

Step Three: Three Words and Four Points  
by Barefoot Bill

"Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." (The third step is found in its entirety in the Big Book from pages 60 to 64)

If the writer of a textbook has an understanding of a word, but the reader of the book has a different understanding of the same word, then the information that comes through will be garbled and incomplete. There are three words in the above "window shade on the wall" version of Step Three that are important to understand.

For a long time, I thought that the Third Step said that I turn my will and my life over to the care of God. But it doesn't say that. What it says is that I MAKE A DECISION to turn my will and my life over to the care of God. So the first word that needs to be understood is the word DECISION, which is defined as "making up one's own mind." Let's say my car breaks down. Although the DECISION to get my car fixed is a vital and crucial step, that decision alone does not get the car fixed. I will ALSO need to take the actions necessary to get it fixed. For any decision to mean ANYTHING, it ALWAYS requires further action.

If I decide, or make up my own mind, to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understand God, that decision alone will not turn it over. I will have to take the actions necessary to turn it over. The first three Steps are designed to bring us to the point where we become WILLING to turn our will and our lives over to the care of a Higher Power, Steps Four through Nine are HOW we turn our will and our lives over (by removing the blocks that prevent us from actually doing so), and the last three Steps are how we KEEP our will and our lives turned over to God indefinitely. After a period of time though, our ego (self-will) begins to reassert itself again; and because of our "human-ness", we fall short in maintaining perfect spiritual focus in all of our thoughts and activities. That is why I believe, even if we have worked the first nine Steps to the best of our ability once and are living in Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve, we will still need to eventually go back to Step One and begin the 12 Step cycle again and again for deeper awakenings and further growth in other areas where we have God blocked off that we may not be currently aware of.

The other two words that are important to understand are the words WILL and LIVES. I've always thought that the words "will" and "lives" were concepts way over my head and were way too large to relate to or comprehend. But then it was explained to me that my will is my thinking and what motivates me, and that my life is all the actions that I've taken up to this moment. That explanation made the words a little more down to earth and easier to internalize. So I now understand the Third Step as saying that I decide to take the actions necessary to turn my motivations, my thinking, and my actions over to the care of God as I understand Him. Since I believe that God is Love and Truth, I need to make it a priority to be motivated by love, to move toward having loving thoughts (no matter how I feel or what my circumstances are), to always try to take loving actions (whether I think "they" deserve it or not), and to work at seeing the reality of truth that life presents to me in each moment. Also, what motivates me drives my thinking and my thinking directs my actions, so I need to go deeper than just acting my way into right thinking. If my motivation and thinking is God-directed, I will make the right decisions (whether it seems that way at the time or not), then the actions taken will also be right. But if my motivation and thinking is self-directed (which usually means based on self-centered fear), I will usually make the wrong decisions (even though I may not realize it at the time), then the actions taken will probably also be wrong. Now it made perfect sense!

Besides understanding these three words, the Third Step in the Big Book includes four distinct points involved in taking the Step completely.

The first part is found at the bottom of page 60 where it says, "The first requirement is that we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good." When I read our Basic Text, I like to personalize it so to put it another way, the first requirement is that I be convinced that MY life run on MY will can hardly be a success. Yes, they use the word "requirement". That means that this is needed before I can go on, so I ask myself, "Do I agree with this statement?" Being self-centered and prideful, at first I disagreed. But then the book gives a classic example of where my self-will has always led me: the actor who is forever trying to run the whole show. In other words, not only will I be happy if you act the way I think you should, but YOU will be happy too and life would be wonderful because I know what's best for everybody. This is a really lame attempt at playing God. I have never met an alcoholic who cannot completely relate to this part of the book. The word that comes to mind is manipulation, but you can call it whatever you want. The authors really convicted me here because how could a group of people back in the late 1930's know that about me without even having met me? I was busted! They certainly have my attention now.

