

STEPS

A MAGAZINE OF HOPE AND HEALING
FOR CHRISTIANS IN RECOVERY



STRENGTH

STEPS

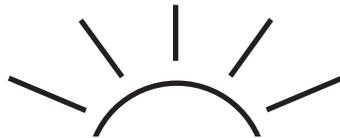
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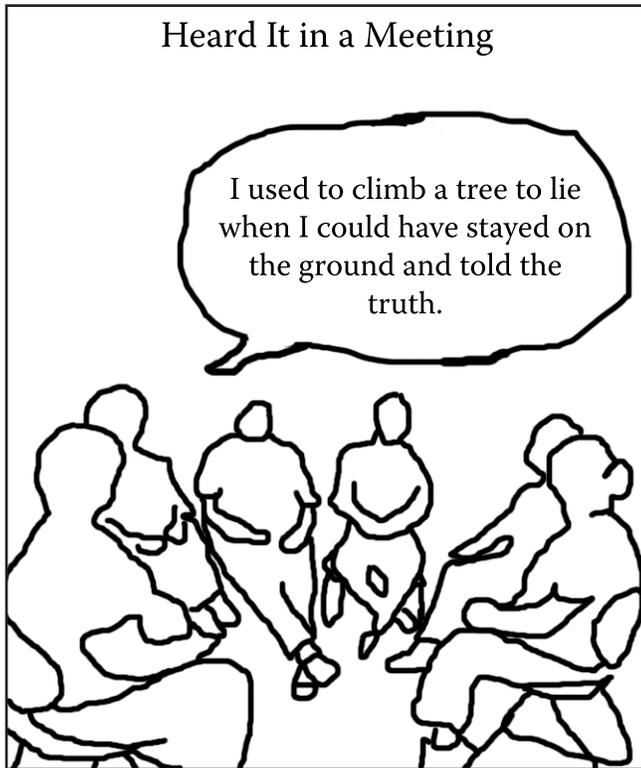
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The Christian faith is still, as the Apostle Paul put it, a kind of foolishness. That the weakness of the infant Jesus could contain the power at the heart of all of creation is sheer foolishness. That the weakness of the cross could possibly constitute the decisive victory over the forces that oppose God's rule seems preposterous. Indeed, it is rare today to find anyone, either within the Christian community or elsewhere, who speaks in praise of weakness. Our understanding of power has become decidedly unparadoxical. We want our power untainted by anything as undesirable as weakness. We prefer peace through strength, and salvation through self-reliance. In the recovery journey, however, we are repeatedly brought back to an inescapable basic truth: There is more power in recognizing our powerlessness than in trying hard to be powerful. May the God whose strength is made complete in our weakness grant you the serenity you need this day.

BEYOND ANONYMOUS



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BEING STRONG IN JESUS

BY JAMES RYAN

Strength is highly valued by people everywhere. Strength is power, either physical or emotional, to deal with difficulties. A physically strong person can come out on top in a fight. An emotionally strong person can weather the storms of life. Many Christians view this second kind of strength as an important part of their faith. “Being strong in Jesus” is, for many, a good summary of the Christian life. We’re to hang tight to our faith, remaining always cheerful, no matter what trials befall us. We’re to resist any and all temptation by force of will.

Those of us who have struggled with addiction—either our own or someone else’s—may have felt that we were somehow less “Christian” as a result. After all, if we were truly strong in Jesus, wouldn’t we be able to resist the temptation to drink, or drug, or act out sexually? Wouldn’t we be able to keep ourselves, and our families, under control? When we look at families who do appear to be struggling with addiction, we see them living out the kind of Christian life we think we should be living. Where did we go wrong?

The shame that results from this kind of thinking is not generally helpful to people struggling with addiction. I’ve never known addicts to stop using because they felt ashamed of their behavior. In fact, shame just seems to be a good excuse to use. Likewise, I’ve never seen codependents stop acting out due to shame. When codependents feel less Christian than others, they tend to increase their efforts to control other people.

But the idea that we should be strong in Jesus is not only problematic for people who struggle with addiction; it is also bad theology. There is no beatitude blessing the strong-willed, or those who try hard to be happy. Jesus didn’t hang out with the people he

TRUE STRENGTH CAN ONLY BE FOUND IN WEAKNESS

BY TOMMY HELLSTEN

The question of strength and weakness remains unresolved in our society. We do not quite know how to deal with weakness; we hide our own weakness and shun it in others, while admiring strength in its different forms and anxiously striving to acquire it for ourselves. We seek strength, for we think that only the strong get what they need, while the weak must settle for leftovers. Seeing no value in weakness, we have built a culture that strives for strength. And we do not just deny weakness—we often hold it in contempt.

