22 Eliminating Self Pity

This emotion is so ugly that no one in his or her right mind wants to admit feeling it. Even when sober, many of us remain clever at hiding from ourselves the fact that we are astew in a mess of self-pity. We do not like at all being told that it shows, and we are sharp at arguing that we are experiencing some other emotion—not that loathsome poor-me-ism. Or we can, in a second, find a baker's dozen of perfectly legitimate reasons for feeling somewhat sorry for ourselves.

Hanging over us long after detoxification is the comfortably familiar feeling of suffering. Self-pity is an enticing swamp. Sinking into it takes so much less effort than hope, or faith, or just plain moving.

Alcoholics are not unique in this. Everyone who can recall a childhood pain or illness can probably remember, too, the relief of crying over how bad we felt, and the somewhat perverse satisfaction of rejecting all comforting. Almost any human being, at times, can deeply empathize with the childish whine of "Leave me alone!"

One form self-pity takes in some of us when we first get sober is: "Poor me! Why can't I drink like everybody else?" (*Everybody*?) "Why does this have to happen to *me*? Why do *I* have to be an alcoholic? Why *me*?"

Such thinking is a great ticket to a barroom, but that's about all. Crying over that unanswerable question is like weeping because we were born in this era, not another, or on this planet, rather than in some other galaxy.

Of course, it isn't just "me" at all, we discover when we begin to meet recovered alcoholics from all over the world.

Later on, we realize we have begun to make our peace with that question. When we really hit our stride in an enjoyable recovery, we may either find an answer or simply lose interest in the search. You'll know when that happens to you. Many of us believe we have figured out the likely reasons for our own alcoholism. But even if we haven't, there remains the much more important need to accept the fact that we cannot drink, and to act on it. Sitting in our own pool of tears is not a very

effective action.

Some people show real zeal for pressing salt into their own wounds. A ferocious proficiency at that useless game often survives from our drinking days.

We can also display a weird flair for expanding a minor annoyance into a whole universe of gloom. When the mail brings a whopping telephone bill—just one—we bemoan our *constantly* being in debt, and declare it will never, *never* end. When a soufflé falls, we say it proves that we never could and never will do anything right. When the new car arrives, we say to somebody, "With my luck, it'll be a ..."

If you finished that statement with the name of a sour citrus, you're in our club.

It's as if we carried on our back a large duffel bag stuffed with unpleasant memories, such as childhood hurts and rejections. Twenty, even forty years later, there occurs a small setback only slightly similar to an old one in the bag. That is our cue to sit down, unshoulder the bag, and pull out and lovingly caress, one at a time, every old hurt and putdown of the past. With total emotional recall, we then relive each of them vividly, flushing with shame at childhood embarrassments, grinding our teeth on old angers, rewording old quarrels, shivering with nearly forgotten fear, or maybe blinking away a tear or two over a long gone disappointment in love.

Those are fairly extreme cases of unadulterated self-pity, but not beyond recognition by anybody who has ever had, seen, or wanted to go on a crying jag. Its essence is total self-absorption. We can get so stridently concerned about me-me-me that we lose touch with virtually everyone else. It's not easy to put up with anyone who acts that way, except a sick infant. So when we get into the poor-me bog, we try to hide it, particularly from ourselves. But that's no way to get out of it.

Instead, we need to pull out of our self-absorption, stand back, and take a good, honestlook at ourselves. Once we recognize self-pity for what it is, we can start to do something about it other than drink.

Friends can be a great help if they're close enough that we can talk openly with each other. They can hear the false note in our song of sorrow and call us on it. Or

we ourselves may hear it; we begin to get our true feelings sorted out by the simple means of expressing them aloud.

Another excellent weapon is humor. Some of the biggest belly laughs at AA meetings erupt when a member describes his or her own latest orgy of self-pity, and we listeners find ourselves looking into a fun-house mirror. There we are—grown men and women tangled up in the emotional diaper of an infant. It may be a shock, but the shared laughter takes a lot of the pain out of it, and the final effect is salutary.

When we catch self-pity starting, we also can take action against it with instant bookkeeping. For every entry of misery on the debit side, we find a blessing we can mark on the credit side. What health we have, what illnesses we don't have, what friends we have loved, the sunny weather, a good meal a-coming, limbs intact, kindnesses shown and received, a sober 24 hours, a good hour's work, a good book to read, and many other items can be totaled up to outbalance the debit entries that cause self-pity.

We can use the same method to combat the holiday blues, which are sung not only by alcoholics. Christmas and New Year's, birthdays, and anniversaries throw many other people into the morass of self-pity. In A.A., we can learn to recognize the old inclination to concentrate on nostalgic sadness, or to keep up a litany of who is gone, who neglects us now, and how little we can give in comparison to rich people. Instead, we add up the other side of the ledger, in gratitude for health, for loved ones who are around, and for our ability to give love, now that we live in sobriety. And again, the balance comes out on the credit side.