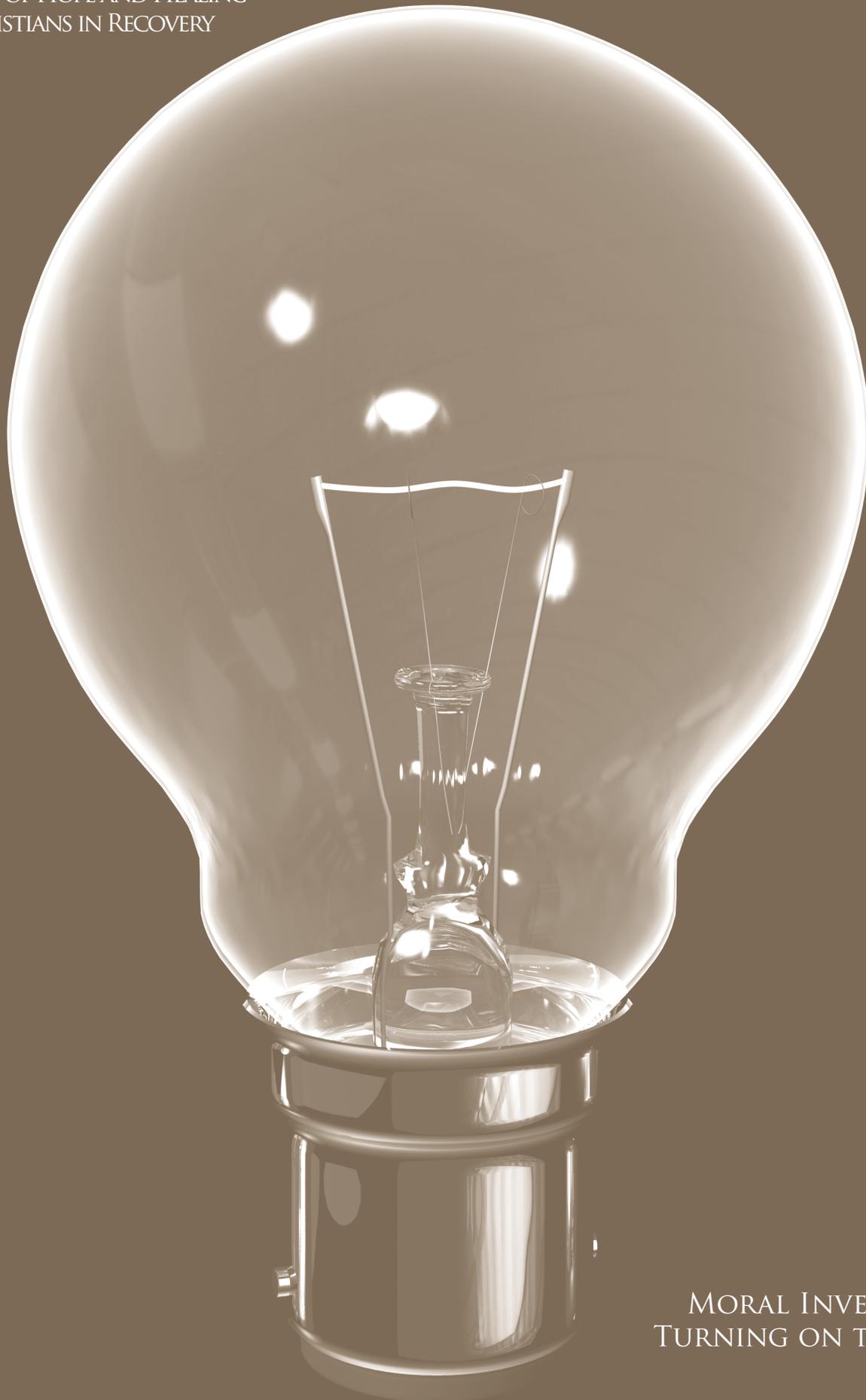


STEPS[®]

