

Recovery Wisdom for the Pandemic, by Jeff Jay

The Twelve Steps have helped people through difficult situations for more than eighty years. Originating with Alcoholics Anonymous, the steps have been used by dozens of organizations, and have spread throughout the world without funding or sponsorship—a testimony to their efficacy. The popularity of the Steps comes from their simple structure and their practical approach to spiritual principles. How can the Twelve Steps help us through the COVID-19 pandemic? Let's take a look at the first three Steps and see how they apply to our life in the pandemic.

Step One in the original AA program says, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.” It may seem counter-intuitive to begin with such an admission, but it clears the way for a realistic assessment of the facts. We can all see how our lives have been impacted by the pandemic. Where we once felt in control of our destiny and enjoyed our independence, we now find ourselves sheltering in place. The unmanageability of the situation cuts across the three major areas of our life: physical, mental and spiritual.

Physical unmanageability stems from the bald facts of COVID-19. The pandemic requires extreme disruptions and precautions, combined with fewer resources. These are the new facts of my existence and they are out of my control. I am physically unable to live my normal life.

Emotional unmanageability grows out of the physical unmanageability. I'm worried about the facts, I'm fearful about the future. I'm frustrated in the current moment. As a result, I'm snapping at others, judging them harshly, denigrating myself, and wishing I'd done things differently. I know I am “awfulizing” on some level, but recognizing that fact brings little relief.

Spiritual unmanageability grows out of physical and emotional unmanageability, and it is the most pernicious. I find myself wondering at God's apparent indifference, and this despair hollows me out from the inside. God's seeming disregard vexes me, and makes me irritable and impatient. Prayers don't seem to work. I'm getting no results. Where is mercy? Where is love?

As a result, we are tempted to turn away from God. Yet on some deep level we know that turning away from God would be turning away from life, and this would be the greatest loss of all.

All this unmanageability can send us around the bend, which brings us conveniently to Step Two. "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." This is a challenging directive, because most of us think just the opposite. I think I must restore myself to right thinking. I should be the agent of change, and summon the willpower to get myself back on track. Step Two points in a different direction. It implies that the patient can't also be the doctor. Instead, Step Two points toward The Great Physician.

Big problems demand big solutions. Who is greater than God? In the end, we must come back to faith, but it must be a practical faith and a no-nonsense solution. AA's like to paraphrase a quote from James: "Faith without works is dead." God may speak in a still, small voice, but he also works through people. If I can't manage my situation by all by myself, then God—and God working through people—might be the solution. This is the "We" of the Twelve Step programs—from isolation to community, from weakness to strength. When we reach out to others, we give God a channel to act in our lives. How can I open myself to the channels God has provided?

Step Two asks us to let go of our plans and to believe in a greater plan, an unseen plan. It is a tall order and the linchpin of the Twelve Step program.

I'm asked to accept the unseemly fact that I'm not the director of this movie. I'm asked to accept that I am a character in a still-unfolding epic story, a hero's journey. We are called to face every challenge in this odyssey with courage and confidence, knowing that God is ultimately upholding us, even in our darkest moments.

Step Two asks us to believe that God can restore us to sanity, to wholeness, to a new life we can't envision. It is an acknowledgement that our plans and our willpower are insufficient, and a leap of faith is required: that maybe—just maybe—God will be able to deliver us.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1) But assurance and conviction are the very things I lack during the pandemic. Where is my relief to be found? The answer from the Twelve Step community is emphatic: “I can't, but we can.” There is no relief inside my own skull. I have to give God a channel to act in my life. I need to pick up my phone and use it. I need to connect to my fellow travelers, my faith community, my friends, and my extended family.

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer is the only way to God. Prayer is essential, but prayer is my vertical relationship to a Higher Power. It is my direct connection. Curiously, however, we have been created in such a way that prayer is insufficient. God wants me in communion with the body of Christ. It's messy. I have to unburden myself and I have to help others unburden themselves. How can I make myself a channel for God's love in the world today?

Step Three tells us how to get it done: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, *as we understood him.*”

The decision is to get out of the director's chair, and to entrust our lives to the care of God. I do not relinquish my free will (as if that were possible), but I place my will into the *care* of God.

What would a power greater and more loving than myself have me do right now? What friend or family member needs me? Who needs me to back off? Who is isolated? Can I donate ten dollars to the local food pantry? Can I turn away from the nonstop news?

The third step sounds like a spiritual one, and it is, but our actions determine if we are really turning our will and life over to the care of God. What would you have me do, Lord? Trust. Accept. Get busy. Wash the feet of those who look to you. Can I set aside my qualms? The unexpected by-product of Step Three is to loosen the grip of anxiety and depression.

What would Love have me do? What would Forgiveness have me do? What would Patience have me do? What would Courage have me do? What would Generosity and Sacrifice have me do?

The Bhagavad-Gita can be boiled down to three words. The protagonist, Arjuna, is in despair about his untenable choices. He cannot go on, even if he is a prince. Krishna gives him a kick in the pants, along with a clear direction: Do your duty. In Step Three we do what we're supposed to do, not what we want to do. Step Three helps us find the discipline—in prayer and in community—to do the work in front of us.

Prayer is also an action. Like any relationship, my relationship with God requires time. Prayer is a respite from the world and a glimpse into something greater. Prayer can be dry or fruitful, so perseverance is essential, and perseverance is an action.

