

Sponsorship Guide: Steps Six and Seven

An Overview of Steps 6 and 7

Quite aside from the brief treatment these steps receive in the Big Book, the lasting impact of this part of the AA step program brings an equally lasting result in the transformation of the new member. Good sponsorship here becomes somewhat less "action oriented" and much more "concept oriented." A simplified "bullet points" approach describing that the essential importance of Steps Six and Seven will leave both the new man and the sponsor wondering why this matter was made into such a big deal in the first place.

The basic ideas of 6.) *being ready to walk away from one's "defects of character,"* and 7.) *seriously utilizing the spiritual side of the AA program's central theme to realize such a goal* don't really seem to be particularly distinct from the work of the preceding steps. After all, aren't these two goals basically similar to what the sponsor – sponsee team hoped would result from the work already accomplished in Steps One through Five?

Why did the authors of our Big Book seem to pause in a program marked up to this point by direct, "on the ground" action to switch AA's focus to these particularly "in the clouds" matters? ***We have come to believe He would like us to keep our heads in the clouds with Him, but that our feet ought to be firmly planted on earth.*** (BB p130) So far, we have accepted the idea that our recovery will be advanced by actions – step work – but that the engine of our new sobriety will be the compelling spiritual changes we encounter. Hasn't it been the general idea that the aim of step work was to prepare the new member to be able to accept such spiritual help which would emerge when he was ready to receive it?

We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. (BB p84) Our old selves were based on self-sufficiency – "***self-reliance.***" (BB 68) We were convinced that the solving of our worldly problems was a challenge we faced solely with our own abilities, but that led us to *alcoholic fear* – the predictable result of our relentless feeling of *alcoholic inadequacy*. The spiritual approach of the AA program tells us that great and effective additional spiritual advantages are always close at hand. Regardless of the new man's unexamined ties to all the complex, "moving parts" of the Christian religion's mythology, perhaps everyone will come to agree (compared to "...come to

believe...") that AA style "spiritual work" will do for us many important things not possible without it.

Clearly, the steps preceding Steps 6 and 7 are founded on actions which confront the new member with the absolute necessity of a new understanding of the *spiritual dilemma* of the **disease of alcoholism**. The new member has heard AA's in our meetings emphasize the central importance that spiritual progress holds for our recovery. The "promises" which describe the spiritual goals which result from his work on Steps 4 and 5 seem to center on changes in his outlook.¹ Those promises are centered on the experience – *what it feels like* – to be making spiritual progress. The new man, at this point, is definitely beginning to experience the new and exciting *sensation* of his recovery. However, will continuing his step work into Steps 6 and 7 result in simply more of the same? If not, what's next?

Here, we can very safely introduce a new and useful understanding by explaining a slightly more advanced idea of precisely what "being an alcoholic" means. Yes, Chapter Five lays out the idea that such a sickness has debilitating effects on "body, mind and spirit," but the goal of Steps 6 and 7 seems to be based on an even larger landscape and, yet, also an even more spiritually detailed model of such troubles which is only now becoming a concrete possibility for the new member.

The sponsor's task at this crossroad of consolidation can be presented as another new and effective "frame of reference" through which the new man can continue to develop his model of:

- a. the nature of the disease*
- b. the transformation made possible by AA's Twelve Steps, and,*
- c. the spiritual nature of the work we undertake to gain sobriety.*

As step work has progressed to this point, all these topics have emerged in the format and presentation of the ideas of the previous steps. However, each has been handled, in a sense, individually, that is, by concentrating on single matters one at a time. Our AA experience strongly supports such a "single focus" approach based on the thought situation common to many of our new members in their beginning days of sobriety. There is little justification for risking the likely confusion of considering all the aspects of the recovery program all mixed together. The idea of firmly establishing the foundations of our ideas by focusing step work on highly defined specific issues has, frankly, worked wonders with our alcoholic members.

¹ "We pocket our pride and go to it, illuminating every twist of character, every dark cranny of the past. Once we have taken this step, **we are delighted**. We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone at **perfect peace and ease**. Our fears fall from us. We begin to feel the nearness of our Creator." (BB p75)

Steps 6 and 7 mark a nicely designed departure from the single focus approach to a far more encompassing new idea. The sponsor should emphasize here that the preliminary work has been completed, making the consolidation of the previous efforts the next important theme. Looking at this one way, we might say that the preliminary, educational and observational parts of the recovery program are now in hand, and that it is now time to carefully draw some permanent and beneficial conclusions about the road ahead, thus, our introduction of the “new paradigm” idea.

The Old Paradigm

We will have to consider the “old paradigm” in two parts. First, we have the new member's impression of his alcoholism prior to his entry into the AA program, and second, his developing understanding of his alcoholism resulting from his work in Steps 1 through 5.

When he first crossed the threshold at the doorway of his first meeting, his rough ideas of what his problems might be were based on his experiences with those problems in a non-alcoholic world. He had a *non-alcoholic* view of his alcoholism. Most of us would agree that the non-alcoholic view of alcoholism is rarely either very promising or particularly objective. In fact, as non-alcoholics tried to explain and understand our alcoholic behavior, they consistently placed themselves in our positions asking, “If I were him, why in the world would I have done that?” As a consequence, our new member may very well be asking similar questions of himself! After all, these are the questions he has repeatedly heard non-alcoholics ask each other about him during his alcoholic drinking career.

Our Big Book contains numerous anecdotes of conversations between non-alcoholic observers who, while observing us, have asked such questions of each other. These fictional accounts reveal just how paradoxical alcoholic behavior appears to the non-alcoholic. In the non-alcoholic mind, there seem to be no reasons whatsoever which can explain such an alcoholic behavior and outlook. The idea of “*restore to sanity*” in Step 2 connects very directly with this part of the new member's alcoholic history. For many of us, these relentless observations by non-alcoholic “others” have led us to suspect that we really may well be insane.

On the other hand, when the new member is able to adopt an *alcoholic view of his alcoholism*, all sorts of good possibilities emerge -- and very often, quite quickly. Now, reflecting on these ideas, we might think that this was the topic of the work done in Steps 1 through 5, and we would be right.² But at Steps 6 and

² Returning home we find a place where we can be quiet for an hour, carefully reviewing what we have done.” (BB p75)

7 good sponsorship will require a repeat of that previous work, only this time, done through our “new paradigm.” Always before we had focused on unavoidable specifics about the new man's spiritual status, his behavior and his thoughts (*his alcoholic history*). Now we must undertake a similar focus on the spiritually larger view of his situation, one which will consolidate the new understanding he has gained into a *spiritually material basis* for his continuing progress.

The second part what the new man has accumulated through his short association with AA amounts to an exciting, yet realistic, idea of his prospects. Yes, he agrees, the recovery program is, indeed, a transformational one, but that implies that he will be transformed from what he was when he first arrived into a “new” something when he has, well, *recovered*. This point is too important to allow a thoughtless collapse into the “never cured” idea.³ That concept has great value, but we must not let its importance mask this very reasonable question from the new man.

He was confronted with the perplexing notion of considering the nature of his future sober life very soon after he first started attending meetings.⁴ Hopefully, he has heard other AA's describe some of the features of their new sober lives in our discussions and has begun to formulate an idea of what *his sober life* might be like. However, much of the shared experience in the meetings deals with *behavior and consequence* matters. These are probably quite interesting to him, considering his recent experience with the disease, but what might be missing is a frank discussion not of what he will *do* in sobriety, but rather, what he will *be*.⁵ What will the new man, an alcoholic, become in recovery? The sponsor must present a view of his personal possibilities which goes quite far beyond the endless bridge games of geriatric sobriety. Steps 6 and 7 take on this last question in the spiritual sense – that is, what will the spiritual nature of the recovered alcoholic be like?

Hopefully, previous step work has laid a foundation of what what this new spiritual nature of the recovered alcoholic might *feel like!*

Because we are discussing the parts of the “old paradigm,” we may as well inject the “depth” question. These steps address an important transformation, and it will fall to the sincere sponsor at Steps 6 and 7 to completely explain the alternatives. AA's take very different approaches to this part of step work.

The non-alcoholic model of the alcoholic tends to focus first on the behavior of the man suffering from the disease. These behaviors seem to be the distinct

These suggestions prepare the new man for Step 6.

3 “We are not cured of alcoholism. What we have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.” (BB p85)

4 “To them, their alcoholic life seems the only *normal* one.” (BB p xxix: Doctor's opinion)

5 “We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us *be*.” (BB p68) *fear inventory*

difference between an alcoholic and a non-alcoholic in the eyes of non-alcoholic observers. This is especially the case when we consider the outlook of those observers who are involved with the alcoholic in a “social” or “formal” sense, that is, judges, employers, policemen, probation officers and so on.

A more intimate version of the non-alcoholic model of the alcoholic occurs with observers who find themselves much “closer” to the consequences of his alcoholic disease. These observers become painfully aware of the psychological impact of his being an alcoholic. Although they are almost unavoidably living in the midst of the chaotic results of his alcoholic behavior, they also see the inner misery he endures as a result of the disease. In this respect, we can say that mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children and so on, have a desolate awareness of at least some of the self-disgust, frustration and hopelessness of the sufferer, and we can conveniently characterize these symptoms as psychological maladies.

Debating that definition with all matter of argument instigating details won't really be of much use here, so, we *simply group these as psychological*.

The alcoholic model of the new man's disease – that is, the one he encounters as he becomes more and more familiar with AA's ideas about alcoholism by attending meetings and engaging in step work with a sponsor, *can* be centered on these behavioral or psychological views of our disease even though our Big Book emphasizes over and over that neither behavior modification nor psychological therapy seem to make much permanent progress.

One way of seeing the mechanism of failure for such approaches can be summarized as a failure to *permanently consolidate* the progress made. Of course, within the steps of the AA program, that permanent consolidation idea falls very squarely within the province of Steps 6 and 7.

The New Paradigm

There are some non-controversial realities which arrive with the progress possible in Steps 6 and 7. To the new man, these might also seem to be a strange departure from the ruthless self-observation demanded by his inventory. When considering the prayer⁶, the new man's thoughts of a perpetual commitment to unrelenting “Twelfth Step Work” for the remainder of his life may seem a little baffling. Happily, none of the conflict he may see is meant to be burdensome at

6 “My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen.” (BB p78) Note the clear difference in the authorship tone expressed in how this prayer is written when compared to the Third Step Prayer. (BB p63)

all! It falls to the sponsor to make certain that the transformative change in Step 7 comes to be held deeply and dearly as a wonderful new asset, not a troublesome duty.

After detailing the destructive effect of having the non-alcoholic view of the new man's alcoholism, the "new paradigm" paves the way for a realistic and achievable new path. That will include a new, refreshingly realistic, AA concept of his alcoholism, hence, the "*new paradigm*."