A MAGAZINE OF HOPE AND HEALING
FOR CHRISTIANS IN RECOVERY



MORAL INVENTORY:
TURNING ON THE LIGHT

STEPS

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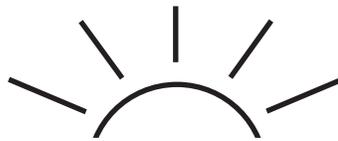
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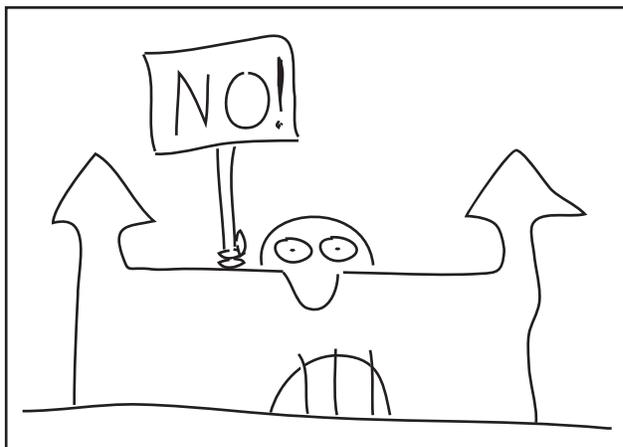
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One of the most challenging parts of the recovery process is learning to tell the truth. It is just plain difficult. Most of us are quite experienced at evasion, deception, blame and other equally ineffective self-protection strategies. So honesty almost always feels new and uncomfortable at first. It is not the path of least resistance for most of us. But it is one of the keys to recovery. Without it there is very little hope. Some of us learn honesty in therapy, some in Twelve Step groups. . . it doesn't really matter how or where we learn. The important thing is to find the encouragement, strength and support we need to begin telling the truth. Our prayer is that this issue of STEPS will provide a little encouragement, strength and support for your journey toward the truth. May you find in each step toward honesty that you are walking hand-in-hand with the God of Truth.

Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.
Psalm 31:5

BEYOND ANONYMOUS



Fred sets his first boundary.



Could you hand me that poker?
I don't know why my sponsor keeps insisting
that I've only got skeletons in my closet.

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LEARNING TO TELL THE TRUTH

STEP 4: MADE A SEARCHING AND FEARLESS MORAL INVENTORY OF OURSELVES.

I recently returned from ten days in Cairo, Egypt, where Juanita and I spoke at the annual conference of the recovery ministry at Kasr el Doubara church, the largest Protestant church in the Middle East. We also spent several days consulting and planning with the leadership team of this ministry. About 180 people attended the conference, and many others had been turned away, including anyone who was coming to “observe.” If they weren’t coming to work on their own issues, the space was reserved for someone else. (Hmmm. Maybe that’s not such a bad idea.)

The visit was a wonderful experience. While just about everything was different culturally from what we’re accustomed to in the U.S., it was easy to find common ground. One thing that struck me powerfully was hearing people say about their recovery process, “It is difficult here because no one in my family will talk about this kind of thing.” The family rules against talking about painful truths are just as strong in Egypt as they are here.

In the midst of that commonality, however, there is a major dif-

ference. In the U.S. when we talk about family resistance to telling the truth we usually mean resistance in our immediate family. We are thinking about our parents, our siblings, and maybe our grandparents. But whereas our culture is young—a couple of generations is a long time for us—Egypt’s culture has very deep roots. On several occasions I had a sense that the people I was talking to were breaking family rules that had been in place for perhaps dozens of generations. They may be the first in their family in a thousand years to find the courage to tell the truth about the brokenness they live with as a result of abuse, addiction, and trauma. Stunned by that realization, I was reminded of how much courage and persistence it takes for anyone to learn to tell the truth. Sometimes it does feel like swimming upstream in the Nile. The weight of generations of dysfunction can be powerful for all of us.

But learning to tell the truth is not an optional part of the recovery process. We must learn to tell the truth or we will be washed downstream, falling deeper and deeper into the dysfunction. So

although “taking inventory,” as described in Step 4 of the Twelve Steps, is not easy, it is a lifeline. It is a connection to solid ground. Learning to tell the truth gives us a place of stability, a kind of solid spiritual ground into which God can help us sink our roots.

One of the best things about Twelve Step programs is that they provide us with a structured way to learn to tell the truth. Taking inventory is, of course, an implementation of the ancient spiritual discipline of confession that has a long history in the Christian tradition. The New Testament presents confession as a nonnegotiable element of normal Christian experience. John says it like this: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

Continued on back cover

Dale Ryan is the executive director of the NACR and the director of the Fuller Institute for Recovery Ministry.



