

Step 12

The "key stone" of complete transformation

Step 12 and Step 1

Remarkably, the comments one hears in our meetings concerning Step 1, that is, the frequent comment that Step 1 is the only step which must be "*done perfectly*," seems unexpectedly to also be applicable to the last of the twelve steps. In fact, a careful look at such comments suggests, perhaps, a broader view of precisely "*how perfectly*" a new member is expected to work *all the steps*.

So, as a beginning, let's change the Step 1 "*done perfectly*" idea to something a bit more workable such as "*engaged completely*." The subtle change in concept may be an important one. First of all, the "*perfection*" of a member's accomplishment of Step 1 begs judgment. In fact, such a judgment is made even more comfortably convenient for AA members because it can be effortlessly rendered based on the results of a member's continuing sobriety.

The judgment of Step 1's perfection lends itself very nicely to the simple question of whether or not that AA has remained sober! It also offers an effortless explanation of a relapse into alcoholic drinking -- "*He's lost his commitment to Step 1.*" Applying such a neat package in the very beginning of one's sobriety is easily understood and quite effective. No one seems to have much of an objection to such a common sense approach.

The "*engaged completely*" idea, on the other hand, implies a permanent and on-going acceptance of Step 1's theme of "*powerless*" and "*unmanageable*." All through the successful history of AA the central idea of Step 1 has served literally millions of alcoholics as a foundation of permanent sobriety. The idea is that, once an alcoholic has thoroughly accepted what Step 1 presents as the unconditional and immediate nature of his alcoholic problem, he has begun his path to recovery. The facts are so obvious that almost no sober AA would contest the idea.

To be even more graphic, Step 1 must "*soak into*" the new member so thoroughly that his entire being is utterly saturated with the idea. Further, he must remain thoroughly saturated from then on -- *his sobriety will depend on it*. He must remain constantly -- from his sobriety date onward -- aware of the "*powerlessness*" and "*unmanageability*" which will inevitably arise from any more drinking.

But why is Step 1 revisited here in the discussion of Step 12?

In fact, just as was the case with Step 1, Step 12 must also be thoroughly and permanently engaged. The ideas of the last of the twelve steps must saturate the new AA member just as "*perfectly,*" *permanently* and *durably* as the ideas of the first! Step 1 offered a permanent end to the drinking, and here, we speak of drinking as a material manifestation of all the factors which led the new man to AA in the first place. In the most concrete terms possible, this reference to drinking means a whiskey bottle, a glass and a mouth ready to drink it. Step 1 was the doorway through which an alcoholic might pass when that awful, destructive obsession was about to be lifted.

Well, Step 12 is a similar doorway. Hopefully, the bottle was left far behind the new member as he accomplished more and more step work in the AA program. In fact, there is not even a fleeting mention of drinking in any of the steps after the first one. Steps 2 through 12 focus exclusively on the *rest of the problem* he has brought to AA for a solution. Whether he fully realizes it or not, all sorts of critically important things have been addressed in the steps he has worked leading up to Step 12. The foundation for an astonishing transformation has been solidly laid, ready to support an entirely new structure in his future.

The point is that just as Step 1 had to be completely and permanently engaged, Step 12 must also become an enduring, permanent daily fact in the new man's sober life. Returning to the "*done perfectly*" idea of Step 1, Step 12 must also be "*done perfectly.*" Step 1 signaled the end of the curse of the bottle. Step 12 heralds the end of the suffering and set backs of the rest of his alcoholism. Nothing less than this will suffice for a new life free from the misery of the rest of his alcoholism beyond the bottle.

After all, returning to Step 9's Promises, *isn't this what was promised?*

The ancient Romans built wonderfully picturesque -- and exceptionally durable -- arched bridges from carefully quarried stones all across Europe. An amazing number of such bridges still serve every day travelers yet today! However, all during the construction, an extensive scaffolding was required to hold the thing up as it progressed to its final state. Ultimately, however, the **key stone** was finally placed in the top of the arch, all the scaffolds were removed and the completed bridge began its successful life, confidently supported by the strength of *all* the parts of its construction, *all* of which relied, in the end, on the correct design and placement of the last stone in the arch -- the **key stone**.

Step 12 represents, in a sense, the same final element of AA's step work. Its addition to all the changes made possible through the preceding steps will be the *key stone* to the new man's recovery. Just as the final stone was added to the

bridge being built centuries ago, the role of this key stone, Step 12, will continue to be the element which sustains the bridge's structure, in this case, the element which will make the opportunity for complete recovery from the disease of alcoholism a strong, stable and permanent new structure for the alcoholic.

Who wouldn't want such a change to be just as entirely dependable as a well built Roman bridge? The good news? *It is.*

It is somewhat puzzling when an AA is asked the question, "*Have you worked Step 12?*" This is especially the case when the answer is "*Yes, I have worked Step 12.*"

Unlike step work such as inventory or amends, Step 12's work is never simply something which is "*accomplished.*" A more correct answer to the question above might be, "*Yes. I am working Step 12 right now -- all the time!*" A constant and continuing commitment to Step 12's suggestions indicates that an AA is "*connected to the main engine*" of the AA program and is receiving its extraordinary benefits on a steady, hour by hour, day by day basis.

"Perfect" Recovery versus "Complete" Recovery

Sponsorship experience, especially once the new member has begun a stable and satisfying sobriety, occasionally includes moments of rather destructive self-criticism. Frequently, as the result of a meeting where a fellow AA shares that he "*has drifted to his own will instead of remaining in God's will,*" the new member may call his own recovery into question. In fact, he may approach his sponsor with a conclusion that he has failed to make "perfect" some aspect of his AA program.

Now, only a day or two prior to this collapse of confidence, the sponsor and his charge may have been at coffee, laughing and joking. Further, the new man may be surrounded by every kind of evidence of a successful recovery, including being active in his group and assisting other alcoholics. Yet, here he is, doubting the unquestionably remarkable progress he has clearly made through his step work.

After all, our Big Book speaks of "***spiritual progress, not spiritual perfection.***" (BB p58) Although, now at Step 12, the immediacy of the obsession to continue drinking has been left far behind for the man in sponsorship, our much improved understanding of the destructive potential of alcoholism's "perfection" remains. Experience with sponsorship suggests that this is another of those discussions which, when viewed only insubstantially, may

seem to be an indulgent abstraction, yet may present a very material challenge to the new member and his sponsor.

The sponsor can remind him of all the disadvantages of characterizing uncertainty or self-doubt as being, somehow, essential ingredients of spiritual progress. AA step work absolutely requires completeness, not perfection. All the stone to build the new house must be delivered, and, once constructed, the house may be continually improved. However, should the construction go ahead with some of the stone missing (i.e. *never delivered*), no amount of wall paper will produce the structure described in the blue prints.¹

An *imperfect*, yet *complete* AA program is the goal. In fact, nothing less is acceptable at all. Loose ends must be tracked down, corrected and resolved. All of them. Sobriety is too important for the new man to be left stranded with a "gaping hole" at some point in his foundation.

For one final note, the sponsor should have thoroughly presented the idea that alcoholic ideas of perfection, whether defining a perfect life in recovery, a perfectly conducted step work or other perfect outcomes, is essentially fraudulent. They will always remain suspicious invitations to the old ideas which proved so unsuccessful before.

The correct place for this kind of perfection in a life of recovery will be in the new man's spiritual ideal, and, it can be emphasized here -- and to him -- that this addresses the ideal, not his present state. Step 11 goes to great lengths to describe a process of continuing improvement, and a very similar theme is the central idea in Step 12 as well.

There can be little justification for developing a spiritual aim for himself which falls short -- in any way -- from the ideal picture as a goal of his utmost effort. Yet, a habit of constantly criticizing his accomplishments, literally returning, once again, to the expression of self-will and self-seeking in hopes of convincing others of some flimsy image of his humility has nothing productive to add to his recovery. The Really New Man, attending his first few meetings, need not see the

¹ Although presented as a suggestion for a serious reflection of what has been accomplished -- and agreed to -- during our Big Book's discussion of Step 5, Step 12 implies an even more far reaching idea of the importance of completeness. *"We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone in perfect peace and ease. Our fears fall from us. We begin to feel the nearness of the Creator. We may have had spiritual beliefs, but now we begin to have a spiritual experience. The feeling that the drink problem has disappeared will often come strongly."*

"Returning home we find a place where we can be quiet for an hour, carefully reviewing what we have done. ... Carefully reading the first five proposals we ask if we have omitted anything, for we are building an arch through which we shall walk a free man at last. Is our work solid so far? Are the stones properly in place? Have we skimmed on the concrete put into the foundation? Have we tried to make mortar without sand?" (BB p75)

The same exciting admonition to make the new man's work toward his own recovery complete -- and *permanent* -- is Step 12's great, on-going challenge to the alcoholic.

experience of the AA program presented in such a self-deprecating light, either.

