

Step Four

We can imagine the steps of the program as a building process, with each of the steps contributing towards constructing a new way of life. In the first two steps, we decide our “house” is flawed and that it needs rebuilding. In the third step, rather than trust ourselves, we appoint an architect to oversee the construction. We need a solid foundation and in the fourth step, we are going to evaluate the structure and decide what to keep and what to get rid of.

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

There are two main fears that hold us back when we consider doing this step. Fear that once we have completed it we have to reveal the contents to somebody else and the solemn warnings in the Big Book about failing to do this step thoroughly. We can be frightened that we won't remember all of the incidents we “should”, so that through no fault of our own we won't correctly complete the step. There is a difference between actually forgetting and feigning memory loss. Providing we are determined to be honest as we approach this step, we will do it right. We can sort out forgotten incidents later, but skipping inconvenient ones can prove fatal.

Throughout this book, it has been emphasised that we do a step at a time in the order they are written. The same as building a house, the walls come before the roof. It is essential to ignore the remainder of the program until we complete step four – especially step five.

This is an “action” step. One, two and three are replacing old beliefs with new ideas. In the fourth step we do a specific task...

Made a searching and fearless...

It is important to recognise what the defects are and how they caused harm to others. It is easy to say, “I am too proud”, but it is harder to describe specifically how our pride has led us into doing wrong. Pride and fear can be difficult to separate, is it pride or fear that stops us being able to play successfully with children because of what others might say? Which defect stops us speaking out when we see somebody victimised or injured by gossip? What forced us into spending more money than we could afford?

Many defects start as acceptable behaviour and in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions it suggests that we suffer from “twisted instincts”, where normal instincts have evolved into abnormal demands. There is nothing wrong with taking a well-earned rest, but this can become lazy behaviour. We try to justify it, but in our hearts, we know that we are shirking responsibility and putting extra burden upon others. We tend to be people who always want more - more food, more sex, more gratification, more... anything that gives pleasure.

The idea is to go through a process of detailing our hidden secrets and putting them down on paper. Times we harmed, cheated and deceived others. By getting the skeletons from the closet and re-visiting our feelings, we look honestly at why we acted the way we did.

...Moral inventory of ourselves.

Imagine for a moment that we are going to help somebody sort out a garden shed, its locked door has remained unopened for many years and nobody knows what is inside. It could be tempting to assume that it is all rubbish and throw the whole lot out, but then we won't see the hidden treasure that we are in danger of losing. We need to empty it completely, spreading the contents in the sunlight so that we can see what is there.

We would probably start to group things into piles as we lifted them out. We would put tools, tins of paint, and garden ornaments into separate piles for more detailed examination. By grouping the items together, it is easy to see that there are three garden rakes. Two of them are broken, but we can clean the third and return it to the shed.

The moral inventory we are embarking upon is a similar exercise. The shed is our life, full of our past behaviour and beliefs. Whilst the contents will emerge in a random order, we will find it easier to start to “pile” the contents into headings of a similar nature. In the last chapter, we suggested headings that we could use to group our defects. These are usually words like Anger, Pride, and Resentment.

How do we do it?

People often say that Step Four is where life started to get better. It is about preparing to build a new and solid life. Each defect we identify is a step out of the shadows towards the sunlight of contentment. Despite these

assurances, we would not be human if embarking upon a deliberate examination of the worst parts of our character did not frighten us a little.

Although there are a few ways of doing the fourth step the best starting point is to try the method described in the Big Book using the three suggested columns.

Big Book Method

This method leads us to look at who or what we resent. We then dig down to the cause of the resentment and clearly state how this affected our feelings and life. From these roots, most of our defects seem to manifest.

