

## 19 Being Grateful

One AA member recalls that, even during the worst of her drinking career, she never lost her faith. "I had a firm, unshakable belief—in disaster," she explains. "Every morning, almost my first conscious thought was 'Oh, my God, I wonder what new troubles are going to hit me today!'"

When someone knocked at the door, she was sure it was for an unpleasant reason. She confidently expected only bills and other bad news in the mail. And if the telephone rang, she sighed in anticipation of dreary tidings.

Such an enormous expenditure of energy in negative speculations is familiar to many of us; we remember the dark cast of mind that prevailed during the active stage of our own alcoholism. Some of it, to be sure, may have been simply a pharmacological effect of alcohol, which is a depressant drug. When we get the last molecules of alcohol out of the system, a lot of the gloom disappears along with it

But the habit of thinking in such neurotically depressed ways can stay with some of us, we have found, until we learn to spot it and carefully root it out.

This is no prescription for mindless Pollyanna-ism. We do not pretend that hardships are meaningless, nor deny that everyone has mountains to climb from time to time. Grief really hurts, and so do other kinds of pain.

However, now that we are free of alcohol, we have much more control over our thinking. We have a broader range of thoughts, in minds that are no longer so blurred. The thoughts we choose to spend time on in any given 24 hours can strongly influence the complexion of our feeling for that day—bright and healthy, or murky and disheartened.

Since so much of our thinking used to be intricately associated with our drinking life-style, we have found it worthwhile to look closely at our thinking habits and find different and better ways of using our minds.

The following illustrations may not be an exact fit for you, but even if the words

are new, perhaps your emotions will be moved to recognize familiar emotional tunes accompanying them. Some are intentionally exaggerated, to make the point unmistakably clear. Others may, at first glance, look trivial. Scores of us have found, though, that easy little changes are a good starting point for a big strong recovery.

When our favorite toddler falls, bumps her head, and squalls, it's fairly simple to see whether she is seriously hurt or just frightened. Then we have a choice: We can either shriek hysterically because the child got hurt or frightened, and carry on over what could have happened; or we can keep our cool and be comforting, grateful that no serious harm occurred.

When our 90-year-old grandfather, long ill and unhappy, finally dies, we again have a choice. We can insist that the only thing to do is rage in grief and anger at the surprise of it, or wallow in guilt—and perhaps drink in either case. Or we can, besides being sad, remember that he did have a long, often good and happy life; that we did try to be good to him and assure him of our continuing love; and that his suffering and unhappiness are now over. It is doubtful that he would appreciate our using his passing as an excuse to get drunk and endanger our health.

When we finally get to visit a place long dreamed of, we can concentrate on the inconveniences of our lodging and the weather, the passing of the good old days, and the fact that we have only a few days or weeks to spare. Or we can be grateful that we finally got there at all, and keep adding to a mental list of the delights we can find if we look for them.

We can watch out for a tendency to say, "Yes, but—" in response to any optimistic, complimentary, or positive statement. A friend's good luck or his youthful appearance, or a celebrity's plug for a charity may tempt us to say sourly, "Yes, but—" But... does this thinking habit help anyone—including ourselves? Can't we let something good simply be? Can't we just be pleased about it, rather than trying to downgrade it?

Those who try to quit smoking realize two possibilities are open: (1) continual moaning about how hard it is, "This time it won't work, either," and "See, damn it, I just lit another one"; or (2) enjoying a deep smoke-free breath when we think of it,

being glad an hour has passed without a drag, and, even when a cigarette is unconsciously started, congratulating ourselves for putting it out without smoking it down to a stub.

If one of us wins only \$500 in a sweepstakes that has a \$50,000 top prize, the sensible mood is easy to pick out. It is *not* bitterness at losing the biggest pot.

We continually find opportunities to make similar considered choices, and our experience convinces us that feeling gratitude is far more wholesome, makes staying sober much easier. It will come as a pleasant surprise to discover that it is not difficult to develop the habit of gratitude if we just make some effort.

Many of us were reluctant to try. But the results, we have to admit, did speak for themselves. It may sting at first to bite the cynical comment from the tip of our tongue. We may have to swallow twice before getting out a mildly positive remark of the type we called saccharine during our drinking life. But it soon comes easier, and can become a strong and comfortable force in our recovery. Life was meant to be enjoyed, and we mean to enjoy it.