Not departing too far from the Big Book's description of likely features of one's alcoholic history, the "new paradigm" introduces interesting questions about the nature of the alcoholic before the drinking began which, unavoidably, move into similar questions of his nature after his drinking ceases. The AA idea spares no effort to define the alcoholic as fundamentally different from other, non-alcoholic people. At first, this difference is focused on drinking, that is, "...unable to drink like other people."⁷ But as the new member progressed to the ideas of Chapter Five, it became clear that the difference between the alcoholic and "other (*non-alcoholic*) people" ranges further afield than simply being able to drink successfully or not.

Steps 6 and 7 are inescapably directed to the the goal of overcoming the "***spiritual malady***." (BB p64) "*Boiled down to the bones,*" ***that*** seems to be the most foundational difference between the alcoholic and the non-alcoholic. Repeating what has been mentioned earlier, "If we could *think* like other people, we could probably *drink* like other people." The ***spiritual malady*** idea is precisely the basis of why ***we don't think like other people***. The new man's question at Steps 6 and 7 is, "Should I expect that, in my recovery, I will begin to think like other people? Is that what the restoration of my alcoholic sanity means?"

Although this "rat hole" of conditional sobriety isn't even worth exploring, there remains, for the sponsor, the task of answering his question.

For that, the term "alcoholic sanity" is a good place to start. Naturally, such a goal has everything to do with ***spiritual progress***, and Steps 6 and 7 are its focus. Here, the sponsor returns to the question of "depth." Will Step 2's promise of "*a return to sanity*" mean that the recovered alcoholic will begin to *think like other people*? And, if that is to be the case, will he then be able to *drink like other people*?

We can structure our understanding of the disease of alcoholism with respect to increasingly effective depths of understanding, and this discussion of Steps 6 and

⁷ "Therefore, it is not surprising that our drinking careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could drink like other people." (BB p30)

7 is an appropriate place to consider such layers. The new man will get to this point of departure sooner or later, so it may as well be a good time for both him and his sponsor to "*kiss the girlfriend.*"

Understanding may be an important first phase, but *doing* – the second phase – pays the wage!

The New Man's Developing View of HIS Personal Alcoholism

A great deal has already been said about the benefits of having an alcoholic view of one's alcoholism. To be more exact, this may mean having an understanding of the "big picture"⁸ which is based on the various "depths" of understanding which encompasses the idea that, in the following list, each symptom is caused by the one below it. Of course, it seems as if all such considerations return to, finally, the spiritual dimension, that is, the "***spiritual malady***" of the alcoholic disease.

- a. alcoholic behavior***
- b. alcoholic psychology***
- c. alcoholic spirituality***

Our sponsorship through the first five steps has dealt extensively with the first two of these. Likewise, the first chapters of the Big Book exhaustively define our alcoholic behavior, assisting to convince us of our alcoholic dilemma in a way compelling enough to encourage our acceptance of *the necessity* of realizing AA's ***promises***. (BB p83,84)

Further, the consequences of alcoholic behavior are divided into external and internal effects on our previous lives as drinking alcoholics. The external consequences make up the historical part of the "***wreckage of our past,***" (BB p164) and the internal consequences emerge as the "***pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization***" (BB p30) we experience as we repeatedly apply these "coping skills" while unsuccessfully continuing to try to fit in with other people and the rest of the non-alcoholic world.

In those areas which we loosely define as "psychological," we see the astonishingly penetrating description of the alcoholic "coping skills" in Chapter Five, highly specific names which can be applied to the Third Step Prayer's "***bondage of self.***" (BB p63) There seems to be no way for an alcoholic reading our book to avoid a chilling personal identification with "***self-pity,***" "***self-seeking,***" "***self-delusion***" and so forth. (BB p60, 61, 62, 63)

⁸ [*resentment*] "From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been *spiritually sick*." (BB p64)

However, with both of the first two items, our Big Book very directly counters the prospect of finding much lasting relief⁹ by simply addressing them head-on. Behavior modifications¹⁰ don't seem nearly durable enough to represent a lasting solution, and the limitations of **"self-knowledge,"** (*psychology*) (BB 39) although hypnotically attractive to many of us, turn out to be an equally deceptive cul-de-sac when it comes to permanently overcoming our problems.¹¹

At Steps 6 and 7, the sponsor – and the new member – now must face *"even more facts."*

Alcoholics were probably already something somewhat "special" even before they started to drink. Steps 6 and 7 suggest that the sponsor and the new member extend this idea even a little further. Soon enough, we face the fact that, as alcoholics, we were something "special" even before we started the historical calamity of our ***alcoholic thinking!***

As mentioned earlier, our Big Book is quite clear that we alcoholics are fundamentally different than non-alcoholics. The easiest observation of this arises from the differences between our *alcoholic drinking* and others' *non-alcoholic drinking*. (BB p19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24) However, soon enough we see that the root of this difference is squarely based on our alcoholic thinking. We simply don't *think* in the same way the non-alcoholic does.

These conclusions, however, are still not "deep" enough to provide the meaning required to constructively enter the challenges at Steps 6 and 7. For these steps, the new member must understand that the differences between him and the non-alcoholic are even more foundational than mere, obvious differences in drinking, thinking or even behavior. At this point, the spiritual side of this part of the AA program presents the unsettling idea that these "differences" exist for the alcoholic at an even more fundamental level, and, in the mind of the new men, that may pose the question of "Where did all this begin? Why did I turn into an alcoholic when someone else, otherwise quite similar to me, didn't?"

AA's seem to love debating whether members were *born* alcoholics or *became* alcoholics (*nature or nurture or both...*). Relax. We can leave this question to the debating society. Still, at some stage in the life of an alcoholic, it is likely that

9 *"Neither could we reduce our self-centeredness much by wishing or trying on our own power. We had to have God's help."* (BB p62) A broader view of this idea is that we would need to make *spiritual progress* to accomplish this change in behavior and thinking (*psychology*).

10 *"And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone – even alcohol."* Our crazy, alcoholic demand that we control everything is slipping away. (BB p84)

11 *"But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge."* (BB p39) On the other hand, this same alcoholic will quite possibly also be able to stop drinking *without some of the serious self-knowledge* he will gain by working our steps.

he considered himself and experienced his life in a way which seemed quite like the non-alcoholics around him. This happy period might have been when he was no more than a toddler or, in other cases, as late as his college or teen years, or even middle age.

Getting Ready for the Consolidation of “Spiritual Progress”

We are now ready to “flesh out” the details of our ***new paradigm*** in preparation for our discussion of Steps 6 and 7. Let's take a look at an alcoholic's life history in this new way.

Here, as sponsors, the personal side of our work becomes foremost. These ideas are presented as a well-tested alternative to the highly dogmatic approach which is readily admitted to be the most effective path forward in some cases. At issue is the fundamental idea in our AA Traditions which frowns on sponsorship techniques which result in alcoholics being denied the vast, life saving benefit of our program. A fact of 21st Century AA is that many who apply for our assistance in gaining sobriety are turned away when confronted with a sponsor's unthinking insistence on introducing extraneous burdens, that is, external interests which are *not essentially consistent* with our primary purpose.

By Steps 6 and 7, the new member is very likely anxious to have a new understanding of his life as an alcoholic – both *before, during and after* his alcoholic drinking. We begin with the idea that the man who later found himself mired in the **disease of alcoholism** was already essentially different from his peers even before the nightmare began. His understanding of such matters is at the very basis of his work in these two steps.

In fact, the necessity of such an understanding seems to arise from the wording of Steps 6 and 7. Their point is all about the removal of those elements of character which have made so much trouble, that is, **defects of character** and **shortcomings**. And, the trouble we mention here seems to materialize into the drinking alcoholic's life with a dismal regularity at all three of the alternate depths of understanding in our short table (*above*) – the *alcoholic's behavior*, the *alcoholic's psychology* and the inevitable anguish of the *alcoholic's spiritual malady*. But what did these traits look like before the disease of alcoholism began its crusade of destruction?

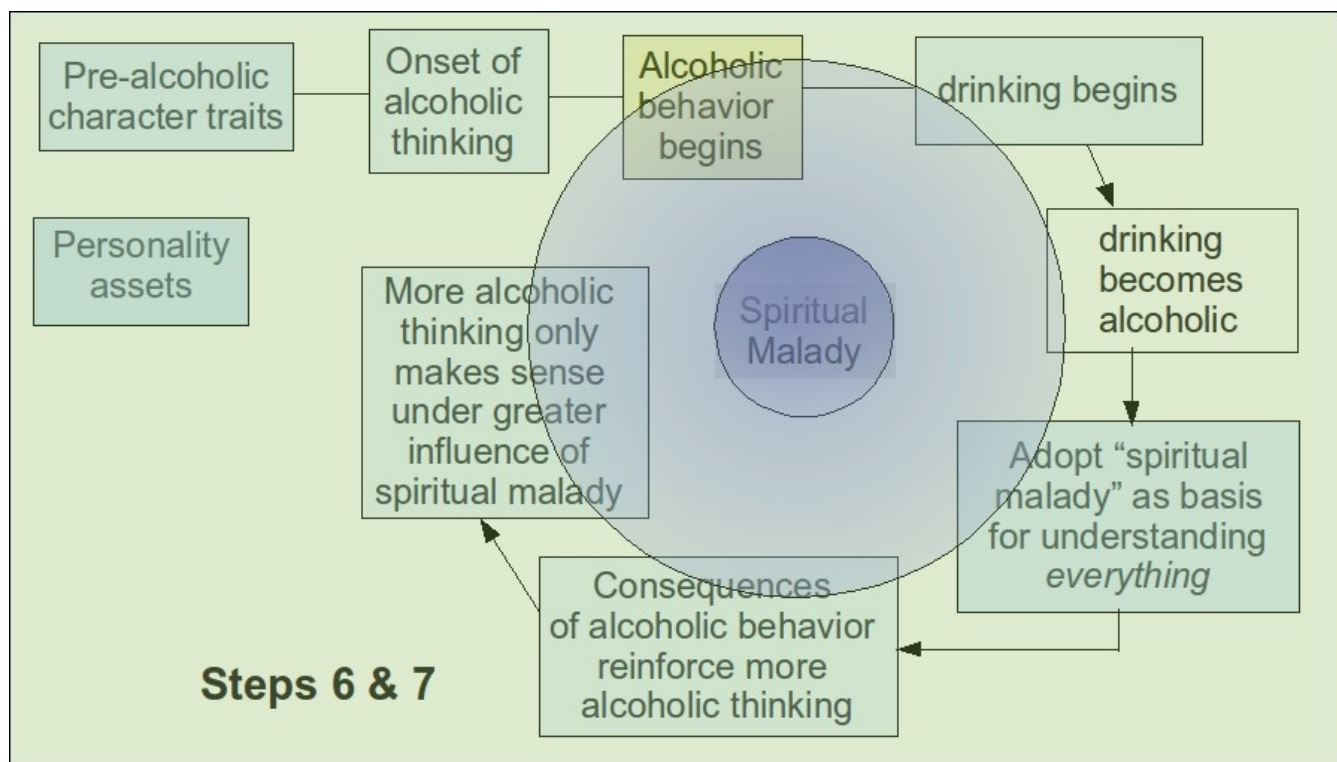
So, the new member must have a very constructive new idea about his *entire* life history – one which certainly includes the agonizing episode of his alcoholic drinking, but one which also includes a reasoned perspective of the place his drinking career occupies in a wider view of his life when considered as a whole. After all, AA's great promise is one which, by applying the alcoholic view of his

alcoholism, can provide a sensible account of both his *drinking* and the *rest* of his life – most importantly the really great possibilities which arise from his new spiritual growth.

