

Step 3

C H A P T E R T H R E E

DECIDING TO BE FREE

We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

Step Three introduces us to a core concept: *God as we understood God*. Many people who have a problem with Step Three tend to focus on its overt reliance on God, taking this to mean a reliance on religion in one form or another. While one cannot deny that the practice of the Twelve Steps is at its heart spiritual, it is not in any way religious if by *religious* we mean that it is connected to one organized faith or another. Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill W. makes this very clear in the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*:

I had always believed in a Power greater than myself. I had often pondered these things. I was not an atheist. Few people really are, for that means blind faith in the strange proposition that this universe originates in a cipher and aimlessly rushes nowhere. My intellectual heroes, the chemists, the astronomers, even the evolutionists, suggested vast laws and forces at work. Despite contrary indications, I had little doubt that a mighty purpose and rhythm underlay all. How could there be so much of precise and immutable law, and no intelligence? I simply had to believe in a Spirit of the Universe, who knew neither time nor limitation. But that was as far as I had gone.

With ministers, and the world's religions, I parted right there. When they talked of a God personal to me, who was love, superhuman strength and direction, I became irritated and my mind snapped shut against such a theory.¹

When I first read, this I felt a deep sense of relief. I, too, didn't believe in religion. I, too, placed no trust in rabbis, pastors, imams, gurus, and the like. I still don't. True, I am a rabbi, and maybe it is because I am that I know that rabbis and other clergy know nothing special. We are trained to explain and promote our respective religious systems, and we may even believe that the system to which we belong is the one true system, but belief is not fact, and sincerity is no guarantee of truth. Step Three, however, isn't concerned with fact or truth; it is concerned with *God as we understand God*. Given this phrasing, God is what you imagine God is; God is what you need God to be so that you can recover from the disease that is ruining your life and the lives of those you love.

What does Twelve Step have to say about God? Absolutely nothing. The success of working the Steps isn't dependent on any theological proposition; rather, it is dependent on you finding something or someone greater than yourself to whom you can be surrendered. For some of us, God is the God found in our respective scriptures: Torah, Gospel, Qur'an, or Bhagavad Gita. For others, God is Nature, Tao, the Great Spirit, the Goddess, or even the principles of Twelve Step themselves. Some of us are theists; others are atheists. Some of us have a clear image of a specific God, while others have a vague sense of Something Greater unattached to any religion. The point is, it doesn't matter. God is whatever you need God to be in order to get beyond the insanity that rules your life.

Listen to Bill W. on this:

The word God still aroused a certain antipathy. When the thought was expressed that there might be a God personal

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to me this feeling was intensified. I didn't like the idea. I could go for such conceptions as Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind or Spirit of Nature but I resisted the thought of a Czar of the Heavens, however loving His sway might be. I have since talked with scores of men who felt the same way.²

What allowed Bill W. to use the word *God* was his radical notion that he could conceive of God as he wished. Step Three invites you to become your own theologian, to create an idea of God that allows you to trust in something greater than yourself. It is this fact that makes practicing the Twelve Steps a spiritual discipline, but it is also this fact that makes many people, both religious and nonreligious, nervous: "If we know we are imagining God or envisioning God according to our own understanding, how do we know we are surrendering to the true God?" the Reverend Myra, an Episcopal priest with a history of prescription drug abuse, once said to me. "When it comes to God in Twelve Step recovery," she said, "we are like the proverbial blind men and the elephant. We each have a piece of the truth, but the Whole escapes us."

The story of the blind men and the elephant comes from India, and Sufis, Jains, Hindus, and Buddhists all have versions of it. The nineteenth-century American poet John Godfrey Saxe's version is perhaps the best-known telling of the story in the West. The poem opens,

It was six men of Hindustan
to learning much inclined
who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind).

