

by Fr. Bill Wigmore



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Writing in the book “12 Steps & 12 Traditions,” A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson asks, “Who cares to admit complete defeat?” Then he answers quickly for all of us, as he responds emphatically, “Practically no one!” Yet it nearly always requires the experience of some kind of personal defeat to bring us into recovery - and it often requires the ongoing experience of additional defeats to keep us growing. Carl Jung was fond of saying that by the time we reach mid-life, success has practically nothing left to teach us; but then he was quick to add that, if only we will allow it, defeat can become our greatest teacher. The problem, of course, is that few of us willingly sign up to learn these hard lessons; and, fewer still are those who will actively seek it! “Lord, help me to grow and to change; but make it all painless and make it damn quick!”

Modern Twelve Step fellowships owe their origins to the Oxford Group. It was this program of spiritual change in which Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob found their sobriety, along with the first forty or more alcoholics they helped . Originally described as, a “First Century Christian Fellowship,” the Group attempted a return to the earliest days of Christianity when the words and actions of a simple, Jewish carpenter somehow took root in his follower’s hearts and souls and exhibited the power to transform their lives at very deep levels and in very great numbers. Oxford Group people wanted what those first followers of Jesus had found. They wanted “the peace that passes human understanding” - a peace that wasn’t disturbed by what all of us experience as the many pains of life. Some of these early followers of Jesus even went to their deaths with a smile on their faces and with love and forgiveness in their hearts. Either they were mad or they’d lay hold of the very secret of life.

Oxford Group people wanted this peace but they were eminently practical in how they set about finding it. If some practice worked, they used it – if it didn’t, they discarded it. Perhaps one of the most important things they borrowed came to them from the writings of Professor Robert Speer. These were a set of four characteristics or personality traits the author attributed to the life and teachings of Jesus. Taken together, they formed the key spiritual principles his early followers attempted to adopt and put into practice. They were clearly laid out for all to see in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

What the Group’s members found was that these principles worked just as well 2,000 years

later. The four principles were: Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love. Without them, it seemed, peace was impossible, both in one's personal life and in the larger world around them as well. But when these principles were lived and, indeed, when they were made the absolute basis for one's life, the peace of God could be found and, in fact, it knew no bounds. Those forty or more recovered alcoholics who left the Group to form their own program of Alcoholics Anonymous soon wrote that they had found access to a Power and to a way of life that catapulted them into a veritable "fourth dimension of existence," the reality of which they had never suspected or even dreamed.

Now entry into that "Great Reality" nearly always begins with a gut-level and gut-wrenching experience of HONESTY. At first, the HONESTY is forced upon us by circumstances beyond our control. This is what Jung referred to the "mid-life crisis" and it is the same crisis which addicts and alcoholics likewise face, although their chronological age is incidental.

A world that was false because it was built upon a "false self" collapses. An inflated Ego that had always ruled supreme and had managed to carry one successfully enough through life now comes face-to-face with a problem, or an event to which it finds itself incapable to overcome or accept. The internal manager – the Ego that had been firmly in control finally throws in the towel and admits defeat. Whenever this happens to us, we feel like we are dying. The world we've put together and operated within has fallen apart; but it's then, and only then it seems, that we are ready both spiritually and psychologically to HONESTLY ask for help. This is the jumping off point for recovery – this is Step One - but it is only the beginning.

Unless HONESTY is continually sought and practiced as a way of life, the Ego will return and the recovery process that has begun will soon be sabotaged. Recovery requires a new and rigorous approach to HONESTY. It requires an HONEST relationship between our innermost selves and with God. It likewise requires an HONEST relationship with each and every other human being we meet. When our internal sense of peace is lost – if we are HONEST - we will know the Ego has returned and life has presented us with a new opportunity to grow.

Oxford Group people were no worse or more Ego-driven than most other people; and, HONESTLY, neither are alcoholics and addicts. But like those early Christians, many of them had found a way of life and a way of relating HONESTLY to God, and to their fellows, and to all the events of life that brought them into conscious contact with an inner-peace that was worth whatever pains life might bring. For some of them, it even extended to death on a cross or to facing lions in a Roman arena while praying for strength and forgiving the cheering crowds. Sometimes I'll trade my inner-peace for an Ego-attack when the check-out line at the grocery store is too long or when a traffic light conspires with other cosmic forces to turn red and stop

my inflating-Ego in its tracks. When I face my Ego-insanity and fears HONESTLY and when I turn from it and ask God for help, the attack subsides and I grow – when I do not, I'm back at Step One being asked to learn some new lesson in powerlessness or unmanageability. Along with Bill Wilson my Ego asks, "Who likes to admit complete defeat?" It's then I'm grateful for those who've gone before over the past 2,000 years and found a new way to live and to love and to be at peace no matter what. This is never easy but it's ABSOLUTELY and HONESTLY the only way.

This is the second in a five part series on the Four Absolutes that can be found at:
<http://www.austinrecovery.org/images/website142/thefourabsolutes.pdf>

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