FOUR KINDS OF MORAL INVENTORY

BY JAMES RYAN

MORAL INVENTORY SHAPES our understanding of ourselves, which in turn shapes our relationship with God. Some styles of inventory ask us to take a hard look at our character defects, and this can create a powerful sense of our need for God. Other styles of inventory encourage us to look not just at our shortcomings but at our strengths as well, and so the sense of need for God is not as strong. If we write according to the first style of inventory, we are more likely to enter into an intimate relationship with God, whereas if we write according to the second style, our relationship with God might become more cooperative.

Because moral inventory affects how we understand ourselves in relation to God, it might be helpful to look at what the various styles of inventory are and how they operate. If we know the basic assumptions of a particular style of inventory, we have a better idea about whether it is a good match for us. This article examines four styles of moral inventory: the Four Absolutes, the inventory based on the Big Book, the inventory presented in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and the inventory presented in a Step 4 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, and some understanding of how we can get started.

FOUR ABSOLUTES

THE FOUR ABSOLUTES are a tool that was used by the Oxford Group, an evangelistic 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 were deficient. 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—for 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. We will look specifically at resentment inventory because it is the topic that the Big Book describes in the most detail.

Like the Four Absolutes, the Big Book resentment inventory generally consists of four columns. Inventory writers complete a column before moving on to the next. The first column asks for a list of people, institutions, and ideas that are the objects of resentment. The second column asks writers to go back to each item on their lists and explain why they resent each item. In the third column, writers make notes as to whether the resented item affected their pride, pocketbook, self-esteem, ambition, or personal and sexual relations. The fourth column of Big Book resentment inventory asks 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. All of the alcoholic's resentment, fear, and sexual problems are caused by his or her own selfishness. Revealing this selfishness creates an opening where writers can 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, inventory writers 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.

In place of selfishness, God provides inventory writers with the

In Oxford Group belief, God provided Guidance to the fully surrendered soul.

strength and freedom to be of real use to other people. Big Book inventory provides the motivation for writers to move out of self-obsession and into the work of helping others.

According to the
Twelve and Twelve...
there is nothing
morally wrong with
the alcoholic.

TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS

THE INVENTORY INSTRUCTIONS in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, commonly called the Twelve and Twelve, 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 Twelve and Twelve 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 Twelve and Twelve, the alcoholic's problems are caused by misdirected instinct. There is nothing morally wrong with the alcoholic; it is just that his or her good qualities have been driven to extremes by alcoholism.

Unlike the Four Absolutes and Big Book inventories, the Twelve and Twelve does not offer a standard by which inventory writers can measure their defects of character. There is no guide to tell the writer what constitutes an imbalance, or how one might know when a balance of the instincts has been achieved. Instead, writers are left to develop their own standard. They must sort out their instincts alone and decide which ones need attention. Writers must also decide what balance will look like in their own lives. For the Twelve and Twelve, inventory writers are considered perfectly capable of sorting out their own imbalances.

Corresponding with this positive view of the self, the Twelve and Twelve has a less intimate description of the alcoholic's relationship with God. Because the alcoholic is not suffering from unmanageable defects of character, there is not a strong need for God's aid. Of course, this does not exclude a relationship with God, but it does make the relationship less intimate and more cooperative. God might be invited to help the inventory writer see and correct the imbalance in his or her instincts.

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 columns remain the same for each part. The Hazelden guide asks inventory writers to list their resentments in the first column. In the second column, writers are asked why they resent those items. In the third column, writers are asked to examine their character traits that are revealed by each

resentment. Character traits are not to be judged as positive or negative; the guide 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 that by discovering underlying mistaken beliefs, the inventory writer can be relieved of self-destructive behaviors.

Each addict is understood as a person possessed of a rational mind, who is able to figure out and think through his or her own problems. The addict is also expected to be capable of separating mistaken beliefs from those that are correct. No criteria are offered in Hazelden's guide to help the inventory writer judge true from false. Writers must decide for themselves.

In this style of inventory, God is not really needed to remove anything, since mistaken beliefs are removed in the process of identifying them as such. Persistent mistaken beliefs might benefit from prayer, and so there is room for God in the work described in *Step 4: Getting Honest*. However, persistent mistaken beliefs might also be remedied with the help of a therapist, or simply by repetition of the insight that such beliefs are wrong.

IDEAL VERSUS INTROSPECTIVE INVENTORIES

LOOKING BACK over our four styles of inventory, we can distinguish between two types: 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 are ideal inventories. Their use of an ideal involves a strong moral assertion that selfishness (or sin) is at fault for the writer's troubles. The ideal works to create within the inventory writer a sense of conviction and a corresponding acknowledgment of his or her need for an intimate relationship with God. This intimacy must be of an experiential kind, meaning that the writer feels a need to have God enter and change his or her personality.