Each man explores one part of the elephant and extrapolates from that a picture of the complete animal. One grasps hold of the tail and insists the elephant is shaped like a rope. Another

grabs a leg and argues that the elephant is like a pillar. A third holding the trunk insists it is shaped like a snake. The six men argue endlessly as to the true shape of an elephant, and never once imagine that the elephant could incorporate all their notions and could not be reduced to just one.

The difference between the men in Saxe's poem and people in recovery is that we don't argue about God. Our concern isn't with theological accuracy but pragmatic efficacy. If your understanding of God allows you to recover from your addiction and bring some sanity to your life, then your God is as true as God needs to be.

THE REALITY OF NOT KNOWING

The real challenge of Step Three isn't coming to know God, but coming to know ourselves. If we can imagine God any way we wish, then we are not bound to any theology, but once we admit that we are creating God according to our understanding, we cannot help but shift our concern from "who is God" to "who am I." Who is this *you* who decides to turn your will and your life over to the care of God regardless of how you understand God?

Step Three places us in a very interesting situation. If we get to decide who or what God is in order to then turn our will and our lives over to the care of this God, are we not simply surrendering to ourselves? And if that is true, how can we say we are surrendering at all?

Clay, an engineer at an auto plant and a recovering alcoholic, put the problem this way: "If you're powerless over your disease, how can you be powerful enough to understand God? If the disease makes life insane, how do you know your understanding of God is sane? If addicts are obsessed with our own egos, how do we know we aren't simply praying to our egos dressed up as God?"

We don't.

Twelve Step recovery asks us to do the impossible. We are asked to recognize that we are powerless and at the same time to

find the power “to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.” We are asked to surrender to God and at the same time to recognize that this God is only the God of our understanding and hence a partial picture at best. We cannot escape the suspicion that we are fooling ourselves.

This means that, even as we trust the program and work the steps, we can harbor doubt in the efficacy of both. This doubt is in fact a key to recovery. Knowing that we cannot know for certain who or what God is, whether or not Twelve Step will work for us, and just who the *you* is who is doing all of this, leads to an ever-deepening sense of humility, and it is this humility that is vital to our recovery.

The humility generated in recovery is the ability to admit that when it comes to the core questions about who you are and why you are here on this planet the only honest answer is, “I don’t know.” “Humility,” Dr. Valerie once told me, “is living the question without settling on an answer.”

In the context of Twelve Step recovery, the core question is always the same: “Will I succumb to my addiction today?” And the answer is always the same, “I don’t know.” Not knowing is not a sign of weakness, but of honesty. Traditionally, people in Twelve Step programs speak of “one day at a time,” and commit to abstinence and sobriety just for today. A more accurate rendering of the situation would be to say “one moment at a time.” You are abstinent now in this moment, but you cannot be certain about the next moment or the moment after that. Nor do you have to be. The next moment doesn’t exist, only this moment needs attention, and in this moment you abstain from whatever addiction haunts you.

Tom, a banker who, according to his own account, has “gambled away three fortunes,” put it this way:

I was a big-picture guy. I looked at my life in terms of years not days. And just thinking about giving up gambling for

good made me sick. I mean a lifetime without casinos? No way. When I came into the program and started to hear this one day at a time thing, even that was too much. Then it hit me: How about one hour at a time or one minute at a time? Hey, I'm not gambling right at this moment, so I can live without it. Let's see how to do that in the next moment and the next.

Living the question is living without knowing the answers; living without knowing the answers requires us to live each moment with attention, humility, and curiosity. As the medieval Ch'an (Zen) poet Niu-t'ou Fa-Jung wrote, "Not knowing is knowing the essential ... The highest principle cannot be explained: It is neither free nor bound; lively and attuned to everything, it is always right before you."³

What is right before you is this question: "Will I be abstinent in this moment or not?" The answer is not an abstract yes or no, but the reality of your action in that moment. You are either abstinent or you are not. There is no abstract knowing, there is only observing what is right now.

DECIDING OR DEFRAUDING?