But what is weakness, actually, and what is strength? The person who appears strong—is he really strong, or could it be that his strength is used to cover weakness? In other words, is there an unhealthy kind of strength? Is it possible to become sick with this strength? Is our culture catching this disease, as it loses touch with the value of weakness?

Are there superior strong people and inferior weak people—or are we all, in fact, weak? Or strong? What is normal, and what is not? Does weakness make a person bad or defective? Is strength defined by a lack of weakness, or does a denial of

weakness lead to strength? Or could it be that true strength originates in weakness? Could it be that those who are in harmony with their weakness are strong?

What about weakness, then? Does it mean putting oneself down? Am I humble if I do not make an issue of myself? Is such humility a feature of which we can be aware? Is it possible to achieve humility by striving for it? Does it pay to be humble; in other words, is humility a “good deal,” does it have market value, does it make us strong? And what is the difference between self-pity and honest acknowledgment of weakness—or is there a difference? Is it possible to hide behind weakness to avoid taking responsibility for one’s own life and personal growth?

These questions perplex us, and they are part of our everyday life, even if we are not grappling with them consciously. Clearly, strength and weakness are opposites full of the dynamic tension characteristic of a paradox. Could this tension be a sign of the mysterious wisdom also found in a paradox? If we become aware of this wisdom, will it lead us to a deeper understanding of life and, therefore, to a deeper life?

HUMILITY: THERE IS STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

This question of strength and weakness is one of the most important questions in life—if not the most important. It has to do with our essential identity, for this pair of opposites leads us to the question of our inner and outer selves. In a culture that finds weakness despicable and shameful, we feel that we must at least appear strong. We work hard to establish a facade of strength that hides our weakness. The greater the weakness we feel within, the more convincing our facade must be. We might well conclude, then, that the stronger a person appears, the greater the weakness he hides within. This kind of strength, developed to hide weakness, is not healthy, for it has no foundation in reality. When strength is all we communicate, we are not revealing our real selves. We are true and authentic only when we acknowledge our weakness, embrace it, and reveal it.

What might this weakness look like, then, if it were visible, if we revealed it? It is humility: *humility is strength that does not deny weakness*. In fact, true strength originates in weakness, for it requires owning up to weakness. *True strength, then, is humility, which results from facing and coming to terms with our weakness*. The humble person is real because he has discovered

and acknowledged his powerlessness. Thus we meet the second paradox of this book: *True strength can only be found in weakness*.

If you look more closely at people who strive for wealth or power, in contrast, you will find that they are actually striving for a cover-up for their weakness. A person may strive for power in an effort to attain a position that feels secure and strong, far removed from weakness. Of course, power is not always an indication that the powerful person is fleeing from weakness, but it can be. The same is true of wealth: if a person amasses wealth and clings to material things, he eventually reaches a state of affluence that appears immune to weakness. Like power, wealth in itself is not necessarily a sign that a person is trying to hide his weakness, but it can be.

In our culture, outward impressions have become more important than our authentic selves—so important, in fact, that we often come to believe the surface identity that we present to others is our true identity. Most of us devote a lot of effort and energy to making a favorable impression on others. We try to dress in the latest fashions, patronize the right restaurants, and socialize with the right people. This effort may extend to decorating our house, going to the gym, losing weight, driving a certain kind of car, reading the right books, spend-



THE QUESTION OF
STRENGTH AND
WEAKNESS LEADS US
STRAIGHT TO THE
QUESTION OF LOVE.

ing vacations in the right places, going shopping where the latest trends are created, and even enduring plastic surgery.

To charm and impress, we craft positive representations of ourselves: streamlined, polished versions stripped of such embarrassing flaws as clumsiness, uncertainty, and lack of style. We present these versions to convince ourselves and others that we have no weaknesses. Only when we have managed to convince everybody else that we are strong do we feel we have earned the right to live. However, we pay a heavy price for this charade. When we are not truthful, we cannot find true intimacy, and the lack of intimacy leads to loneliness.

LOVE FOSTERS
WEAKNESS

The question of strength and weakness leads us straight to the question of love. We cannot afford to be weak unless we are surrounded by love. Without love, it is not safe to be weak. This is why we build our elaborate exteriors. The less we know of love, the stronger the facade we feel compelled to construct.

Love fosters weakness, allowing us to reveal our powerlessness. Love has such a deep respect for us that it embraces our authentic selves, letting us be who we really are. Love is not shocked or repelled by weakness; on the contrary, it makes

room for it. In fact, love—like true strength—originates in weakness. We all know that it is difficult to love someone who is superficially strong and conceited. But it is easy to love someone who is weak, for this weakness awakens our sympathies. This is exactly why children engender our love. The weakness we see in them is natural—and in it, we recognize ourselves.