Riffling back through the memories of our drinking past, some of us spot another manifestation of negativism. But it, too, is a type of behavior many have learned to change, and the change in our actions has also brought better attitudes and an improvement in our feelings.

For some reason, we spent a lot of time thinking or noting or talking about how wrong or mistaken so many *other* people persistently were. (Whether they really were or not is irrelevant to the welcome change in our own feelings now.) For some, the change begins with a tentative willingness to wait and see, to accept for a moment the hypothesis that the other person just possibly might be right. Before rushing to judgment, we suspend our own argument, listen carefully, and watch for the outcome.

It may, or may not, prove us to be in the wrong. That is not the important issue here. Whichever way the chips fall, we have at least temporarily freed ourselves from our driving need to be always right, or one-up. We have found that a sincere "I don't know" can be rejuvenating. Saying, "I'm wrong, you're right" is

invigorating when we are sufficiently at ease with ourselves not to be bothered about actually being in the wrong. We are left feeling relaxed and thankful that we can be open to new ideas. The finest scientists are always alert to new evidence which may prove their own theories wrong, so they can discard any false notions and move closer to the ultimate truth they are seeking.

When we achieve a similar openness, we find our instant negativism has begun to evaporate. Perhaps an illustration can clarify the relationship between the desire to be always right (the negativism of seeing almost everyone else as wrong), and the freedom to be wrong ourselves—to grasp and use new ideas and other help for staying sober.

Many of us, when drinking, were deeply sure for years that our own drinking was harmless. We were not necessarily smart-alecky about it, but when we heard a clergyman, a psychiatrist, or an A.A. member talk about alcoholism, we were quick to observe that *our* drinking was different, that *we* did not need to do any of the things those people suggested. Or even if we could admit that we were having a bit of trouble with our drinking, we were sure we could lick it on our own. Thus we shut the door against new information and help. And behind that door our drinking went on, of course.

Our troubles had to be pretty dire, and we had to begin to feel pretty hopeless before we could open up a little bit and let in some fresh light and help.

For thousands of us, one of the clearest memories which incorporate the wisdom of "being grateful" is our recollection of what we originally thought and said about Alcoholics Anonymous when it first came to our attention:

"It's fine for them, but I'm not that bad, so it isn't for me."

"I've met a couple of former A.A.'s drunk in barrooms. From what they say, I can tell it wouldn't work for me, either."

"I knew a fellow who joined A.A. He turned into a rigid, fanatic, dull, intolerant teetotaler."

"All that God stuff and going to meetings turn me off. Anyhow, I've never been a joiner."

Now, honesty makes us admit that we spent more time concentrating on those negative opinions, and reinforcing our own reasons for drinking, than we spent actually looking into AA with an open mind. Our investigation of it was hardly scientific. Rather, it was superficial and pessimistic — a search for things not to like.

We neither talked with many of the sober members, nor read at depth the quantities of literature by and about AA. If we did not like a few things or people we first encountered in AA, we gave up. We had tried it, hadn't we? (Remember the man who said he didn't like reading? He had already read a book and didn't like it!)

It is clear now that we could have acted differently. We could have invested some time in searching out things we did like in A.A., ways we could go along with it, statements and ideas we did agree with. We could have been thankful that A.A. welcomes casual visitors, and that we were not required to jump in headlong. We could have been grateful that A.A. has no dues or fees and demands no adherence to any doctrine, rules, or rituals. If some talkative AA's weren't to our taste, we could have been pleased that so many others kept quiet, or spoke more to our liking. We could have kept trying to find out why so many eminent professional experts have endorsed A.A. over and over for many years. It must be doing something right!

Staying sober can boil down to just such a choice, we have learned. We can spend hours thinking of reasons that we want or need or intend to take a drink. Or we can spend the same time listing reasons that drinking is not good for us and abstaining is more healthful, and listing things we can do instead of drinking.

Each of us makes that choice in his or her own way. We are pleased when anyone else chooses to make a decision like ours. But whether you are interested in A.A. or not, we offer good wishes to anyone starting out to stay sober in any way. We keep being grateful that we are free to do it in the ways described here.