The Twelve and Twelve 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 moral ideals. Because writers are seen as capable of sorting themselves out, there is no felt sense that God is needed to enter the writer's personality. If the writer chooses to have a relationship with God through this work, it is likely to be of a more cooperative nature, meaning that the writer will relate to God as a means of encouragement for the writer to grow without needing to experience a transformation of personality.



We don't have to do this perfectly. We do have to do the work, but the outcome does not depend on us getting everything exactly right.

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 is seldom pleasant. If we are going to write ideal inventory, we must be prepared to be uncomfortable.

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 produces a profound feeling of need for God that we might sometimes experience as a form of desperation. If we need God deeply, we must feel God deeply. If we write ideal inventory, our religious sense will probably become a more central part of our personalities, and some of us may find this undesirable.

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? Many people prefer to seek a point of comfort rather than a point of balance. Are we comfortable relying on our own insights about what constitutes a true versus a false belief?

Another thing to consider before writing introspective inventory is the more distant relationship with God that generally results from the process. If we decide that we are confident in our own capacity for insight and value judgments, then we will not feel a deep need for spiritual contact. Our relationship with God will be less intimate and more cooperative. For some of us, this may not be enough.

THE CHOICE BETWEEN writing ideal inventory and writing introspective inventory may require a lot of prayer and soul searching. However, there are at least two things we can keep in mind. First, regardless of which type of inventory we choose, all of us will examine ourselves in a new way and will learn something from the process. Second, and most important, the Fourth Step is not the last time in our lives that we will write inventory if we are committed to working the Twelve Steps. The Tenth Step encourages us to make inventory writing a part of our ongoing faith development. As we learn to walk with God in the Steps, our relationship to inventory may change over time. We may end up trying out all the styles of inventory presented here and perhaps many more. We don't have to do this perfectly. We do have to do the work, but the outcome does not depend on us getting everything exactly right. We just do our best, and God fills in the rest. Learning to trust God to help us understand ourselves is what writing inventory is all about. ❧

TURNING ON THE LIGHT:

A DISCUSSION OF THE INVENTORY PROCESS

WITH AARON SHEPARD

Aaron Shepard is the program coordinator at the Plymouth House, a Twelve Step–model addiction treatment center in Plymouth, New Hampshire, where he was a guest in March 2002. The Plymouth House uses a Big Book model of Step work and inventory. We interviewed Aaron about his experience of Big Book inventory and his experience in helping others through this exercise.

STEPS: When it came time for you to write inventory, what did your sponsor tell you?

Aaron: He unveiled it slowly to me as he did with most of the Steps. He met with me and said, “This is the next thing to do.” He also showed me how to use prayer in inventory. Coming into the Plymouth House, I wasn’t religious at all; I had gone to Sunday school a few times as a kid. My sponsor clued me in to the fact that if I was having a hard time praying, then inventory was a place where I could get some results.

He explained that the fourth column would give me a new perspective—a new brain, as we call it. It would provide me with a place to act differently from. A cleaner, purer place than I was in then. It’s about creating a space in the mind so the person can do something new or different. He also said I would feel differently about a lot of things I wrote about.

STEPS: How did you feel about having to write inventory?

Aaron: I was terrified to read it. And writing inventory produced really uncomfortable feelings. I felt like a worm crawling through an apple. I also had a physical response to it: I walked around with my head hanging low, not wanting to talk to anybody. I was nervous about some of the things on my inventory, not because I was such a bad guy so much as that I felt so petty.

Most of what was on my resentment inventory was really petty stuff. “She didn’t call me.” “She got five dollars and I didn’t.” “I wanted to go to Disneyland and they didn’t take me.” These things revealed that I was very different from what I tried to appear to be, from what I wanted people to believe was the truth.

What I didn’t understand, going into inventory, was that God would remove things that I could see and that I couldn’t see. Its like Alka-Seltzer. After the bubbles come up, it just looks like a glass of water. I changed over

time in ways I didn't foresee, and I put no thought into it. I just became disinterested in things unconsciously. One of those things was "stuff." I became less attached to possessions. I own less stuff now. I had no idea that inventory would lead to that. One fear that I didn't realize I had, and that got taken away, was the fear of looking like a fool. When I work with others I don't have to be afraid of their judgments.

