselves for direction, their decision-making process became central to their relationship with God. When faced with any decision, they prayed and asked to be shown the right answer. Whatever answers came were then tested against the Four Absolutes—the right answer was always as honest, pure, unselfish and loving as possible.

## **BIG BOOK INVENTORY**

The “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous outlines a three-part inventory covering resentment, fear and sex. For example, Big Book resentment inventory generally consists of four columns. Inventory writers complete each column before moving on to the next. The first column asks for a list of people, institutions, and ideas that the stepworker resents. The second column asks for a short explanation of the cause of each resentment. In the third column, stepworkers make notes about whether the resented person affected their pride, pocketbook, self-esteem, ambition, or personal and sexual relations. The fourth column of Big Book resentment inventory asks inventory writers to examine and describe their own selfishness, dishonesty, self-seeking and fear in relation to each resentment.

According to the Big Book, selfishness is at the root of the alcoholic’s troubles, and all of the alcoholic’s resentment, fear, and sexual problems are caused by his or her own selfishness. This type inventory can create a sense of conviction similar to that created by the Four Absolutes. Big Book inventory writers discover that they are selfish and realize the extent to which they need God to take over their lives. The Big Book states that, by exposing their selfishness and turning it over to God, stepworkers will find forgiveness for the people, institutions and ideas that they formerly resented. They will find courage where they were once afraid, and new ideals to shape future sexual conduct.

Both the Four Absolutes and Big Book inventory offer a clear moral standard against which the stepworker can measure his or her personal history. In fact, the fourth column of Big Book resentment inventory offers standards very similar to those of the Four Absolutes; where the Absolutes suggest a perfect ideal of Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love, the Big Book suggest that the alcoholic search out the places where he or she has been selfish, self-seeking, dishonest, and afraid. The two standards are not a perfect match, but there is a lot of agreement between the two, and the desired effect of both inventories is spiritual in nature. Both the sinner who uses the Four Absolutes and the alcoholic who writes resentment inventory are expected to find themselves closer to God as a result.

## **12-and-12**

The inventory instructions in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, commonly called the 12-and-12, are very open-ended. They suggest that inventory writers ask themselves a probing series of questions about various areas of their lives and then write down the answers. While it suggests that writers explore issues such as their sexual and business conduct, the 12-and-12 is also very clear that its examples are meant to be only suggestive of the type of examination recommended. Writers are simply supposed to ask themselves questions and be honest in their answers.

According to the 12-and-12, the alcoholic’s problems are caused by misdirected instinct. The alcoholic isn’t necessarily selfish; it’s just that his or her natural strengths have been driven to extremes by alcoholism.

Unlike the Four Absolutes and Big Book inventories, the 12-and-12 does not offer a standard by which inventory writers can measure their defects of character, although it does suggest that some type of standard—such as the Seven Deadly Sins—might be helpful. Still, there is no fixed guide to tell the inventory writer what constitutes an imbalance of instinct, or how one might know when a balance has been achieved. Instead, writers are left to sort it out as best they can, adopting a standard or not as they see fit.

The 12-and-12 has been very influential in recovery culture, and many step guides take their cues from its pages. The NA step workbook, for example, presents the stepworker with a series of questions on a variety of topics and allows each addict to come to his or her own conclusions about their moral condition. The 12-and-12 also makes the suggestion that inventory writers can list assets along with their defects. Most inventory guides that came after the 12-and-12 picked up on this suggestion and included a section where the inventory writer lists his or her strengths.

## **Hazelden**

*Step 4: Getting Honest*, published by Hazelden in 1992, suggests a four-part inventory encompassing (1) resentments; (2) guilt, remorse and shame; (3) fear; and (4) pride, warmth, love and kindness. We'll take resentment as an example, since the structure for each of the four parts is very much the same.

The Hazelden resentment inventory, like that of the Big Book, asks inventory writers to fill out a series of four columns, listing their resentments in the first. In the second column, writers are asked to list the causes of their resentments. In the third column, writers are asked to examine their character traits that are revealed by each resentment. The Hazelden guide suggests that these character traits are not to be judged as positive or negative and even suggests that sometimes selfishness can be good and unselfishness can be harmful. In the fourth column, writers are asked to examine the belief or motivation that lies behind each resentment.

The goal of this exercise is to discover mistaken beliefs that cause the writer to think and act in self-defeating ways. The philosophy here is derived from Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and suggests that by discovering underlying mistaken beliefs, the inventory writer can be relieved of self-destructive behaviors.

## **IDEAL VS. INTROSPECTIVE INVENTORIES**

Looking back over our four styles of inventory, we can distinguish between two kinds: "ideal" inventory, which focuses on a comparison with a fixed, external standard, and "introspective" inventory, which is open-ended and views standards as relative to the individual.

Both the Four Absolutes and the Big Book offer ideal inventories. Their use of an ideal involves a strong moral assertion that selfishness (or sin) is at fault for the stepworker's troubles. The ideal works to create a sense of conviction and a corresponding acknowledgment of the inventory writer's need for an intimate relationship with God.

The 12-and-12 and the Hazelden guide are both introspective inventories. They assume that inventory writers can set reasonable standards for themselves and generate all their own insight without the aid of fixed moral ideals.

Regardless of which type of inventory we feel drawn to, there are some important things to consider before we begin. Those of us who are interested in writing an ideal inventory may want to first make sure that we are willing to test ourselves against the external standard provided by the style of inventory we've chosen. Are we really ready to see ourselves as sinful or selfish? These inventories can generate remarkable insights, but the process isn't always pleasant.

Another thing to consider before writing ideal inventory is the level of intimacy that we want to have in our relationship with God. Ideal inventory can produce a profound feeling of need for God that we might sometimes experience as a form of desperation. If we write ideal inventory, our spirituality will probably become a more central part of our lives.

Those of us who are interested in writing an introspective inventory should first stop to consider whether we are really capable of the kind of value judgments that the process requires. Can we trust ourselves to

set a reasonable standard for balance for our instincts? Or is it better for us to enter this kind of inventory with a set of standards, like the Seven Deadly Sins, to help us sort ourselves out? If working a Hazelden-style inventory, are we comfortable relying on our own insights about what constitutes a true versus a false belief? Or will we run a risk of deceiving ourselves?

The choice between writing ideal inventory and writing introspective inventory isn't always an easy one. Our sponsors will probably have some good advice to help us along, and, if we are truly committed to working the 12 steps, the fourth step is not the last time in our lives that we will write inventory. The tenth step encourages us to make inventory writing a part of our ongoing development, and so it will be possible to try more than one style of inventory until we find the one that works best.

In this article, we have not—by far—covered all of the types of moral inventory available. Hopefully, we have at least made clear the fact that there is more than one style of inventory available, and that each different type has its own strengths and weaknesses. If we've done our work well here, the newcomer and old-timer alike will have gained a better sense of their options when it comes time to write inventory.