At the beginning of his life, he was simply a human being with characteristics which, if not handled appropriately, made him prey to the ***spiritual malady***. The toxifying effects of that ***spiritual malady*** relentlessly produced all types of alcoholic thinking and feelings, even before he began to drink. However, once the drinking had begun in earnest and had begun producing its inevitable consequences, a reinforcing cycle commenced to make all the unpleasant and destructive aspects of the ***disease of alcoholism*** continually worse for him.

Once he entered into the dismal cycle (*roughly shown on the diagram below*), his situation went from bad to worse. The final result was one of hopeless desperation where practically no sensible idea – one which might occurred in the mind of a non-alcoholic who found himself in a similar situation – could ever so much as “gain a foothold.” His entire “*thought life*” was so saturated with ***alcoholic thinking*** that it became nearly impossible for him to apply his original assets in an effort to solve his problems. Discussing just what caused what in this destructive combination of the ***spiritual malady*** and one's descent into desperate, miserable alcoholic drinking is far too similar to arguing about “the chicken and the egg.”

Let's just say, if there are a lot of chickens, there are probably also a lot of eggs. The basic theme of AA sponsorship is based on the idea of confronting the immediate problem with an AA program with a proven track record. Determining whether the chickens or the eggs came first can be left to those “*at a higher pay grade.*”



In the diagram (*above*), we see that there can be little doubt that the dark field of what is called the **"*spiritual malady*"** may as well be the very center of the "tornado" mentioned in our Big Book. (BB p82) However effective the "cyclone" model may have been in step work so far, we now find it necessary to look a little more closely.

The new paradigm suggests that even the term "alcoholic" may have more meaning as a description of the character of a man who ultimately became convinced of the ***unceasing necessity*** of alcoholic drinking. Whatever the new man might have been before that may continue to represent a great deal of what he might expect to become when the drink problem has passed, thus, its relevance to Steps 6 and 7.

Human children mature individually through all sorts of experiences which influence or, maybe, even define their character as adults. (*yes, back to the nature or nurture or both question...*). As a child, our sponsee's life also progressed through these experiences. However, in his case that path led to alcoholic drinking. In most other cases, that is, among our non-alcoholic companions, the results were quite different.

As sober AA members, we can all remember quite a bit about various feelings we had in our lives as we gradually transformed ourselves into drunks. ***"Our liquor***

was but a symptom." (BB p64) Many of us recall clearly some very common experiences – even before we took our first drink – which provide a clue as to the merit of this idea that we AA's may have had a suspiciously similar state of mind before our disease really began its "wrecking ball" in earnest.

The point here is straightforward enough. We, as alcoholics converted our experiences while maturing into the onset of our alcoholic drinking history along a myriad of paths. Whatever the individual details, our characters during this process produced all the varied, unhappy results we hear about in speaker's meetings. And, yes, there's plenty of behavior and psychological components to the process in every case, but it is the spiritual part we wish deal with in Steps 6 and 7.

We were, apparently, quite different from our fellows at a very early age -- so early as to predate not only our ***alcoholic drinking***, but also the onset of even our ***alcoholic thinking***. The effects of our spiritual malady didn't suddenly begin when we first started to feel alone in a crowded room or frighteningly inadequate. The non-alcoholic youngsters all around us very likely had most of those same feelings, but those experiences did not mark a long, depressing descent into one's first AA meeting.

Equally interesting, whatever these specific differences were, they were not at all necessarily destructive or negative, at least not inevitably so. They only took those turns for us alcoholics.

What characteristics can be said to commonly mark the pre-drinking, pre-thinking alcoholic? Our book says that we are very often quite intelligent, very sensitive, remarkably energetic, enthusiastic, and so on, when our personalities are not twisted by ***alcoholic drinking*** and ***alcoholic thinking***. For lack of a better term, the diagram refers to these characteristics as "pre-alcoholic character traits," but in this discussion of Steps 6 and 7, we will refer to these as "assets." After all, they made up the basis of our outlook on the world.

It seems that our problems as alcoholic drunks arose from not handling (*maturing*) in our applications of those assets of ours very well at all. We further suspect that the particular assets we already had before the onset of our alcoholism were "*just the right ones*" to host the dismal results we experienced later if they were not handled correctly, and, of course, *they weren't*.

Being susceptible to the spiritual defect we seemed to already carry as pre-alcoholics, the odds were not good that we would find our way through this dilemma in a way much different than the way it actually turned out. We entered into the alcoholic drinking period of our histories where these natural "assets" in our characters, employed incorrectly thanks to the spiritual problems in our

*understanding of everything, became our greatest liabilities.*¹²

Once under the “thrall” of our common **“spiritual malady,”** the developing phases of our alcoholic history had begun. We are all familiar with some form of the diagram's “tornado,” that is, the cycle of “drinking” – “*alcoholic drinking*” – “adopting an outlook based on the **spiritual malady** as a basis for everything we thought and felt” – “creating consequences with **alcoholic behavior**” – “applying **alcoholic thinking** as we tried to solve the consequences” and so on. In fact, once this nasty business got a good, solid start with us, we seemed destined to traverse this discouraging, depressing cycle over and over, in many cases, perhaps *every night*.

The inescapable “good news” encountered in Steps 6 and 7 is that we will emerge into recovery from alcoholism to discover that we still have the same characteristics – or “assets” – that we had in the beginning! Only this time, thanks to the spiritual progress resulting from the work we have done as we completed our step work, we will have a mature, reasoned opportunity to take that same, individual style of intelligence, sensitivity, energy and enthusiasm we used so poorly as we slid into our drinking and try our hand at turning it into a spiritually satisfying life!

Step Six

Getting Ready for a Really Great Change

The sincere sponsor can begin with a clear explanation of the idea that, before we became alcoholic disasters, we already had pre-alcoholic traits, but in addition to those, we had a respectable collection of fairly acceptable looking, fairly normal other human personality “assets.” Step 6 speaks of “defects of character.” ***Let's be clear, the defects we are anxious to leave behind are the results of our catastrophic mis-applications of our assets, not the assets themselves!*** Now that the previous steps have laid a solid foundation of the spiritual nature of the problem – including all the convincing observations in a recent inventory, the question at Step 6 is simple enough:

*“Even though this mis-application of assets had turned into a 'full time job' during the period of alcoholic drinking, are we now ready to separate the 'wheat from the chaff,' and walk away from so many things we have become so accustomed to doing and believing about ourselves? Are we prepared to single out the behavior, thoughts and spiritual errors which defined our **alcoholic thinking** and drinking history and leave them behind while understanding that the basic*

¹² *“But not so with us in those last days of heavy drinking. The old pleasures were gone. They were but memories. Never could we recapture the great moments of the past.”* (BB p151) There is little difference between living in a world which appears dark and living in one which is dark. This is the **alcoholic deception of perception**.

package of human traits with which we began our journey are still with us and not defects of character?"

Step 6 **"Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."** (BB p59)

The wording of this step presents two interesting themes, and both of them will probably come up during sponsorship as the new member enters into the work of Step 6. The first is the simpler of the two, dealing with the meaning of **"defects of character."** The new man has the character of an alcoholic. The two of you have discussed dozens of convincing "sides" of precisely what that means in the step work already done. The confusing implication is whether or not a "defective element" in the character of an alcoholic suggests a characteristic that is *not alcoholic*?

This would normally amount to little more than a semantic hiccup. However, we have already mentioned the idea that the basic character of the new member – at one time – was not what we would consider to be alcoholic. That came later. This is important because after the new man completes the work of all our steps, he will face the prospect of having all those same pre-alcoholic traits once again only without the **spiritual malady** which caused so much trouble.

If the new member expects some other outcome, he may be convincing himself that he deserves an entire, fresh start, that is, an entirely new set of personal characteristics quite divorced from the facts of his history – something similar to a spiritual "witness protection" program. Talk about playing God! He will emerge from his successful step work quite spiritually transformed, but he will still be, in many matters, who he always has been, not some suddenly created, unknown stranger who immediately needs a new apartment, birth certificate and drivers' license.

There is no spiritual advantage from throwing the "baby out with the bath water," and we need to be quite clear on this point. Although the AA program can transform our members in astonishing ways, it doesn't claim to turn them into "re-created" people with new histories.

The second theme comes from the implied parochial passivity of the idea that Step 6 prepares us to simply have **"defects of character"... "removed."** This concept contains a *very great, large, abrasive, confounding* amount of the precepts of charismatic Christian teaching. If the new man is deeply and sincerely committed to the subtleties of that religious mythology, no problem. If he isn't, and most of the 21st Century sponsees we encounter haven't been, the sponsor has some serious, foundational work before him. He's on the hook to explain exactly what this might mean.

Perhaps the most dangerous of all possible courses ahead is marked by the sponsee's grudging nod of acceptance when confronted with such ideas followed by a sponsor's eagerness to "kick" Steps 6 and 7 under the bus and get on with amends. It seems that most new AA members are much more convinced they are making progress while working steps that "hurt." Here, the sponsor really needs to keep things on the tracks.

The Twelve Part Airplane

When we find ourselves flying at 40,000 feet in an airplane made of twelve different parts, that is, the engine being one part, the wings one part, the landing gear one part, and so on, which part is the most important? Which one is the new man (or his sponsor) ready to "do without" or even neglect a little?

Likewise, we see the absolute necessity of Steps 6 and 7. We can explain to the new man that our airplane may not fly very well without all the twelve parts correctly constructed and operated. Just as our imaginary airplane will need all of its twelve parts to get where it's going, we will need all the twelve steps to get where we're going.

