

THE PROMISES

“If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

“Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.”

Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism, 3rd ed. (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976).

from the author

When I got sober, just shy of my twenty-fourth birthday, the last thing I felt was the freedom and happiness that the promises speak of. I was sick: not just physically sick from the amount of chemicals in my system, but soul-sick, completely bereft of a sense of spirit or purpose beyond finding a way to meet the day's craving.

I remember very little about my first 12-Step meeting beyond crying and shaking so hard I could barely hold on to the cup of really bad coffee I was given. I certainly couldn't fathom why the people who gave me that coffee and then helped me find a seat would have any interest whatsoever in caring for the wreck I had become.

But I let them lead me nonetheless, because I had reached the very bottom of my particular hell.

I wasn't a skid-row drunk. I was a middle-class, puke-every-morning-until-I-could-get-the-day's-first-drink-to-stay-down, off-to-the-races-for-the-day-and-night kind of drunk. I was quite a functional alcoholic actually, which confused and worried my family, friends, and employers all the more because they couldn't grasp how I could be so messed up and still show up for things—mostly on time and ready to do what was called for at any given moment.

That doesn't mean I was any good at anything. Quite the contrary, I was just good enough to give everyone a glimpse of some greater potential, just good enough to compel everyone to keep me around; just good enough to get by.

So nobody saw any need to intervene with me because I stayed one tenuous step ahead of any real consequences of

my addictions. I mixed my chemicals in a way that had me up when I needed to be up, down when I needed to come down, and completely wasted when that's what it took to keep up with the people I ran with. For years, I chose to associate with only the people, places, and professions that I could manipulate to support my addictions. In the end, I drank and drugged because I couldn't not drink or do drugs. I drank and used whether it was sunny or rainy, life was good or not so good, because it was Tuesday or because it wasn't.

All along, deep inside me, I knew something was wrong, that how I interacted with alcohol and drugs wasn't right or good or normal. I just didn't know what to do about it.

In this book, I tell my story of recovery, as suggested by our 12-Step programs: I will tell you what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now, not with "drunkalogues" to convince you of my qualifications, but with stories, sayings and strategies that might help you or someone you know get sober, stay sober, and live a life of joy.

That is my life today. It's not a perfect one, but it is a joyous one, because no matter what is happening on any given day, I never lose sight of the amazing blessing of my sobriety; the incredible freedom it gives me to be who I want to be, to go where I want to go, and to serve others in ways I had never imagined. I know that reaching out in this way gives me yet another day of peace.

FOR THAT, AND FOR SO MUCH MORE, I AM
GRATEFUL.

introduction

“If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through.”

This sentence leading into the 9th Step Promises opened my eyes to the fact that if I carefully and methodically did the work, I would see significant progress in my recovery in a very short time.

At the time I first read that passage, my downs dramatically outweighed my ups, and I was way more accustomed to being horrified and ashamed than to being amazed. So that was my first real sense of promise from the 12 Steps: that if I were thorough in my inventory, in humbly sharing that inventory, in making my amends, and in doing whatever was necessary to repair the damage of my past, I would start to experience a very important personal shift.

But, I couldn't figure out what amazement would be like exactly—would it be a big, onetime, burning-bush moment? Or an ongoing, smell-every-rose, daily zest for life?

I didn't know how to answer those questions; I just knew that I desperately wanted to replace the sadness and uncertainty that I felt most days, and amazement sure sounded like a great alternative.

But before I could truly know any of the 9th Step Promises, amazement included, I first had to go through the eight preceding steps. The first step—admitting that I was powerless over alcohol and that my life had become unmanageable—was the easy one; I had plenty of evidence. After all, it was the powerlessness and unmanageability I felt

with alcohol and drugs that had led me to a 12-Step meeting to begin with.

The next seven steps gave me quite a bit more trouble, and it took me more than a year to work through them. But, by the time I had finished, I was starting to feel what it meant to be amazed, which was this pervasive wonder from seeing my life evolve into something beautiful and useful.

