

The Third Step
July 3, 2011

The first time I remember consciously reading the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous was in a little bookstore in Kailua-Kona, on the island of Hawaii. My mother had moved there when she'd married, and my oldest brother had followed her there several years later, to get clean from his drug addiction. On one visit there, I attended a couple of Al-Anon meetings with my mom and my sister in-law. The people in the meetings spoke honestly, vulnerably, and used words like serenity, which at the time I thought were reserved for only the most spiritual of people, like the Pope and the Dalai Lama.

Knowing Narcotics Anonymous was saving my brother's life, and having recently quit drinking myself, I thought there might be something to this 12-step world, so at the local bookstore, I perused a copy of the book known as the 12 and 12 (12 steps and 12 traditions). I don't know if I actually read any of the steps to their completion. I just saw lots of other words surrounding the phrase "God as we understood Him," and concluded, on a gut level, that this 12 step stuff was not compatible with my spiritual palate. Not that I had any kind of spiritual palate I could articulate at that time. I just knew "God as we understood Him" was not working for my secular feminist vaguely agnostic self.

Still, having stopped drinking but recognizing that I was still living under the influence of a lot of pain lying just under the surface of my day-to-day existence, after I got back to New York City, where I was living at the time, I found myself landing right where I needed to be: In AA, and Al-Anon, and ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics Anonymous), along with a few other A's. It wasn't that I was having difficulty staying sober from drugs and alcohol. But, as Lao-Tse says, "if there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors. If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home. If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart." I was having difficulty finding peace in my heart. Hearing the stories of others, listening to their tales of hitting bottom, and then of climbing up and out and transforming their lives, I too began to have hope that I could change my life for the better.

Honestly, I don't know if I would have stuck with it had I not been living in New York City at the time. Meetings I went to, mostly in the East and West Village, were filled with with poets, musicians, artists, AIDS activists, and drag queens. My kind of people. And just like good biblical scholars, unafraid to bring critical thinking with them to their studies, my sober companions did not hesitate to do a careful exegesis of the 12 steps. Every word was worth mining. Every phrase was worth translating in such a way so that the spirit, rather than the letter of the law was what people took in as deep and necessary wisdom.

And that's how they not only stayed sober another day, that's how they grew, and deepened, and persevered. That's how they helped others get and stay sober. No one had to give up their poetry or their art or their fabulous outfits. They just had to seek honesty and humility and healing.

Thinking about those days, and those people now, I have to give thanks to all those East and West Villagers, those Lower East Siders, too. And actually, recently, I kind of got to. Because, serendipitously, I ran into one of them. I was in Charlotte, North Carolina, with four other Wildflowers and several thousand other Unitarian Universalists, for General Assembly. As part of the Unitarian Universalist Addictions Ministry Team, I spent much of the week helping staff our booth in the exhibit hall. (I also co-led a workshop on alcohol use policies in congregations and helped with a sober celebration.) But, back at the booth, we had the pleasure of having in the booth next to us the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Ministry Team. (Surprisingly, people did not try to steer very, very clear of we two booths...) The UU Trauma ministry team travels to places like, most recently, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Joplin, Missouri, after the tornadoes hit those towns, and they were there within 24 hours after the shooting at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Nashville, in the summer of 2008. They do a kind of intense first responder pastoral care ministry. Anyway, one of the people staffing their booth, a minister, looked vaguely familiar. On the last day of General Assembly she approached me and said, "Did you ever live

in New York City, like in 1991?” Turns out, she was one of those folks I went to meetings with back in the day. She told me that, like me, she and a mutual friend from those days both now have twenty years of sobriety. Aside from the crazy fact that it’s been twenty years since those days in New York City, it’s pretty darn cool to think of all that sustained sobriety, that our lives have had the chance to grow and change and give back for all those years.

And, though my path has changed over the years, and Unitarian Universalism and yoga and Buddhism and other sacred traditions influence me just as much as if not more than the 12 steps do now, I still carry with me the spirit of their teachings--the imperative of humility and honesty, the willingness to seek and to offer forgiveness, an understanding that I am not in control of the world, and that letting go of that delusion will do me a lot of good.