If we can't really know God, and all we have is our understanding of God as a projection of our ego, deciding to turn our lives over to this projection is not going to change things. Indeed, on the surface Step Three appears to be simply a subtle gambit of the ego convincing us that we have achieved something when, in fact, we are still in the grips of our addiction to power and control now masquerading as God rather than ego.

I admit that most people in Twelve Step recovery may not think about the steps as deeply as this. They are interested in only one thing—recovery—and parsing the Steps in itself isn't going to help with that. Indeed, at first it might get in the way by bog-

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ging us down in extraneous philosophical rambling. But my sense of things is that once we are working the Steps, delving more deeply into them can further our recovery and deepen the spiritual transformation they promise.

Which brings me back to Step One: We are powerless. The ongoing realization that we cannot change reality and must learn to navigate within it is a humbling experience. It continually forces the ego to let go of its grip on the illusion of power and control and allows us to fall into the arms of what *is* rather than into the addiction that promises to protect us from it.

Step Three says we can decide to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understand God. We have seen that the formula “God as we understand God” reduces God to an abstract idea of our own conjuring. Given this, we have to wonder just what value there is in “deciding” to turn to this idea in the first place. And, even if there is value in it, how can we decide to do this if, in fact, we are powerless?

My own experience with Step Three turns the Step on its head, and I am not alone. As Daniel, an accountant in his late thirties with an oxycodone addiction, put it, “I couldn’t decide anything. I mean if I can’t decide to be clean, how can I decide to surrender to God? And even if I could, I realized that the God I was surrendering to wasn’t real. He was just a projection of my own imagination. So I was blocked in on all sides. I did admit I was powerless over this thing, and I do believe that God can restore my sanity, but so what? I couldn’t do what Step Three asks me to do.”

No one can. And it is only when we realize that we can’t that the true gift of Twelve Step recovery begins. We have already turned our lives and our will over to whatever substance we are abusing. It is no longer ours to turn over. My life belongs to food, yours may belong to drugs or alcohol or sex or gambling or compulsive overwork or whatever madness you worship in hopes of getting some control and power over things.

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The genius of Step Three is not that we have the power to decide anything, but that it forces us to realize that we can't even make this simple decision to change; we are forced to realize the extent to which the addiction now runs our lives. Step One's admission of powerlessness is now put to the test in Step Three: If we are really powerless, we cannot decide. And if we cannot decide, there is no hope of recovery. Step Three doesn't offer us hope, it confronts us with horror: a lifetime of unending addiction and insanity. And that is its genius, for the horror of our situation is now so acute that we cannot do anything but howl for help. And in that howl is an act of "deciding" far more profound than anything to which the ego can pretend.

Step Three is a radical disruption of the illusion of control that our ego has spent a lifetime constructing. This is, as contemporary spiritual teacher Ram Dass might call it, the fierce grace of God, *regardless* of our understanding of God, tearing the last bit of ego-centered hope from our hands and letting us fall to our deaths.

FALLING INTO THE ARMS OF GOD

The Sufis call this "dying before you die." You are not dying physically but psychologically. Without anything to hold on to—neither your addiction nor the illusion of deciding—you just fall. It is a terrifying experience, until you realize there is no landing. The real problem with falling isn't the falling itself, but the landing. When we truly accept our powerlessness over life, we discover that there is only falling.

This insight at first seems to contradict the idea of hitting rock bottom and requires closer examination. Hitting rock bottom is an experience of the ego. It is the point where the ego, the addicted self clinging to the illusion of control, can no longer maintain that illusion and is surrendered to the reality of powerlessness. It is only when you hit rock bottom that you have the opportunity to begin to climb out of the hole into which you have fallen. Or at least that is the standard metaphor.