Of course, weakness can also arouse contempt. Those who are running away from their own weakness despise it in others. The more we deny the weakness within us, the greater our need to condemn others. This is the logic behind bullying at school and in the workplace. Bullies lack self-esteem; in other words, they lack the capacity to love themselves, so they try to bolster their self-image at the expense of others—to become a little bit taller by stepping on somebody else.

TRUTH REVEALS FALSE
STRENGTH

The question of strength and weakness is also a question of truth, for truth reveals false strength. Truth seeks to tear down our facades and reveal our authentic selves—to return us to reality.

A person who has come to terms with his weakness has a strong sense of reality. As human beings, our reality encompasses our weakness. All humans are weak; there is no other kind.



And so we find our true identity when we face our weakness. When we embrace our weakness, we realize that we cannot make it through life on our own. We begin to see that we must depend on others, and we begin allowing ourselves to feel that need. The more profound our understanding of this truth, the greater our understanding of the meaning of healthy dependency. Being dependent on others means, in fact, being dependent on love. Love creates the sheltering surroundings in which weakness can make itself at home. Love is the context in which we are meant to live our lives.

The humble person is a realist because he acknowledges his weakness. The person who seeks to cover up his weakness is anything but a realist. On the outside, he may appear mighty and convincing—so convincing that everybody believes he is what he appears to be. That is the purpose of his mightiness: to conceal his weakness behind a facade of strength, a masterpiece of illusion through which only the most perceptive can see. This illusion may be composed of such attributes as an impressive body of knowledge. The problem is not knowledge itself, but our attitude toward knowledge. Real knowledge is humble; it knows its own limits. As the saying goes, the more a person knows, the more he knows how little he knows.

The road to truth leads

through weakness. There is no other way. Truth strives to lead us to our own powerlessness, weakness, and helplessness. If we are willing to acknowledge our weakness, truth will make us free. But it will also make us hurt. It is not easy to face something we have done our utmost to avoid. Therefore, we need love as well as truth in this encounter with our weakness. We cannot face the truth of our wholeselves without love to shelter us from the inevitable hurt.

LACK OF LOVE LEADS TO SHAME

Love enables us to face our weakness; thus, love leads us to our true identity. There is probably nothing we need more than love. But, as we all can see, love often seems scarce in a world full of cruelty, war, exploitation, envy, and bitterness. We get very little of what we need the most. Even children are subjected to utmost cruelty and lack of love—children, who most need and deserve our love. This happens everywhere, even in homes that outwardly appear perfect.

This lack of love is not only apparent in the way we treat those closest to us; it also affects the way we treat ourselves. We often treat ourselves badly, even contemptuously. We abuse substances to feel good; we work unreasonably hard to gain acceptance; we overeat to smother our longing for love, we stop



eating in an effort to lose weight and receive love, we torment ourselves at the gym in our effort to be good enough.

Lack of love is a fact in ourselves and in our world; it has always been and, apparently, will always be. Only those of us—far too many of us—who do not even know what love is can ignore this sad fact. So many of us have never been touched by love—and without knowing what we have missed, we cannot even grieve for the loss. Children who grow up without love never really have the childhood they were entitled to. To grieve for this loss, they must have the chance to experience, at least a little, what it feels like to be loved for who they are. Gaining this experience of love is one of the goals of therapy, or at least it should be.

Lack of love creates *shame*—*a sense of disgrace and unworthiness*. This happens to children who must adapt themselves to unresolved family issues, such as alcoholism, violence, sexual abuse, or rigid religious practices. When these issues are not addressed, children misinterpret their feelings, experiences, and perceptions. If it is forbidden to talk about the father's alcoholism, for example, the child cannot process his feelings, thoughts, or perceptions. Instead of connecting his anger, sadness, hurt, or fear with what is going on in the family, he perceives his own emotional responses as personal flaws. He thinks, "There must be some-

thing wrong with me. I must be a bad person." He does not realize that he is feeling bad because he is being treated badly. In this situation, the child's personality becomes entangled in shame. Everything within—hopes, fears, reactions, memories, feelings—is bound with shame. Shame becomes a normal state of being.

When we live with shame, our weakness feels like a flaw, and we believe that we are failures as human beings. Shame is like a hungry predator that lurks at love's heels. The instant that love falters and wanes, shame attacks. Shame steals away the protective love needed to shelter our natural human weakness. When love is not present, the sense of shame takes over. This does not necessarily require dramatic events or secrets in the family, such as alcoholism or sexual abuse—all it takes is the simple absence of love.