Returning to the passive, "*automatic*" removal of the "***defects of character,***" the new member may very well see a puzzling transaction. Absent the religious certainty of the more dogmatically oriented sponsee, this more secular counterpart may not derive Step 6's meaning very clearly, at all. All through this series of papers the point is made over and over. Conversion to charismatic Christianity is not the price we exact for our assistance in surviving the ***disease of alcoholism***. That may be the way AA actually works too many times, but *it is not a legitimate part of our program of recovery*.

So, where does that leave the sponsor and his sponsee when it comes to Step 6? Our experience with the kinds of spiritual solutions the AA program provides shows that, as usual, this sponsor/sponsee pair find themselves in a good place where real spiritual relief is reassuringly approachable and clearly explained. Our new spiritual approach offers a very understandable means to "part company" with the crazy and destructive combination of our pre-alcoholic nature and the subsequent effects of the ***spiritual malady*** of our active alcoholism.

There are no mysterious "*moving parts*" in the equation after all. Equipped with a new spiritual outlook *on everything*, the new man is now challenged to simply go ahead, adopting the new position that his unmanageable thoughts and feelings really can be left behind, making way for thoughts and feelings much more consistent with his new spiritual life. More specific details of what this might mean are expressed in the discussion of Step 7 (*following*).

The sponsor can remind his friend that no one was designed to lead a life where

alcoholic misery was, somehow, part of the "big picture" plan of his creation. The spiritual universe, once it is approached within the ideals of our AA program, offers a remarkable, available **"... road of happy destiny."** (BB p165) The new member's next task is to **take that path**. Being willing to spiritually dislodge those **"... old ideas ..."** (BB p58) and begin his permanent journey to a far happier life is the **"Entirely ready ..."** part of Step 6's work.

The Dangerous Message of "Miraculous"

Why make things more uncertain than they need to be?

One common theme in our AA meetings is the too often cited claim that our escape from alcoholic destruction is *"miraculous,"* often presented with the additional idea that even our survival of the **disease of alcoholism's** killing power long enough to *"find"* the AA program was also a *"miracle."* When these *"miracles"* are continually attributed to "special treatment" from a Higher Power, we see a suspicious presence of self-will in action.

Especially when the sponsor and the sponsee arrive at the challenge of Steps 6 and 7, the question of what is a "miracle" and what is not will probably become a topic of discussion. The point here is that a constant reference to miracles can very easily lead to a complicating misunderstanding of the actual meaning of Step 7 in particular, and in a more general sense, to the actual meaning of the mechanics of recovery itself.



A miracle is a perceptible interruption of the laws of nature, such that can be attempted to be explained by divine intervention, and is sometimes associated with a [miracle worker](#). Many [folktales](#), [religious](#) texts, and people claim various events they refer to as "miraculous." People in different cultures have substantially different definitions of the word "miracle." Even within a specific religion there is often more than one meaning of the term. Sometimes the term "miracle" may refer to the action of a [supernatural](#) being that is not a god. Thus, the term "divine intervention," by contrast, would refer specifically to the direct involvement of a deity.

In casual usage, "miracle" may also refer to any [statistically unlikely](#) but beneficial [event](#), (such as the survival of a [natural disaster](#)) or even which regarded as "wonderful" regardless of its likelihood, such as [birth](#). Other miracles might be: survival of a terminal illness, escaping a life threatening situation or 'beating the odds.' (wikipedia [dictionary](#))

Illustration 1: Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life is a fine example of a "miracle." As far as we know, it did not happen in an AA meeting.

It is not a miracle when an alcoholic begins attending AA meetings, gets sober and stays sober. To consider it a "miracle" can only introduce some serious confusion in the mind of the new member to our program. When alcoholics receive the immense benefits of all the various parts of the AA program, it is NOT a "*perceptible interruption of the laws of nature.*" If this were actually the case, we would have to assume that recovery from alcoholism was, in its essence, *against natural law!* It simply isn't.

Further, we have to reconsider the familiar statement that some of our fellow AA members survived the dangers they encountered during their alcoholic drinking only thanks to specific "miracles." Clearly, some potential members of our AA group actually didn't survive the dangers of ***untreated alcoholism*** long enough to join us on our journey to recovery. We never had a chance to meet them. But do the rest of us sitting, sober, in an AA meeting have to don the suspicious (*self-will...*) title of being "miracles?" This unhappy reality is not a "statistically unlikely" event at all. Anyone who thinks so, gravely underestimates both the killing power of the disease we face and the remarkable possibilities of our AA program. Assigning the contrasting fates of those of us who did not survive and those of us who did to the status of an "unlikely miracle" hardly represents a mature view from a position of spiritual humility.

All aspects of the gratitude we feel about this are real, not miraculous.

We aspire to be "spiritually adult" in our new lives as recovered alcoholics. This, unavoidably, includes have a very thoughtful understanding that we, as alcoholics, survived our alcoholic drinking long enough to arrive at AA, but that others, probably quite similar to us in many ways, did not.

When there is continual talk of recovery only possible as a "miracle," the clear message sent to new members, usually locked onto every word being spoken in our meetings, is that the only chance for recovery they might enjoy will be the unlikely product of receiving a miracle!

In casual usage, "miracle" may also refer to any statistically unlikely but beneficial event, (such as the survival of a natural disaster) or even which regarded as "wonderful" regardless of its likelihood, such as birth. Other miracles might be: survival of a terminal illness, escaping a life threatening situation or 'beating the odds.'

Is the idea that recovery is "*statistically unlikely*" the message we wish to transmit to new members? Is that a realistic approach to stirring their faltering hope that they, too, can recover and have an incredible, wonderful sober life? Yes, one way to look at the entire AA program is that it can "change the odds" of having other possible outcomes in the life of an alcoholic. But, *no*, the "beating the odds" idea implies that we all sit at a great poker table where our sobriety and our chances for a successful satisfying life rest on which cards we are dealt.

The real prospects of recovery must be presented as an outcome equally available to all alcoholics who come to our program. For us, drinking was not optional. No conditions prevailed on our drinking, and no conditions must be allowed to prevail on our sobriety.

AA doesn't work that way. Such an idea contradicts both our Traditions and the very spirit of our hopes for all new members, whether one is up close and personal under your sponsorship or the withdrawn and frightened stranger sitting in the very most distant seat in his first meeting. We all need to place our hopes on something a bit more substantial and more available than "*miracles*."

Finally, an additional perspective is offered in the Forward to the Second Edition of our Big Book: **"... *public acceptance of AA grew by leaps and bounds. For this there were two principle reasons: the large numbers of recoveries, and reunited homes. Of alcoholics who came to AA and really tried, 50% got sober at once and remained that way; 25% sobered up after some relapses, and among the remainder, those who stayed on with AA showed improvement. Other thousands came to a few AA meetings and at first decided they didn't want the program. But great numbers of these – about two out of three – began to return as time passed.*"** (BB p xx)

Although these percentages cast a chilling note when comparing the effectiveness of our 21st Century form of the AA program to its 20th Century predecessor, the fact remains. The remarkable success of the AA program – both then and now – does not represent a "miracle," a *statistically unlikely* outcome. Quite the contrary, based on our experience we can confidently say, "*This happens in AA groups every day whenever two or more of us get together in an effort to stay sober and share the astonishing possibilities of a new spiritual life in recovery.*"

Eliminating the Unusable Limits of Step Seven

If its not a "miracle," then what is it?

One of several disturbing practices of religionists is to provide all encompassing limits to the actual, possible nature of every sort of spiritual concepts. We see this in various forms of "blanket statements" concerning spiritual matters all through AA literature. For example, in the beginning of his discussion of Step 2 in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (the "12 x 12"), Bill Wilson states the following: ***"Having reduced us to a state of absolute helplessness, you now declare that none but a Higher Power can remove our obsession. Some of us won't believe in God, others can't, and still others who do believe God exists have no faith whatever that He will perform this miracle."*** (TBT p25)

Such comments very neatly spell out what Bill W. considered to be the *only* choices describing the spiritual state of the new member and the *only* possible path forward toward the goal of recovering from the alcoholic illness. Dr. Bob continues this theme in his story: ***"If you think you are an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptic, or have any other form of intellectual pride which keeps you from accepting what is in this book, I feel sorry for you. If you think you are strong enough to beat the game alone, that is your affair."*** (BB p181) In Dr. Bob's opinion, anyone having spiritual ideas contrary in any way to his own simply suffers from "*intellectual pride*." Perhaps this comment represents his view of the admonitions of Step 10: ***"Our next function is to grow in understanding and effectiveness."*** and ***"Love and tolerance of others is our code."*** (BB p84)

Opinions such as these place themselves "front and center" when our sponsorship reaches the work of Step 7. Nothing here condemns such personally held beliefs, but effective sponsorship has no alternative but to squarely address the spiritual needs of new members who find such ideas an unnecessary obstacle in their step work. Overlooking the unneeded difficulties imposed by such ***"outside interests"*** (Tradition Five: ***"primary purpose"***) can result in *"constructing a hill one must climb before even reaching the mountain one must climb."*

Of course AA's, following what might be considered their inevitable nature, might insist that all these specific religious ideas are *NOT* an *outside interest*. The presumption that all alcoholics who have recovered have similar ideas or that they will, sooner or later, have such ideas, actually has very little to do with the necessity of real spiritual work. These are no more than unexamined and

unquestioned remnants of yet another hybridized form of the prevailing cultural religion. Adoption of them is not a part of the AA program for spiritual recovery.

AA's opportunity for the blessings of sobriety need not be "purchased" by a new member's conversion to randomly selected components of religious mythology.

All these contradictory assertions may have been delayed, cleverly dodged or otherwise "*neatly swept under the rug*" during the progress through Steps 1 through 5, but at Steps 6 and 7 common sense difficulties with such ideas can no longer be minimized. The elephant in the living room has placed that ugly two thousand pound vase squarely in the center of the kitchen table. And, at this point, we all agree that no one can really argue with the elephant *or* move the vase.

The religious approach, drawing so heavily on Biblical ideas, cannot be allowed to strand the new man in an inescapable religious paradox. This is simply yet another case where good sponsorship must step in to save the day and get the job done! This means that a successful alternative to the mythological approach must be made available. Remember, the goal for the new man is to find a spiritual solution that works – and continues to work! Such a task usually requires more than a distant missionary visit to some savage, heathen native which results in a spectacular, momentary conversion.

An important part of that new spiritual approach will be the nature of its results later, as the new man applies it in the future decades of his life as a recovered alcoholic. Whatever it may be, his new spiritual outlook will need to continue to function in a dependable and satisfying manner for a long time after his step work is completed. If the spiritual part of the AA program of recovery can't offer this life-saving advantage, the future possibilities of the new member are cloudy indeed!