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What I've learned, however, is that when we are truly surrendered at rock bottom we don't climb out; we fall through. We discover that the bottom is false, part of the ego-centered drama of the addicted personality. We hit rock bottom because the addicted ego takes a perverse delight in degrading itself. As long as we think we are in control, we blame ourselves for our situation, and the blame either motivates us to wallow in our depravity or make some heroic effort to climb out of it. In either case, it is still the ego at work, and this is not yet true surrender.

True surrender involves not only hitting rock bottom but losing even the capacity to wallow or climb out. We are completely broken. In that brokenness we call out not as a tactic for survival but as a last gasp before we die. It is then that we are surrendered.

With that complete surrender, a surrender that comes not as a last-ditch attempt to save ourselves, but as an involuntary death rattle, the bottom of rock bottom opens up and we enter a kind of free fall. Hitting rock bottom shatters the ego, and without the ego there is no more need of rock bottom. Rock bottom was just another illusion of the addicted mind. When you hit it full force, both it and you are shattered by the experience, and you discover a new kind of falling, a free-falling into God.

God, as I understand God, is Reality itself, and reality is infinite and infinitely creative. Free-falling into God is the experience of creativity not as some alien force but as my own true essence. Free-falling into God is the discovery that you are part of the Divine and filled with a creativity that allows you to live free of the addiction that defined the preshattered ego.

It is the nature of total surrender, rather than talk of reliance on God as you understand God, that makes Twelve Step recovery a deeply spiritual practice. As we have said, God as you understand God is most likely a stand-in for the ego; God as you understand God is too often you masquerading as God. But with hitting rock bottom this *you* is shattered, and

with it your understanding of God. There is a moment of sheer panic as this *you* dies, followed by a breathless wonder as the bottom itself shatters and you enter the free fall of Divine Reality. Then the *you* that remains—the *you* that you have never met and could never meet as long as you were boxed into the addiction-fueled fantasy of the old *you*—is suddenly called on to live in this new reality. Yet this new *you* doesn't have a clue as to what to do. So you do the only thing you can do: You cry for help.

SELF-POWER OR OTHER POWER

I'm not one who readily calls for help. I live under the conceit that I'm in control, or at least that I should be. All my life I was taught to lift myself up by my bootstraps, and I never questioned the wisdom of that advice.

I think this is what drew me to Zen Buddhism in my teens. *Jiriki* is the Japanese word for self-power, what my dad called “bootstrapping.” *Jiriki* is contrasted with *tarikī*, other-power. The contrast of *jiriki* and *tarikī* is essential to the contrast between Zen and Pure Land Buddhisms, the latter being the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan.

Zen is all about bootstrapping. If you are to reach enlightenment, you must do so under your own power. The self-powered approach of Zen is paradoxical, given that the Buddha taught *anatta*, the nonexistence of this very egoic self upon which Zen seems to rely. I suspect that the paradox is deliberate, forcing us to rely on the illusion—as an addict relies on her addiction—until both illusion and addiction are shattered in the experience of true rock bottom. In both Zen and Twelve Step, *rock bottom* is the shattering of this illusory self and the insanity of thinking you can bootstrap your way through life.

Pure Land Buddhism takes a different approach. Rather than push you toward freedom through self-shattering, Pure Land tells you from the very beginning that you can't free yourself at all. In Pure Land you have no bootstraps on which to pull, and this leaves

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you barefoot with no self-powered escape. While Zen is rooted in *jiriki*, self-power, Pure Land Buddhism rests on the idea of *tariki*, other-power. While Zen holds that the individual can attain enlightenment under his own power, Pure Land says that in the end only by calling on the power of Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, can enlightenment be attained.

The story of Amitabha Buddha is found in an early first-century Buddhist sutra (sacred text) called the Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life. In this sutra, the historical Buddha tells Ananda, his chief disciple and personal assistant, that there is a long lineage of Buddhas who preceded him, Buddhas who are still alive and aware of him. The Buddha tells Ananda the story of one of these Buddhas, Amitabha.