We are, in essence, dependent on love. To find our true identities, we must be seen, heard, and acknowledged as the people we really are. Here I am reminded of a magical moment in my own life, back in the early eighties, when my oldest son, Mathias, was three years old and we lived by the sea. It was a winter's night—the sea was frozen, and the sky was dotted with stars. I decided to take my son along for a walk on the frozen bay, where the night was darkest and the stars at their brightest. When we reached the middle of

the bay, we decided to lie down on our backs on the ice to better see the brilliant stars, thousands of them; the sky appeared low, almost within our reach. Right there it occurred to me that I should ask my son how he felt about all this, how he perceived the world we live in. So I asked, “What do you think, Mathias; who has made all the stars?” He paused to think for a moment, then replied with the innocence and sincerity of a child: “Daddy!”

That was one of the greatest moments of my life—not because my son thought so highly of his father, but because his response told me something essential about the world of a child. My son felt that his father had created the universe in which we live, and the child felt very special: he was the child of the Starmaker.

If the Starmaker spends time with his child—takes an interest in him, listens to him, and takes him seriously—it must mean that the child is very special, important, and lovable. The child senses this attitude, and over time he internalizes it as his own perception of his personal value. This is one way self-respect is woven into a budding personality. If the Starmaker does not take his child seriously, but instead belittles, mocks, and rejects him, the child will read his limited value in this lack of love. Thus the child, when subjected to a parent’s abuse and abandonment, does not conclude

that the parent is thoughtless, cruel, unfair; rather, he draws conclusions about his own unworthiness. An abandoned child learns to abandon himself; a loved one learns to love himself. We need someone who loves us and is there for us, for we do, to a great extent, treat ourselves just as we have been treated—picking up where our parents and other important people in our lives left off. Any lovelessness we experienced in the past carries over into our attitude toward ourselves. And if we are unable to embrace our imperfection, we try to conceal it.

When our identities are based in shame, we strive to build ever more elaborate facades to convince others that we are admirable and worthy. We may compulsively help others, become “workaholics,” act overly nice and polite, clown around to get attention, or take unnecessary risks to appear heroic. All these efforts have one thing in common: they isolate us from others. In our shame, we cannot safely share our weakness with others. We avoid true intimacy in every possible way, because it could reveal our weakness.

Being in a constant hurry is one way of avoiding closeness. If we keep ourselves busy, we can keep our encounters with other people safely superficial. To do so, we must convince ourselves that external circumstances force us into this con-

IF WE ARE UNABLE
TO EMBRACE OUR
IMPERFECTION,
WE TRY TO CONCEAL IT.



stant rush. We refuse to admit that we create all this hurry and worry ourselves. Yet it is a result of poor choices; it exists only because we want it to exist, for it serves an important purpose in our life. This is a truth that a person with a shame-based identity does not want to hear. If he did, he would have to face his weakness and take responsibility for his choices.

HOPE LIES NOT IN STRENGTH, BUT IN WEAKNESS

The Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step recovery program has become firmly established in Western culture. A broad range of groups—including drug addicts, adult children of alcoholics, overeaters, sex addicts, and survivors of sexual abuse—are applying it to a variety of problems.

The 12-step program was established by a group of alcoholics who decided to write down some of the principles that had helped them achieve sobriety after years of alcoholic hell. This gave the program a solid foundation. It is a practical program, encouraging changes in behavior, not in religious beliefs. The program offers spiritual and psychological wisdom originating from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but does not require members to affiliate with any religious tradition or doctrine.

The 12-step program is spiritual in a deep and healthy way.

From the very first step, the program addresses the issue of weakness: “We admitted that our lives had become unmanageable and that we were powerless over alcohol.” Each person admits that he cannot make it on his own. His hope lies not in his strength, but in his weakness; when he acknowledges this, his growth begins. This program guides the alcoholic not only to sobriety, but also to personal and spiritual growth, in other words, to the origins of true strength. This strength can be harnessed only by those who are willing to face their weakness with courage and honesty.

Before reaching this step, the alcoholic has probably tried to fight his drinking habit on his own for years or even decades. He has tried to be strong and control his drinking in many ways: he has made promises of sobriety; he has moved to another city; he has sworn to stick to “light” alcoholic drinks; he has married and started a family; he has changed jobs, found new buddies, launched a demanding exercise routine, stopped traveling. He has tried everything he can think of to be strong and in control of his drinking.

But nothing has stopped him from drinking. He can stop only after he has realized that he cannot stop. This paradox is difficult for him to understand until he realizes the immense power inherent in acknowledging weakness. Even now, his efforts are useless. He does not

stop drinking; instead, alcohol becomes useless in his life as long as he stays in touch with his weakness. For this reason, it is important that he still refer to himself as an alcoholic in 12-step program meetings. He continues to do so even after years or decades of sobriety. He is a sober alcoholic. This is his way of saying, mainly to himself, that his sobriety and growth depend on his staying attuned to his weakness.

