30 Trying the 12 Steps

"When all else fails," said the old country doctor, "follow directions."
We have not talked about the Twelve Steps offered by AA as a program of recovery from alcoholism, and they are not going to be listed or explained here, because anyone curious about them can find them elsewhere. Their origin is striking, however.

In 1935, two men met in Akron, Ohio. Both of them were then considered hopeless drunkards, which seemed shameful to those who had known them. One had been a Wall Street hot shot; the other, a noted surgeon; but both had drunk themselves almost to death. Each had tried many "cures" and been hospitalized over and over. It looked certain, even to them, that they were beyond help.

Almost accidentally, in getting to know each other, they stumbled onto an astonishing fact: When each of them tried to help the other, the result was sobriety. They took the idea to an alcoholic lawyer confined to a hospital bed, and he, too, decided to try it.

The three then kept on, each in his individual life, trying to help one alcoholic after another. If the people they tried to help sometimes did not want their aid, they nevertheless knew the effort was worthwhile, because, in each case, the would-be helper stayed sober even if the "patient" kept on drinking.

Persisting at this avocation for their own benefit, this nameless little band of ex-drunks suddenly realized in 1937 that 20 of them were sober! They cannot be blamed for thinking a miracle had happened.

They agreed they ought to write a record of what had happened, so their experience could be widely distributed. But, as you can imagine, they ran into real difficulty in reaching agreement on what precisely had taken place. It wasn't until 1939 that they were able to publish an account they could all subscribe to. By then, they numbered about 100.

They wrote that the pathway to recovery they had followed up to then consisted of twelve steps, and they believed anyone who followed that pathway would reach the same destination.

Their number has grown to more than two million. And they are virtually unanimous in their conviction: "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail."

Many of us had long been booze-fighters. Time after time, we had stopped drinking and tried to stay stopped, only to return to drinking sooner or later and find ourselves in increasing trouble. But those Twelve Steps of AA mark our road to recovery. Now, we do not have to fight any more. And our path is open to all comers.

Hundreds of us had only a vague idea of what AA was before we actually came to this Fellowship. Now, we sometimes think there is more misinformation than truth about A.A. floating around. So if
you have not looked into AA firsthand, we can imagine some of the distorted, false impressions you may have picked up, since we had so many of them ourselves.

Happily, you need not be misled by such misrepresentations and rumors, because it is perfectly easy to see and hear the real AA. for yourself. AA publications (see page 70) and any nearby AA office or meeting (see your local telephone directory) are original sources of facts which surprised many of us a whale of a lot. You need not take any second-hand opinions, because you can get the straight dope, free, and make up your own mind.

Really getting a fair picture of AA may be one instance in which willpower can be put to very good use. We know for sure that alcoholics do have tremendous willpower. Consider the ways we could manage to get a drink in defiance of all visible possibilities. Merely to get up some mornings—with a rusting cast-iron stomach, all your teeth wearing tiny sweaters, and each hair electrified—takes willpower many nondrinkers rarely dream of. Once you've gotten up with your head, on thosecertain mornings, the ability to carry it all through the day is further evidence of fabulous strength of will. Oh yes, real drinkers have *real* willpower.

The trick we learned was to put that will to work for our health, and to *make* ourselves explore recovery ideas at great depth, even though it sometimes might have seemed like drudgery.

have seemed like drudgery.

It may help if you try to remember that A.A. members are not eager to question you. We may not even seem to be listening to you much, but spend more time laying on you the unvarnished facts of our own illness. We are in pursuit of recovery, you know, so we talk to you very much for our own benefit. We want to help you, all right, but only if you want us to.

It may be that problem drinking is, indeed, as some psychological experts say, an ailment characterized especially by egocentricity. Not all alcoholics are egotistical, although many of us have learned to see that tendency in ourselves. Others of us felt inferior most of the time; we felt equal or superior to other people only when drinking.

No matter which type we were, we realize now that we were excessively self-centered, chiefly concerned about *our* feelings, *our* problems, other people's reactions to *us*, and our *own* past and future. Therefore, trying to get into communication with and to help other people is a recovery measure for us, because it helps take us out of ourselves. Trying to heal ourselves by helping others works, even when it is an insincere gesture. Try it some time.

If you really listen to (not just hear) what is being said, you may find the person talking has quietly slipped inside your head and seems to be describing the landscape there—the shifting shapes of nameless fears, the color and chill of impending doom—if not the actual events and words stored in your brain.

And whether this happens or not, you will almost surely have a good laugh or two in the company of AA's, and you'll probably pick up a couple of ideas on living sober. If you want to use them, that is up to you.

Whatever you decide to do, remember that making these ideas available is one of the steps toward recovery for us.