It is a program of attraction. Maudlin displays of false humility a perpetual uncertainty about his sobriety are hardly attractive to the frightened alcoholic who has, only just now, decided to take a look at the kind of recovery we have to offer. Remember, by Step 12, we have moved into a realm defined by *conscience* and *responsibility*. We -- both the sponsor and his sponsee -- are officially here to help, not show off. A calm, confident, factual recovery is far more satisfying -- and far more attractive to even newer members -- than a successful acting job. Both the sponsor and his charge must constantly remember, these frightened, desperate new alcoholics *are watching and listening!*

Step 12

Sponsorship Presenting Life After a Spiritual Awakening²

Happily, Step 12 lends itself very well to the same sort of dis-assembly this discussion has employed in several of the previous steps. Further, that convenience is not one strictly derived from some artificial separation, but rather reflects the three fundamental areas in an alcoholic's future which will be the foundation of his success in sobriety.

Step 12: *Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all of our affairs.* (BB p60)

We can consider these elements of Step 12 in the following sections:

- a. the nature of a Spiritual Awakening,***
- b. carrying the message to alcoholics, and,***
- c. practicing these principles in our lives in recovery.***

Step 12, when considered in the role of being the *keystone* to the combination of all the things constructed in the preceding steps, offers an immediate explanation of their role in the path ahead, that is, "***a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps.***" Further, Step 12 speaks of "***these principles,***" a phrase which seems to sit quite easily with AA's, but also hints at a kind of understanding which may not be all that clear to the new member.

Sponsorship, especially with respect to the "completeness" of step work, could

² For any reader troubled by the "*after a spiritual awakening*" sub-title to this section, Step 12 contains the most complex grammatical verb form found anywhere in our Big Book - "***having had.***" The usage implies that the spiritual awakening is a *fait accompli* at Step 12, something already accomplished which is presented as describing the *starting state* of this final step work.

hardly start "coasting" once all the more immediate, active work has been done. Step 12 will involve a few critically important landmarks of its own, each of which must be emphasized to the new man.

The Nature of a Spiritual Awakening

Because this series of discussions has set as its central goal a description of sponsorship when it is conducted without the evangelical or redemptive ideas of the mythological model, the idea of a Spiritual Awakening must also take on its own meaning within the same theme. After all, a candidate for proselytizing or a willing participant in revival or redemption of the religious variety, derives, at some point in the process, a spiritual awakening.

That new state has everything to do with an acceptance of a religious doctrine or the restoration of his determination to follow religious guidelines in his life afterwards, both developments are consistent with various aspects of salvation as presented in specific religions (*that is, salvation by conversion or redemption*). Religious ideas are quite open concerning the ultimate goal in these cases, the central one of which being centered on the prospects of certain forms of salvation after death.³

Of course, there are almost endless variations of such religious practices including just as many descriptions of what one might receive as a reward and the precise practices which are presented as means to that end. There is no criticism of such belief structures presented here, but this series of discussions directly challenges the "hay-maker" integration of these strictly religious concepts into our AA program.⁴

3 Looking back, the sponsor can return to the new man's Step 4 "***fear inventory.***" Was the *fear of death* among the fears listed? Can the origin of such a fear be honestly confronted? How was it considered in the framework of inventory? Should it necessarily be considered in a religious context with respect to the ***spiritual awakening*** mentioned in Step 12?

4 "***We have no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired.***" The major tenets of the specific way outlined in our Big Book, although only just previously denied, follow. "***If what we have learned means anything at all, it means that all of us, whatever our race, creed, or color are the children of a living Creator with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as are willing and honest enough to try. Those having religious affiliations will find here nothing disturbing to their beliefs or ceremonies. There is no friction among us over such matters.***"

We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals. This should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in the light of past associations, or his present choice." (BB p28)

A presumptive, unthinking insistence that AA and all the parts of this mythological construction are inexorably intertwined has already gone far to discredit confidence in our program among those who were previously our most sincere friends and supporters. Responsible sponsorship cannot allow such a departure from our Traditions to jeopardize the progress of a new member who has sought our help, just as good AA citizenship cannot allow the excellent reputation of our program to be eroded by the thoughtless promotion of "outside issues," *even when they seem to be all embracing, exclusively religious concepts with which no one might reasonably disagree.* It is difficult indeed to present an alcoholic who seriously wishes to

So, as Step 12 denotes "**Having had a spiritual awakening,**" how will the new member perceive this critical, liberating change in his own life absent the rather defaulted position of simply being more committed to supernatural objectives? For many modern AA members, the idea of a *spiritual awakening* will clearly have to stand on its own two feet, absent the exclusive mythological definition. Here, there is no alternative but for the sincere sponsor to "*rise to the challenge.*"

We can begin with a careful look at the exact words of Step 12. The "*spiritual awakening*" will be one which is "*a result of these steps,*" not one based on supernatural religious concepts. Throughout this series of discussions a continuing emphasis on the nature of **spiritual progress** has been described. The "*spiritual result of working these steps*" should not be an inaccessible mystery, obscured by emotional generalities or complicated, non-evidential ideas presented by others pursuing their own "*outside interests,*" in this case their desires for salvation resulting from their evangelism.

The **spiritual malady** has been clearly defined as the collection of all the disadvantages an alcoholic encounters from the dark view of his world through the lens of the spiritual dilemma. **Spiritual progress** has been consistently defined as the process of moving toward a new, more successful and more comfortable outlook. And now, at Step 12, a **spiritual awakening** will be defined as a continuing state which will make it possible to enjoy the on-going benefits of that improved outlook.

Both conversion and redemption are *instant states*. This implies that there is at least a momentary period *prior* to the accomplishment of each, an event which *produced* each as its result and a *subsequent period* after each had been accomplished. The AA idea of a **spiritual awakening** must be a departure from this idea of *suddenness*. It will be, most likely, not an instantaneous change so much as a gradual, enlightened migration from an alcoholic's *old ideas* made possible by the *new ideas* he encountered during his step work. The sponsor cannot reasonably allow the *instantaneous idea* to define Step 12's meaning of *spiritual awakening*, especially not when both he and the new member are freshly aware of how long step work has taken.

recover with such an additional obstacle, imposed artificially, as a prerequisite to his recovery. In fact, the presumption that "*going to any lengths for victory over alcohol*" will unavoidably include such a conversion is fundamentally antithetical to the essence of Step 12. Although the matter has arisen before, it becomes a pivotal issue in the meaning of Step 12.

Tradition Three: *The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.* (BB p562)

Bill Wilson's Recap of "...as a result of these steps."

How did AA's founder see this part of Step 12?

In his book, **Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions**, Bill W. presents an insightful summary of the specific accomplishments of step work which will provide a suitable foundation for Step 12's "***spiritual awakening.***" Three rather lengthy paragraphs in his introduction to Step 12 are directly quoted here because their contents are specifically relevant to sponsorship.⁵ The new member should have a clear understanding of the traditional view of the program's ambitions for what will be accomplished in step work.

(Speaking of a spiritual awakening) AA's manner of making ready to receive this gift lies in the practice of the Twelve Steps in our program. So let's consider briefly what we have been trying to do up to this point.

