

Step Twelve

"Having made an effort to practice these principles in all our affairs, we tried to carry this message to other compulsive gamblers."

If we've made it to this point, we've had a spiritual awakening. Though the nature of our awakening is as individual and personal as our spiritual path, the similarities in our experiences are striking. Almost without exception, our members speak of feeling free, of feeling more light-hearted more of the time, of caring more about others, and of the ever-increasing ability to step outside ourselves and participate fully in life. The way this looks to others is astonishing. People who knew us when we were actively gambling, often appearing withdrawn and angry, tell us that we're different people. Indeed, many of us feel as if we've begun a second life. We know the importance of remembering where we came from, so we make an effort not to forget, but the way we lived and the things that motivated us seem increasingly bizarre the longer we stay clean.

The change in us didn't happen overnight. It happened slowly and gradually as we worked the steps. Our spirits awakened a bit at a time. It became increasingly more natural for us to practice spiritual principles and increasingly more uncomfortable to act out on character defects. Notwithstanding the powerful, one-of-a-kind experiences some of us have had, we've all slowly and painstakingly built a relationship with a Power greater than ourselves. That power, whether it's our own best and highest nature or a force outside ourselves, has become ours to tap into whenever we want. It guides our actions and provides inspiration for our continued growth.

- What is my overall experience as a result of working the steps?
- What has my spiritual awakening been like?
- What lasting changes have resulted from my spiritual awakening?

Each time we work through the Twelve Steps we will have a different experience. Subtleties of meaning for each of the spiritual principles will become apparent, and we will find that as our understanding grows, we are also growing in new ways and in new areas. The ways in which we are able to be honest, for instance, will expand along with our basic understanding of what it means to be honest. We will see how practicing the principle of honesty must first be applied to ourselves before we are able to be honest with others. We will see that honesty can be an expression of our personal integrity. As our understanding of the spiritual principles grows, so will the depth of our spiritual awakening.

- Which spiritual principles have been connected to which steps, for me, and how have those contributed to my spiritual awakening?
- What does the phrase "spiritual awakening" mean to me?

We Tried to Carry this Message

Many of us recall the first time we heard the words, "You never have to gamble again if you don't want to." For many of us, hearing this message was shocking. Perhaps we'd never thought in terms of "having" to gamble before, and were surprised to find out just how much truth that statement held. *Of course*, we thought, *gambling ceased to be a choice for me a long time ago*. Although just hearing this message may or may not have resulted in us immediately stopping gambling, we still heard the message. Someone carried it to us.

Some of us had the experience of believing that we could stay clean in GA, but when it came to recovery, that seemed beyond us. Gaining a sense of self-respect, making friends, being able to carry ourselves out in the "real world" without it being obvious that we were compulsive gamblers all seemed like more than we could actually expect from GA. The day we began to believe that this program could do more for us than just help us stay clean was a tune we remember as a turning point in our recovery. What happened to give us that sense of hope was that someone gave us a reason to believe. Maybe it was someone sharing at a meeting with whom we identified in a very personal way. Maybe it was the cumulative effects of hearing many compulsive gamblers share that recovery was possible. Maybe it was the unconditional love and quiet insistence of our sponsor that we could recover. In whichever way we heard it, it was the message, and someone carried it to us.

Some of us have the experience of staying abstinent for a long time and finding joy in recovery. Then we experience a tragedy. Maybe it's the breakup of a long-term committed relationship or the death of a loved one. Maybe it's the relapse and death of someone with whom we have been friends in GA. Maybe it's that we find ourselves destitute. Maybe it's simply that we've realized that other GA members aren't perfect, and so they're capable of hurting us. Because of whatever crisis we've experienced, we find that

we've lost our faith. We no longer believe that GA holds the answer for us. The bargain we thought we had made - we'd stay clean and try to do the right thing and, consequently, our lives would be happy - had been breached, and we were left wondering about our purpose in life all over again. At some point, we began to believe again. Maybe someone who had been through the same crisis reached out to us and helped us through in a way no one else could have. Again, someone carried the message to us.

- What are the different ways in which I've experienced the message?

So the message can be broken down very simply. It is that we can stay abstinent, that we can recover, that there is hope. Recalling the times when we heard the message personally will provide part of the answer to why we should now carry the message, but there is more.

