

Surrounded by Prayers

As I sit here, a Roman Catholic, absorbing yet another Buddhist text, I call to mind one of those seemingly inconsequential and pithy adages thrown about at AA home groups all over the world: "Take what you need, and leave the rest."

Before entering AA, sadly, that was my philosophy of life. I took and took and took what I thought I needed and disparaged the rest. I was a bottomless pit of need (and drama). I shutter when I look back at the damage that I caused and still, after ten years of continuous sobriety, I am supremely grateful to this program for giving me my life back. So, when I think back to those first couple of "24 hours," I remember be surrounded by all of those plaques with what seemed to me inscrutable or merely irrelevant words painted on them - and not too artfully either. "Let GO and Let God." "One Day at a Time." "KEEP IT SIMPLE STUPID." I not only did not appreciate them. I quite resented them.

Back then, I was trying to get through the next five minutes without a drink and the last thing I felt that I needed were these smug catch phrases and these AAers who I thought were trying to impress me with their memorization skills. Talk to any old drinking buddies still out there in the War Zones and they will tell you, "It is all brain-washing." Fortunately, I was so completely down and out that I really had no where else to go, and if the truth be known - my brain could use a little washing. So, I gave up my opinions for awhile, ^I accepted that my best intentions kept getting me [^] in a deeper and deeper mess, and ^I started listening. [^]

Eventually, I began to accept a new way of living. I allowed

it to flow into me. Over time, I began to see the world differently. And I mean over long periods of time. Sobriety came for me in bursts and sputters. My way of seeing the people and situations changed. All these ideas offered by AA started to make sense; not just in an intellectual way, but also in on a gut level. The way I perceived myself changed as well. This all happened because I worked the program.

"Take what you need..." Really, now as I hear those words, they seem to me ^{to be} a few of the most generous on the planet. When I was drinking my life could ^{not} embrace such an idea. I was a closed fist. My entire life was pain, confusion, disappointment, and regret. I could not grasp onto anything healthy and loving until time passed in the program. The concepts and the ideas of the program as expressed through our books, meetings, catch phrases, sponsorships, and so on slipped in very slowly as that closed fist loosened. Years into this, I had this overwhelming feeling one day: The Program of Alcoholics Anonymous was truly working in my life. I didn't know why it was working or where it would take me. I just trusted.

I did not like much of what was said those early on, nor did I care how much of it was said, but these were seeds that grew on good soil. I guess I embraced those things that appealed to me the most and necessarily did not focus on the other stuff as much. Over time, more and more of what was said in these rooms made sense to me. Then I started to feel alot of what other AAers were describing. I forgave more readily. My prejudices lessened. I loved more freely. And some things that would have never appealed to the old know-it-all me are now becoming things that are important in my life.

Now, am I saying to the Newcomer to run out to the local library and scour the shelves for ancient religious texts or take up a cooking class rather than go to your home group? No, of course not. I am saying that over time all that AA mumbo-jumbo makes perfect sense. This is the stuff that gives us our lives back. (Most of us couldn't remember a life before a drink and a drug.) Then other aspects of our lives open up too in miraculous ways. It has been said that this program is not meant to be our lives, but give us our lives back. And it does with dividends.

You'll look back as I have and see that the program has been guiding you to a beautiful, full life we could have had no other way. I am also saying that when other wonderful things start sneaking in because of sober living, don't be surprised. This program truly is a miracle. I could never have imagined the joy and happiness that could be mine and how I could learn to accept pain and disappointment today as also an important part of everyone's life - even the Alcoholic's.

So, as you sit waiting for the next meeting to begin, or even feel a little rushed to end the meeting and get on with your day - take a moment ^{to} ponder the plaques around you. Then imagine this: All those catch phrases and adages are prayers. They are carrying us even when we do not realize it to a wonderful life of sobriety. A life not constrained by the limits of our imaginations or even by our past. These prayers on the walls surrounding you came to AA through much sorrow, but offer much joy. They welcome the Newcomer and still guide the Oldtimer. Don't just throw them at each other haphazardly - offer them to each other and to yourself with love and respect. They bind us

together. They contain some rather complex tenets of our program in a very down to earth way. For me, they remain sacred and truly understanding them did not come cheap.

CJR