STEPS: What was a typical writing session like for you?

Aaron: I always started with lots of good intentions. Then I'd get frustrated and stand up. I couldn't write for very long, 20 minutes at a time at most. Then I jammed it all into a couple of days because I knew that I had to be finished. I would try to look at my selfishness, and I'd get frustrated because I couldn't figure it out. I'd walk away and pray, go do something else and think about it, and when I came back I could see it.

Writing inventory taught me how to pray. It taught me a real utilitarian use of prayer. There is a task in front of me, so I pray, "God, please help me do that," and then I get direct results from praying. In my Third Step I changed, but I couldn't see the results; I had to have other people tell me that I had changed. But in my Fourth Step I could see my own results.

STEPS: How did it feel to be finished?

Aaron: It was a mixed blessing. I was afraid that I was not thorough enough. My thought was, *If I don't do this right, I'm going to be in trouble.* But it also felt good to be finished. Finishing something was rare for me. Being alcoholic, I typically start something and then leave it unfinished.

I wasn't sure that I was ready to read—as a typical alcoholic I always second-guess myself—but I was going to do it. My sponsor was there and he said it was time, so we just did it. At the time I was pretty much in a constant state of prayer without knowing it.

I wasn't sure I had done well enough on my inventory. When I read it, it was as if someone else had written it.

In my Fifth Step, I discovered that there was a shift in me that I couldn't have produced on my own. I wasn't sure I had done well enough on my inventory. When I read it, it was as if someone else had written it. But I changed in relation to people. They were still doing the same things, but I felt differently in relation to them. Which really speaks to something in the Steps. Things happen that I couldn't even have dreamed of.

After reading my inventory, I didn't feel alone anymore, which made being sober much easier. The act of having somebody witness my inventory made me feel that somebody knew me. My sponsor didn't say, "You're not that much of an addict." But he didn't look at me like I was a weirdo, either. Part of it was an internal feeling, and part external. Internally I felt I wasn't alone anymore, and having my sponsor there grounded that feeling for me.

STEPS: What happened after you read your inventory?

Aaron: I meditated alone for an hour. I was really indulgent with that hour. I meditated on whether I had done it thoroughly. It's part of the nature of who I am that I'm never quite sure of myself. But I felt something that

said, “You have done OK.” I realized that I was having my own experience. There was no one there to tell if I had done this or not. If I went to sleep during that hour, nobody would know, but I would know.

I just wanted to get it right. My sponsor pointed out a prayer in the Big Book, and I said that Seventh Step prayer literally standing up, lying down, out loud to myself—any way I could think of. I had seen this stuff in my inventory, and I wanted to be rid of it. I knew I had to be rid of it if I was going to get anywhere.

The next morning, for the first time in my life my first thought was about others in a way that was not motivated by self-interest. It blew my mind, because I had never thought that way before. I thought, *I need to help people*, and not because I needed something from them or because I’m supposed to.

My next thought was, *I’ll go be a missionary*. I didn’t talk about that, because it was crazy. I thought I was insane, because I had never thought that way before. At the time, I had no idea that the Plymouth House was a place where I could help people. Now I work here, but I do still think about being a missionary at times.

I came out of my Seventh Step sure that I would do Eight and Nine, which was amazing because that was the stuff that really scared me. After inventory, it was just the next thing to do. I could also see that I needed to do Eight and Nine because after Seven I couldn’t really help you. I could help you write, but I couldn’t help you do what came next, which was really to go and clean up the world. Inventory was necessary for amends; if I didn’t write inventory, I couldn’t make amends. Up to Step Seven, it’s just about me. But after Seven it’s about other people. I see the real truth about myself in Step Nine by going to people I’ve hurt, letting them tell me how I’ve hurt them, and then comparing what they tell me to how I thought I had hurt them.

Inventory got me through that process. When I called one person I needed to make amends to, she told me, “Call me back when you’re serious.” I had to work to be sure that I was really serious about making amends, and the only way I knew to do that was through inventory. Also during that time my fiancée left me, and I had to use the inventory process because of that.

One thing that happened after inventory was that I didn’t cop resentments anymore. Nobody could have done anything to piss me off. Somebody could kick me in the knee, and I would have said, “It’s all right. He’s a sick man.” That state of mind lasted for a whole month.