The idea that selected elements of the prevailing religion offer the sole path to recovery from alcoholism can be confusing. The religionist influence on the Big Book's presentation of spiritual progress results in a collection of "religious certainties" which enjoy an unlikely freedom from the burden of precise explanation. Such an approach might have been quite effective in 1940, but now AA sponsors are called upon to provide much more of an answer to simple questions such as "What do I do?" Just as was the case with the examples above, the "solid gold" message of the necessity of ***spiritual progress*** is everywhere, yet much of an idea of what this might be – other than something

akin to the conversion of erstwhile savages – is missing.

A successful and satisfying spiritual life in recovery will require, at the very least, some working definitions beyond those of an instant of submission to an undefined and undefinable deity, very much a concept presented by others.¹³ This discussion will provide ideas as to exactly what these spiritual ideas might mean later when it addresses sponsorship in Step 7.

A New View of Alcoholism Brings a New View of Recovery

An important reconciliation between a recovered alcoholic's "Higher Power" and his more "down to Earth" matters of sober living.

When a sponsor promotes the mythological approach, the **"Came to believe .."** of Step 2 and the **"Made a decision ..."** of Step 3 seem, for the moment, to make good sense. In both early step work and early sobriety, that good common sense contains more than enough common sense to go forward. However, with such a beginning, the traditional, supernatural aspect of Steps 6 and 7 may very easily begin to have their own "common sense" problems, in fact, both steps drift almost at once back to the "miracle" idea – an uncomfortable foundation for something as important as sobriety.

The questions such unexamined ideas may leave lingering in the mind of the new man in your sponsorship are straightforward enough. The Big Book seems to imply that **"Came to believe ..."** means coming to believe in God, or at least, coming to believe that God will be able and willing to restore an alcoholic to sanity. When that idea is further amplified by the rather demanding, charismatic evangelism of AA's such as Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob, your new man may decide that he needs to make peace with the Christian religion before he can proceed. As incredible as it may seem, far too often this dismal conclusion leads not to a decision to **"Make a decision ..."** but, instead, to an outright rejection of all the wonderful, possible benefits of our program, a rejection which will probably include more drinking.

The next question of spiritual progress appears almost as quickly. If believing in the existence of God and His willingness to restore me to sanity – the central

¹³ *"When we saw others solve their problems by a simple reliance upon the Spirit of the Universe, we had to stop doubting the power of God. Our ideas did not work. But the God idea did,"* (BB p52) Once the *"Spirit of the Universe"* idea is transformed into the *"God"* idea, we have clearly made a troubling substitution, introducing a concept previously defined by others. This quickly becomes an *"outside issue"* with respect to **Tradition Five**. *"When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God."* (BB p47) AA's spiritual approach constantly asks every member the question, "Would you believe this way if you had casually adopted the God ideas of others?"

theme of Bill W.'s discussion of most spiritual questions – is the spiritual “price” of entering into the AA program, what will that price become later? After the steps? During a sober life where such spiritual advances will be constantly necessary for your sponsee's sobriety, success, satisfaction and even survival?

Does spiritual progress in the new man's later life (*after his step work*) mean that he will aspire to “believe” the revelatory aspects of Bill W.'s “*belief in God*” even more fervently? Do we really expect something already rather distant from AA's recovery program to meet the requirements of transformational (alcoholic) spiritual relief which will be needed for decades of happy, well adjusted sober life?

The mythology of a 4,000 year old book from another culture serves its own purpose quite well, at least, in the minds of those who follow such an approach. They can certainly receive the full benefit of the AA program while holding such beliefs, but is there any good reason to allow them to imply, as Dr. Bob does with his “intellectual pride” and “sooner or later you'll collapse into a position exactly like mine,” that it can be no more than a matter of time until all successful AA's have the same religious ideas?

Too often the “***... as you understand Him***” seems to effortlessly become having a Higher Power astoundingly identical to the divinity in their religious mythology! Further, any reference to such a mythological basis of religion seems to be free and clear when expressed in AA meetings. Anyone who doesn't submit to, or at least tolerate, such inappropriate outbursts is characterized as “not ready,” “not through drinking yet” or otherwise “stuck in old ideas, intellectual pride or spiritual defiance.”

Not really. Both our sponsee and our AA program deserves better.

The title of this section could have easily been expanded to “*A New View of Alcoholism Brings a New View of Recovery, and a **New View of Recovery Brings a New View of Spiritual Progress.***” The classic interpretation of our Big Book offers a series of concepts, each of which seems to plunge even more deeply into contradiction with Tradition Five's “**primary purpose**” idea.

So, what precisely is meant by a “*new view of spiritual progress?*” The new man will be filled with such questions as he enters into the fantastic work of Step 7. All of this discussion won't mean much if it doesn't include a few examples.

A New View of Spiritual Progress: the “Big Picture”

Steps 6 and 7 both center on the idea of “*removing something.*” Viewed in a superficial way, this “*something*” might be the alcoholic behavior of our drinking

history. After all, it was that behavior which really “pissed off” the non-alcoholics with whom we were trying, unsuccessfully, to co-exist.

Considered a bit more deeply, that “*something*” might be the psychological misery we experienced as a result of our **alcoholic thinking** and the equally unsuccessful attempts to apply our alcoholic **“coping skills”** to meet the challenges in our lives. As alcoholics, we know very well that being a total pariah in society really doesn't feel good! As mentioned before, the non-alcoholics closest to us who cared about us as family and friends were very aware of the *nightmare-thoughts* which filled our minds and how desperately unhappy we were.

However, Step 6 and 7 clearly center on an even deeper understanding of our alcoholic problems, that is, of course, our **spiritual malady**. If the “removal” of **alcoholic behavior** and **alcoholic thinking** are accepted as complete and reasonable goals of your sponsees's AA recovery plan, some explanation of the spiritual side of recovery may be needed. Of course, getting rid of the behavior and thinking consequences of his alcoholism which were probably main contributors to his very first beneficial interest in AA, represents an undeniably good development. On the other hand, such improvements, although probably very greatly appreciated by the new man, are not at the foundation of his **spiritual malady**. The lasting relief from the **disease of alcoholism** can only be gained by making changes at the most fundamental level of its cause – the **spiritual level**.

So, if we have decided that the passive, supernatural approach is not going to satisfy our new man, what's left which will get this job done? Probably, a good place to begin is by further exploring what is meant by the **“spiritual malady”** mentioned in Chapter Five. If there is a single “crux of our problem,” that term seems to be a clue.

We have already considered some of the conceptual difficulties which arise when one tries to integrate the **“spiritual malady”** idea with the hybridized, mythological details of an unexamined “God” idea. As his sponsor, you can see the immense importance of remaining focused on the new man's alcoholism as opposed “adding extra steps” by injecting the additional burden of reconciling our AA program with other ideas which are important as issues of religious faith. If the new man has brought a strong, sincere religious tradition with him to the AA program, such a reconciliation may be quite useful to him. If he has not and the new man later becomes convinced of their desirability,¹⁴ it will be the role of institutions other than AA to answer such needs.

¹⁴ “*Those having religious affiliations will find here nothing disturbing to their beliefs of ceremonies.*” (BB p28) “*This hope, however, was destroyed by the doctor's telling him that while his religious convictions were very good, in his case they did not spell the necessary vital spiritual experience.*” (BB p27)

The AA sponsor needs to concentrate on the new man's recovery from alcoholism, and that means the shared spiritual work must focus on AA spirituality. At Step 7 that means a focus on the **spiritual malady**, the "removal" of **defects of character** and **shortcomings** and a firm idea of what "**spiritual progress**" might mean in very definite terms.

First, to the matter of the "**spiritual malady.**"

We have already presented the idea that the **disease of alcoholism** should not be defined by the nature of its consequences. It is clear from the stories we hear from our fellow AA's that, while the consequences vary widely, the root cause of those consequences is highly uniform. One AA's **disease of alcoholism** is fundamentally similar to that of the next AA, and our book tells us that this is a *spiritual commonality*. If this were not the case, a single approach would not be effective in overcoming all of our *individual* forms of the disease.¹⁵

Chapter Five presents the idea that *a.)* this "root cause," our **spiritual malady**, runs hand in hand with the physical and mental symptoms, and *b.)* also that real recovery will only be possible when the alcoholic emerges from that "**spiritual malady.**" Further, Step 12 speaks of a "**spiritual awakening**" (BB p60) in a way which easily suggests that such a wonderful and promising outcome will mark a great relief from the "**spiritual malady.**"

When the new member is prepared to stare directly at the **spiritual malady** idea, that is, when it is "divorced" from both **alcoholic behavior** and **alcoholic thinking**, he is finally ready to undertake Step 7 in its most beneficial, spiritual sense.

In our discussion of Steps 2 and 3, it was proposed that all forms of religious and philosophical concepts were used to "make sense" of the world one sees. It turns out that the alcoholic's attraction to *his* **spiritual malady** is really no exception to this general idea. However, the particular "*sense*" our **spiritual malady** makes for comprehending the world we see has none of the constructive possibilities enjoyed by non-AA religious or philosophical alternatives.

The alcoholic's spiritual understanding of the world is a dark, dangerous one. Additionally, whatever form that took when it was just getting started in us continued to become even more dismal and destructive as we experienced the utterly discouraging consequences of having such an outlook. After living through a miserable series of unsuccessful attempts to co-exist with non-alcoholics, our "**pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization**" (BB p30) was an inevitable

¹⁵ "*The tremendous fact for every one of us is that we have discovered a common solution. We have a way out on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action.*" (BB p17)

and unchanging outcome until we could change the old "**spiritual malady outlook**" into a new form which had the possibilities of working better – *much better!*

The ideas in Steps 6 and 7 accept and acknowledge the fact that making such a *spiritual change* amounts to quite a bit more than even the most determined and sweeping alteration in **alcoholic behavior** or **alcoholic thought**. A change in an alcoholic's basic outlook on his world will necessarily address his **spiritual malady** itself rather than the alcoholic consequences arising from obsessively employing his old outlook as a foundation for every idea which directs his life.

So long as an alcoholic begins every thought in that threatened, fearful place (BB p65 "... **hurt or threatened** ..."), the results will remain the same.

A New View of Spiritual Progress: Examples

Where, the rubber hits the road, time to put our money where our mouth is. Oh well, you get the idea. It's high time for a few definite examples.

Expect help. Ask for it.

The dark universe of the old, alcoholic outlook could never depend on the prospect of getting, regardless of the circumstances. The new, spiritually corrected outlook includes a real trust that there really is help, and that it is available to the new member. This is a radical new view of what had always previously been a dangerous, hurtful world. He can sincerely ask for help without having to worry about being rejected or humiliated. In fact, wasn't this exactly what he did when he asked you to sponsor him?