The 12-step program has uncovered a truth that applies to all human life: we can grow only to the extent that we acknowledge our need for growth. Jesus said that it is not the healthy who need to be treated, it is the sick. He did not mean that there are perfect people who have no need to grow and change, and then there are all the rest of us who do; he meant that a core prerequisite for growth is the acknowledgment of sickness. This creates the need to heal. A healthy awareness of sickness is the first harbinger of health.

This development is about humility—about admitting and accepting our weakness. We humans, however, feel compelled to hide our weakness—not only from others, but from ourselves. We deny our sickness and incompleteness, unaware that weakness is an essential part of human life. Because we do not truly love ourselves, we regard our weakness as a flaw and a sign of failure, so we try to make ourselves seem better than

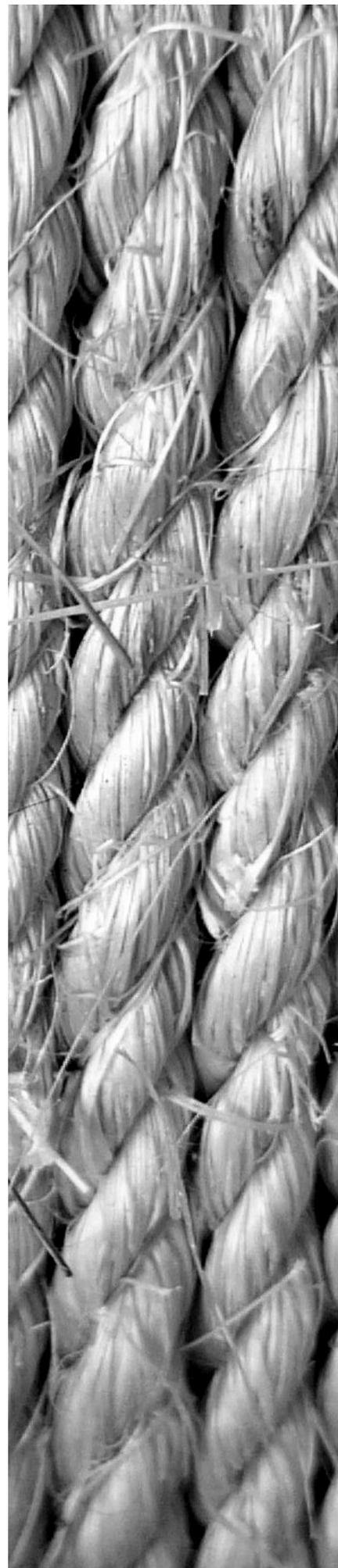
we actually are—to seem “normal.” Once we have managed to convince ourselves that we are normal, we leave it at that. We feel no need to grow or examine ourselves; instead, we examine others. We find faults and shortcomings; we are absolutely certain that others should grow and change. We earnestly give them advice on changing the error of their ways, and we prove our noble nature by offering to help them in their hour of need. This is nothing more than ordinary pride, but pride in such a sophisticated form that it often goes unnoticed.

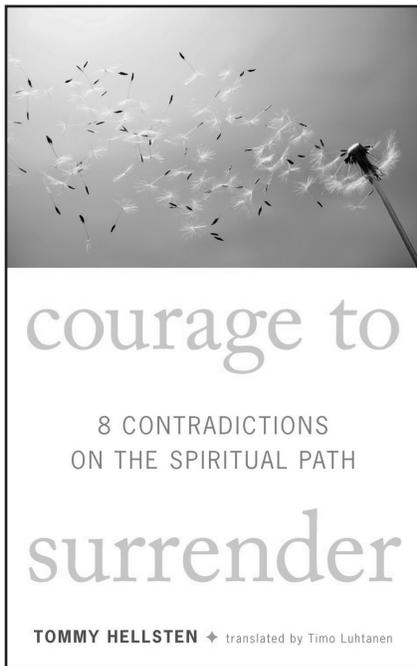
IN WEAKNESS WE LEARN
WHAT IS VALUABLE
IN LIFE

What is the true value of weakness? What is this powerlessness that we need to acknowledge in order to grow? Does it truly exist?

In our Western culture, most of us manage the job of life quite well. On the surface, we appear neither powerless nor weak. We have it made, more or less: we do our jobs, have plenty to eat, have some free time to enjoy; we buy stocks, raise children, surf the Internet, hold strategy meetings. So why all this talk about weakness and powerlessness? What does it have to do with us? Why should we, all of a sudden, develop these strange qualities when our lives seem to be going along just fine?