I find that I have more fear since writing inventory. I didn’t have that many fears when I first did it, and my sponsor said, “More will be revealed.” He was right. I tend to have more fears now and less resentment. It’s about fifty-fifty, where before it was only maybe twenty-percent fear. On my Fourth Step inventory, my resentments started at eight and nine years old. There were some things revealed that were important to think about in terms of how I’ve lived my life.

The next morning for the first time in my life my first thought was about others in a way that was not motivated by self-interest.

There was a shift
in my prayer from
“God, help me” to
“God, thank you.”

STEPS: How did writing inventory change your relationship with God?

Aaron: I had tangible results from Steps Four through Seven. Praying became part of my daily life. I had to pray so much when writing that I ended up praying when not writing. Also, there was a shift in my prayer from “God, help me” to “God, thank you.” I knew that God was there for me when I needed him most. I felt protected. When I have trouble in personal relationships I know I can pray through them. I also started praying more for other people.

STEPS: What is it like for you as a sponsor listening to other people’s inventory?

Aaron: Well, the typical length is about three-and-a-half to four hours of straight reading, and I just pray. If I know it’s going to be really long, I get supplies: coffee and water. I try to listen, which for me is a task in prayer and meditation, because I’m really trying to absorb these things and people can tell if I’m listening or not. I don’t say much. People can tell if you are present. I ask God to be there with me, with both of us. My role is to bear witness.

Actually, I forget most of it. It goes in and it goes out. Afterward I can pray it away. Mostly I get a sense of the other person, a flavor of who they are. I’ve really learned not to make assumptions about other people, because you never know who you are dealing with. I’ve worked with people who I thought would never be able to write inventory, and they have totally surprised me. You learn that when you assume, you are not really sure, and that’s part of my selfishness.

Hearing inventory is also another way to learn about my own selfishness. I’ve had the experience of hearing something on someone else’s inventory and realizing that it applies to me too. I also hear things that are shocking. When that happens I try not to react. But there are times when someone expects a reaction, a nod or a moan or something. People expect a response, and I do my best to understand what they need.

With a couple of people recently, what they needed was to laugh. They were laughing and I was laughing. Some of this is really funny. It is usually funny/sad or funny/tragic. Something we learn in this process is that we’ve got to not take ourselves so seriously. We can be really petty, and it’s important to look at that.

STEPS: Do you ever give people suggestions if you feel they haven’t been thorough in what they’ve written?

Aaron: I might ask them to consider something if they are really off the track. If I think, *Who did they work with? Did I do that?* I might say something like, “Consider looking at it this way.” But I don’t do this very often unless they want me to. If they’ve really tried and they can’t see it and it would be helpful for me to suggest something, then I do. I’m not here to do someone else’s work for them; if they haven’t tried, then saying something might ruin their chances of getting it later.

When I'm working with someone, I try not to impose my version of this process on them. I want something to happen for them that happened for me, which is for them to have their own experience. I'm done holding someone's hand when we reach the Fourth Step. If they come to me with a question about selfishness, I ask, "Did you pray before you came to me?" It's a good time to start to break away from the sponsor/sponsee relationship. Writing inventory was when I started to have my own experience. I went to the Big Book for answers, and it was the first time I'd had my own experience of the Big Book. Before that, my experience of the Big Book was always through my sponsor explaining it to me.

STEPS: Do you ever feel you need to prod people to get them to finish their writing?

Aaron: It's equal to people's experience. Everyone has a different experience with the Steps. Some people experience a change in themselves in just writing inventory. Others change in Steps Six and Seven, and still others don't change at all until they get through their amends. Part of being a sponsor is getting people to trust you when you say they will feel different when they are finished.

Some people I prod, and some I don't. With some, it would be a big mistake to prod them. It's about learning to sense what people need, and about making mistakes as a sponsor and learning from those mistakes. I've made mistakes. I've joked when I should have been serious, and I've been serious when I should have joked. In part, this is a process of learning how to talk with people and to put myself in their shoes. I started to look at things from another person's perspective in Step Four. I got some more of that in Step Nine, and really got it in Twelve, which makes all the previous Steps more powerful. I can see how they build to the point where I can do this work.

The Steps are not about checking things off a list. They are more about having an experience than about trying to accomplish anything. If someone has only ten resentments, he can still have an experience. It's about what you put into those ten resentments. A lot of people make the mistake of trying to use the Steps as a trick to stay sober rather than to change, which is the more difficult thing.

STEPS: What do people generally learn from writing resentment inventory?