Step One showed us an amazing paradox: We found that we were totally unable to be rid of the alcohol obsession until we first admitted that we were powerless over it. In *Step Two* we saw that since we could not restore ourselves to sanity, some Higher Power must necessarily do so if we were to survive. Consequently, in *Step Three* we turned our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. For the time being, we who were atheist or agnostic discovered that our own group, or AA as a whole, would suffice as a higher power. Beginning with *Step Four*, we commenced to search out the things in ourselves which had brought us to physical, moral, and spiritual bankruptcy. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory. Looking at *Step Five*, we decided that an inventory, taken alone, wouldn't be enough. We knew that we had to quit the deadly business of living alone with our conflicts, and in honesty confide these to God and another human being. At *Step Six*, many of us balked -- for the practical reason that we did not wish to have all our defects of character removed, because we still loved some of them too much. Yet we knew we had to make a settlement with the fundamental statement of Step Six. So we decided that while we still had some flaws of character that we could not relinquish, we ought nevertheless to quit our stubborn, rebellious hanging on to them. We said to our selves, "This I cannot do today, perhaps, but I can stop crying 'No, never!'" Then, in *Step Seven*, we humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings such as He could or would under the conditions of the day we asked. In *Step Eight*, we continued our housecleaning, for we saw that we were not only in conflict with ourselves, but also with people and situations in the world in which we lived. We had to begin to make our peace, and so we listed the people we had harmed and became willing to set things right. We followed this up in *Step Nine* by making direct amends to those concerned, except when it would injure them or other people. By this time, at *Step Ten*, we had begun to get a basis for daily living, and we keenly realized that we would need to continue taking personal inventory, and that when we were wrong we ought to admit it promptly. In *Step Eleven* we saw that if a Higher Power had restored us to sanity and had enabled us to live with some peace of mind in a sorely troubled world, then such a Higher Power was worth knowing better, by as direct contact as possible. The persistent use of meditation and prayer, we found, did open a channel so that where there had been a trickle, there was now a river which led to sure power and safe guidance from God as we were

⁵ Although long quotations have been generally avoided in this discussion series, this case will be made an exception based on its importance. Here, ideas are presented which bear directly on sponsorship tasks at Step 12. A summary review of Bill W.'s ideas express his concept of "*the result of these steps.*" Its inclusion will, hopefully, make reference to it more convenient for the reader.

This will be the first of two inclusions from material other than the Big Book. The second will be an account of the "*principles,*" each one delegated to a certain step, a document with an anonymous origin although most likely made by an AA member.

increasingly better able to understand Him.

So, practicing these Steps, we had a spiritual awakening about which finally there was no question. Looking at those who were only beginning and still doubted themselves, the rest of us were able to see the change setting in. From great numbers of such experiences, we could predict that the doubter who still claimed that he hadn't got the "spiritual angle," and who still considered his well loved AA group the higher power, would presently love God and call Him by name. (TS&TT p107 - 109)

Although, even in this rather comprehensive summary of the goals of step work the precise, operational nature of the "spiritual awakening" remains somewhat ill defined, the central importance of the idea is clear. While, at first, the obvious departure from its presumptions of the role of deity when compared to this discussion may seem to present a contradictory interpretation of essential AA literature, once the ideas of a more factual and less mythological approach are inserted, the core message remains intact.

Further, it will not be an over worked, fragile substitute. With the acceptance of the additional responsibility of step work approached from a position of greater spiritual maturity, Step 12's spiritual awakening will become more available, less uncertain and more constantly and realistically dependable.

The secular new member must find that a solution which is available to him -- absent the implied imposition of such religious tenets -- remains substantial, comprehensive and effective. Arriving at such a *"not-too-difficult"* understanding will, of course, be the new member's own labor, yet one which will be assisted greatly by the determination of a sincere sponsor. This is the basic goal of this series of discussions, that is, *to make such a solution accessible to new members who need it by aiding the development of those who undertake their sponsorship.*

Once more, Step 12's ***spiritual awakening***, when considered as an integral component of a successful life in recovery, is not limited to a mere adjustment in the supernatural features of an alcoholic's approach to life. It is, instead, a critically material ***fact*** which supports a sober alcoholic's opportunity to effectively avoid the horrible alternative. It must be accessible to all alcoholics -- *without condition* -- who come to AA seeking help.

Carrying the Message to Alcoholics

For non-alcoholics, AA's tradition of freely and eagerly assisting other alcoholics is one of the most misunderstood, and often, one of the most suspicious aspects of our program's reputation. Perhaps one central reason for this rests in the fact that it is quite unusual compared to what we might call other common examples

of altruism. As a result of the understandable search for something similar in the considerations of non-alcoholics to which it might be compared or against which it might be measured, our program has never very successfully defined itself in a comfortable way, especially to those viewing it from outside.

Let's look specifically at two important aspects of "carrying the message." In the first case, the man in your sponsorship will almost certainly find himself speaking to an alcoholic who, at the moment, is entirely unsure whether or not AA is for him. A sponsee should have a thorough understanding of what will be his responsibilities in such a circumstance. The second case will occur when he enters into his own sponsorship with his own new man. (*Yes, we're talking "sponsorship grandsons" here!*)

Our Big Book includes a remarkable mention of the support of notable characters such as Dr. Carl Jung and author William James. (BB p26 & 28) Mr. Jack Alexander's article in the 1941 Saturday Evening Post is often cited as validating evidence of the AA program's emphasis on the practice of its members helping others.

In the earliest days our remarkable intent to help all alcoholics who applied, in a certain sense, needed to be explained to a skeptical nation whose "only choices" of similar institutions available for comparison were hospitals, churches, and yes, cults. Although anomalies such as Waco and Charles Manson may be modern inhabitants of the "cult world," being similarly classified in the conservative 1940's seemed to present a serious concern for our founders.

The difficulty arises when AA's begin to assume that they must continue to combat such an opinion as they conduct their 21st Century program. Such an idea begins to color what could have otherwise been more successful "message carrying" with yet another unnecessary *"outside issue."* Step 12's idea of *"carrying the message to alcoholics"* is far too dynamic -- *and spiritual* -- to continue to remain one which carries a public relations burden from being misinterpreted by non-alcoholics outside our program.

This brief account of some of AA's history might seem a little academic in a discussion of Step 12. However, emphasizing the admonition to "carry this message to alcoholics" to the man in sponsorship should probably include the role he will fill in managing the distrust of those he might help this way. The "cult" idea may be the most dramatic style of justifying fairly normal alcoholic resistance to "twelfth step" work, but all the other causes are suspiciously similar.

Remind him that he should assume that it is a natural state for alcoholics tenderly "dipping a toe" in the water of AA for the first time to be suspicious and afraid of just about everything. Because, in the society where this twelfth step work might

take place, there are no *"pure altruisms,"* he will be constantly on guard to spot some sort of compensation which might be revealed only later.

Even the evangelical elements of the AA Big Book imply that sober AA's are spiritually compelled to *"carry the message"* under threat of "losing" their sobriety⁶ or, even more extravagant, that AA's assistance to someone with the alcoholism problem is actually no more than a "side street" in promoting, eventually, a resurgent belief in God.⁷ The "compensatory" nature of twelfth step work, when it is presented with these explanations actually contaminates the incredible purity of what may be the actual reason AA's are so willing to help.

The fact is that ***sobriety reveals an immense and unexpected decency in us!*** What greater -- or more complicated -- reason is needed to explain why we would be so determined to help others facing the same malady we once suffered ourselves! Why would AA's be reluctant to "kiss the girl friend" about this matter for any reason other than if the spiritual growth resulting from their step work had left them inconfident or uncertain about their motives? Or worse, uncertain of their astonishing abilities to help others?

All of this becomes a relevant part of this discussion of sponsorship for a very clear reason. At this place in Step 12, it will fall to the sponsor to make certain that the new member's ideas about *"carrying the message"* are founded on a highly workable, effective understanding of his own role in the process. If the new member fails to meet the almost certain challenge of such suspicions, fears and lack of trust he will most likely encounter with frightened alcoholics he might help in the future, his prospects of "carrying the message" will be severely limited.

Fiddling "around the bush" while he is filled with his own uncertainty, while his mind is consumed with some ambition to avoid the "cult" problem or some other reputation concern or while he is more occupied with the outcome than with the sincerity of his effort is a dangerous invitation for his adversary -- the disease of alcoholism now manifest in the man he would help -- to win the day. Rattling off endless quotations from the Big Book or a series of popular talking points he has heard in meetings probably won't help much either.⁸ He will have to present

6 *"Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics."* (BB p89)

7 *"As to two of you men, whose stories I have heard, there is no doubt in my mind that you were 100% hopeless, apart from divine help."* (BB p43)

8 In cases where the "complexity" of such circumstances seems to intimidate sponsees confronted with the opportunity to "carry the message," this sponsor has occasionally suggested that the AA imagine himself to be entirely naked. There is absolutely nothing more important than his *complete personal presence* and his *entirely immediate, human determination* to complete this job to reach the frightened man before him who is still reeling from the disease.