As the book continues (page 62), they start to make statements like, "Selfishness - self-centeredness! That we think

is the root of our troubles." and "So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn't think so." (So whether I realize it or not, I am usually in self-will and perhaps don't even notice. That's how cunning, baffling and powerful the ego is. Also, it's important to know that this includes before we started drinking, while we were drinking, and even since we STOPPED drinking prior to working Step Three.) The book continues: "ABOVE EVERYTHING, we alcoholics MUST be rid of this selfishness. We MUST, or it kills us." (Wait a minute. Do you think they really mean, "Above everything" and "must"? I always thought that ALCOHOL was my problem. I guess that explains why it says on page 53 that, "When we became alcoholics, crushed by a SELF-IMPOSED crisis we could not postpone or evade," on page 64 that, "Our liquor was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions," and on page 103, "After all, our problems were of our own making. Bottles were only a symbol.") In my book, next to the line, "So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making," I have written in the margin the word, "Hope!" and one day someone sitting next to me at a meeting noticed it. After the meeting, he came to me and said, "Why would you put such a word next to that line? It seems to me that if I have caused most of my troubles, I must be destined for the rest of my life for that to continue." I told him that the reason I put that there was because it is neither necessary nor possible to change others. But if I (with God's help and the Steps) can change myself, I will find that no other changes are needed. If other people or life were to blame for my troubles, there isn't a whole lot I can do about that. But if I am to blame for almost all of my troubles, there is something I can do about that because I am the ONLY person that I can change. Like a wise man once said, "It is easier to put on slippers than to carpet the whole world." The person I was talking to thought for a few seconds, nodded in agreement, opened his Big Book and wrote, "Hope!" next to the same line.

The Book goes on further (page 62) to notify the self-centered alcoholic that God (what I defined earlier as Love and Truth) can rid us of our selfishness: "There often seems NO way of ENTIRELY getting rid of self without His aid. Neither could we reduce our self-centeredness much by wishing or trying on our own power. We HAD to have God's help." SO THE ONLY THING THAT WE HAVE GOING FOR US, WHICH IS SELF-WILL AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE (OR MY LIFE RUN ON MY WILL) IS THE VERY THING THAT WILL LEAD US BACK TO DRINKING (AT BEST) AND/OR PROGRESSIVE MISERY AS TIME PASSES (AT WORST). Let me repeat that: THE ONLY THING THAT WE HAVE GOING FOR US, WHICH IS SELF-WILL AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE (OR MY LIFE RUN ON MY WILL) IS THE VERY THING THAT LEADS US BACK TO DRINKING AND/OR PROGRESSIVE MISERY. IF WE ARE TRYING TO MAKE OURSELVES "UN-SELF-CENTERED", WE ARE STILL BEING SELF-CENTERED! WE CAN'T THINK OUR WAY OUT OF THIS. A SELF-WILL PROBLEM CANNOT BE OVERCOME BY SELF-WILL, A SICK MIND CANNOT HEAL A SICK MIND, WE CAN'T USE THE PROBLEM TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM. Ouch! That snuffed out any hope I had of not pursuing this Higher Power stuff. Now what? I guess since I saw in Step One that I am powerless, what I need is a new Power. I also saw in Step One that my life is unmanageable (especially my mental/emotional/spiritual life, whether I am drinking or not) so what I need is a new Manager. Because anything at all that God has in mind for me is better than anything at all that I will EVER have in mind for me!

So the AA program ultimately asks me to make TWO surrenders, not just one. I need to surrender to my drinking alcohol (Step One), but I also need to surrender to my self-will or "my life run on my will" (Step Three). Unfortunately, many members of AA only make the first surrender and inevitably do not experience all the freedom, joy and serenity that the AA way of life promises. Because of this, they are often miserable and/or go back to drinking. There is a BIG difference between "not drinking" and "not drinking and being happy about it."

In Step 2, we are told that we need to come up with some sort of "God of our understanding" or "Power greater than ourselves." A.A. gave me more respect than anyone I had ever known by allowing me to believe whatever I wanted to believe about this Power. But there is a little unseen footnote next to Step 2 that states, "So long as I am not it!"