Aaron: They come to understand what motivates them, and selfishness is a part of that. Ultimately, the thing is to be able to forgive people. When I can see the specifics of my own selfishness, then I can forgive someone who did this or that. Also, I can forgive people even if I had a very small role in creating the resentment.

My wife was killed when a man hit her with his car. When I wrote my Fourth Step, I didn't get much about my own selfishness in relating to him. But when I saw him five months later, I felt like that event had happened to somebody else. I had no animosity toward him whatsoever.

A lot of people make the mistake of trying to use the Steps as a trick to stay sober rather than to change....

What I've seen is that if we don't take full responsibility for ourselves, we won't get better.

I immediately started thinking, *God, what it must feel like to have done that!* And I started to assume that he must have made an honest mistake. Maybe he was distracted. Maybe he had to scratch his nose, you know? I felt pity for him.

Fear inventory is a little different. Fear gets wrapped up in selfishness to the point where I can't tell sometimes which one came first. Did the selfishness make me afraid, or did my fear make me selfish? For example, if I'm afraid to be alone, then I'm likely to stay with a woman far longer than is good for her, and that is inherently selfish. Whereas if I'm being selfish, it seems I have a lot of reasons to be afraid.

My fears are mostly fears of acting differently. Writing inventory and getting to the bottom of fears lets me think, *I can do this.*

STEPS: What about sex inventory?

Aaron: When I wrote sex inventory it was the first time I took a hard look at my intimate life through the lens of selfishness. I thought my alcoholism didn't have anything to do with that area of my life. In writing inventory, I was able to see who I'd like to be sexually, sort of an idealized version of who I could be.

I changed in relation to my sex life and even in my thought life. I used to spend time in my thoughts. I had a fantasy life, and after writing sex inventory I found that I didn't want anything to do with that anymore. I wanted a physical monogamy, and I wanted monogamy of thinking as well. That's another thing that I didn't know would come out of this, that I couldn't have predicted. And if I could have predicted it, I'm not sure I would have wanted to go through with the inventory process. I didn't think some of these things that got removed or changed were a problem. But you can't pick and choose.

STEPS: We've been talking a lot about selfishness. I think that might bother some people. What would you say to people who think that all this talk of selfishness is shaming?

Aaron: What I've seen is that if we don't take full responsibility for ourselves, we won't get better. In order to do that, I've got to look at my selfishness. Looking at selfishness can give me something that I can take action on, rather than beating myself up or feeling miserable. Steps Six and Seven seem to take away some of that shame. I felt terrible in writing. I felt I was shown who I was. Then I could say, "OK. That is who I was. Now that can change. I can do something about that."

STEPS: And what about people who have experienced some abuse? How do you address that in the inventory process?

Aaron: I try to get them to look at what they've done with that abuse in their own lives. Usually, I talk about some abuse that I've experienced in my life and show how I've come to see it. I may not have the same experience of abuse that they have, but my dad beat me and it didn't make any sense. I was just a kid, and no kid deserves that. But so many years go by,

and then I'm 28 and I'm using my history of abuse as an excuse to manipulate my wife. It may sound extreme, but I used my history to get people to let me get away with things. As an addict, it allowed me to lie to myself, saying that I can behave however I want to because I've been hurt.

STEPS: What about listing some good things along with the bad things?

Aaron: My view on that is that if my good qualities were sufficient to save me from my alcoholism, then I wouldn't have to write inventory. I'm a good dog owner, but that doesn't save me from anything. It's not enough.

I try to look at my selfishness in the sense that I am a person who is capable of doing these things, and not that I am inherently a bad person. The process of getting at the core of our identity is not always a straight line.

But we have to take responsibility for our own capacity for selfishness. Besides, if you ask me to write about my good qualities, then I can guarantee you that that's all I'm going to write about. And I'll sprinkle a few bad things in to make you think I've done the work.

I've been through a lot of different kinds of self-analysis. I've been to talk therapy. I've been through more Freudian stuff, dream analysis, that type of thing. I've written past histories, life stories. I've been in group therapies. I've done some really strange group things. I was at one place where they tell you that you have a "big one" and a "little one," and your mother failed you, so the therapist is your new mommy. Then you sit in a circle and scream at each other. Bizarre stuff.

In all of that work, I could still hide from the truth. I can't hide as easily in Big Book inventory. If I'm talking to you, there is a good chance I can lie to you, and more important, I can lie to myself. If I have to write down the facts and I know I have to read them to someone I respect and who I want to respect me, then I can't really fake it.