My amazement—and usefulness—grew with each formal pass through the steps, which I did three times in the first five years of my sobriety. Along the way, my life turned from an unrelenting horror into this remarkable daily experience to look forward to.

And each subsequent time I have worked these steps, whether formally or informally, I have become more and more willing to be searching, fearless, moral, and honest, and my life and ability to serve others have improved proportionately.

WHICH IS AMAZING. STILL.

March

“We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace.”

MARCH 1

For so much of my life—drunk and newly sober—I felt like I was crawling out of my skin, my nerve endings all jangly and exposed, constantly fueled by worry and restlessness.

And then I learned to breathe, and to pray, and I found peace and serenity in contemplation and meditation and in acting from compassion.

Serenity today comes from knowing that I AM ENOUGH, IN THE EYES OF WHATEVER GOD IS, AND WORTHY OF PEACE AND PROGRESS, ONE DAY AT A TIME.

MARCH 2

The only thing bigger than fear is faith. Focus on what you have deep, abiding faith in, and your fear will subside.

Have faith that you can stay clean and sober, by working the steps, just for today.

Have faith in the promises you can find evidence for.

Have faith in the ones you can't.

Have faith in whatever power is so much greater than you that you are able to feel hope in spite of yourself.

Keep cultivating that faith because the stronger it gets, the less room there is for fear.

**HAVE FAITH THAT I—AND A MILLION OTHER
RECOVERING ALCOHOLICS AND ADDICTS THAT
YOU'VE YET TO MEET—BELIEVE IN YOU.**

MARCH 3

Show up for life in a way that improves everyone's chances for success.

Don't leave the heavy lifting—of spirits, minds, intentions, or the meeting book—to everyone else; **TAKE THE LEAD IN CULTIVATING THE BEST POSSIBLE ENVIRONMENT FOR EVERYONE'S GROWTH.**

MARCH 4

It takes what it takes—no more, no less—for each soul to surrender.

This is the hard truth that no one wants to hear when they ask how bad things must get for an active alcoholic or addict to get sober, stay sober, and live a productive life.

We don't have to have new answers for old problems. Keep it simple: **DIRECT THOSE STILL SUFFERING TO WHAT WORKS, AND LEAVE THE REST UP TO YOUR HIGHER POWER—AND THEIRS.**

MARCH 5

“This too shall pass” is not just a slogan to help us through the hard times; it is a reminder of the impermanence of all things, a step to letting go.

I used to use this phrase to ignore what was happening, to hold my breath while I waited for things to change.

I couldn't look at a difficult situation without reacting, so I would just close my eyes to it until some happier emotion or time could replace it.

Then I found out that happy times pass too.

I FINALLY REALIZED THAT LIVING FULLY MEANT LEARNING TO OPEN MY EYES AND BREATHE THROUGH WHATEVER WAS GOING ON, UP OR DOWN, HAPPY OR SAD. THAT'S HOW I CAME TO SEE AND TRULY APPRECIATE THINGS IN THE MOMENT.

MARCH 6

The problem with claiming to be a perfectionist is that perfection is unachievable, so the claim and the pursuit create undue stress. Instead, simply enjoy the opportunity in sobriety to live a life directed by well-defined values and standards.

Perfectionism is just that: an ism, just like the rest of the ones we battle with. It is an affliction of the mind that causes us to be obsessed with getting what we want, often without regard to whether we are doing something beneficial in the process.

INSTEAD OF STRIVING FOR PERFECTION, FOCUS ON EFFECTIVENESS.

MARCH 7

The quality of our life depends, in part, on the degree to which we can gracefully meet its tragedies and triumphs.

I had a ridiculous time, for quite a long while, managing my moods—and not just in the face of adversity.

Wild swings and expressions of thought and emotion ruled most of my days.

Righteous indignation was a common theme.

Forget compassion: I was too busy pitying you for missing the boat to share any empathy for our common condition.

I was either overly inflated or deflated, never buoyantly in the middle.

It was wearing me out and threatening my sobriety.

