

Step Six

The Bechers Brook of the program is crossed and we expect a simple flat gallop for the finish line. The instructions in the Big Book suggest that we immediately complete steps six and seven. If we read these in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, it describes step six as the step that sorts out the men from the boys, implying that we will now start to take responsibility for our actions and our lives.

Why would the Big Book suggest we embark upon such an important phase with seemingly undue haste?

The reason is one of timing. Steps four and five broke through the shell of justification covering our defects leaving them exposed and painful. If we allow it to heal over, we will rationalise our old feelings and discover that we are reluctant to change.

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character

Were entirely ready...

If we identify something about ourselves that we accept as a defect, why would we not be ready to have it removed? There tends to be an intermingled set of justifications preventing us from acting:

- Convention suggests that something is a defect, but we don't agree.
- Although through steps four and five we accept that our behaviour conflicts with "spiritual growth", we feel we still "need it" and therefore decide to consider doing something about it at a later time.
- We know that our behaviour is wrong, but we think that it is too much a part of us to give it up.

When we first stop drinking, we declare that we are willing to do anything to get sober. We see the fact that we were "willing" to stop drinking and change things that were about to kill us as proof of this. We are wrong. We hit a rock bottom and could see our destructive obsession for what it was, a choice between drink and death. Even then, we required help to change and have our obsession removed.

This is the first time we have a real choice. We can keep the defect and remain in our comfort zone, or change and stray into the unknown. Most of us initially choose to keep our defects and don't perceive them to be a direct threat to our sobriety. We possibly listen to "wiser" voices, but don't hear what they are saying. We bump into a brick wall and feel it is unacceptable for us to change. Strongly held convictions and statements like, "I could never forgive..." highlight these defects. For example, we can see that it is wrong to wish somebody harm, but circumstances assure us that this is the only correct option.

If we allow it to, the monkey on our shoulder will use these convictions as a reason to abandon the program, phrases like "they don't understand", will become part of our thinking. As we hesitate, the monkey will suggest that we need to go and talk to our friends who "really know us" rather than the new friends who seem to be guiding us along uncomfortable paths. By doing this, we will easily find somebody who will help us to justify our feelings.

The monkey is willing to fight to keep the pleasant home it has found. If it manages to trick us into justifying why we don't need to change, we remain trapped in a life of misery and confusion.

Financial pressures and debt

It is common to feel that becoming "too honest" endangers our earning capacity. Alcoholism has a voracious appetite for money and when we stop drinking, we often face large amounts of debt, even if it is manageable, the fear of financial insecurity can overwhelm us and poison our thinking.

In some industries, there are forms of "acknowledged" dishonesty, shop-workers can consider "dipping the till" to be an acceptable way to subsidise their wage and people claiming expenses can adjust the details in their favour. Others earn their living in a criminal or dubious way and cannot find an honest job to provide the same levels of reward. We argue that we will stop behaving this way at some time in the future, but believe it to be the only way to clear our outstanding debts and achieve sobriety.

Distorted self-awareness

In addition to the more obvious defects indicated by strongly held convictions and fears, there are more subtle forms. These are the defects we consider characteristics of our personality. We possibly think we can work

longer and harder than anybody else can, or we enjoy our “forthright” reputation. It could be that we don’t trust anybody else to prepare the meals for a dependent relative. We see these as assets and an important part of us, they are “who we are” and without them, we would become the hole in the doughnut.

In the case of the loving daughter who has shouldered the responsibility of looking after her elderly parents. Other family members could assist, but the alcoholic will frequently take control and occupy the centre stage. Inevitably, the alcoholic comes to feel that they have taken on too much and they hope or demand that others take some of the burden. If no help is forthcoming, they descend further into bitterness, complaining of the injustice of their position. If others do try to help, the alcoholic will immediately find fault in what they do and start trying to control them. Finally, they make the decision that nobody else is competent at the task and they snatch it back.

This is an example of behaviour drifting. The actions were acceptable under exceptional circumstances, but unacceptable in the long term. The drift is gradual and because we are suffering from an illness that blinds us to our behaviour, we sometimes need help to recognise it. By persisting in our own infallibility, we end up crippled by the weight of tasks we have gathered to ourselves.

Fear is certainly part of the motivation in such a situation, we want to ensure that things function correctly, but pride is a much stronger part of it. Looked at from a different point of view we are stealing the happiness from family life for our own selfish reasons. Whilst we feel comfortable in our position of control, our demands can be overbearing. We push others to the point where they react badly and we see their aggressive reaction as proof that they don’t value us.

When our behaviour is the cause of unnecessary distress to other people, we have to consider it a defect. An indication that there is a problem is if we are defending our actions by claiming that people must accept us the way we are. Unnecessary distress could be, selectively enforcing “rules” upon some people, whilst ignoring them for others, just because we feel like it. It might be spoiling somebody else’s pleasure, for a laugh or for spite. These are possibly frivolous examples, but the key telltale is that people are hurt who would not have expected us to be the cause of their pain.

Some of us work in senior roles and have to make decisions that affect people. As we recover from alcoholism, our role can present us with confusing dilemmas. If for sound business reasons we have to dismiss somebody, we should have the strength and courage to carry out our duty. Under these circumstances, we are not causing *unnecessary distress*, but acting in a responsible manner.

...to have God remove...

The step does not say that we removed them. It says that we *were entirely ready to have God remove them*. We have already had the first of our major defects lifted by the removal of the urge to drink destructively. We can see that “something” outside of us achieved this. The next defect is our need for control and self-determination. We will change our old unacceptable behaviour by *unreservedly* accepting outside influence on how our life is going to change.

...all of these defects of character

Where the first part of the program involved looking at our past behaviour to prove where our self-will had put us. We are now going to look at how we act and behave today. Even more than this, we are going to accept that our behaviour is flawed and believe that we can change.