The Big Book says again and again that my belief that the universe revolves around me is a big part of my problem, so that "center of my universe" needs to be replaced with some belief in a Power greater than human power. Then in Step 3, it introduces us to an important attribute that this Power needs to have when it says, "the CARE of God as we understood Him." So our concept of the Power now needs to include the fact that this "God" cares and is caring. This was difficult for me at first because my original concept of our Creator was more along the line of a "judgmental, harsh, He's going to get me, something to be feared" kind of God. I had to completely scrap my old ideas and start over because they just didn't work for me anymore. It wasn't the kind of power that I would turn to for help. If I was to put my trust and life in God's Hands, and turn to Him for help and guidance, I started moving in the direction of thinking of this Power as something that was the loving overseer of everything and, that no matter what was going on in my life, God could be trusted to ALWAYS have my best interest and spiritual maturity in mind. That was the beginning of an outstanding relationship!

This brings us to the second highlight of the Third Step, the last paragraph of page 62, which contains the specifics

about this decision we are making: "This is the how and why of it. First of all, I had to quit playing God." (Why? Because,) "It didn't work. Next, I decide that hereafter in this drama of life God was going to be my Director. He is the Principal; I am His agent. He is the Father, and we are His children. Most good ideas are simple, and this concept was the keystone of the new and triumphant arch through which I pass to freedom." For those who do not know, the keystone is the supporting stone for the ENTIRE structure, so the Third Step decision is the supporting Step for the rest of the Steps. Wow! Now this decision is starting to sound important. God is going to be my Director (and my new Employer), so I need to be doing what I think GOD alone wants me to be doing. In other words, I need to be directed by love, do the next right and healthy thing, and honestly deal with reality. I am going to be His agent, and since an agent is given the power to represent the Principal, I am deciding to start acting in a way that would represent my Highest Power. And if we are all His children (since God has no grandchildren), I need to start acting as if we are ALL equal brothers or sisters. Now I know what this Step 3 decision is that I am making!

But just how do we do all this? We've tried doing things like this before and it has never worked. We mistakenly started to assume that we must not be capable of it.

Although we all have probably tried to have more integrity and peace in our life, our selfishness, self-centeredness and fear prevented us from doing so because our efforts in that direction have usually had a price tag and an expectation of "what's in it for me" associated with it. After I did something for you, if you didn't act the way I thought you should be acting, I wasn't going to do for you anymore. I never was truly altruistic (which means to give of yourself and expecting nothing in return). That's probably because I never followed through with the last two parts involved in working this Step.

The next aspect of working the Third Step thoroughly is the Third Step Prayer, which can be found in the middle of page 63. This prayer is nothing more than an affirmation of the decision we are making mentioned at the bottom of page 62. For a few years in A.A., I thought that the Third Step was only the prayer, but you can see that there is a whole lot more going on here besides just a prayer. I had read Step 3 in the Big Book many times and had gone to many Big Book meetings prior to 1994 and never noticed most of this until I really started to study it. I suggest to people I work with that they say this prayer each morning immediately after waking up (along with their other morning prayers and meditation) and throughout the day when needed or not. I also like to suggest that it be read slowly, while noticing what it says. There is a lot contained in these simple words.

Before going on to the last important statement that is made about this Step, make sure you pay attention to the sentence right after the Third Step prayer, along with the last full paragraph on page 63. Contained in these sentences are some warnings and considerations about following through with Step Three. They are not to be taken lightly and I think they are there to let us know that (like the 12 & 12 says) the effectiveness of the whole A.A. program will rest upon how well and earnestly we try to do this. Also, keep in mind that this book was originally written assuming that the alcoholic reader may have no other fellow A.A.'s in their area (since there were only two meetings at the time in Akron OH and New York City). Today, it would probably be unnecessary for a person to go outside of our fellowship to find the right person or persons to take this spiritual step with. And notice that it says that we are, "voicing it without reservation," which means that we need to say it out loud. It also says there that, "The wording was, of course, quite optional so long as we expressed the idea" I usually suggest to people I work with that we can write our own Third Step Prayer in our own words from your own Heart, as our commitment to our Higher Power. Writing our own prayer is a powerful exercise. We would then share our own Third Step Prayer and also say the Third Step Prayer the Big Book provides with our Sponser as we transition into the Fourth Step.