Emphasize the simple rule: *"When you are the one who is sent, you must not falter. There is no way to tell when you will be called upon or what the circumstances might be, but none of that matters -- delivering AA's life saving message*

himself -- right here, right now and in person -- to reach the alcoholic he would help.

Further, his sponsor can be certain that his sponsee understands the official AA "grading policy" in effect for such encounters. Regardless of the immediate outcome, the man "carrying the message" will emerge with a spiritually neutral experience from the affair. If he thinks he has been "healing the sick" with his own words, he will inevitably pay a subsequent price for spiritual pride. If he enters into the affair with such tremendous false humility as to expect -- and, *probably create* -- no results at all, he may have sacrificed the new alcoholic's future prospects on the altar of his own uncertainty.

The sincere sponsor will do what is necessary to assist the man in his sponsorship to steer himself around these pitfalls by equipping him with the right understanding of the task from the outset. In any event, the "planting the seed" idea we hear often in our meetings is a good one. This form of "carrying the message" reveals again and again that the flower seldom resembles the seed. This seems to be pretty much the "*way it works.*"

The good news, here, however, is that *it **does**, really work!*⁹

Understanding the Opportunity of Sponsorship

Now, to the second case which begins when your new member accepts the responsibility of sponsorship himself.

If you are already the type of sponsor who constantly thinks of those whom you have agreed to help with their sobriety, you should probably just quietly add your "sponsorship grandson" to your list, at least for the first few commitments your own sponsee makes with respect to his own sponsorship. The "first layer" of success AA provides is relief from drinking. The "second layer" provided is the self-propulsion of the first when that success is translated by a recovered alcoholic to next, one alcoholic after another.

A single victory over alcohol may be remarkable enough, but when that victory is extended through determined and sincere sponsorship to others who suffer, we're talking "*fourth dimension*" in the most concrete terms possible! Our experience

does!" Step 12 tells you to always be ready from now on, and the *spiritual awakening which is the result of these steps* will provide all of what is needed to accomplish your goal.

9 The AA Big Book devotes and entire chapter to ideas about "*carrying the message.*" **Chapter Seven: Working With Others.** Just as was the case with the suggestion concerning inventory, that is, *reading Chapter Five several times*, a sponsor can suggest reading Chapter Seven several times as preparation for work at Step 12. Having all those ideas fresh in mind can go a long way toward establishing the new member's confidence when he finds himself enjoying the opportunity of "*carrying the message.*"

shows that no other accomplishment will allow a recovered alcoholic the kind of satisfaction that can be found here. An old parable sizes up the idea.

*"There are two kinds of people in the world, the 'givers' and the 'takers.'
The 'takers' eat well, but the 'givers' sleep well."*

Such a folksy quip might hold some attraction to non-alcoholics, but to those who have endured, as alcoholics have, all the difficulties of a self-imposed self-absorption, the prospect of routinely thinking of others, *being directly involved in the recovery and welfare of other alcoholics*, is hardly a case of altruism as it might be understood by most people. Good sponsorship will require that an AA at Step 12 realize such an important distinction.

One of many great developments which occurs when a sponsee begins to undertake his own sponsorship is that the topics of discussion at sponsorship meetings begin to shift from matters of his own alcoholism to the challenges he faces with his own new member's alcoholism. It should be no surprise that such concerns can now be based on a new, wonderfully spiritual detachment. In sponsorship we, perhaps even more than the new man, can see the incredible transformation which has occurred.

During step work, the new man faced the immediate task of saving himself from the disasters of his untreated disease. As he moves into his own sponsorship, his work against the disease of alcoholism -- both his own and the new man's -- is elevated beyond that desperate tactical level to a much more strategic footing. When this is considered in the sense of "combating alcoholism," your sponsee has become a significantly more "dangerous" spokesman for sobriety, that is, he has grown in **"understanding and effectiveness."** (BB p 84)

Sincere sponsorship at this point in Step 12 will make certain that the new member understands just what kind of "firepower" he is now packing! With his constantly increasing good judgment, measured in his spiritual progress, which has developed throughout his successful step work, he can confidently begin to trust both himself, his motives -- *his spiritual awakening* -- and his abilities to assist other alcoholics in ways no others can.¹⁰

Setting the Course for Good Sponsorship

Although a specific discussion of sponsorship, *per se*, is surprisingly absent from the book, **Alcoholics Anonymous**, our basic text, there is no shortage of

¹⁰ *"But the ex-problem drinker who has found this solution, who is properly armed with facts about himself, can generally win the entire confidence of another alcoholic in a few hours. Until such an understanding is reached, little or nothing can be accomplished."* (BB p18)

references to the idea of sponsorship characterized by just about every alternate description possible. Further, in other AA literature, **As Bill Sees It, AA Comes of Age, Pass It On** and others, compelling accounts of what can easily be considered "sponsorship" experiences abound. From this volume of information presented about the topic, it is clear that the essential founders of our program considered sponsorship -- by any name -- to be a central focus of what they saw as AA's mission.

All this discussion, they felt, was necessary to define a robust understanding of Step 12's meaning to alcoholics who would undertake the work suggested there. Perhaps the reason for this concern was the fact that most alcoholics had never before been called to perform such work. In fact, although alcoholics may have observed activities which, at first, seemed similar enough to the ideas of AA's concept of "carrying the message," further examination of the process reveals profound differences in many important aspects.

Our Big Book presents an extensive and dramatic account of this process, but it seems to be set on a somewhat different context than what a modern AA member might reasonably encounter. Our 21st Century AA groups are filled with alcoholics who, although they face the same alcoholic dilemma described in the examples of our book (*written in the 1930's*), often arrive at their first AA meeting in significantly different circumstances.¹¹

Now, we face the undeniable reality that society is much more prepared to add its own criticism of alcoholics -- often in quite material fashion -- in hopes of making them interested in sobriety. Those who might have previously been classed as alcoholics motivated to come to AA based on the "internal misery" caused by the disease, now arrive with a hybrid form, one where those fundamental maladies have been augmented by the actions of spouses, police, employers and courts.

Although this seemingly well intentioned "add-on" to an alcoholic's disease based misery may serve to inspire him to seek AA, there is a negative effect which will also confront your sponsee as he undertakes "carrying the message." In fact, the threatening incentives which might have been added to a potential AA's problems by society in hopes of motivating him this way may finally undercut the clarity and the persuasiveness of the precise reasons he might have decided to try AA.

Instead of seeking relief from the untreated disease's catastrophic effects on his

¹¹ Stories placed in a more modern context are grouped in a section titled "**They Stopped In Time.**" From its introduction: *"Seeing this danger, they came to AA. They realized that in the end alcoholism could be as mortal as cancer; certainly no sane man would wait for a malignant growth to become fatal before seeking help.*

Therefore, these seventeen (stories in this section) AA's, and hundreds of thousands like them, have been saved years of infinite suffering. They sum it up like this: 'We didn't wait to hit bottom because, thank God, we could see the bottom. Actually, the bottom came up to hit us. That sold us on Alcoholics Anonymous.'" (BB p279)

serenity, he will present with a "sandwich" of confusing internal and external reasons for wanting sobriety. Although any distinction between the "reasons" described in the cases of the first desperate members of Alcoholic Anonymous in various stories accounted in the context of our basic text (*the first 165 pages*) and those stories included in **"Part II: They Stopped In Time,"** may frequently be discounted -- *"It takes what it takes."* or *"Sick and tired of being sick and tired."* -- perhaps they should be taken a little more seriously.