So it is that I wish to explore the spirit of just one of those steps today, the third step. I want to explore it not as 12-stepper, per se, but as a Unitarian Universalist, as a person who strives to provide spiritual guidance for those who pass through these doors.

First, so you don’t feel like you’ve skipped the first two chapters of a good book, I’ll share with you that the *first* step from Alcoholics Anonymous is “we admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable.” And the second step is “We came to believe that a power

greater than ourselves could restore back to sanity.” *Now* comes the third step, the one that raised my little hackles way back when. “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

Now, since I said I was going to look at this as a Unitarian Universalist, I might first point out that, unlike this step, nowhere in our seven Unitarian Universalist principles is the word God or the male pronoun, especially with a capital H, mentioned. And there’s definitely no principle saying we’re making a decision to turn our will and our lives over to anything remotely God-like.

However, I’d also like point out that while the seven principles were democratically created and approved only about twenty-five years ago, when it was (as it still is) hip to be feminist and fine to be agnostic and/or atheist, the 12 steps as they now are came to print in 1939 by two men trying to stay sober one day at a time. From today’s perspective, we might not see anything radical in the wording or the concept of the third step. But those little words in the step *between* the words God and Him, the words that say, “*as we understood,*” were pretty radical indeed. God *as we understood Him*. Not, God as our preacher told us to understand him. Not God as the Nicene Creed defined Him, uh, them, uh, I mean, Him. You know, three in one. Or, one in three. No. God *as we understood him*. Before our Unitarian Universalist fifth principle, the free and responsible search for

truth and meaning, was ever penned that concisely, Bill Wilson and Bob Smith were opening the gateway for people to do just that.

Furthermore, if the words “God as we understood Him” don’t explicitly correlate with our Unitarian Universalist *principles*, then certainly they point us to the first of our many sources from which our living tradition draws. Go ahead and turn the front of your grey hymnal. The page isn’t numbered, not even with roman numerals, but it’s one-page flip before the very first hymn, on the left hand side. The top of the page reads “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...” See it? Now, see the sources on the lower half of the page? The heading reads, “The living tradition we share draws from many sources...” The first source reads--let’s all read it together--- “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us toward a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life...” That source, that first of the sources from which we Unitarian Universalists draw, for me, that is what is meant when I read the ancient scripture of circa 1939, “God as we understood Him.”

And you can (not now of course, because I know you want to hear the rest of this sermon), you can go on down the list of sources and discover how many ways we are invited to explore that transcending mystery and wonder--that, if you please, “God as we understand Him.”

Now, another thing I liked about the meetings back in New York City, and I'm guess folks do this all over the world, too, is that people felt free to change the words to say not "God as understood Him," but "God as we understood God." Just get rid of a gender specific deity--heck get rid of pronouns all together! (Well, I confess I still use the pronoun you, in my prayers, but that's another sermon.)

Anyway, I said in my sermon blurb I wanted us to transcend semantics, and getting caught up what pronoun to use is not feeling very transcendent. Besides, I haven't even touched the first part of the third step. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.* How many of us, upon first glance, find it just delightfully lovely to turn our will and our lives over to the care of someone or something else? I for one get a little itchy when I think *too* much about just *how* much I turn my will and my life over to the care of pilots, flight attendants, and people sitting in the exit rows every time I get on a plane. Rarely do I do a happy dance before sitting down in a dentist's chair. Listening to and obeying my yoga teacher's instructions as she encourages us to remain in chair pose or eagle pose just a little bit longer is an act of not of bliss but more of a wobbly, sweaty humility.

Still, I do these things. In fits and starts, bit by bit, I turn my will and my life over to the care of others. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. I can't, for instance, say wonderful things about Delta Airlines right

now, though they did manage to deliver my luggage to me 12 hours after I myself had landed, three hours late, in Charlotte.