The fourth and last element of this Step begins at the bottom of page 63 and continues to the top of page 64. For me, it is the MOST important point about this step yet it is rarely discussed at meetings and usually overlooked. It states: "NEXT we launch out on a course of VIGOROUS action, the first step of which is a personal housecleaning, which many of us had NEVER attempted." (Which is why I was never before able to be good, loving, and considerate toward others on any consistent basis - I never looked at what was stopping me from being this way). It continues with, "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 to be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us." So it's telling me that this Third Step decision will have little permanent effect unless I immediately follow it up with an intensely active effort to work Steps Four through Nine, because where we face these things is in Steps Four, Five, and Six and where we get rid of them is in Steps Seven, Eight, and Nine. And what we're being blocked off from is the ability to turn our will and lives over to begin with. So after working the six middle Steps, then and ONLY then, will I be able to turn my motivations, my thoughts, and my actions over to my Higher Power with any kind of consistency.

Step 3 in the 12 & 12 on page 40 seems to give the impression that we need to stay at Step 3 for a while before going to Step 4 when it says, "Then it is explained that other Steps of the A.A. program can be practiced with success only when Step Three is given a determined and persistent trial." This does not contradict what the Big

Book is saying about going on to Step 4 "at once" following my Step 3 decision because it is merely saying that if I don't stay connected to Step 3 as I work the remaining Steps, they will not have the fullest transforming power and effectiveness that they could. In other words, if I'm doing my Ninth Step amends and I've lost my commitment to Step 3, the power and freedom I'll be bringing into the process of making amends will be compromised.

This was my missing link! Now I saw why, sober for three and a half years, going to a lot of meetings, making coffee, putting away chairs, going to the diner after the meeting, talking to my sponsor and support group regularly, and going to retreats and conventions; I walked around experiencing AT BEST only small glimpses of the peace of mind and the freedom that I heard other members talking about. I never knew all this because I was told to just stay in Steps 1,2, and 3 for a while. Now I see that this goes COMPLETELY contrary to what our program says to do. Oops, there it is!

My experience started to showed me that if fear is telling me what to do, my Inner Guide can't be. If resentments are directing me, I am not going to do what God wants me to do which is be loving toward all. And if guilt and remorse over what I have done in the past is driving me today, then I'm also blocked off from the sunlight of the Spirit.

Which is the ONLY thing that can overcome my self-will (or the ego) and relieve an alcoholic of the mental obsession and the spiritual malady that keeps us miserable and wants us to return to drinking. And it was ONLY after I went on to work the REST of the Steps AT ONCE (like the Big Book says to do) that I became TRANSFORMED for the better in EVERY aspect of my life and being. It was ONLY after doing what the book was telling us to do ALL ALONG, that I started to experience being happy that I was no longer drinking.

By the way, check out the results of deeply taking the Third Step, otherwise known as the Third Step Promises that can be found in the first paragraph on page 63. And in closing, I'd like to include a story about this step that I think captures the essence of it. In other words, in all things God is the owner and I am the caretaker. Thanks for letting me share.

#### A STEP 3 PARABLE by Steve B.

A drunk is staggering along the street and he meets God. "God, I can't do this anymore," he says. "Please, please, will you give me sobriety?" God says, "Sobriety isn't free, how much money have you got?" The drunk reaches into his pocket. "Fifty bucks." "I'll take it," says

God, "you're sober." The man stands up straight, drunk no more. It feels pretty good. "Yeah but, God?" "Yes?" "I know I gave you my money willingly. But, you see, I need to get gas for my car." "You have a car?" says God. "Well, yes." "You didn't tell Me that. I'll take the car." "But..." "I'll take the car. It's part of the price for your sobriety." "But how will I get to work?" "You have a job? I'll take the job, too." "But God, how will I pay my mortgage?" "Mortgage? You have a house? I'll take that too." "But God, my family. How will I take care of them if you have my house and my job?" God says to him gently and lovingly: "In order to keep your sobriety; you must give Me these things. But I will let you drive My car as long as you remember it's My car. You can have the job, but remember you're working it for me. It's My house but I will let you live in it. And as for the family, they are My family but I will trust you to take care of them."