Superficially, powerlessness





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Tommy Hellsten is a counselor, speaker, and author whose 17 books include the European bestseller Hippo in the Living Room (now in its 29th printing). He has 30 years of experience as a therapist, including training at the Hazelden addiction treatment center in Minnesota and the Caron Foundation in Pennsylvania. This article is an excerpt from his latest book (and the first to be published in the U.S.), Courage to Surrender: 8 Contradictions on the Spiritual Path. Tommy lives in Helsinki, Finland.

seems remote. Despite the conflict, violence, and suffering that plague so much of humanity—to which no nation is now immune—life in the First World is still relatively safe and secure, compared to the rest of the globe. Here, most people's basic needs are met, and beyond that many enjoy an embarrassment of consumer goods and comforts.

But on closer examination, under the surface we are not doing well at all. The gloss and trappings of the good life cover up sadness and anger, bitterness and hurt. Most of us harbor an unmet need for closeness with others. In many of us, this longing to be loved manifests itself as a gnawing pain that wakes us each morning and troubles our sleep each night.

We often dwell on painful questions about the meaning of life: Who am I and what am I living for? Why do I force myself to wake up every morning and go to a job that I do not love? Why am I constantly worried and sad? Why am I afraid of the future, illness, poverty, death? Do I have to spend the rest of my life alone? Why do I feel so lonely even though I wake up beside someone every morning? Am I condemned to be with this person just because I lack the courage to leave? Why don't I ever seem to have enough money? Why don't my children respect me? Why do I always wake up with a headache? Why does my stomach always hurt?

Why don't I ever seem to have any spare time? Why do work problems wake me up in the middle of the night? Why hasn't life changed for the better?

Where do these questions come from? What do they mean? Are they extraneous disturbances that unfairly sabotage our happiness—intruders to be silenced as irrelevant and inconsequential? Or do we need to pay serious attention to these messages? Could it be that these questions result from our inability to face weakness? Do they come from the place in which we secretly harbor feelings of neglect and rejection? If we try, all our lives, to avoid something of essential importance within us, this suppressed part of us will eventually surface with such intensity that it shakes the fortifications we have built to protect our hollow happiness.

As far as I can see, these questions arise from deep within us, from our true identity. With annoying persistence, they keep knocking at the door because they carry essential messages about all that we have overlooked and abandoned in ourselves and our lives. They come from the land of weakness. They are envoys from the place to which we are headed.

But where are we headed? Does anyone still know the direction of life?

Of one thing, at least, we can be sure: for each of us, life in its familiar form will one day come to an end. We are headed toward

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND RECOVERY

BY DELBERT TEACHOUT

Someone once told me that religion is what we do on Sunday and spirituality is what we do the rest of the week. This did not make sense to me. I thought, *I do the same thing every day, so what is the difference?*

It is true that it is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between spirituality and religion. The two are related. But I don't think they are the same. In my work as a program director in a men's rescue mission where the main goal is to help men find a relationship with Christ, I have observed the difference first-hand. I have observed that some men at the mission begin to practice new religious behaviors but have no recovery; they "get religion" but can't seem to "get spiritual." As a result, their recovery is fragile and at risk. There are other men, however, who find spirituality and a new life. Sometimes this involves changes in religious behaviors, but sometimes not.

Dictionaries tend to define *religion* as a commitment to a set of beliefs and practice. When I thought, *I do the same things every day*, I was acknowledging that I have a daily commitment to my religious beliefs and practices. Spirituality, however, seems to be defined by three important relationships: our relationship with our own self, our relationships with others, and our relationship with God. It can be helpful to ask ourselves some questions about these three relationships.

When thinking about our relationship with the self, we might ask, *What motivates me? What are the enduring values that help me decide whether or not to do a certain behavior? What makes me continue to do what is morally right every day?* Some of us would find that we are most motivated by our family or our children. Some of us would say we're motivated by our relationship with God. Others of us just want to be able to live a normal life, have a home, a job, and a few things that make life comfortable, and that is good enough for us. Or we may have nothing of value that motivates us. Our answers to these questions are direct reflections of our spirituality in the context of our relationship with ourselves.

When speaking about our relationship with others, I often say to my clients that "frogs live in swamps, snakes live in the grass, and birds live



in the air.” Then I ask them where they see themselves fitting into the world. Where do they feel a sense of belonging? How do they relate with others? Some have told me they belong at home with their family; some have said they belong in a church; some talk about their work. Many men tell me they are still trying to find out where they fit. Many say they have no friends or close relationships. Some of these men may be forty or fifty years old and they are still trying to figure out where they are supposed to fit. Our answers to these kinds of questions are a reflection of our spirituality in the context of our relationships with others.

The third relationship that is part of our spirituality is our relationship with God. What influence does God have on our life? How much do we turn to God for guidance? Do we spend time with God? Frequently clients have told me they do not have a relationship with God at all and that God is not relevant in their lives. The way we answer questions like this is a reflection of our spirituality in the context of our relationship with God.