"We can only keep what we have by giving it away." This saying is perhaps the most powerful reason we can present for carrying the message. Many of us wonder, though, exactly how this concept works. It's simple, really. We reinforce our recovery by sharing it with others. When we tell someone that people who go to meetings regularly don't gamble, we are more likely to apply that practice to our own recovery. When we tell someone that the answer is in the steps, we are more likely to look there ourselves. When we tell newcomers to get and use a sponsor, we are more likely to stay in touch with our own.

There are probably at least as many ways to carry the message as there are recovering compulsive gamblers. Greeting a newcomer that we met at the previous night's meeting and remembering his or her name is powerful and extraordinarily welcoming to a compulsive gambler who feels alone. Opening a meeting makes sure there is a place for the message to be carried. Taking on a service position in any capacity helps keep GA itself going, and we can do a great deal of good if we approach our service to the fellowship in a caring, loving, and humble way. Sponsoring other compulsive gamblers brings to life the therapeutic value of one compulsive gambler helping another.

- What kind of service work am I doing to carry the message?

Sometimes it's challenging to carry the message. The person with whom we've decided to share the message seems unable to hear it. This can range from someone who keeps relapsing to someone who keeps choosing destructive behavior. It's tempting to think that our efforts are being wasted and we should just give up on such a person. Before we make such a decision, we should think about all the mitigating circumstances. Say we're sponsoring someone who just isn't following our direction. We've suggested a writing assignment, and we don't hear from the person again until a fresh crisis is brewing. We've shared, with all the enthusiasm we can summon, about our own experience with the situation the person is facing, explaining in great detail how our disease was present and how we used the steps to find recovery, but our sponsee keeps doing the same destructive thing over and over again. This can be very frustrating, but before we give up, we need to remember that our choice isn't *whether* to carry the message, but *how*.

We need to get our own egos out of the way. We don't get to take credit - or blame - for someone else's recovery. We simply present the message as positively as we can, and remain available to help when we're asked. We also need to remember that we can't possibly know what's going on in another person's mind or spirit. Our message may seem to be missing its mark, but perhaps the person just isn't ready to hear it today. It may be that the words we spoke will stay with a person for a long time and may resurface at exactly the right moment. If we think about it, we can all recall things we heard GA speakers say when we were new that we didn't understand at the time, but which rose up in our minds years later and gave us reason to hope or a solution to a problem we were experiencing. We carry the message, and we share it freely, but we cannot ever force another person to get the message. The principle that applies to our fellowship's public relations policy - attraction, not promotion - applies very well to our personal efforts to carry the message, too.

It may also be the case that we're not the best person to sponsor someone. Individuals have different needs and learn in different ways. Some people may thrive with one sponsor but not do well with someone who has a different sponsorship style. Some sponsors give a lot of writing assignments. Some are very insistent about their sponsees going to a certain number of meetings. Some are very "proactive," while others may simply respond to a sponsee's stated needs. No type is better or worse than any other. They're just different.

Another time we might find it very hard to carry the message is when we're not feeling very positive about life or recovery. It's probably our first impulse to go to a meeting and dump all our problems out so we can purge them from our own spirits. But GA meetings exist to provide a place to carry the message. Dumping our problems without tying them to recovery or trying to make it clear what the message is doesn't further the primary purpose of our groups. We can carry the message even if we just point out that we're having terrible problems but are not gambling over it and that we're attending a meeting and reaching out to work on our recovery. In most cases, though, the best way to carry the message is to focus on the newcomers in the room and tell them what's good about recovery in Gamblers Anonymous. We should also

keep in mind that sometimes, no matter how long we've been clean, we need to hear the message, and if we sit quietly in a meeting, we have a good chance of doing so.

- What are some different ways of carrying the message? Which ones do I personally participate in?
- What is my personal style of sponsorship?
- What is the difference between attraction and promotion?
- What does it do for me to carry the message?
- How are the Fifth Unity Step and the Twelfth Recovery Step tied together?
- What keeps me coming back and trusting the GA program? What is selfless service? How do I practice it?

To Other Compulsive Gamblers

Why does the Twelfth Step specify that we carry the message to other compulsive gamblers? Why did GA work for us when nothing else had? Almost every one of us had someone - a teacher, a counselor, a family member, a police officer - tell us that gambling was killing us and destroying all we cared about, that if we just stayed away from our gambling friends and haunts, and otherwise limited our access to gambling, we'd be able to change our lives. Most of us probably even agreed on some level, unless we were in complete denial. So why couldn't we find relief until we found Gamblers Anonymous? What did those other GA members have that made us believe recovery was possible?