One last point. I think it's important to read inventory to someone that you have a real relationship with, not some guy you won't see again. I still have a relationship with my sponsor. I work with him now, and there are times when I still need to read inventory to him. I read to other people, too, but there are some things that I take only to him. We are friends and colleagues, but there are still moments when I seek his help. And that was especially true when I was in the early stages of working with others. We can be friends, but sometimes I need him to be my sponsor again, and he is willing to do that for me. ♡

If my good qualities were sufficient to save me from my alcoholism then I wouldn't have to write inventory.

For more information about the Plymouth House, visit their web site at www.theplymouthhouse.com or call toll free 1-800-428-8459.

QUOTABLE QUOTES

ON MORAL INVENTORY

The counsel given by St. James is evidence that mutual confession was practiced in the early Christian groups. The practice, however, fell into such sad abuse that the Reformation abolished it. In the eighteenth century, Wesley had the wisdom to see that the Reformers in their zeal had thrown away some valuable customs of the early Church and he bravely recovered them. Among the practices he revived was confession. He instituted “bands” or groups for those who were seeking a maximum experience of Christ. Wesley laid great stress on what he called being “open.” At every meeting members asked each other: (1) “What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?” (2) “What temptations have you met with?” (3) “How were you delivered?” (4) “What have you thought, said or done of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?”

Once a week the united bands held a meeting for Christian witness. Wesley regarded those who met in these bands as the vanguard of Methodism. It is no small loss to the effectiveness of Methodist discipline and spiritual efficiency that these bands gradually died out.

The Oxford Group Movement has rendered inestimable service to the Church in rediscovering the importance of confession. By open confession groups men and women have

gained victory in their lives and a new sense of spiritual fitness and gladness. The Group insists on the power of sharing to fill the spirit with an entirely new sense of life.... Directly we are honest with God, and with ourselves, and with other people, we are born again. There cannot be any vital experience of religion while selfishness remains, whatever form it takes. All selfishness is sin and all sin is a form of selfishness. It is surprising that so many good people can go on deceiving themselves—men and women who are moral and generous but with some root of selfishness in their hearts which prevents them from experiencing a vital religion and being life changers.

*The Eight Points
of the Oxford Group*

C. Irving Benson
(Oxford University Press, 1935)

Imagine you are transferring the ownership of your life to God in the same way you would transfer ownership of a business. One of the first things you would do in negotiating to sell a business would be to take an inventory to discover the damaged or out-of-date goods that are no longer salable. In Step Four we call it a “moral” inventory because we compile a list of traits and behaviors that have transgressed our highest, or

moral, values. We also inventory our “good” traits and the behaviors that represent them. In our life’s moral inventory the defects or dysfunctional behaviors might include some that once worked; some dysfunctional behaviors may have saved our lives as children, but they are now out-of-date, self-defeating, and cause us a great deal of trouble when we use them as adults.

A Hunger for Healing
J. Keith Miller
(Harper, 1991)

Our understanding of the moral nature of the inventory will be greatly enhanced if we first distinguish between *moral* and *moralistic*. When we are moralistic, we are judgmental and opinionated. Our language is full of shoulds and oughts. As John Keller states: “Moralism is ‘shouldism’: You shouldn’t feel that way.” Moralism is about finger pointing and blaming. It is highly conditional, critical and nonaccepting. Moral, on the other hand, evaluates right and wrong in accordance with God’s law of love, as exemplified by the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. A moral inventory uses the law of love as its standard.”

The Gospel and the Twelve Steps
Martin M. Davis
(RPI Publishing, 1993)

When we take inventory and do confession we are promised forgiveness and cleansing.

Unfortunately, confession is a discipline that has been rarely practiced—or it has been practiced in ways that do not lead to spiritual growth. It is certainly possible to practice confession in ways that do little more than increase our shame and fear. I have no doubt that some STEPS readers have experienced this kind of shame-based confession. Many churches have responded to this kind of abuse by not doing confession at all. But that is an unacceptable debasement of biblical guidance. We need to take regular inventory of ourselves and practice honest confession.

One of the things that the Christian recovery movement is recovering is the spiritual discipline of confession. It is part of our heritage. It is something God has graciously given to us. May God grant you the persistence you need in “searching” yourself and the courage to be “fearless” as you continue the process of taking inventory. May the light of God shine more brightly in your heart and mind each day. ❧

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“Some people delay taking inventory because they are waiting for their past to get better before they begin.”

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