We can usually see the benefits of a sober life, but we want these benefits without effort and discomfort, unfortunately this is not what the program offers. It offers a life that becomes better than our drinking life, but this is conditional; expecting things to improve without allowing change is exactly like expecting to row across a lake whilst the boat remains tethered to the dock. We can put as much effort into rowing as we want, but we will just get tired and disheartened at our lack of progress.

Drilling through these defects

To remove the defects that are hindering our progress we can question ourselves and try to identify in what way these defects really contribute to a peaceful life? If our justifications quickly descend into worn out statements like “somebody has to do something”, “the pope could solve the problem of famine from the coffers of the Vatican” then we are probably ranting in an egotistical manner. Our rant usually isn’t contributing anything. If we feel that it is, then we should drill through the first statement and examine it further. Are we really the “somebody” who can achieve anything? Can we really change the behaviour of an institution like the church?

We can repeatedly apply honest appraisal to penetrate these platitudes and reach the core, which is that our strongly held belief adds nothing to anybody's life, certainly not ours.

We can pursue this "drilling through" on any defect that seems to be worth hanging on to. There are examples in AA of people forgiving the unforgivable. They come to terms with the violent death of a loved one, or have been able to let go of the feelings resulting from the rape of a young daughter. When the emotional surface of the defect is penetrated and the value looked for, we rarely find anything worth keeping. If we think that there is value, then we should talk to our sponsor and discuss these feelings in detail.

There may be defects that seem impossible to address "yet", but we can work towards the willingness to have them removed. This is not an excuse to procrastinate indefinitely, but a viable route forwards.

In our early days in AA, we might have come to hate the word "yet". Whenever we said something along the lines of "I have not been in prison..." somebody would add – yet, emphasising the downward spiral waiting for us if we returned to drinking. Now it comes into play in a positive way, we are not willing – yet, but we can work towards it. The willingness to become willing allows us to consider changing in order to recover.

What happens if we remain unwilling to have a defect removed?

Although the step only requires a willingness to have the defect removed, this doesn't mean that we take no responsibility for our actions.

As a child, I loved to play in the garden. I would be swinging from the tree and see my mother start to prepare the car to go to the shops. I knew what was coming- I was going to have my hair brushed and have to go with her. I always played out the tantrum of how unfair she was being. She always responded by saying, "kicking and screaming, or happy and smiling, you are coming to the shops – now choose."

This also describes what happens for us when we stubbornly refuse to make progress with removing our defects. Our Higher Power allows chaos to build until we accept that we need to change.

Does this seem a bit too weird? This is the first time we have suggested that the Higher Power is not just a concept, but takes actions within our lives.

I sometimes see myself as Elmer Fudd in the cartoons (copyright Warner Brothers, little man, bald head, hates wabbits) and I imagine myself proceeding slowly down a darkening tunnel. As I walk, I see sign after sign, "Don't go this way", "Danger – This means YOU". Do I pay attention? Not a bit, I have my entire being focused upon shooting that darned wabbit. Finally, in the near black gloom I sit down on a convenient box and strike a match. All the onlookers can see that the box says "DYNAMITE," but I sit there and drop the match...

If we see and act upon the sensible notices and warnings that life shows us, we live with the minimum of pain. Exactly as depicted in the cartoon, the strength of the warnings increases as we continue to ignore them. Charred and blinking we realise the mess we are in and finally become willing to do something. We are not made to suffer without cause, or for some "deeper purpose," it is just our Higher Power waiting for us to pay attention.

Any time we feel like we are cornered, having to justify our actions, we are probably embarking on yet another Fudd-like descent down a dark tunnel. This is invariably true if our actions bring us into conflict with people or acceptable behaviour. When our actions start to require secrecy, or when guilt is creeping in, then we have identified a defect. Having identified it, can we develop the willingness to have it removed?

Summary

To maintain the determination to carry on with this, we must come back to the primary purpose of why we are doing the program. We are not trying to become "better people," we are doing this to get well. We are currently following a path and the signpost says ALL of these defects, not just those we choose. Even if we cannot see the reason for removing them, they have to go. We certainly don't lose any portion of our personality that makes us "us". As promised, we lose the defects.

- Are we holding onto anything that could be directly or indirectly the cause harm to other people?
- Do we feel that a level of dishonesty is acceptable?

If we cannot answer no to these questions, we should look for help before we proceed. Without doing so, it is pointless trying to go much further. These defects will taint our progress, we won't achieve a contented sobriety and we will probably drink again.

~O~

ANY COMMERCIAL USE OR PUBLICATION OF ALL OR PART OF DOCUMENTS ON THIS SITE IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED, WITHOUT PRIOR WRITTEN AUTHORISATION FROM:

WWW.MONKEYONMYSHOULDER.CO.UK. (MONKEY@MONKEYONMYSHOULDER.CO.UK)

THE COPYRIGHT REMAINS WITH THE AUTHOR UNDER ALL CONDITIONS.

THIS DOCUMENT IS PROVIDED "AS IS," AND COPYRIGHT HOLDERS MAKE NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY, FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE, NON-INFRINGEMENT, OR TITLE; THAT THE CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENT ARE SUITABLE FOR ANY PURPOSE; NOR THAT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SUCH CONTENTS WILL NOT INFRINGE ANY THIRD PARTY PATENTS, COPYRIGHTS, TRADEMARKS OR OTHER RIGHTS.

COPYRIGHT HOLDERS WILL NOT BE LIABLE FOR ANY DIRECT, INDIRECT, SPECIAL OR CONSEQUENTIAL DAMAGES ARISING OUT OF ANY USE OF THE DOCUMENT OR THE PERFORMANCE OR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONTENTS THEREOF.