

Communicating with a higher power

This short section comes before step seven for a reason. The seventh step instructs us to ask God to remove all our shortcomings and if we reject the idea of a God, we are at the kind of impasse that leads to giving up on the program.

If our Higher Power is of the spiritual variety, we probably feel that prayer is the correct way to communicate, but we should almost certainly wait until after we have reached step eleven before depending upon this as a normal method of communicating with our Higher Power.

This is not to suggest that prayer is wrong, but we often try to adopt an answer without fully understanding the implications of what we are doing. Once we have reached our sixth step, our enthusiasm for the program and spiritual living leaves us open to a different style of attack from the monkey. We are eager to progress and we think that asking for guidance on how to pray is like asking how to fall off a log, a voice says, "How hard can it be?" We need to tread carefully, within an organised religion, somebody with experience helps novices to avoid pitfalls by leading the prayer and it is too easy for us to become confused when we approach this on our own.

When we start to use prayer and meditation, we are looking to become a radio receiver capable of detecting the messages sent by our Higher Power. Just like radio waves, these are undetectable unless we have sensitive equipment that we know how to use. Unfortunately, the monkey is sitting in a taxicab parked nearby and can transmit so strongly that it overpowers any other signal. Currently, it is too easy for the monkey to supplant the messages from our Higher Power with messages of its own. The thoughts can seem logical and well reasoned, but when we look at them rationally, they prove to be the illness in disguise. Thoughts like, "If God doesn't want me to make that call tomorrow I will find that the telephone is not working" or "If I am not meant to sell my car it will be stolen" are examples of the monkey subverting rational thinking.

The guidance for step eleven is to "ask for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out", but this does not infer that all messages from our Higher Power will travel through the ether. It can be a request to guide us towards people to talk to and the humility to discuss our problems honestly. If our GOD (Group Of Drunks) is the fellowship of AA, they are sitting and waiting to help. The only obstacle is our pride. Regardless of the nature of our chosen Higher Power, it is possible to communicate directly and openly. Although we might have wished for something more fantastical than this, once again the answer is simply talking to people.

Those with a "spiritual" higher power can feel challenged by the suggestion that they shouldn't rely on prayer, but if we consider it with an open mind, by talking and listening we give our higher power a mouth, not just at meetings, but on a one to one basis, face to face or on the phone.

Late one night, the phone rang. It was somebody from the meeting I didn't know much about. He said he was feeling lost and uncertain about his sobriety. We chatted for a few minutes and then I heard myself say, "How long have you been having an affair?" It came out of my mouth, but I have no idea where the statement came from. The silence at the end of the line told me that we were treading upon uncertain ground. He hesitated and then started to pour out a tale of living with deception and lies for the last few months. Unable to share honestly, his sobriety was failing, but he hadn't looked at it. That simple enquiry changed his life. I am amazed each time I think of this. I hadn't known anything about him, but somehow I had asked the right question at the right time.

We find that examples like this happen frequently and talking to trusted friends is a positive method of communicating with our Higher Power. If this feels too much like we are straying into unacceptably "woolly" god territory, it isn't. We should consider that the humanistic branches of counselling have proved that there are therapeutic effects whenever two people are in psychological contact in a safe and trusting environment. We achieve this scientifically proven environment whenever we talk to other people within AA, providing we stay within the framework of experience, strength, and hope.

For this communication to work three things must be in place:

- We have to be honest about our feelings, actions and intentions.
- The other person must be able to listen and provide valid feedback.

Most importantly:

- We have to listen to the feedback, and be willing to change from our current course.

Just as the mask in a masquerade ball disguises our identity, an emotional mask attempts to disguise our true emotions. Wearing emotional masks is part of normal life. We sometimes want to make people think well of us or to intimidate them, at other times it is to hide our fears or suppress our anger. A mask helps us get on with people and it is unrealistic to expect to live without adopting one. However, it is a good idea to make a mental check and clear away our masks when we talk with another member of AA. We should be willing to expose our plans, actions and emotions honestly, regardless of how we feel about doing so. We are masters of justification and can easily lead other people towards our chosen answer.

People within AA will give us their time and attention, they are not merely nodding their heads in agreement, as our confidantes of old might have, but are considering carefully what we have said to them. They listen and often when we least expect or desire it, question our motives, explaining that either they or a close friend has ended up in trouble by doing what we are suggesting.

We not only have to listen to what the other person has to say, we also have to be willing to act upon it. They can reveal things that we had not thought of, throwing our preferred path into question, leaving us with a number of choices. We can go and ask somebody else's opinion, we can ignore them and continue with what we are currently planning or we can believe the person we have asked and change our plan.

There is no "correct" answer in this situation, but we soon find that it is pointless and potentially dangerous to "poll" opinion on a defect. If we ask enough people about something, we will eventually find somebody who agrees with us. If we choose to ignore all advice and carry on anyway we need to be on extremely sure ground because if somebody we trust challenges our behaviour with coherent reasons, they are probably right.

Summary:

By staying close to people who have trodden the path, we allow our chosen higher power to guide us without thunderbolts or burning bushes.

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