The new spirituality – in the AA sense – makes *taking risks* a spiritual tool. As his sponsor, you must constantly admire the spirit-backed bravery of the new man's action when he took this risk. If we focus too much on his desperation as an explanation of why he came to AA or "hired" a sponsor, we may miss the importance of this new "risk taking" which became possible thanks to his new spiritual strength – *his developing new spiritual outlook!*

This is spiritual progress without the confusing mythology.

Quit Waiting for Perfection

The old outlook, based on the spiritual malady, was an ingenious source of

constant excuses for waiting and waiting and waiting to make any decision or to take any action. It has been mentioned before that the “three legs on the stool” where our disease of alcoholism sat were **“hopelessness, confusion and perfection.”** So long as our disease could keep these crippling ideas “front and center” in our thoughts, our alcoholism flourished.

Of course, when these three toxic concepts represented the most basic beginning point of all our ideas, the work of the **spiritual malady** was *lethally effective*. We all know the sensation of being so paralyzed by fear of humiliating outcomes that we hesitated to take any risk whatsoever, even in ridiculously menial matters where good or bad outcomes meant essentially nothing or made very little difference. The consequences of all those moments of paralysis built up very predictably to a literal maelstrom of fear and frustration from which there seemed to be no escape.¹⁶

Now, we too often see this same aspect of the **spiritual malady** in our fellow AA's. While their sober lives tick away the minutes, they wait. They wait until conditions are *perfect* before they talk to that special girl who has caught their eye. They wait until conditions are *perfect* before they dare try for that job they've wanted. They *wait* until they are *perfectly* prepared before they offer to sponsor that new member who needs *their help*

They wait to invite some friends over for a nice dinner until the dinner can be *perfect*. They *wait* to start a homework assignment until all other little tasks have been *perfectly* completed. When all these opportunities they have dreamed of accomplishing in their sobriety have passed them by, they like to feel that their suffocating situation is actually what they deserved all along! The *perfection angle* of the alcoholic **spiritual malady** is functioning as a *perfect* self-sabotage!

A sober life should not be one which continues to be filled with more of the soul strangling frustration and discouragement we experienced while we were “lost at sea” in our alcoholic drinking! The supernatural, mythological form of **spiritual progress** becomes less and less comforting (*useful for recovery*) as the years wear on in such a state of mind, that is, as the years wear on in sobriety with that *old idea* (BB p58) for such a limited and external spiritual outlook.

The Continuum

¹⁶ “We were in a position where life was becoming impossible, and if we had passed into a region from which there is no return through human aid, we had but two alternatives: One was to on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable condition as best we could; and the other was to accept spiritual help.” (BB p25)
Some of this, of course, deals with out of control alcoholic drinking, but the consequences of such a life seemed able to wreck everything else, too, even in sobriety! More wrecking, more hopelessness and more confusion – our **spiritual malady** in action.

No, we're not talking about that pesky alien in the Star Trek episodes.

An old adage of AA wisdom says that "*Alcoholics are egomaniacs with inferiority complexes.*" This has never been a humorous or light hearted concept for us. Although it might sound like another one of the famous "jokes" being bandied around in our meetings, this idea cuts right to the heart of another side of our ***spiritual malady***, *a side we are familiar with, a side which has been a veritable cornucopia of alcoholic misery for us.*

Based on the ***spiritual malady's*** idea that nothing will work out and that the world and its people are "*out to get us,*" even the most reasonable risks become so threatening that doing nothing seems to make the most sense of all the choices. In fact, many alcoholics reveal a great talent for producing "horror movies" in their minds. The doctor's opinion speaks of not "*being able to drink like other people,*" (BB p xxix *Doctor's Opinion*) but under the miserable handicap of this part of our spiritual affliction, we were not able to "*dream like other people!*" We were *afraid* to dream like other people!

Being risk averse to the extreme degree thanks to our ***spiritual malady's*** always threatening world view, our alcoholic lives became a self-fulfilling dark prophecy of failed dreams, procrastination and catastrophes of ambitions. (BB p xxx – *Doctor's Opinion*) The more failures we "*racked up*" as we went through our lives with ***untreated alcoholism***, the more "*gun shy*" we became about having any dreams at all – even modest ones! Sooner or later, although usually before we came to AA, we simply gave up, considering all these ambitions of ours to be hopeless folly, reserved only for the brave and the beautiful.

Step 7 tells us all – *both the sponsor and the new man* – that this outlook of spiritual cowardice has to end! When the new member understands this part of our program, the spiritual transformation he seeks has begun in earnest! How could a sincere sponsor settle for anything less than 100% spiritual recovery as he leads his hopeful friend through our step work?

Life's outcomes are not as absolute as we once thought. There are plenty of wonderful possibilities between "*perfectly perfect*" and "*alcoholically wretched.*" Spiritual progress calls every recovering alcoholic to have this new outlook when he considers the possible outcomes of the risks he takes. So long as they are reasonable, thoughtful, sober gambles to start with, he can expect they are probably going to work out just about as well as they do for everyone else. Further, the AA program's emphasis on a careful observation of his alcoholic history, that is, his history of one dream botched up after another thanks to his untreated disease, prepares him to undertake these exciting personal ambitions – to take risks now possible because of his new spiritual strength – that he will be able to live with afterwards, regardless of the outcome.

In terms of “outcomes,” sober alcoholics once outfitted with the program's ***spiritual progress*** are extremely durable. They can expect to enjoy and endure both good and bad outcomes while sustaining their ***spiritual progress*** in good working order. The one outcome they must avoid in order to protect their progress from our relentless disease is *hopelessness*. That choice is not on the table for the ***spiritually fit***, (BB p85) sober AA member.

Step 7 is the step which takes that destructive possibility “*off the table!*”

Taking Advantage of Good Examples

This may sound so simple as to not merit a place in our list of the manifestations of ***spiritual progress***. However, alcoholics seem remarkably willing to miss such beneficial observations even when surrounded by good examples of all sorts of things – good sobriety, good AA spirituality, good health maintenance, good risk taking, good AA membership and good character! The list can go on for miles, and, unquestionably, lots of these good examples are probably walking around in our meeting groups, the products of AA's astonishing program of recovery!

This matter of noticing and following good examples is quite new to most of us when we finally arrive at our first AA meeting. Thoroughly battered by our disease, we begin to think that our experience makes being cynical a good choice. Once again, thanks to our common ***spiritual malady***, it's difficult for us to trust people. In fact, make that “*difficult to trust anyone!*” Our dark, spiritual distrust of the people of the world around us effectively eliminated any of the great benefits we might enjoy if we were only able to see the positive side of people's character a little better.

Instead, in a way consistent with our sick idea that everyone was out to trick us, humiliate us, reject us or out compete with us, the very first thought we held, thanks to our ***spiritual malady***, was that we had better consider all these people suspicious! On the occasions when they were pleasant with us, we knew that they had ulterior motives of some sort which would emerge to, sooner or later, make our precarious situation even worse. We had spiritually eliminated the possibility that things might actually turn out to be alright. Again, we considered any type of outright admiration of *anyone* to be perilous folly.

The predictable result of such an outlook was that, over time, we found ourselves isolated from fairly normal people we *could not trust* in favor of good, drunken friends we thought we *could trust*. Those folks hanging around the bar with us day after day or pounding down bottles of vodka in our music drenched, late

night, slobbery argument parties were known commodities. *We really did know exactly who they were and what they were like. We thought they were like just what we thought we were like!* No mystery, and little likelihood that we would be “caught off guard” by a sudden display of sincere decency.

All too often, we eliminated such uncertainties by drinking – and living – in the melancholic solitude of an alcoholic, and austere, loneliness. Once that cycle began, it reinforced itself. Our possibilities of encountering an unexpected, pleasant surprise among our acquaintances *really had been permanently eliminated*. Still, with all the distractions of even the company of other drunks removed, our alcoholic **self-pity** and **spiritual negativism** could flourish unhampered even if it meant that we were endlessly whining where only the air around us could hear our moans.

Many different types of our non-alcoholic peers benefited greatly by sincerely admiring what they consider to be the best examples of various traits they saw in each other. In the depths of our alcoholic drinking, they seldom saw such admirable qualities in us! In fact, we usually had a habit of sorely testing even their most compassionate tolerance most of the time.

Can any of us consider such a state to be anything besides more of the **spiritual malady** of our untreated alcoholism? It's an outlook problem! And, as such, these painful thoughts are clearly a part of the spiritual dilemma we hope to solve in our AA program of recovery!

There can be little question that recovery from the disease of alcoholism will include a successful re-integration into the non-alcoholic society which surrounds us. Being excluded from that community was clearly one of the most painful results occurring during our worst drinking. We could bravely claim “I don't care what other people think,” but that was almost never the case. We did care. What other people thought of us was important, and when the opinions of other people were constantly and abrasively negative, our ideas about ourselves followed the descent of those public opinions of others.

That leads to the other side of the “good example” part of the **spiritual malady**. As we watched all the other, non-alcoholic people criticize our alcoholic behavior, our main focus became combating our “bad press.” We had no time or energy to devote to being “good examples” ourselves. Well, even that had to change as we progressed spiritually.

Once we accepted the idea that we were “on the hook” to be a contributing member of this world community, we realized that, although part of that responsibility would be trying to benefit from the “good examples” of others, the other side of the coin would be for us to try to be “good examples” ourselves for

the benefit of the next guy. It is fairly easy to track the new man's release from his previous, alcoholic "*crazed self-hood*" to this bright new possibility of "*wanting to be included.*" It is a journey of realization, perhaps beginning with **alcoholic behavior** and **alcoholic thinking**, but finally that journey arrives at this next, life changing "spiritual lode stone," thanks to Step 7.

Spiritual Inadequacy

Most likely, we have all heard our fellow AA's speak of "*never feeling like I was enough,*" as one of the powerfully debilitating experiences they encountered during the low points of their untreated disease. On the other hand, our Big Book seems to repeatedly introduce ideas about humility. Confusion may arise in the new man's understanding of the spiritually complex proposition of "being enough" and "being humble" all at the same time.

The "*never feeling like I was enough*" or "*never feeling like I was good enough*" ideas were a predictable result of yet another side of the alcoholic's **spiritual malady**. When the unceasing torment of our spiritual dilemma's "threatening world" was accompanied by the fact that this same "threatening, dangerous world" seemed to winning one match after another as life progressed under the burden of that toxic, spiritual outlook, most alcoholics concluded that holding out for any better outcomes was simply no more than yet another hopeless folly.