But of course, the third step doesn't ask us to turn our will and our lives over to one other finite human being, such as the baggage handler. Instead, the step asks us to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. As we understand God. Higher Power is a term commonly used to replace the word God, for those uncomfortable with it. Or HP, if you've got a really close connection. But then some people complain that the word *higher* sounds, well, hierarchical--makes you feel like you're supposed to look up, as if you might then see, and wave to, the old man in the sky.

Actually, though, the steps don't say anything about a *higher* power. The second step, before ever mentioning God, simply says we came to believe that a power *greater than ourselves* could restore us to sanity. For anyone who's spent some time in the rooms of 12 step meetings, you know many people use the group itself as a power greater than themselves.

Which is right up our Unitarian Universalist alley, isn't it? Seeing and believing in the power of beloved community? I bet more than one of us first came to a Unitarian Universalist church because we were seeking, knowingly or not, a power greater than ourselves. A love greater than our loneliness. A forgiveness greater than our bitterness. A compassion greater than our shame. And I bet that many of us *found* that power greater than our loneliness or our bitterness or our shame in a sanctuary filled with

people, just like this. It's like the passage from Wendell Berry we heard Martha read. We may not be herons or wood drakes, or day-blind stars, absent of the forethought of grief. But something about being together, something about being in one another's midst, eases our despair, and for a moment, we too are free.

And that's the beauty of the third step, when you really put it all together. We decided to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God. It's about letting go. It's about the paradoxical wisdom of the fool, ready to walk off the cliff. It's all about trading in our notion that, "I must figure it out myself!" for something more like, "Hey, I can't seem to quite do life like might be good for me. Could you maybe help?" And when we are vulnerable enough to reach out like that, we find that people, in return, do care.

And remember, it's turning our will and our lives over to the *care* of-- Not the wrath of, or the judgment of, or the wagging finger of. We turn our will and our lives over to the *care* of God as we understand God.

Now, saving perhaps the best for last, or as dessert can sometimes be, saving the most problematic for last, aside from community, just how do we understand God? Well, since there is no way I'm going to try to tell this bunch--theists, atheists, agnostics, pagans, christians, Buddhists, and on down the line--what I think you should understand god to be, I'll tell you my own, working, free-and-responsible-search-for truth-and-meaning definition

for myself. God, or god-ness as I like to call it, is not an omnipotent creator, or a judge or, as Jonathan Edwards claimed back in the 1700s, a dangler of human beings like spiders over the fires of hell. God is not an entity at all. God, as I understand God, is that, “transcending mystery and wonder which moves us toward a renewal of the spirit.” God is the voice of conscience. God is the presence of compassion. God, as I understand God, is the presence of what Gandhi called ahimsa. Nonviolence.

When a person is in the throws of addiction, it is extraordinarily difficult to be connected to that mystery, to listen to the voice of conscience, to feel the presence of compassion, to honor the spirit of ahimsa.

In my own life, when I turn my will and my life over to the care of mystery and wonder, when I turn my will and my life over to the care of conscience, to the care of compassion, to the care of ahimsa, that is when I find peace in my heart.

So as I go off for the rest of this month to study, to relax, to travel, to get over this cold, and for one week, to serve as a chaplain at senior high summer camp at U Bar U, I will be taking with me this step, this practice of turning my will and my life over to the care of God as I understand God. And it won't be the first time. Because, as I said earlier in my prayer, it's not a one time thing. If it were, perhaps I would have walked out of that little bookstore in Hawaii a transformed woman. Instead, a seed planted, I walked out of that store at the beginning, or somewhere along the line, of a

free and responsible search for truth and meaning, seeking a new way of living my life, seeking God as I understand God. Whether you are a theist, an atheist, an agnostic, an addict or simply a label-free human being, I invite you, too, to ask yourself how you can be turning your will and your life over to the care of something greater. Something greater than your ego or your pride, your fear or your shame, your aloneness or your addiction. Whatever it is that may be gnawing at you, may you take the time to listen, take the time to heal, take the time, day by day, minute by minute, to let your light shine.

Amen.