There was no easy answer. I just got sick and tired of being sick and tired and erratic in sobriety, so I worked on being less like that, and more like the happy, joyous, and free people.

OVER TIME, HAPPY, JOYOUS, AND FREE
WON OUT.

MARCH 8

Don't get so focused on the character defects of others that you lose sight of your own and miss the opportunity to correct them.

Don't deflect. Stay centered and focused on your own stuff, and don't let the temporary "pleasure" of finding fault in others take you away from working on yourself.

YOU CAN'T DO THEIR WORK FOR THEM ANYWAY, SO YOU MIGHT AS WELL CONCENTRATE ON DOING YOURS.

MARCH 9

"Attraction rather than promotion" only happens if we carry ourselves with humble certainty, not certain arrogance.

There is nothing wrong with conviction, but people will only know by our works whether we are truly convinced of our path.

We just have to watch that our stance about the wonders of our recovery program doesn't become piteous or preachy.

WE DON'T HAVE TO SHOUT ABOUT THESE WONDERS; WE CAN SIMPLY BE A SHINING EXAMPLE OF THEM.

MARCH 10

Be careful what you make of things without evidence to support your conclusions.

MARCH 11

Celebrate the little victories that come with being clean and sober.

Getting out of bed.

Making the bed.

Cleaning up after yourself.

Opening the drapes.

Opening the mail.

Returning phone calls.

Keeping food in the refrigerator.

Balancing a checkbook.

Paying the bills.

Paying the bills on time.

Showing up for work.

Showing up for work on time.

BEING GRATEFUL. (ACTUALLY, THAT'S A BIG ONE.)

MARCH 12

Time in the program is a mark of survival, not necessarily of wisdom.

I was very focused on time in the beginning. If you had some, then you must have known something I didn't.

Consequently, I fell in with and took bad advice from some folks who weren't drinking, but weren't exactly happy, joyous, and free either.

Fortunately, at the insistence of my sponsor, I started paying attention in meetings to whether people were walking their talk.

EVENTUALLY, I LEARNED WHAT IT MEANT TO
"TAKE THE BEST, AND LEAVE THE REST."

MARCH 13

People put their lives in our hands each time they give us their challenges in sobriety.

No one did me any favors by commiserating with me; it often made things worse by validating my wrong thinking and action.

Thank goodness there were people who were committed to leading me away from my problems by pointing me in the direction of my solutions.

THANK GOODNESS THEY WERE WILLING TO INCONVENIENCE ME IN THE MIDST OF MY WOES, FOR MY OWN GOOD.

MARCH 14

Today I will soften—my stance, my judgment, and my attitude.

We know that what is simple isn't always easy, and vice versa.

However, sometimes life is both.

HALLELUJAH.

MARCH 15

Sponsor: "You're not responsible for what pops into your head; you're responsible for what you do with it."

FORTUNATELY, OVER TIME, BOTH HAVE IMPROVED.

MARCH 16

Claim serenity, peace.

I lived in such a fretful world in my addiction that on the rare occasion that I had a good day, I felt too guilty to enjoy it lest I leave any of my drama-filled buddies behind in the process.

I did leave some people behind when I finally chose a sober, happier life. I didn't dismiss them or lose my love and compassion for them, but I did leave them behind.

IT'S OKAY TO MOVE ON.

MARCH 17

No one will take a stronger stand for your sobriety than you.

You gave me a meeting schedule; you didn't drag me in the door.

You gave me the book and told me how to study it; you didn't force me to read it.

You showed me an example of a happy, joyous, and free perspective; you didn't force me to want it.

You were glad to see me at yet another meeting; you didn't place my sobriety before your own.

You gave me a place to grow; you didn't demand a time frame for it.

I had to be ready; you couldn't make it take hold.

YOU GAVE ME THE BLESSINGS; I HAD TO PROTECT THEM.

MARCH 18

Ground yourself with the confidence that, no matter what the question, you either know the answer or know where to get it.

This is the blueprint for becoming a phenomenal resource for the success of others.