Unhappily, although this pessimism during our alcoholic drinking careers might have seemed pretty sensible at the time, how can it be extended into a sober life? When our fellow AA members, enjoying the exciting and spectacular new possibilities of a life replete with an *actual spiritual awakening*, still seem to suffer the suffocating limits of this "inadequacy" idea, we have to suspect that maybe their spiritual progress is, somehow, incomplete.

In this case, our Step 7 sponsor will need to make the most basic idea about **recovery from alcoholism** absolutely certain in the understanding of his sponsee. The important work of Step 7 is a new conclusion that the new man, although certainly not a superman or spiritual giant, *is not inadequate!* The old outlook of the **spiritual malady** demanded that every undertaking in sobriety began with his acceptance of the idea that "*he is not good enough*" or "*he doesn't deserve such a success.*" All of these self-defeating, negative hobgoblins must be replaced with "*he probably is good enough,*" or, at least, "*odds are that he actually is good enough ... I guess we'll see!*"

What about the opinion of the AA member who, after reading through this, says "*That's not a spiritual milestone!*" to such an idea? Let's take a look at the moving parts. This alcoholic dilemma certainly arises from the new man's outlook

on the world around him, that is, this problem has emerged as an effect of his ***spiritual malady***. As such, it is a spiritual problem which falls very neatly into the list of such problems our AA steps are supposed to solve.

If that doesn't get done, part of the blame has to find its way to the sponsor. Incomplete recovery can be almost as ***"cunning and baffling"*** (BB p59) as alcoholic drinking!

Mature, Sincere and Decent Instead of Just

Altruistic

Of course our Big Book emphasizes the central importance of helping others. In fact, this idea is elevated to the status of super importance in the first sentence of Chapter 7: ***"Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics."*** (BB p89)

Too often, this entire concept is neatly bound up and moved over to Step 12. Certainly Step 12 is the place where one finds the actual words about *"carrying the message to other alcoholics,"* but the Step 7 "side" of this rests squarely on the question of ***"Why?"*** *What is going to be the motive for carrying the message?* In fact, why would anyone insist that there must be a "motive" anyway? Has the Big Book's description of the alcoholic – both while drinking and during his recovery – jaded our view of his character so severely that we have become uninterested in considering an explanation of *anything* he might do other than as an answer to some motive he holds?

The "trade off" scheme seems to fall apart all too quickly when considered from the point of view of more mature sobriety. That refers to the proposition that one's sobriety will be sustained as a sort of compensation for working with other alcoholics.¹⁷ A grotesque type of spiritual paycheck? Once your sponsee undertakes a journey down this road, a confusing number of other considerations will "pop up" in no time. Perhaps, both the first and the worst will be the matter of "judgment." How will his "message carrying" be judged?

As altruism? (Hence the title of this section.) Will it be "helping others" for the reason that he will be repaid for his efforts with sobriety? What alternative could there be to such a proposition?

Well, there is one, and it has everything to do with the very real goal of what can be achieved in the new man's work on our Step 7. Perhaps this new member will

¹⁷ Some AA's call this *"contract altruism."* It tends to become both impersonal and ineffective as Twelfth Step Work.

help others simply because he has been transformed into a person who, *well, helps others!* Such a wonderful transformation is very much within reach when he “walks away” from the disabling spiritual handicap of his alcoholic outlook, that is, when he becomes determined *for himself* that he is finished suffering under the ***spiritual malady!*** When Step 7's reference to the “removal of shortcomings” is viewed this way, what AA wouldn't want such things to be “removed?”

Prayer: Knowing What's Right and Wanting to Do it

In the supernatural theme of our Book's discussion on the use of prayer, we find the following stern admonition: ***“We ask especially for freedom from self-will, and are careful to make no requests for ourselves only. We may ask for ourselves, however, if others will be helped. We are careful never to pray for our own selfish ends.”*** (BB p87) Step 7 seems to join in with this idea by asking for *“our shortcomings to be removed.”*¹⁸

There can be no disagreement with the fundamental concept of this great idea, at all! However, if, as a sponsor, you find yourself dealing with a new member who does not subscribe to all the religious “moving parts” of this proposition, there may be more work to do before proceeding, and that “more work” should not be interpreted as simply insisting on his acceptance of enough of the theological ideas inherent in the matter to “make sense” of the Big Book's comment. Of course, such an effort at conversion would not be consistent with the ***“primary purpose”*** clause in our traditions.

First, to the question of what this has to do with the ***spiritual malady***. Step 7 directly addresses the new man's goal that “shortcomings” will be “removed.” The premise here is that those “shortcomings” are an undeniable result of the untreated alcoholic's response based on his damaged outlook toward both people and everything else. That destructive outlook was, for him and for the days of his alcoholic drinking, something which seemed to be a good idea, in fact, a constantly necessary idea!

His problems materialized as loneliness resulting from his untolerated alcoholic behavior and the dark unhappiness of the twisted psychology of his alcoholic thoughts, but when only those superficial difficulties were addressed as the central matters in his recovery, it soon became clear that the effort had been incomplete. A new life where he began to “do the right things” was a promising beginning, but a spiritual renewal had even more to do with *“why he was*

¹⁸ The new member's prayers are a profoundly individual matter for him. How exactly did the authors of our Book set out such specific and concrete conditions? Part – *the constructive part* – of the foundational basis for such instructions arises from getting good results and part – *the less constructive part* – arises from numerous Biblical assertions regarding all sorts of uniquely traditional religious things.

beginning to do the right things!"

The adage of AA wisdom which says: "*Fake it until you make it!*" spells this out very understandably. A new member's ability to even so much as "*fake it*" is already a promising, exciting advance when compared to the alcoholic disaster he endured before he came to us. However, the AA program of step work describes a journey to a ***spiritual awakening***. We might consider the "*fake it*" phase to be better behavior and better thinking, while considering the "*make it*" phase to represent a real, lasting spiritual departure from the raging alcoholic ***spiritual malady*** which had brutally dominated his life during the period of his alcoholic drinking.

One outcome of the new man's experiences with this crushing problem was to begin to think that he really didn't have much of an idea of what the "right" response to the challenges in his life might be. Under what became the suffocating and incomprehensibly negative lens of his ***spiritual malady*** outlook, he was gradually convinced that even his best ideas were inescapably flawed. This might not have been entirely the case, and, as such, that may have clouded the reality of his situation in a very confusing way.

It turns out that, even during his drinking, he remained quite able to "conceptually" produce good solutions to direct his life, but he also seemed *spiritually trapped* in not being able to follow through on any of those fairly good ideas. The outlook on the world provided to him under the cloud of his ***spiritual malady*** continually sabotaged his prospects for "*doing the right thing.*"

Psychiatrists characterize the state of having no idea what the right decision might be as *classical psychopathy*, that is, one who is in that state is a *psychopath*. However, in the AA sense of things, the ***insanity*** noted in our Step 2 is somewhat different than this nice, neat clinical concept. In some ways, it is even more discouraging.

The psychopath may find himself standing with a bloody knife over the body of his last victim, wondering why everyone seems so upset. The untreated alcoholic, on the other hand, knows why everyone is upset, simply wondering why, although he knew what the right thing was, he didn't do it. Again. His fairly good ideas of the right action fell prey to his ***spiritual malady***, becoming all manner of unsuccessful actions.

Those acceptable ideas of his may have begun in good order, but they had to develop into action under the *mistaken certainties* that his plans would not work out, everyone was out to ruin him or that trickery and lying presented the only chance he had to get what he needed. That list could be extended to include the endless varieties of the alcoholic dilemma we hear about in meetings.

His problems did not stem from having bad ideas so much as from having fairly good ideas which then became bad actions as a result of his outlook, that is, as a result of his ***spiritual malady***.

Turning Examples into a General Principle of Spiritual Progress

The seven brief examples provided above represent a sample of the basic idea of the targets of ***"removing shortcomings"*** in Step 7. Such descriptions could go on and on, but, hopefully, enough specifics have been cited to introduce a general principle which can serve to provide any additional ones which might be required in an individual case of sponsorship. Remember: **Sponsorship is always a very personal matter in every case. We apply the AA program as a "blanket proposition" for recovery, but we apply it in a very individual way.**

Try it out. The following is a short list of other possibilities which can be explained in roughly the same way as the ones above.

Stopping the Automatic Habit of "Nightmare Making"
Dreaming is not Optional
Placing Fears in a Continuum of Possible Outcomes
Valuing and Trusting Our Accomplishments Toward Recovery
Remaining Basically Hopeful, No Matter What
Spiritual Progress Invites Us to an Exciting New Life, and,
Outlook May Really Be Everything!

The repeating form is straightforward enough. In the untreated alcoholic, the outlook imposed by the ***spiritual malady*** automatically converts what could otherwise be fairly normal reactions to life's challenges into a life or death battle for survival in a hostile, unfair, threatening world. Be sure the new member understands that this is precisely what must be "removed." Once this terrible impediment has been abandoned in favor of a new spiritual outlook where there is a chance for good to prevail at the same odds which the non-alcoholics accept as "a normal part of the package" of life, his results will improve dramatically.

And, they will improve "from the bottom up," thoroughly changing what had been previously an intractable alcoholic nightmare into the bright possibility of truly a new happiness and satisfaction in his sober life. The new member can be reassured that such changes are actually not reliant in any way on the supernatural models imposed by religious "outside issues."

Step Seven

A Journey of Reconciliation Rejoining the World, Both Inside and Outside the Man

Although we have already noted the importance of the idea of reconciliation, the *actual working* of Step 7 brings it "*front and center*" in a very formal way. There is no need to draw a long suffering sigh at the prospect of yet another endless dissertation. Relax, most of the *heavy lifting* has already been done in the earlier sections.

The breakthrough at Step 7 represents your new man's commitment to actively resist the bad effects he has suffered from the ***spiritual malady***. If that sounds suspiciously more psychological rather than spiritual, *it is!* In an off-handed application of yet another AA adage, "*Better thinking is always the result of better actions, not the other way around*" your man's progress will depend on a bit of a metaphorical adjustment to that old idea.