The man in your sponsorship will be charged with the responsibility of addressing whatever "mix" of symptoms and consequences may arise in his encounter with even newer members. Whether those conditions which have motivated an alcoholic to seek help are largely internal, as was the case with the "low bottom" crowd in our first groups, or when they have, as frequently found in more modern cases, been "enhanced" by receiving DWI's, being fired, facing the departure of his girl friend or being unable to hold a job, *they remain the motivating conditions.*

As such, your sponsee will need to discuss those exact things as he "carries the message," regardless of the precise nature of the mix. An unthinking "blanket approach" based on the idea that what all alcoholics in AA *now* will be suffering from, word for word, the complaints of the 1930's alcoholics described in our book will be introducing an unnecessary complication. AA would hardly be able to pursue its theme of "helping others" if AA's "message carrying abilities" were so dated as to be ineffective.

Many of us have literally cringed as we listened to our fellow AA members describe a cold, mechanical plan for their own sponsorship of a new member. *"Why, I just plan to read the book and work the steps with him. That ought to do the trick!"*

On an even less positive side, the information about sponsorship presented in the resources noted above, can be "canonized" into a brutal, "one size fits all," lockstep approach where any results, effective or otherwise, can be validated simply by the process's adherence to what was suggested in that literature. Successful, experienced sponsors expect that there will be much more to it than that!

"Carrying the message," whether in a first encounter with an alcoholic or later, in the process of sponsorship and step work of one who has decided to become a member of AA, will always be personal. No matter how much we might wish it were the case, a blinding confrontation with details of stories from six or seven decades ago is producing fewer and fewer cases where the sufferer is suddenly convinced that AA is the right solution for his own, personal, case of the disease.

Further, this rejection of AA can occur within the first few minutes of being introduced to it or from frustration later on -- when his experiences with AA's program of recovery should, reasonably, be producing positive results, not more confusion and frustration. Your sponsee must fully recognize that relentless orthodoxy -- imposed based on an absolute reliance on "matching" the precise words of our book -- can rarely be justified. When such a cold infatuation with being impersonal results in a man who has sought our help returning to alcoholic drinking when better results were possible, we will have *"snatched defeat from the jaws of victory!"*

When such an event is characterized such phrases as *"He wasn't ready yet,"* we have to ask ourselves -- and the AA who may have uttered such a thing in his own justification -- *"Ready for what?"* *The disease we face follows no "rules" whatever!* The man doing the work of Step 12's "carrying the message" must know exactly what his goal is. If he is emerging from your sponsorship through his work at Step 12, he must not only be far better prepared than this, but also very naturally find himself both significantly more eager and determined based on his own spiritual progress.

Just as was the case with our drinking, your new member will discover that his new outlook as a sober alcoholic will, as strange as it may seem with some cases, lead him to a natural interest in helping other alcoholics. Here, the sponsor may refer him to the Big Book's description of the cessation of drinking.

"We will see that our new attitude toward liquor has been given us without any thought or effort on our part. It just comes! That is the miracle of it. We are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we had been placed in a position of neutrality -- safe and protected. We have not even sworn off. Instead the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us." (BB p85)

His natural impulse to assist other alcoholics can be presented using the same idea except with the word "liquor" being replaced with some aspect of "carrying the message." After all, this discussion of Step 12 began with its comparison to Step 1. Once changed in this way, the passage above might read something like this.

We will see that our new attitude toward carrying the message has become a normal state of our thoughts. It just comes! That is the amazing result of step work and spiritual progress. We are not forcing ourselves to do this important work, nor are we searching for excuses to avoid it. We have made no sworn pledge to pursue it. Instead, it has become a natural impulse, a natural part of ourselves as we enter a future life of recovery. We have no hesitation or reluctance to carry the message. All those selfish reasons not to carry the message are no longer present as a part of our sober selves.

Anything less than this will leave him considering Step 12's admonition to "carry

the message" to be yet another burden designed to sustain his suffering rather than as an opportunity to complete his recovery! If this is an end result of his step work, it will be a clear case of "*snatching defeat*" which promises little in terms of either his personal satisfaction or good results.

It's a Matter of Principles

...to practice these principles in all of our affairs.

Good sponsorship will continue through all parts of all steps, and the final part of Step 12 is no exception. Yet, in a sincere effort to "enhance" and simplify the understandability of this last portion of Step 12, AA's may have done themselves a bit of an injustice. The difficulty arises with the question, "*What, exactly, might be meant by the use of the word 'principles' in what is 'suggested' in this last step?*"

Historically, although not, perhaps, Traditionally, AA's have proposed that each of the twelve steps represents a fundamental principle, that is, each step has, as a part of its meaning, a specific virtue or benefit which will be incorporated into the life of an alcoholic who "works" it. Naturally, in that there are twelve steps, there are twelve of these "principles."

Although there are, because these "principles" were not precisely specified in AA literature, several, various forms "floating around." Happily, the differences one encounters between one or another form are minor. Here is one popular form of the "12 Principles" along with excerpts of an explanation by its author, AA historian, Bill Pittman: (Pittman, Bill. Practice these Principles and What is the Oxford Group. Published by: Hazleton Pittman)

I returned to the same meeting recently to present a sponsee with a sobriety medallion and a few people approached me with the same comment. "I've been looking all year, since your talk, in the literature for the principles and can't find them!" My answer was the same as I tell my sponsees, "The principles of Twelve Step recovery are the opposite of our character defects."

In recovery, we try to take the opposite of our character defects/shortcomings and turn them into principles. For example, we work to change fear into faith, hate into love, egoism into humility, anxiety and worry into serenity, complacency into action, denial into acceptance, jealousy into trust, fantasizing into reality, selfishness into service, resentment into forgiveness, judgmentalism into tolerance, despair into hope, self-hate into self-respect, and loneliness into fellow-ship. Through this work we learn to understand the principles of our program.

(first example)

1. **Surrender.** (Capitulation to hopelessness.)

2. **Hope.** (Step 2 is the mirror image or opposite of step 1.)

In step 1 we admit that alcohol is our higher power, and that our lives are unmanageable. In step 2, we find a different Higher Power who we hope will bring about a return to sanity in management of our lives.)

3. **Commitment.** (The key word in step 3 is decision.)

4. **Honesty.** (An inventory of self.)
5. **Truth.** (Candid confession to God and another human being.)
6. **Willingness.** (Choosing to abandon defects of character.)
7. **Humility.** (Standing naked before God, with nothing to hide, and asking that our flaws in His eyes be removed.)
8. **Reflection.** (Who have we harmed? Are we ready to amend?)
9. **Amendment.** (Making direct amends/restitution/correction, etc..)
10. **Vigilance.** (Exercising self-discovery, honesty, abandonment, humility, reflection and amendment on a momentary, daily, and periodic basis.)
11. **Attunement.** (Becoming as one with our Father.)
12. **Service.** (Awakening into sober usefulness.)

(second example)

Step 1: Honesty

After many years of denial, recovery can begin with one simple admission of being powerless over alcohol -- for alcoholics and their friends and family.

Step 2: Faith

It seems to be a spiritual truth, that before a higher power can begin to operate, you must first believe that it can.

Step 3: Surrender

A lifetime of self-will run riot can come to a screeching halt, and change forever, by making a simple decision to turn it all over to a higher power.

Step 4: Soul Searching

There is a saying in the 12-step programs that recovery is a process, not an event. The same can be said for this step -- more will surely be revealed.

Step 5: Integrity

Probably the most difficult of all the steps to face, Step 5 is also the one that provides the greatest opportunity for growth.

Step 6: Acceptance

The key to Step 6 is acceptance -- accepting character defects exactly as they are and becoming entirely willing to let them go.

Step 7: Humility

The spiritual focus of Step 7 is humility, asking a higher power to do something that cannot be done by self-will or mere determination.

Step 8: Willingness

Making a list of those harmed before coming into recovery may sound simple. Becoming willing to actually make those amends is the difficult part.

Step 9: Forgiveness

Making amends may seem like a bitter pill to swallow, but for those serious about recovery it can be great medicine for the spirit and soul.

Step 10: Maintenance

Nobody likes to admit to being wrong. But it is absolutely necessary to maintain spiritual progress in recovery.

Step 11: Making Contact

The purpose of Step 11 is to discover the plan God as you understand Him has for your life.

Step 12: Service

For those in recovery programs, practicing Step 12 is simply "how it works."

The origins of AA's principles, and of the AA program itself, can be traced back to the Oxford Group, a nondenominational spiritual movement. The cofounders of AA, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, were both associated with the Oxford Group prior to their meeting in 1935.