Amitabha Buddha began life as Dharmakara, a mythic king who, aeons ago, heard a sermon delivered by Lokeshvararaja Buddha, the Buddha living at Dharmakara's time. Dharmakara was so taken with the sermon that he abdicated his throne, and became a monk. It was Dharmakara's intent to earn enough merit to create a Land of Bliss where people would go after death and from which they would then attain enlightenment.

The sutra lists forty-eight vows taken by Dharmakara to ensure his success. At the heart of Pure Land Buddhism is Dharmakara's eighteenth vow, the Vow of the Ten Recitations. Dharmakara promises that anyone who calls upon him ten times in his enlightened state as Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, will be reborn in the Land of Bliss, or the Pure Land as the Chinese called it, from which they would eventually attain enlightenment themselves.

As Pure Land Buddhism develops, the practice of reciting the *nembutsu*, which is Japanese for "mindfulness of the Buddha," becomes its central practice. Followers of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism recite the phrase *Namu Amida Butsu*, which means both "I trust in the Buddha of Infinite Light," and "Homage to the Buddha of Infinite Light."

I had been practicing the art of bootstrapping most of my life. Zen was my formal practice, but bootstrapping was my way of doing everything. Yet my addiction always got the better of me. No matter how hard I pulled those straps, I never managed to lift myself up. It was then that I realized how Zen, at least for me, was the way to Pure Land.

Zen exhausts the self and leaves us humbled enough to call for help: *Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu*. Yet even that is a kind of *jiriki*, self-power. So we call and call until we discover that we are no longer calling the *nembutsu*; rather the *nembutsu* calls us. Even one recitation of the *nembutsu* in that state of surrender is enough to awaken you to the Pure Land, which, of course, is only this land without the delusion of a separate and volitional self propped up by the illusion of control and the addictions that maintain it.

While most Buddhist commentaries on the Twelve Steps focus on traditions rooted in *jiriki*, it is, I believe, Pure Land Buddhism and its reliance on *tariqi*, other-power, that is the Buddhism better suited for people working the Twelve Steps. This becomes clear in the words of Tz'u-min, an eighth-century Chinese Pure Land master:

The Buddha, in the causal stage, made the universal vow:
 When beings hear my Name and think on me,
 I will come to welcome each of them,
 Not discriminating at all between the poor and the rich
 and well-born,
 Not discriminating between the inferior and highly
 gifted,
 Not choosing the learned and those upholding pure
 precepts,
 Nor rejecting those who break precepts and whose evil
 karma is profound.
 Solely making beings turn about and abundantly say
 the *nembutsu*,
 I can make bits of rubble change into gold.⁴

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The “bits of rubble” are those broken individuals whose lives are unmanageable, and who cannot, under their own power, do anything about it. The *nembutsu* is the cry of one who has fallen into the pit, hit rock bottom, fallen through, and cannot save himself. As Taitetsu Unno, a Pure Land Buddhist priest, student of Zen, and my professor of Buddhism in college wrote:

This transformation expresses the boundless compassion, nonjudgmental and all-inclusive, that is the moving force in the Buddhist tradition. It is not, however, a simple naive optimism, for the starting point of Buddhism is a recognition of the universal face to human suffering born of both personal and collective karma. In fact, it is a realistic appraisal of life as it is, not merely on the surface of things but at its most profound depth. In this depth, abundant with the accumulated pain and sorrow of humanity, is also found the capacity of the human spirit to achieve its fullest potential, no matter the obstacles, through awakening to the working of boundless compassion deep within our life.⁵

It doesn't matter if you cry out in Japanese or Chinese as a Pure Land Buddhist might, or if, as a practitioner of another faith, you use some other formula. The cry isn't magic; the words don't matter. What matters is that you have no other choice but to cry.

Practice: Crying Out Loud

The practice of calling out to a power greater than ourselves is universal.