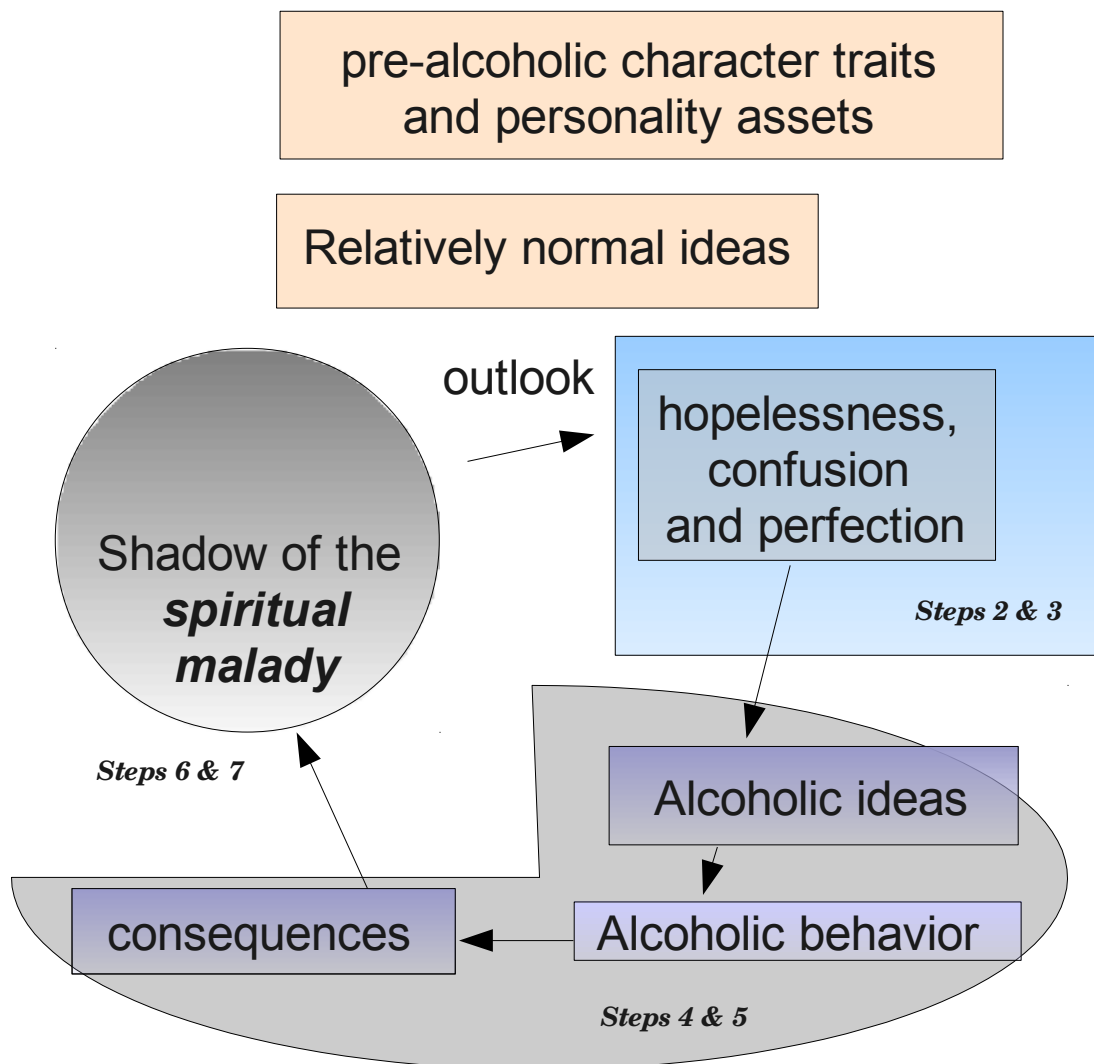
The adage itself refers, most likely, to the agonizingly endless, *reinforcing dance* between his ***alcoholic behavior*** and his ***alcoholic thinking*** during the new man's drinking history. However, in this case, we'll elevate the terms of the adage to a metalevel of redefinition where the spiritual side of Step 7's goals can fit in a little more understandably.

In its original form, our adage implies that perhaps the job of taking on ***alcoholic thinking*** is best approached by addressing our *alcoholic actions*. The idea is that, when we change our actions, changes in our thinking – changes which might have otherwise been inaccessible – will develop as a consequence. We can apply this same line of thought at the metalevel.

In that case, we will presume that our spiritual state – especially our spiritual outlook on our world – will improve as a consequence of "going against" what always previously seemed to be our automatic *alcoholic thoughts*. After all, at this point it's pretty clear that those *alcoholic thoughts* were the manifestation of our ***spiritual malady***. In our "three layered" model of alcoholism's destructive effects on one's life, we segregated those effects – and *causes* – by the depth of our characters at which they seemed to function.

alcoholic behavior – the most obvious and superficial
alcoholic thinking (*psychology*) – operates slightly deeper than the behavior,
and,
the alcoholic ***spiritual malady*** – at the ***root*** of our problem¹⁹

¹⁹ "*Though our decision was a vital and crucial step, it could have little permanent effect unless at once followed by a strenuous effort to face, and be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us. Our liquor was but a symptom.*" (BB p64) This, from our book's discussion of Step 4, presents the idea of the original adage.

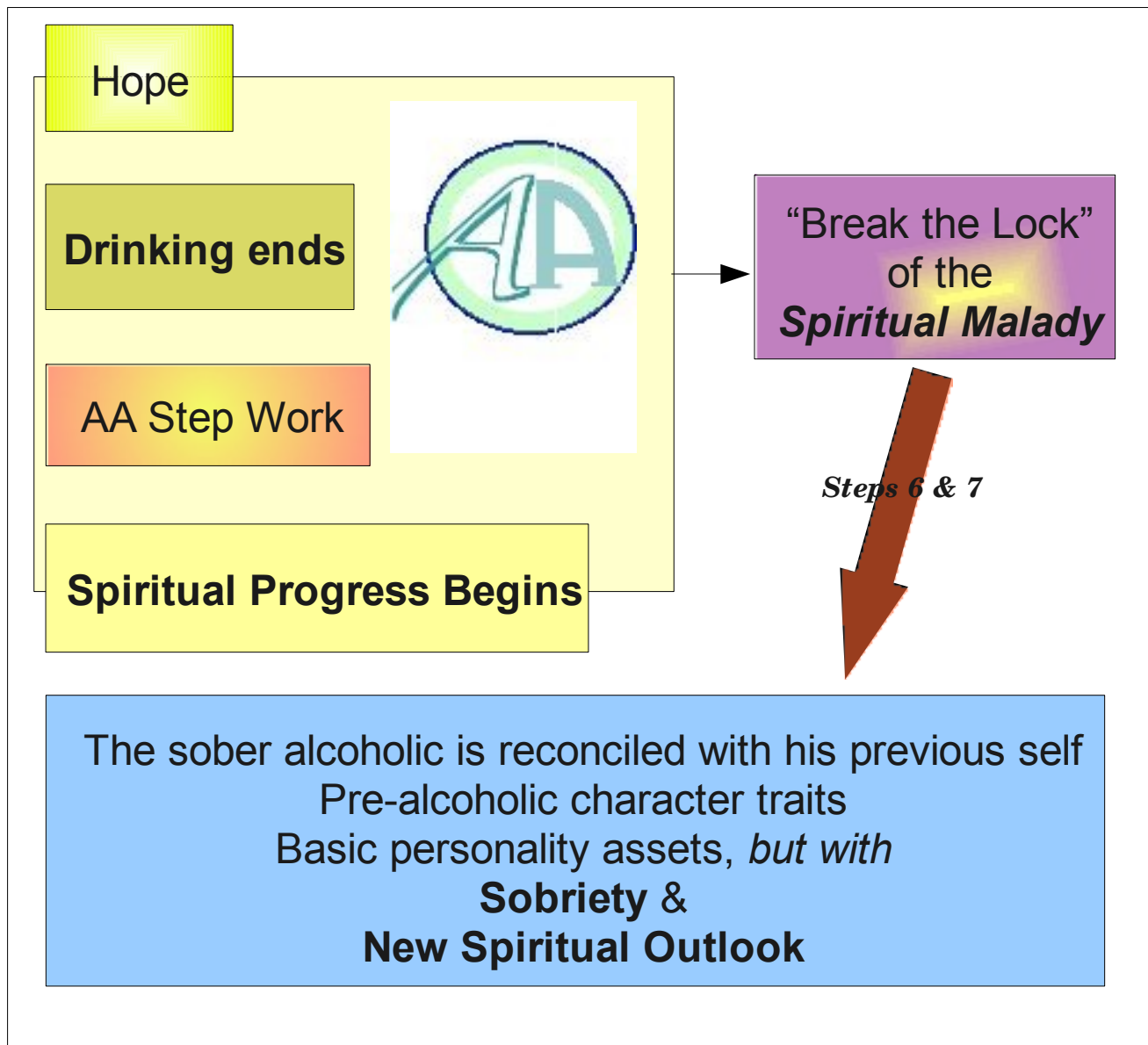


The adage, in its original form, makes the excellent point that we, as newly sober alcoholics, may not be able to address (*access*) our **alcoholic thinking** directly. However, it also implies that we **can address** our *alcoholic actions (behavior)* directly, making changes to them *accessible* during our earliest efforts at recovery.

The same adage, in our new form, "ups the ante." When applied to the new man's progress at Step 7, it becomes, "An improvement in our spiritual condition is always the product of improvements in our thinking, never the other way around." Far from the supernatural approach of "just laying there, filled with faith ..." this new idea suggests *action!* What action? A new, active focus on "going against" the dark old ideas which always seem to spring up as a relentless foundation for every new thought!

First, we go against the thoughts. When we resist their contaminating effect, they will subside. As they subside, we will realize that our spiritual dilemma has also begun to ease, that is, we will see that we have actually made ***spiritual progress***.

When such an effort is attempted long enough and in a determined way, our new man can begin to enjoy the exciting success of "*rinsing the stain out of that old dirty shirt.*" Although those who seek all their answers as some aspect of mythology might not agree, what can we call this but ***spiritual progress?***



Although we clearly cannot think our way out of our alcoholic disease, it also seems, we can't really do very much to simply change our spiritual state by simply deciding²⁰ to make it different. For those of us locked in the thrall of various forms of religious mythology, this often manifests as the selection of an alternate religion or the further hybridization of a religious tradition already held previously.

For the rest of us, that is, those requiring – *and seeking* – some serious, common sense, AA style spiritual progress, we will still need to *do something* in the absence of the “*just lay there and wait for it to be removed*” idea. If your sponsorship encounters such a challenge at Step 7, relax. The “common sense,” non-supernatural approach, historically, has produced excellent results. Down the road, the new member in your sponsorship may be grateful that you went the “extra mile” to straighten all this out and make it available to him on the quite effective basis of AA ideas.

Thankfully, our AA style, spiritual ideas don't require any complicating additions.

20 “*Many of us had moral and philosophical convictions galore, but we could not live up to them even though we would have liked to. Neither could we reduce our self-centeredness much by wishing or trying on our own power. We had to have God's help.*” (BB p62) Any approach which did not include our newly discovered spiritual commitment would almost certainly not amount to what we were seeking.