As we review the general focus of this (non-AA) literature, we can notice the pressing influence of the ideas of the Oxford Group. Of course, for an AA member personally dedicated to the tenets of the Christian religion, none of what is presented in these examples represents any particular problem. However, when these same "principles" are implied to be a necessity for spiritual growth or sobriety to a member basing his recovery on a more spiritually mature approach, the mythological "moving parts" can become confusing or troublesome.

Still, sponsorship will require a complete set of answers for every question his charge may present during step work. Here, we may address our own questions in an attempt to more accurately characterize what is meant by Step 12's suggestion: ***"to practice these principles in all our affairs."*** Because this part of Step 12 is as much an essential component of successful recovery as any other part of any other step, the fundamental meaning of "principles" becomes an unavoidable, material aspect of sponsorship at this point.

Let's consider the "big picture" of step work which will include everything involved and all the results we seek from progressing through all twelve steps. One clear outcome can be noted in the first element of Step 12: *the new member will have had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps.* We need not "over analyze" too much to conclude that such an accomplishment can also be classed as his having adopted *new, significantly spiritual principles* which can serve to guide him to a successful life in his recovery -- a spiritual awakening based on much improved principles.

Further, step work, when considered as a whole, strives to provide the new member with access to a series of specific transformations. Each step, in a sense, confronts yet another part of the spiritual malady which has caused him so much confusion and difficulty. Piece by piece, what was, when considered as a confounding whole (*the consequences of his disease of alcoholism*), a seemingly intractable problem, has been explained and remedied with each new step he has

undertaken.

Where a "unilateral" transformation might not have even been possible, the step by step approach broke obstacles down to a point where they once again became manageable. The point here is that the nature of each of those specific parts of the process is not as important as the nature of the astonishing result. The common "mapping" between individual steps and the nature of corresponding individual "principles" becomes somewhat strained.

That astonishing result reflects, undeniably, the principles which support it, which define its nature and which will sustain it once it is in place more than on the individual tools which made it possible. This premise denigrates no part of the AA program of recovery as less vital or less important than another, but, on the other hand, allows the immense transformation which has resulted from such work to independently define the principles upon which it is founded. The "answers to the principles" question should be derived from the product, not the process.

So, placing the utility of specific steps aside for a moment, this leaves the sponsorship task of "extracting" the principles which run concurrently with recovery. After all, both Step 12's "spiritual awakening" and suggestion to practice the principles of recovery allude to the rather significant value which might derive from examining exactly what such principles might actually be when considered this way.

Your sponsee asked for you help becoming a sober member of AA, not an Eagle Scout.

The step work is almost complete. What lies ahead for the new member is a life of sobriety and recovery -- one directed by the guiding principles he has encountered as a result of his transformation. As sponsors, we can see little benefit from passively defaulting on the question of exactly what Step 12's "principles" might be.

Taking a More Spiritually Mature Look at Step 12's Principles

Perhaps one of the most striking features of our AA literature arises from its appeal -- and accessibility -- to a wide variety of AA's. As we consider all the possibilities for describing the "principles" an AA will encounter in reading the Big Book, Bill Wilson's *"Twelve by Twelve"* and other material, there are actually many choices, each one, remarkably, tailored to some rough demographic of AA membership. It could be no other way.

Without question, the Alcoholics Anonymous program was created with this wide disparity in mind. No alcoholic who seeks our help will be left behind or excluded. This Redux discussion of sponsorship, in fact, invites alcoholics who might have faltered at the prospect of adopting non-intuitive ideas about spirituality to join their companions in receiving such life saving benefits.

Let's consider some of the several optional sources from which an AA might derive an understanding of the "principles." Here, we can expand the usual constraints to include some other choices which might have seemed less directly relevant. We have already mentioned most of them as we moved through our description of sponsorship.

a few simple rules (BB p xxix)
Good Orderly Direction (common, from meetings)
the Seven Deadly Sins (TS&TT p48)
the Promises (BB p83-84)
understanding and effectiveness (BB p84)
ceased fighting anything and anybody (BB p84)

The fact is that, in a more open sense, each of these ideas might rise to become a fundamental "principle" in the context of Step 12. There are many more. As noted previously, individual AA's continually -- and effectively -- find that selecting one or more of such ideas meets their personal requirements for understanding the idea of "principles" as it applies to their own recovery.

The "12 Principles" cited previously (*above*) have certainly been adopted, quite successfully, by many AA's in much the same fashion. If the man in your sponsorship has found that these or some similar part of our AA program will successfully serve as a foundation for his own individual "principles," fine.

However, here, we find ourselves indulgently entering an innocent experiment of cyclical reasoning. Focusing on the "12 Principles" as a convenient example, we notice some mysterious qualities. They are heavily influenced by the mythological explanation of sobriety and recovery, and, even with this caveat, they still seem to have been painfully and artificially extracted from step ideas, as if the final product, *i.e.* the 12 Principles, represented something to be esoterically "discovered" within parts of our program which were, at first glance, meant for another purpose.

Another interesting aspect of the 12 Principles is found in *what is not there*. None of them particularly emphasizes AA membership or more basic themes of participating in the AA program. Instead, they seem to concentrate on increases in the piety and virtue as aspects measured under the metric of religious considerations, all based on the presumption that such improvements will, somehow, finally and inevitably result in better AA citizenship.

So now, we can begin to consider "principles" which will benefit sponsorship. Further, we can dismiss what might appear to be a divide between Step 12's practice of these principles -- as a foundation for recovery in the individual sense -- and principles which might prove to be highly relevant to efforts at sponsorship -- work directly associated with the completion of the transformation of an individual AA but also central to AA's continuing success as an organization.

One part of the spiritual commitment implied in this third aspect of Step 12 will certainly include this institutional priority. This is the "cyclical" element of the reasoning mentioned above. What's good for effective sponsorship will, ultimately, be an extension of what's good for individual recovery. The adoption of principles which promise to improve an individual AA's chances for "being judged well" in an after life seem to crowd out principles which might be, although somewhat less mythologically satisfying, more successful at "carrying the message" while one's feet remain firmly on the ground. (BB p130)

Based on this more secular idea of the spiritual principles, exactly what counsel can the determined sponsor offer the new man for his interpretation of this part of Step 12? Happily, quite a great deal of good counsel, indeed. Let's consider some "principles" which can support both Step 12's spiritual completion of step work while also remaining both highly relevant to effective sponsorship and a forthright and enduring husbandry of our AA program.

Looking squarely at the transformation resulting from step work and the AA program in general, what spiritual "principles" seem to be common sense foundations for both personal recovery, determined sponsorship and sustaining AA's future effectiveness?

Principle: *The Primary Purpose*

The Primary Purpose of the Fifth Tradition establishes "helping alcoholics to achieve sobriety" as the all encompassing, central theme of our program. Any AA who finds himself in the role of sponsorship must remain constantly focused on this over arching goal at all times, no matter how frustrating a particular moment might be, continually examining and reasserting his commitment to assist those who have asked for his help. The sponsor must "completely" apply his experience, strength and hope in the utmost effort. Half measures are usually just as bad -- if not worse -- than not trying at all.

One side of this is that the sponsor must systematically and energetically exclude the intrusion of any outside interests whatever. Our adversary in these encounters, the disease of alcoholism, obeys no rules and honors no limit in its

seeming resistance to an alcoholic's recovery. Our AA program works incredibly well when it is applied with vigor and vitality and when other private agendas are not allowed to cloud a determined sponsor's full commitment.

Why confuse the amazingly simple idea of the Primary Purpose by denigrating oneself? If sustaining one's own sobriety is the central focus of assisting newer alcoholics, can we really claim that we have moved very far beyond the old self-absorption? Why not trust ourselves to be reasonably responsible AA citizens who naturally help others based solely on our newly discovered decency?

When a new member sees the more experienced alcoholics in his group constantly refer to "You have to give it away to keep it!" the spiritual nature of the motive at play becomes suspiciously less spiritual.

So, precisely what message must be transmitted to the man in your sponsorship concerning this "principle?"

Dare to be decent. Dare to be decisive. Dare to be strong. Act in conscience.