In a word: credibility. We knew that they, who were just like us, had stopped gambling and found a new way to live. They didn't care what we had or didn't have. Most of us were grateful to find out that we qualified. We knew we'd suffered enough, but we wanted to be accepted. And we were. The compulsive gamblers who were there for us when we first started coming to meetings made us feel welcome. They offered their phone numbers and encouraged us to call any time. But what we really found important was the identification. Members who had gambled just like we did shared their experience with getting clean. Members who knew from personal experience exactly how isolated and alone we felt seemed to know instinctively that a simple, loving hug was what we needed. It seemed as if the whole group knew exactly what we needed without us having to ask.

We often say to one another that we're fortunate to have this program; it gives us a way to cope with life on life's terms. After we stay clean for a time, we realize that the principles of Gamblers Anonymous are actually completely universal and could probably change the world if everyone practiced them. We may begin to wonder why we don't open up GA to all those who have any kind of problem. As we learned from our predecessors, having a single purpose is probably one of the most effective ways of ensuring that the opportunity will remain for a compulsive gambler to find the identification he or she needs. If GA tried to be all things to all people, an addict might walk in, wanting only to know how to stop gambling, and not be able to find anyone who knew.

- Why was a GA member able to reach me in a way that no one else ever had? Describe the experience.
- What is the therapeutic value of one compulsive gambler helping another?
- Why is identification so important?

We can't be all things to all people; we shouldn't even try. This doesn't mean, however, that we can't share our recovery with others. In fact, we won't be able to help it. When we live a program, the results show up in every aspect of our lives.

Practicing these Principles in all Our Affairs

When we talk about practicing the principles of recovery in all our affairs, the key word is "practice." We just need to keep trying to apply spiritual principles to our lives, not be able to do it perfectly in every situation. The spiritual benefits we derive from working this step depend on our effort, not our success.

For instance, we try to practice the principle of compassion in every situation in our lives. It's probably relatively easy to practice the principle of compassion with an active gambler who has just walked into her first GA meeting, no matter how belligerent or needy that newcomer is. But what about someone who has just returned from a relapse, or a multiple relapser? What if he walks in blaming GA for his relapse? What if she casually walks back into the rooms projecting an attitude that seems to take recovery for granted? What if it's someone we sponsored? We may find that practicing the principle of compassion doesn't come as easily as it used to. We don't *feel* compassionate toward the person, but we can still practice the principle of compassion. All we have to do is continue to carry the message without conditions. Our sponsor can help us learn how to be compassionate without giving the impression that we think relapsing is okay. We can pray and meditate, asking our Higher Power to help us be compassionate.

This step calls upon us to practice principles in all our affairs. Many of us would like to separate our careers, our romantic relationships, or another area of our lives from this requirement because we're not sure we can get what we want if we have to practice spiritual principles. For instance, it may very well lead to apparent success and financial reward if we compromise our principles at work. We may be asked to meet a production deadline that results in profits for the company but produces an inferior product that could compromise the safety of the people who purchase it. So what do we do? We practice the spiritual principles of our recovery. There are probably many different choices about the specific action to take in response to our principles; the important thing is that we respond to our principles.

What about GA service? Strangely enough, some of us reserve GA service as the one place where we forget our principles. We cease giving people the benefit of the doubt in a service setting. We openly accuse others of hatching plots, and we say cruel things because we're not practicing the principle of kindness. We set up impossible processes for those we elect to do a job because we're not practicing the principle of trust. We become self-righteous, belligerent, and sarcastic. It's ironic that we seem to want to attack those whom we trust with our very lives in recovery meetings. We need to remember to practice spiritual principles in any meeting, whether service or recovery. Service gives us many opportunities to practice spiritual principles.

Knowing which spiritual principle to practice in any given situation is difficult, but it is usually the opposite of the character defect we would normally be acting out on. For instance, if we feel compelled to exert absolute control over a situation, we can practice the principle of trust. If we would usually be self-righteous in a certain situation, we can practice the principle of humility. If our first impulse is to withdraw and isolate, we can reach out instead. The work we did in the Seventh Step on finding the opposites of our character defects and the work we did at the beginning of this step on identifying the spiritual principles in the previous steps will give us some additional ideas about the principles we need to practice. Though most of us will wind up with very similar lists of spiritual principles, the attention we devote to certain ones will reflect our individual needs.