NOTHING EVER FELT SO GOOD.

MARCH 19

Instead of finding fault, today I will find compassion.

We really don't have to look far to see our collective humanity.

But, we do have to be willing to look.

And let's not forget the seemingly limitless tolerance that others have had for our faults.

PERHAPS WE OWE THAT SENSITIVITY TO THEM TOO.

MARCH 20

For every excuse I make about why something can't be done, someone, somewhere, is making it happen under the same or worse circumstances.

Knowing this, I'm left with deciding whether I really want what I say I want, and whether it is something I will go to the ends of the earth to accomplish in spite of any perceived obstacles.

If so, great.

IF NOT, THAT'S OKAY TOO.

MARCH 21

Live with integrity and honor. Be in alignment with the values you've always had—those that may have been hibernating while you were up to other things.

Integrity in sobriety is being who I say I am and doing what I say I will do.

Living with honor means practicing these principles in all my affairs, developing good character, ethics, and morals, and consequently being able to hold my head up, knowing I have done these things, this day, to the best of my ability.

IF I THINK ABOUT IT, THIS INTEGRITY THING IS NOT A COMPLETELY NEW EXPERIENCE—MAYBE IT'S JUST BEEN DORMANT FOR A WHILE.

MARCH 22

Express yourself.

Dance, sing, write, paint, craft, build, sculpt, draw.

TODAY, GO PLAY, BECAUSE YOU CAN.

MARCH 23

We don't always have to strive and push for greatness. Sometimes being good (truly good, not the false "fine" we sometimes use) is good enough.

Besides surrendering to powerlessness over alcohol, surrendering to the truth of my existence—and learning how to express that—was the key to improving my choice of how to be at any given moment.

AND THEN I REALLY WAS FINE.

MARCH 24

The more responsibility I took for my life, the more I grew up, and the less dysfunctional everyone else appeared.

We see the world through lenses clouded by our own experience, for better or for worse.

If we are being dysfunctional, all we tend to see is dysfunction.

MAYBE IT'S TIME FOR A NEW PAIR OF GLASSES.

MARCH 25

Stop telling old stories.

We come into sobriety with some very old, very limiting stories about what we are capable of.

Notice how often you use the following lead-ins to describe yourself and whether what follows builds you up or tears you down:

“I always . . .”

“I never . . .”

“I am . . .”

Chances are, we are way more competent than we give ourselves credit for.

IT'S A GOOD DAY TO WRITE A NEW STORY
BASED ON RECOGNIZING YOUR OWN SKILLS.

MARCH 26

Clarity, discernment, and joy came from being honest, open-minded, and willing.

I had to break through the clutter of my old thoughts, become newly curious, and develop new habits of honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness.

Before, I was motivated to do that so I wouldn't get drunk and die.

TODAY, I'M MOTIVATED TO DO IT TO LIVE.

MARCH 27

Intensity doesn't always equal care; sometimes it's just our futile attempt at trying to control the uncontrollable.

MARCH 28

You'll know you're doing "the next right thing" by your willingness to help the greatest number of people in the process, even if you're not one of them.

I'm not talking about codependence, where you neglect yourself in the process of giving everyone else your time and attention.

I'm speaking of your willingness to do what's hard, but right, and to still do it even if you don't benefit.

**BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THE RIGHT THING CAN
BECOME THE POPULAR THING.**

MARCH 29

No one is immune to relapse.

If we're truly living a day-at-a-time philosophy, it is imperative that we do whatever will keep us sober today.

**LORD KNOWS WE'VE GOT PLENTY OF TOOLS
FOR THAT.**

MARCH 30

My Higher Power didn't get me sober for my comfort, but so that I can serve.

We are here to help each other. The only way we can do that is if we are free to do so.

The only way we can be free is if we are clean, sober, and clear.

The only way I know how to be that is to practice the principles of the 12 Steps in all of our affairs.

THE DAY IS FULL OF CHANCES TO PRACTICE.

MARCH 31

Lead.