Principle: A Constant Thought for New Members

A sincere AA -- sponsor or not -- understands that new members can be similar to sponges. They are absorbing everything. Further, this inflow of all sorts of impressions is not limited to specific material about the AA program. It will include conversations they might overhear between experienced AA members, phone calls to spouses just before a meeting, jokes bandied forth freely between sober members -- the list of what might be included is wide open.

All these "snippets" of sobriety form an important background of what might be, in a bigger picture, the new member's impression of AA in general. Explanations of things from our literature, especially the Big Book, will constitute what can be considered initially, *educational material*. Of course, an alcoholic who has only recently joined us will want to know all about the recovery program, that is, all about steps, meetings, sponsorship, spirituality and so forth, but we must also assume that he will be fascinated with the nature of the results successful AA's are enjoying as a product of their recovery.

Although this may represent an unanticipated discipline for the AA who notices all this attention being paid to what a new member might presume to be the "non-AA" side of his affairs, its importance cannot be over estimated. Further, when it comes to what will be shared in meetings when examined both in the sense of the content actually spoken and the background context of describing life in recovery,

the sincere AA will constantly ask himself, *"What, exactly, will this sound like to a new AA member?"*

One side of "what it will sound like" will have everything to do with "carrying the message." Perhaps you have heard AA's who are already enjoying the benefits of stable sobriety and recovery lament that *"No one seems to be interested in my sponsorship. No one ever asks me to sponsor them."* We suspect that such a state may actually be better described as *"I haven't been interested in their sponsorship!"*

The point here is that when one imposes this discipline on himself, that is, on his presentation of himself as one who is benefiting from AA style recovery, he is acting with principle -- he is *"practicing these principles in all his affairs."* If, instead of a constant and sincere invitation to a new member to enter into the substance of AA recovery, his sharing is marked by a drenching, false humility, endless ranting about his special knowledge of the mysterious nature of his higher power or an abiding uncertainty about his continuing sobriety, what new member would want *"what he has?"*

The AA emerging from step work under your sponsorship will need a complete understanding of this "principle" in order to fully benefit from his own AA program!

Principle: Sponsorship Which Produces Results

Some AA's seem to assume that sponsorship can be conducted as little more than a disinterested hobby. In fact, observing sponsorship of such "low octane" quality almost suggests that the task is grudgingly performed in preparation for something akin to a legal defense for having unsatisfactory sobriety. Such a sponsor seems to think that he might appear in an "imaginary court," defending the lackluster quality of his recovery with *"Hey, I sponsored some people. Why didn't this work out better? Why didn't the Promises come true for me?"*

Here, we suspect that we know the answer to his questions. Granted, on a twelfth step call where the goal is to introduce the AA program to an alcoholic only just beginning to decide about his sobriety, there is not much of a concrete estimate of how things will ultimately work out from the effort. On the other hand, when an alcoholic has been attending meetings and asks you to sponsor him, our goals become significantly more material. It should be highly likely that an AA who has progressed far enough to ask for sponsorship should be well on his way to a lasting recovery.

Although the new member's progress from that point will centrally rest with his own determination, the role of his sponsor cannot be underestimated. We are not called to theoretically assist the new man, we are called to assist him very effectively. If, when approached by an AA asking for help, you immediately begin to consider what might be the least amount of help which could still be persuasive in the "court" mentioned above, you should probably refer him to another AA who is more likely to take the responsibility of his sponsorship more seriously.

Any lack of experience or insight is usually corrected more or less automatically as things progress with your new sponsee. However, your lack of a *"whole hog plus the postage"* commitment can lead to a disaster. Complete, energetic commitment and determination will see our sponsorship mission through much more reliably than years of experience of simply "going through the motions."

Recovery from the spiritual malady provides sponsors with all the foundation they will need for great sponsorship. The "power source" of spirit which becomes available in recovery is both constant and effective. Of course, the **"Rarely have we seen a person fail..."** (BB p58) idea rests heavily with the person seeking sobriety, but there remains plenty of room in the equation for what quality of sponsorship he receives, too.

Throwing our hands up and justifying ineffective sponsorship outcomes by repeating some AA "talking point" -- *"He's not done yet."* *"He's not ready."* -- or attributing outcomes to *"the will of God,"* is hardly spiritually mature or responsible. The **"cunning, baffling and powerful"** description in Chapter Five *"ain't just whistlin' Dixie."* We have a cold, realistic, sober -- *yet highly optimistic* -- understanding of precisely what we're in for when we accept sponsorship responsibilities. That's why we are attracted to the challenge!

And, thanks to the spirit angle, we don't get discouraged or exhausted with sponsorship work. We know what our role is, and we know what the consequences of failing are likely to be. Remember, *everybody and everything will remain imperfect, but everybody and everything will be better than before!* You already know this. Make certain that the man in your sponsorship at Step 12 understands it, too.

Sponsorship is not for the *"faint of heart."*

Principle: AA Must Keep Going and Keep Working

It was mentioned at the beginning of this section that the rather high borne ideals of the 12 Principles seemed to make only a deflecting contact with the extremely "down to earth" idea that the subsequent "generations" of sober AA members will be charged with keeping our program "on the tracks." Our Second Tradition very judiciously -- and *rather religiously* -- describes **"...one ultimate authority -- a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience."** (BB p562) as the essential root providing the (*present and future*) AA program's guidance.

Of course, there is every reason to avoid any impulse to "take over," implementing all sorts of corrections and improvements on the unsuspecting members of your man's AA home group. However, the Second Tradition's "*authority source*" does mention the critical importance of the group conscience. The man in your sponsorship should be fully aware that the spiritual voices in that group conscience will include his own, and, as such, will be a manifestation of his own spiritual progress. He will be responsible for presenting the best, most sincere ideas of his own recovery as his contribution to guiding his group.

It doesn't herald much for the future if AA, although we may continue to define ourselves as centrally spiritual in nature, keeps "walking into the props" absent the spiritual guidance of sincere members. In fact, our continued existence relies heavily on our continuing reputation for being effective and successful, logical attributes of "on the ground," practical, spiritual leadership.

The work you and your sponsee have done together has been focused on his -- and, *probably yours, too* -- sobriety and recovery. This principle of the final suggestion of Step 12 expands that "playing field" a bit. From this point of view, that step work has also been laying the foundation for your sponsee's participation in the continuing maintenance and guidance of the program itself. As his sponsor, it has been your task to make sure he is ready to perform such work. It will be his job, when you are no more than a fond memory, *to make certain that it continues to get done!*

Further, just as was the case with the kind of "low octane" sponsorship which might theoretically suffice as the performance of this important job, we sometimes limit "*keeping AA going*" to simply speaking in group conscience meetings. Although very important, there are so many other areas where his determination to "*keep AA going*" must also be front and center!

Every time he shares in a meeting, each time he undertakes sponsorship, every occasion when he sits quietly with one of his fellow AA's in the hope of providing

some kind of assistance are also moments when his commitment to "keeping AA going" is right at the cutting edge. Every casual "Hello, how are you doing?" he utters as he greets a frightened new member "keeps AA going." Every ashtray he rinses, every coffee urn he cleans, every meeting he chairs "keeps AA going."

The point here is that, although all elements of an alcoholic's individual development and transformation are fundamental to his success in recovery, the rather worldly task of "keeping AA going" may well turn out to be equally critical. Although high borne ideals -- such as the abstractions noted in the 12 Principles -- may provide a much needed beacon for his personal development, won't a serious and continuing responsibility for the on-going maintenance of our life saving program fit in among his spiritual priorities somewhere?

While even experienced AA's are prone to share in our meetings about the personal benefits they have enjoyed in sobriety, the fate of the AA program itself seems to be left as an orphan only serendipitously emphasized as a "side effect" of the successful recovery of so many alcoholics. Step 12's suggestion to "practice these principles" includes a constant, energetic commitment to sustain AA in good working order for the next alcoholic.

This idea enters the realm of good sponsorship as the new man, just now completing his step work, begins to understand the highly spiritual nature of a.) accepting the incredible legacy and its beneficial results for himself, and b.) also accepting his role in thoughtfully sustaining AA as the vital social/spiritual mechanism necessary to save the lives of still more alcoholics who will need it.

Even long after being saved from the "shipwreck," the grateful survivor, knowing that there will be more shipwrecks in the future, will remain determined that the lifeboat not leak.