MATTERS OF THE HEART

It seems to me that all three of these relationships are concerned with matters of the heart. Unlike religion, which can be centered in our ideas or our behaviors, spirituality is a heart-centered thing. Everything that happens to us and everything we do goes through our heart, our emotional center. We have feelings when we are unemployed or when we get promoted. We have feelings when we get married or when we are divorced. We have feelings when bad things happen and when good things happen. Everything goes through the heart. All our internal thoughts, all our external situations, and all our interpersonal relationships influence our heart; therefore, they influence our spirituality.

The heart-centered nature of spirituality is part of the reason why changing our spirituality is so difficult. By comparison it is relatively easy to make changes to our religion. Religious change might mean we stop practicing certain religious behaviors or that we change our ideas about certain doctrines or that we switch allegiance to a different denomination. These changes are not necessarily easy ones, but they are pre dominantly behavioral or cognitive changes. And that means they are much less difficult than spiritual change which is a heart-centered change. In the Old Testament, when King David realized he had sinned, he confessed, and he asked God to give him a new heart because he knew that merely doing a religious ritual would not change his condition (Psalm 51:10). King David needed a new life, which could only be obtained by changing his heart.

How we feel about ourselves, about others and about God is a direct reflection of our spirituality. For true recovery to occur, we need to con-

tinually turn to God to transform our heart so that we love ourselves, love others, and love God. Jesus said we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). He also said we are to love others as ourselves (Matthew. 22:39). These are religious scriptures, but they are referring to our spirituality.

It seems to me that recovery is fundamentally about our spirituality. When I am in recovery, I am able to view myself as God views me, someone who is capable of sin but who God loves very much. Because God loves me, I can love me; and because God forgives me I can forgive myself. In recovery I view God as being strong when I am weak, as someone who will never leave me nor forsake me, and so I am able to see others in the world not as adversaries but as people who God loves as much as he loves me. Recovery means having a relationship with myself, God, and the world that allows me freedom from isolation, resentment, and addiction.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN RECOVERY

But can religion—a set of beliefs and practices—have a part in recovery? Yes, it can. Some actions that are purely religious practices may also improve our relationships. Prayer, confession, forgiveness, and reading scripture are all religious behaviors that also improve our relationships with self, God, and others. And the reason why the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous work in our lives and improve our spirituality is that they are based on those same religious behaviors. Daily prayer keeps us in touch with God, however we understand God. Confession and forgiveness remove hardness in the heart and help us maintain good relationships with others in our lives. Scripture readings give us encouragement and guidance for the day. If we practice these religious behaviors, our heart is changed and our view of the self, the world, and God is changed as a result. If, on the other hand, religion really is just something we do on Sundays, then it might not have an effect on our spirituality. Without an integration between religious practice and the relationships that make up our spirituality, our hearts might remain hard—our relationships with self, God, and others, unchanged. And yet, religious practices are the backbone of any real recovery.

The bottom line is that while change in our spirituality is the heart-centered transformation that makes recovery possible, there are many religious practices that can facilitate this change. The Twelve Steps are a set of religious practices that, if practiced on a daily basis, can transform our hard hearts into the kind of heart that is near to the heart of God.

Delbert Teachout spent seven years as the Program Director of Guiding Light Mission's Spiritual Truth and Recovery Training Program, a Michigan licensed substance-abuse rehabilitation program. He is credentialed as a Certified Advanced Addiction Counselor.

DEFINITIONS: STEP ONE

BY TERESA MCBEAN

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.

Powerless: It's a tough concept, but there's no need to proceed until admission is made—I do not have the power to live life well; my life is not working for me. Those who come into recovery as believers can take this one step further—I do not have the power to live life as God intends. At the heart of powerlessness is the acknowledgment that we cannot stop doing whatever we're doing that is leading to unmanageability; nor can we maintain the choices that are positive, healing and healthy—in keeping with the deepest desires of our hearts. When all our strategies to control ourselves and others stop working, we're ready to admit that we are powerless.

Unmanageable: This is when life is out of control. Whether we feel the craziness of it or not, we might ask ourselves if those who know us well would say our lives are unmanageable. Are we forgetful? Do we ever wonder if we're crazy? Do bad things keep happening and we don't know why? People get confused and think that only addicts have unmanageable lives, but that's not true. Unmanageability can be found in relationships, eating, finances,

religion, work, health—anything that has such a hold on us that we find other areas of our life affected negatively. God is a God of order. Our life can be orderly. I'm not talking rigid, overscheduled or inflexible. I am talking calm, peaceful and just plain good. We were created for a good life.

Another clue that life has gotten unmanageable has to do with desire. When we desire to change more than anything, we have given it our best shot and still nothing changes—we are ready for step one.