- How can I practice principles in the different areas of my life?
- When do I find it difficult to practice principles?
- Which spiritual principles do I have a particularly hard time practicing?

Spiritual Principles

Even in the step that asks us to practice spiritual principles, there are specific principles connected to the step itself. We will focus on unconditional love, selflessness, and steadfastness.

Practicing the principle of unconditional love in the Twelfth Step is essential. Nobody needs love without conditions more than a suffering addict. We don't ask anything of the people to whom we are trying to carry the message. We don't ask for money. We don't ask for gratitude. We don't even ask that they stop gambling. We simply extend ourselves.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't take reasonable precautions. If we believe it isn't safe to bring a suffering compulsive gambler to our home, we shouldn't do it. Twelfth Step calls should always be done with another GA member. Nor does practicing the principle of unconditional love require that we allow ourselves to be abused. Sometimes the best way of loving and helping is to stop enabling someone else to use.

- How am I practicing the principle of unconditional love with the addicts I am trying to help?

Why do we carry the message? Not to serve ourselves, even though we benefit. We carry the message to help others, to help them find freedom from their addiction and grow as individuals. If we have an attitude that the people we sponsor are somehow our possessions, that their lives would fall apart if we were not directing their every move, that most likely they wouldn't even be abstinent without us, then we've missed the point of the Twelfth Step. We don't expect recognition for the number of sponsees we have or for how well they're doing. We don't expect recognition for being of service. We do these things to accomplish something good.

It's a great paradox that selfless service becomes an expression of our deepest selves. Through our work in the previous steps, we have uncovered a self that cares more about allowing a Higher Power to work through us than it cares about recognition and glory. We have uncovered a self that cares more about principles than the exercise of our individual personalities. Just as our disease is often expressed in self-centeredness, our recovery is expressed beautifully as selfless service.

- What is my attitude about sponsorship? Do I encourage my sponsees to make their own decisions and grow as a result? Do I give advice, or do I share my experience?
- What is my attitude about service? Could GA survive without me?
- How am I practicing the principle of selflessness in my efforts to be of service?

Practicing the principle of steadfastness means we need to keep on trying to do our best. Even if we've had a setback and fallen short of our own expectations, we need to recommit ourselves to recovery. Steadfastness keeps a bad morning or a bad day from turning into a pattern that can lead to our relapse. This commitment ensures that we will keep practicing the principles of our program despite how we feel. Whether we're happy about it, bored with it, disgusted by it, or completely frustrated over it, we keep on trying to work a program.

- Am I committed to my recovery? What am I doing to maintain it?
- Do I practice spiritual principles regardless of how I feel?

Moving On

Before we get too excited about the prospect of being finished with the Twelve Steps, we should realize that we're not - finished, that is. Not only will we continue trying to practice the spiritual principles of all Twelve Steps, which many of us call "living the program," but we will formally revisit each of the steps, probably many times, throughout our lives. Some of us may immediately begin working through the steps again with the perspective that we've gained from our journey thus far. Others wait for a time or concentrate on certain aspects of the steps. However we do it, the point is that whenever we find ourselves powerless over our addiction, whenever more has been revealed about our shortcomings or people we've harmed, the steps are available as our path to recovery.

We should feel good about what we've done. We have, in many cases for the first time, followed a process all the way through. This is an amazing accomplishment, something about which we should be very proud. In fact, one of the rewards of working the GA program is finding that our self-esteem has grown a great deal.

We find ourselves joining society. We can do things that seemed beyond us before: exchanging hellos with a neighbor or the clerk at our local market, taking on positions of leadership in our communities, joining in social events with people who don't know we're compulsive gamblers and not feeling "less than." In fact, we may have looked with contempt upon such things in the past because we felt we'd never be able to fit in, but now we know we can. We become approachable. People may even seek out our advice and counsel on professional matters.

When we think about where we've come from and what our recovery has brought to our lives; we can only be overwhelmed with gratitude. Gratitude becomes the underlying force in all that we do. Our very lives can be an expression of our gratitude; it all depends on how we choose to live. Each one of us has something very special and unique to offer in gratitude.

- How will I express my gratitude?