Principle: *Conscious Giving Follows Conscious Taking*

Perhaps we all have seen, among our fellow AA's, the slow but dangerous inclination to cease "taking what is offered" Frequently, in these same members the commitment to assisting other alcoholics gradually becomes paramount, while the man so committed to such "giving" neglects a continuing self-observation of the state of his own recovery.

The unpleasant result is that one of our most experienced "captains of our program" becomes so obsessed with his task of "*carrying the message*" that his unattended efforts to "*practice these principles*" gradually leaves the results of his sobriety in shambles. How can an AA imagine that his good results in sobriety will continue to effectively attract the uncertain new member who is still

wondering if AA is "for real?"

"Helping others" is a concept which, by its very nature, includes "helping oneself" as a prelude. The relationship continues in an AA's future life of recovery. Simply put, he must continue to "help himself" to all the parts of our program so, among many other reasons, his sobriety will remain reassuring and healthy when it is viewed by the frightened alcoholic attending his first meeting. Although this may seem to be a superficial motive at first glance, won't such an effort be centrally necessary to his helping new members as well as to "keeping AA going" and to "keeping himself going?"

The "hope" that a new member sees when he begins to attend our meetings will always actually be the "hope" he sees when he looks at individual cases of successful recovery which he will encounter there. As one of those individual cases, the member in your sponsorship needs to fully understand the importance of contributing his part to that overall picture of hope. Confidence and optimism are not optional.

When our Big Book squarely states that ***"Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics."*** (BB p89) it is perhaps too easy to always refer to the "Norman Rockwellish" painting of the AA selflessly succoring the man in bed. In fact, many of the references to "carrying the message" presented in our book seem to omit the equally necessary idea of constantly maintaining good "sobriety hygiene" to make sure that we are fit to "carry the message" effectively.

Of course, we speak here of the "attraction" idea. The admonition to assist other alcoholics can travel full circle. Generally speaking, the first alcoholic we needed to assist was ourselves, and that theme continually persists long after the desperation of the bottle fades into your sponsee's past. Good sponsorship cannot overlook the careful presentation of such an idea during work on Step 12. An alcoholic's recovery will require *taking* what he needs from the program as a necessary element to being able to effectively *give* what others will need.

Principle: *Conscience not Morality*

All morality is external. Moral codes are adopted when the persuasion of outside ideas becomes compelling. Unhappily, they can just as quickly be discharged when other contradicting matters become more compelling. Once adopted, moral codes can come to be considered to have more authority than they would deserve if considered more carefully.

Such a proposition might be deemed too academic for this discussion if AA were

not suffering under the onslaught of exactly such an over extended external morality. The checkered past of the Oxford Group is a good example. Although AA's, absent any serious research into the exact history of that group, passively consider it to be something of a "birth creche" for the AA program, its actual nature was as a club heavily populated by British nobility.

Concerned with strengthening their elite social positions by reinforcing a rather savage revival of submission to their version of Christian morality by the lower classes of the British population, their writings show a suspicious admiration for similar efforts in the German Reich prior to WW2. In fact, after a few catastrophic experiments at promoting their "moral" ideas, the Oxford Group changed its name to "Moral Rearmament."

The question here is simple enough. Should AA's unthinkingly conclude that all the spiritual progress we have discussed as a necessary component of our recovery must be "painlessly" handed over to ideas which arose from such a dubious source? Further, does an AA have any alternative to a dogmatic adoption of the "moral rearmament" of the Oxford Group's basic philosophy?

The answer to such a question is equally simple. *There had better be an alternative and an effective one.*

We, as AA's, need not be distracted or discouraged as we reflect on our program's origins. However, we should not hesitate to make certain that the program we see -- and rely upon today -- makes sense, both to us and to new alcoholics who come for our help. Perhaps this challenge finally rehabilitates the often condemned "**Think, Think Think**" signs which have wound up in the closets of so many of our meeting rooms.

As mentioned before in this discussion,

*"Smart won't necessarily get you sober,
but stupid will just about for sure get you drunk."*

Spiritual maturity requires the replacement of external moralities with a restored reliance on one's own conscience. Once this change is made, the danger of unpredictable, lurching shifts to other even less examined yet equally persuasive, contradictory moralities is removed. No matter the outcomes, when one relies on his own conscience for direction (*and then acts on it*), the state of his spiritual progress becomes unavoidably revealed -- especially to him. AA's are no exception. In fact, an AA's successful recovery may require him to rely on this type of spiritual direction even more than even the most moral non-alcoholics.

What determined sponsor would neglect to make such a point to the alcoholic

man he has committed to assist? The new member's adherence to an external morality may ebb and flow, but the AA member in your sponsorship will always face his future *in the company of his conscience*. This is the foundation of Step 12's "practicing these principles," not a reckless, unending "gun fight" with the confusing paradoxes of someone else's tormented moral code.

Principle: *Sincerity*

Remarkably, perhaps what will ultimately be the most important sponsorship message to the new member will also be one of the shortest topics in this long discussion.

Any idea one might consider can be measured by whether or not it compels a potential subscriber to act insincerely, that is, against his conscience. An AA -- or, for that matter, anyone else -- who is sincere in his approach to life will be sincere because he follows his conscience. The incredible, inspired nature of the AA program will be no exception to this. Simply put, no part of our program will ever suggest or demand that a sober AA member act insincerely.

The principles of Step 12 derive from a profound trust and acceptance of the idea that, in the final results of one's efforts to stay sober and be spiritual, he will become a man of conscience. This is the transformative product of step work, spiritual progress and an AA's new outlook on all features of life which he will encounter in sobriety.

We have spoken at length about the idea of self-preservation as a fundamental element of spirituality. In the dark days of alcoholic drinking, self-preservation served as the awful war lord for our disabling alcoholic fear, our relentless spiritual malady. Recovery's full reconciliation with both one's alcoholism and one's sobriety will, unavoidably, begin from this same starting point, that is, will be fundamentally constructed from the same elements.

What other dependable and available personal assets could be the foundation for our new lives? *These are the things we have!*

AA's medallions carry the message: **"To Thine Own Self Be True."** How could an insincere man be true to himself? Worse, how could an insincere sponsor be spiritual? When the incentives of self-preservation and sincerity can finally embrace each other, reinforcing the foundation for a new life, AA's theme of spirituality will have become an astonishing reality.

If there is an actual "miracle" afoot in our AA program, it is revealed in sincere sponsorship! So, sponsor, be the miracle you are!

Final Thoughts

Recovery from alcoholism can probably never be complete without both the assistance of a sincere sponsor and the robust benefits which come from sincerely sponsoring other alcoholics very soon after that. Such efforts may be marred by honest mistakes, a lack of experience or even normal alcoholic bumbling, but *sincerity will always carry the day!*

We know from experience that although our insight and knowledge of the disease we face provide great advantage to our efforts, they alone cannot guarantee the results we seek. The "secret weapon" AA sponsors carry -- and rely upon -- is the *passion* of their AA spirituality. Passion is the essential origin of the compassion we claim in our commitment. Passion and compassion! Either one, absent the other, is doomed to be sterile, empty and ineffective.

Finally, Tradition One says "*Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity.*" When AA's, infatuated for whatever reason with promoting mythological concepts over the essential nature of our program, gradually overwhelm all other aspects of the recovery plan, a schism in Tradition One's "unity" has, effectively, *already occurred*.

The question for 21st Century AA's, sponsors or sponsees, is whether or not that division will tear our life saving program into two disparate parts, one for those with strictly religious ideas about recovery and one for those with a more spiritually mature approach. The first group, emboldened by the strongly mythological origins of the idea of the AA program, seem quite willing to exclude the second. This exclusion, in far too many cases, leads to the predictable destruction of those potential AA's who fail to submit.

Can something like this be a central feature of sponsorship, especially when it flies in the face of our Traditions?

There are no detached, theoretical solutions -- including the lazy imposition of an unexamined mythology. For this simple reason, as for those of us who sponsor, it will be the application of our emotions, our passion to complete the task we have undertaken, which will finally prove to be the unstoppable momentum which will finally overcome alcoholism, both in ourselves and in others. To seek the source of the necessary determination elsewhere only endangers those we would help.

We know, at the moment we say "Yes, I will sponsor you," what we are up against, what we must do and, most importantly, *what we must be*.