Denial: Denial is that stubborn propensity to see things with a skewed perspective. We know we're in denial when we tell a story, and people sort of cock their head at a funny angle as they listen—and avoid eye contact.

Here's a fancy definition for denial as it relates to an addict (But I think we can all relate). Denial is a wall of limitation. It keeps us from naming our problem, which ensures that we are not free to find the solution. Admitting our powerlessness is the ticket out. Admitting that we have a problem drags it out of the darkness, and into God's wonderful light. God is in

the business of rescue and recovery, but he's extremely respectful of our right to choose our own path. He won't violate our right to not want his awesome healing power. Perhaps we didn't know that God would heal us. Maybe we thought it was true for other people and not for us. Or maybe we just didn't feel ready to drag our problem into the light.

Power: The key to the first step is acknowledging our powerlessness. We do not have the power to change ourselves or others. We can't make it rain. We can't change our life circumstances. But there is power, and we desperately want to have it, right? Here's a news flash: we're right. There is power and God has it. In recovery, we come to learn that until we relinquish the lie that we are powerful, we can never truly experience God's power lived out in and through us.

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the moment when we open our hands and life slips away. Death is the ultimate weakness. It means total loss of control over our lives—total helplessness and surrender.

Could it be that this loss of control awaiting us at the end of our days is an indication of what is important in life? Perhaps life invites us to relinquish control before it is taken from us, irrevocably, by death. The reality of death hints at the value of the life that precedes it. Death reminds us to live our lives well and consider what is truly important. Because death will strip us of everything that is unnecessary, it offers a baseline for our lives. Whatever does not endure in the face of death is not, in the end, important. In this sense, death can be seen as the culmination of human life. It is the victorious fanfare that ends the lifelong process of growth. It is our most joyous award ceremony—and our award is our entry into something new at the end of our old existence.

We are headed toward utter weakness. But *in weakness we learn what is valuable and enduring in life*. In acknowledging our weakness, we enter life through death. Our facades collapse, our false selves die, and we are reunited with our true and authentic selves.

Continued from page 3

thought were the strongest members of his faith community; he ate his meals with prostitutes and extortionists. The son of God did not lay waste to the Roman Empire; he was incarcerated and then executed as a criminal even though he didn't raise a finger in his own defense.

Jesus, I think we can agree, was not big on the idea of "being strong." Instead, he demonstrated the value of being weak.

The Twelve Steps, a program of recovery for people who struggle with addiction, are based on Christian principles, that is, on principles exemplified in the stories of Jesus' life. Jesus lived by the will of his father. We surrender our will and lives to God's care. Jesus went out to the desert and was shown his own humanity in a series of temptations. We make a fearless and searching moral inventory. Jesus lived his life in the service of those who needed him most. We make amends to the people we've hurt, and then carry the message to others who suffer as we do. To work the Steps is to become weak as Jesus was weak, and to depend on the Father as he did.

Any effort to be "strong in Jesus" will disrupt this process, making recovery impossible. If we decide to resist temptation instead of admitting our powerlessness, we are essentially telling God, "Don't worry. I won't need your help on this. I'll just tough it out on my own in your name." God, of course, is patient and loving and willing to humor us, but the results of cutting God out of the recovery process are usually not good.

For Christians in recovery, it's important to come to terms with the difference between strength and weakness, and to learn to let go of our inherited ideas about the value of strength. Because Jesus did not come to heal the already healthy, we need not be ashamed to count ourselves among the poor in health.

Willpower tells me I must, but willingness tells me I can.

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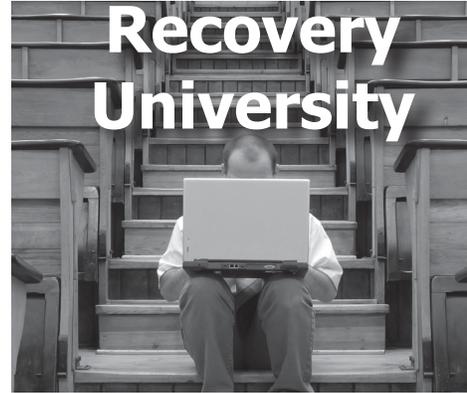
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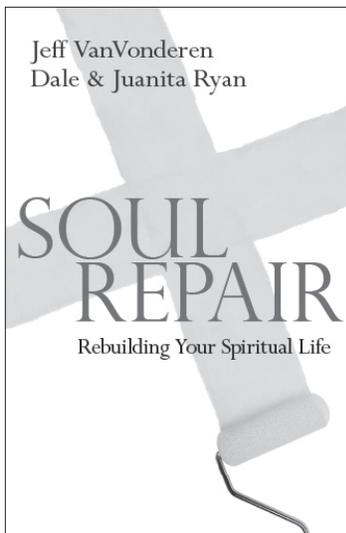
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