

AN ATHEIST AND STEP THREE

Step Three - Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

As an atheist with long-term sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous, I am occasionally asked how I resolve my atheist philosophies with the program's strong reliance on belief in God's participation in recovery from alcoholism. I have been asked, for example, "How do you work the program when you don't believe in God? Do you just skip the God Steps? What do you turn your life over to? I can see how you could do Step One, and maybe even Two, but how does an atheist do Step Three?" I have asked myself all those questions and many more over the years as I learned how to stay sober within AA.

Perhaps the key to remaining atheist and in AA is that I got permission for some flexibility early in my AA experience. The man who urged me into AA told me the other members would speak about God, but I could overlook that and listen to their advice on daily living. He said I could accept their friendship and assistance without buying all their ideas. The woman who took me to my first meeting told me to accept what would help me and reject what didn't--I could choose. She pointed out that chapter five in the Big Book says the Steps are "suggested," which implies the right to reject some of the directives.

Although I was given the permission for selection of ideas, I was also told by my early sponsors that the Steps and recovery go together. In other words, it would probably be necessary for me to find a way to incorporate into my life all the actions described in the Steps. I would reduce the likelihood of gaining a successful and happy sobriety if I simply omitted the Steps that refer to God. So, with the permission for flexibility, I also got the responsibility to find ways to view each of the Steps as compatible with my lack of belief in God. My job would be to interpret the program so I could live with it, literally.

I cannot say when I began thinking about AA's Steps and how I could apply them to my life. I know that my initial sobriety consisted of little more than not drinking and going to lots of meetings. When I did start, to listen to others' advice to incorporate the suggested Steps into my decisions, Step Three seemed the most important one to address. First, that Step contains an absolute declaration for belief in God, and I recognized that reconciling my atheism with such a seemingly incompatible concept might very well determine whether I could remain in AA. Second, everyone told me they had gotten the most benefit from applying Step Three. And third, I kept hearing people say that Step Three was their stumbling block. If that were true for believers, I thought I was facing one heap of trouble. I have since realized I couldn't have been more mistaken--Step Three has been no more difficult than those which have nothing to do with God.

Step Three had been thrust at me almost immediately. It seemed that nearly every discussion meeting I attended during the first few weeks used Step Three as a topic. What a greeting for an atheist! If I had not been so desperate I might also have been too narrow-minded and arrogant to think I could learn anything from all those strong believers. Luckily, I was frightened, miserable, lonely, physically weak, and unable to argue about anything. Because I wanted and needed the safety of AA, I was forced to listen to dozens of people describe their experiences with turning it over, letting go and letting God, and trusting in higher powers. I stuck around because I had nowhere else to go. I didn't do anything about Step Three, of course, but I did find out that all that God talk had not injured me.

My approach to Step Three started with the willingness to listen to spiritual and religious perspectives I had dismissed many years earlier. I did not listen with the intent or hope to convert to a belief in God. I listened because I figured that each Step had a purpose for being and a route for acquiring some aspect of sober, sane living; I needed to find out just exactly what Step Three was meant to do and how I could achieve the purpose. Based mostly on what I heard from others about the effect of the Step, I decided its purpose must be to relieve self-generated conflict and fear. The method almost certainly is to relinquish the compulsive need to control and to do what is reasonable.

Having realized Step Three's purpose, I have spent the past sixteen years trying to hear what people do when they say they turn their will and life over to the care of God. The distinction between what people do and how they talk about and think about that action is very important for me. Someone would tell their method of doing Step Three and it would strike me that I could do that; I could do it without believing in God. I could not, however, think about my action as having anything to do with God as my friend might, because I do not recognize any form of God. All of us in AA have heard many different methods of acting out belief. Most of the time the process of exercising belief seems to consist of an internal pep talk and then going about one's business. One woman said that she "turns it over" by repeating an old phrase: Hope for the best, expect the worst, and take what comes. And then she cleans house or goes to work or visits a friend or whatever else occupies normal living. She does what actually is the only reasonable thing she can do. I can do the same thing--repeat her phrase to remind me of the reality of chance and the absurdity of expecting to be able to control all aspects of my life, and then go about the business of living.

Another member described Step Three as "going with the flow" of life. That advice helped me try to fit myself to circumstances rather than insist on creating them. They are words for helping me establish more rational views of my role in life's events.

Countless numbers of people have told me they recite the Serenity Prayer as a tool for engendering an attitude of turning it over. I now regard the statements in that prayer, except for the part about asking it to be a grant from God, as a description of a completely sensible way to approach life. Even atheists can learn to recognize the futility of non-acceptance, the value of risking changes, and the way to tell the difference between things we can affect and those we can't. When I begin to worry about things I can do nothing about, I tell myself to "accept what you can't change." Often I have used the ideas in the Serenity Prayer as a trigger for relinquishing my need to control and as a reminder to take action when some discontentment can be remedied.

I find I actually do very little that is different from the actions of those who believe in God. I just think about the actions in a different way. The words of the Serenity Prayer are a concise way to tell myself to do what makes sense because sane and sensible action has a track record of success. When I make a decision to quit trying to control, I do not expect anyone or anything will oversee events and take care of me. I make the decision because it is the reasonable action to take. I get relief from anxieties and fears the same way the believers do--I stop concentrating on what dismays me and direct my attention to activities that are productive. For the past year or so I have been using a Zen observation as a guide to Step Three practice. The Zen master noted that peace and enlightenment come when you stop evaluating in terms of good or bad and merely accept all of life as what is and try to learn from it. No mention of God is there, but that idea conveys a non-combative principle that is quite similar to that of Step Three and it is said in a way I understand.

Observing what people do, rather than simply listening to how they talk, has been crucial to my interpretation of all the Twelve Steps. Concentrating on discerning the action each person takes allows me to get around the words about God that get in the way of my understanding how various Steps work. Steps work the same way for me as for someone who believes in God. Only the words get changed. My Step Three would say, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of reasonable action."