After Step Three, the remaining Steps take us on a deeper dive, beginning with a searching look into our fears and resentments (Step Four). A double-dose of Humility (Step Five). Addressing our defects of character (Steps Six and Seven). Making amends for the harm we've done to others (Steps Eight and Nine). Honesty as a pragmatic way of life (Step Ten). Learning how to discern God's will (Step Eleven). And finally, being helpful to others (Step Twelve).

These Steps are beyond the scope of this article, but we can start to see why the Steps are never completed. They may be gone through the first time in a linear fashion, but after that, the Steps are more like the spokes of a wheel.

Steps Four through Twelve rest on the foundation of Steps One, Two and Three. So what are the practical aspects? How do we actually do the first three steps on a daily basis? In the time of pandemic, there's nothing like a routine to keep us on track.

1. **Get out of bed.** For many of us, the darkest thoughts of the day come before our feet hit the floor. Worse yet, these corrosive questions have no answers. The antidote is movement. I get up and get going as soon as possible. I go to the bathroom and get the day started. It's important that I get dressed and put myself together, even if I'm not going outside. These actions set an affirmative tone and help me to change the one thing I truly can change: myself.
2. **Have a cup of coffee with God.** My face may now be washed, but my brain still needs cleaning. I don't start the day with social media, I start it by spending some time with God. The best catalyst I've found is some version of *lectio divina* or divine reading. Everyone must find their own source books. For some, it will be a daily reader or meditation book. For some, it will be the Liturgy of the Hours or scripture; for others, it will be a selection of books. The point is to read, ponder and pray (or lift your thoughts to a higher level). On most days, this quiet time with God leads me into a feeling of gratitude and a fairly clear intuition of what I need to do next.
3. **Do the work.** What has God given me to do today? What are the things I can actually accomplish? If the project is too large to finish in a day, what can I get started? I need to get down to business. I may be called to do something quite different than I had planned

and it may not be what I would prefer. What would Love have me do? Boredom comes from trying to entertain myself, which is shallow and selfish. Perhaps I'll learn how to bake sourdough bread, something everyone will enjoy.

4. **Reach out.** Who needs to hear from me today? Who needs an understanding ear? If I choose, I can be a unique channel for understanding and encouragement. Equally as important, I can reach out for understanding and encouragement for myself. Who can I call to confide in? When I reach out to others, especially to get support for myself, I'm demonstrating a healthy sense of humility, and giving God a channel to act in my life. It's up to me to pick up the phone.
5. **Be of service to others.** How can I pitch in, without being a self-appointed leader? How can I play a small part without looking for accolades? I need to do the little things quietly and then the bigger things will start to straighten out. In this time of physical distancing and sheltering in place, there is still a great deal I can do with my extended family, my friends and my community. The world has moved online, and I can join the party.

Like Arjuna in the Bhagavad-Gita, we have a role to play in the unfolding epic of COVID-19. If I am a parent, I have to play the role of a parent. How can I kick it up a notch? How can I be a better spouse, friend, employer or employee? I must try to play my part with grace and confidence, not in a superficial way but with thoughtfulness and intention. Only then can I reflect some glimmer of Love, which is my ultimate duty.

In my daily life there is a quiet consolation that comes from being present for others. The sacrifice and the gift of remaining cheerful with those entrusted to your care is the mark of a healer. Being positive, even as you admit your own struggles to a friend, is the mark of maturity.

These are the duties that fall to us now.

People in twelve step recovery love slogans. These good words remind us of the hard-won progress we've made and the wisdom of the people who've gone before us. They convey in a few words what people have taken years to learn. In a harried moment, they can mean the difference between quiet recollection and destructive impulses. What could be more timely?

Easy does it. Acceptance is a core concept in recovery, and this slogan reminds me not to try to force my will on people or circumstances. Acceptance doesn't mean being a doormat, rather it reminds me of the power of patience and perseverance. Hyperactivity isn't productive and neither is paralysis. Easy does it—but do it.

One day at a time. Sometimes our difficulties seem insurmountable, but this slogan reminds me that I only have to live in the twenty-four hours allowed to me. Just for today, I will persevere and carry on. In fact, I can do almost anything for one day. And that's all I ever have to do. Easy does it.

First things first. What needs to be done that I can actually do? What is the practical priority that stands before me? I need to stay in the present, and keep my priorities straight. If I can stay true to my faith, I will find the courage to face adversity.

This too shall pass. Our life is transitory, and the highs and lows are ephemeral. I should not be too worried by setbacks and upsets, because they will soon pass away. The Sufi poet Rumi was one of the first to write down this maxim, and it has been used by many people, including Abraham Lincoln. It is a proverb of acceptance and a reminder to “wear my life like a loose garment.”

H.A.L.T. This acronym stands for: don't get too Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired. When I feel myself getting out of balance, I need to halt and see if one of these items is at fault. Part of

my daily regimen is to eat enough healthy food, avoid anger and resentment, stay connected with other people and get a good night's sleep. A lot will go right when I fulfill these basic needs.

In this time of pandemic, let's keep it simple (another slogan), and take time to rest. Let's take a break from work and worry, and get outdoors. I can be extravagant and set aside a whole day to recharge. The Sabbath is a day for rest and gratitude, originally promulgated as a commandment. I need to get out in the air and turn my face to the sun. I need to breathe.

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