I Resent	The reason I resent	This affects
Mr. Normal (My Boss)	He is not as bright as I am, but he is my boss. He will not listen to my advice I have to work hard to make up for his failings	Self Esteem (Pride) Personal security (Fear)
Mrs. In-law (My wife's mother)	She does not think I am good enough for her daughter. She does not believe a word that comes out of my mouth. I am scared that she will turn my wife against me	I feel insecure and threatened (Fear)
Mrs. Ex-Wife	She rejected me – she won't have me in the house. All of our friends have stayed with her	Self Esteem (Pride) Security (Fear)

An additional way of using this layout is to change the word "Resent" and use the words Angry and Frightened. Sometimes similar names and feelings occur, but when we do this, we open another rich seam of thought. The important part is to get the names of the people and the detail of why they make us feel the way we do. We need to be rigorously honest and have no fear about the fact that we will be discussing the contents with another person. Each incident from our past that causes our stomach to churn is usually associated with these simple headings: Resentment, Anger and Fear. Frequently the target or victim of the emotion does not deserve the venom directed at them and it often eases when we can accept our part in the situation.

Life Story Method

Some people write a life story, they work through the events of their lives and see their part in the situations they remember. This is a good way to build a framework and reinforce the fact that drinking is only a symptom a deeper illness.

Throughout our life, regardless of the advice of others, our selfish motivation drove us into foolish decisions. Incident after incident highlights how we attempted to control others into doing our will. As we chronicle our progress, it becomes obvious that many of the incidents occur well before the time we thought drink contaminated our life.

Two distractions commonly occur when we use the life story method. The first is that we can become embroiled in re-fighting past battles and reliving the arguments we believe we should have handled differently. Instead of writing, we spend hours transfixed by the tableau we create, indicating that we have allowed the illness to trick us into taking other people's inventories, rather than concentrating on our own.

A second problem is that we start to imagine our life as a good novel or a gripping film. We cast ourselves as the angst-riddled hero of the tale trying to do the right thing, misunderstood, suffering and driven into desperation by a killer illness. We dwell on the mood lit camera shots highlighting our bewildered misery and meander away from honestly documenting what occurred into dramatic justification.

By avoiding these pitfalls, many successfully use the life story method to prepare their step four. Removing justification from our thinking is a great way to practice humility and teaches us how to live honestly amongst people.

Two Column Method

This is where we write two columns labelled assets and defects and put entries into each column.

For some strange reason we can decide that each column should contain a similar number of entries and frantically try to balance the columns. When we do this, we are confusing two issues, low self-esteem and a moral inventory. We are performing a moral inventory, our focus is upon the defects and it would be peculiar if we listed as many assets as we do defects.

We will address our self-esteem by completing the program and are possibly not yet equipped with sufficient moral judgement to be able to label all of the elements of our behaviour as an asset or a defect. As we progress and become more honest, behaviour we thought to be an asset can prove to be a defect. In the Asset column we might write, "I can always be relied upon to do any task I am asked to do". As we learn to look more objectively at our behaviour, we often change our mind. We realise that we should have written in the defect column, "I will do anything to please other people," or "I have to be the centre of any activities so that I am seen as indispensable."

If we become stuck trying to make these decisions, it is worth remembering that we don't have to complete step four in solitary confinement. It is perfectly acceptable to ask for help sifting through the assets and defects to assess them correctly. Our sponsor can listen to how we see our behaviour and point out where we are being lenient or harsh upon ourselves. Learning to rely appropriately on other people for guidance is an important lesson to learn and this is a good opportunity to practice.

Summary:

When we embark upon step four, it is essential to keep the fourth and fifth steps separate. Step four is preparing an honest moral inventory of our wrong doings and motivations. Once complete, in any form that we are content with, we have to get rid of all of the rubbish as soon as possible.

When we started our fourth step, the fifth was frightening, but as we reach the end we can get a burning urge to progress and do step five. If this is not the case, possibly we are still holding on to things, hoping to keep them secret. It cannot be emphasised too strongly to get these steps completed as thoroughly and quickly as possible, leaving hidden secrets to come back and trip us up later is probably one of the most common reasons for failing to achieve a worthwhile sobriety.

- Set a date to do step five and then ignore the fact that we will discuss what we write down with somebody else.
- Choose a method and allocate sufficient time to do it.
- Go to as many meetings as possible and talk to people that we trust.
- Do not hold anything back for fear that it will shock.

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