In the Mathnawi of Rumi, the Sufi poet urges us to call out “Allah” repeatedly. “Mention [of the Name] of Allah is pure; when purity has arrived impurity ties up [its] belongings [and] exits [from you]” (Mathnawi 111:185). Rumi teaches that reciting the Name of Allah is the same as Allah saying to you, “Here I am!” (Mathnawi 111:188).

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In Hinduism this practice is called *nama-japa*, the recitation of the Name. There are many names for God in Hinduism, and each has its own mantra, or sacred word or phrase. I will mention only two here. The *maha-mantra* (the great mantra): *Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare; Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare*; and the *Shiva mantuma*: *Om Namah Shivaya*.

Like many who went to college in the sixties and seventies, I have had some experience chanting *Hare Krishna*. The context was always that of an ecstatic encounter with Krishna devotees who used the recitation of the Name, along with drumming and dance, to shift themselves into an altered and more expansive state of consciousness. Even today I regularly attend Krishna worship for the sheer exuberance of it.

But my experience with the recitation of *Om Namah Shivaya* has been the more profound. Shiva, to whom this mantra is addressed, is the Hindu God of destruction, that aspect of Reality that shatters all delusions and removes the last vestiges of the separate self. I learned how to chant this mantra from a swami of the Siddha Yoga tradition, and I can attest that, once learned, internalized, and recited, this mantra is a powerful cry for help for those of us who have at last admitted that we are powerless.

In the Christian tradition, the mantra of choice is *The Jesus Prayer* or *The Prayer of the Heart*: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Twelve Step practitioners who use this prayer tell me they substitute their particular addiction for the word *sinner*. For example: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, an alcoholic.”

The prayer most likely originated among the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the fifth century. These devotees

of Jesus withdrew into the Egyptian wilderness to be alone with God. While the prayer itself is from the fifth century, the Christian practice of reciting short lines of sacred text goes back at least two centuries earlier to St. John Cassian (360–435), who taught the repetition of psalm lines to induce inner tranquility.

In Judaism the practice is called *gerushin*, which means “to separate or divorce.” Through the repetition of a divine Name of God, you are separated from the addicted ego and released into the infinite Source and Substance of all reality. Reb Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810), the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, taught the repetition of the name *HaRachaman*, the Compassionate One. In my own practice this is the Name that I use most often.

It is up to you to find a Name or short prayer that works for you. But once you have settled on one, the practice itself is simple. All you need do is make time each day to sit comfortably and recite the Name or text you have chosen. As the practice of recitation becomes a regular part of your day, extend the practice from formal sitting times to other free moments throughout the day.

I practice calling out the Name of God in different settings. As a formal practice, I spend forty-five minutes or so repeating Names of God each morning as part of my contemplative walking practice. I set out each morning at dawn and walk through town to Lyttle Creek, and then follow the creek to Stones River. I walk along the riverbank for a while and then return home. The whole walk is about six miles, but only the first half is focused on chanting.

I also practice calling out to God silently throughout the day. I do so whenever I am waiting in line at the grocery store or bank, or stuck in traffic. In this way I no

longer imagine that I'm wasting time, but rather using it to deepen my awareness of the presence of God. Most importantly, however, I use this practice when I sense the madness of compulsive eating coming over me.

Sometimes when I am in a supermarket or walking by an ice cream parlor and I find myself caught up in crazy thinking about food, an argument starts in my head: to eat or not to eat? The answer to this question is always the same: Eat! What I have come to learn is that it is not the answer that matters, but the madness of the question. If I give myself over to the question, I will succumb to the answer. So I have to shift my attention away from the question, and I do this by repeating the Name of God.

While at first a matter of *jiriki*, self-power, this practice quickly becomes a matter of *tariki*, other-power. Once I recognize that I am falling into the insanity of addictive thinking, the mantra arises in my mind. I don't choose to recite it; it chooses to be recited.

Is this God taking control of my life? The question at that moment is irrelevant to me. I am free from the madness, and that is all that matters.

