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Unselfishness – “Dying to “self” Before We Die”

by Fr. Bill Wigmore

Bob Dylan isn't usually quoted much in recovery circles, but his song, “Gotta Serve Somebody” holds a powerful lesson for alcoholics and addicts willing to learn a deep, spiritual lesson. Dylan writes:

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
You might be a rock 'n' roll addict prancing on the stage,
You might have drugs at your command, women in a cage,
You may be a businessman or some high degree thief.
They may call you Doctor or they may call you Chief
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Most of us know what it's like to serve King Alcohol or Lord Heroine or whatever Master it was that bought us to our knees; but when we try to leave his service and switch our allegiance to God, we meet still another Lord and Master most of us never even knew existed: this demon comes disguised as our very own “self” – and therein lies the real, inner-battle of recovery.

This article is the third in a series exploring the Four Standards or the Four Absolutes of the Oxford Group. **Absolute Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love.** These standards helped shape the spiritual lives of the pioneers who wrote the Big Book and Dr. Bob said at the end of his life that he felt the Four Absolutes were still important to him and were good yardsticks for testing his thoughts and behavior. But while the Absolutes are rarely mentioned today, they have been subtly passed down to the Fellowship through the Big Book's attention to their exact *opposites*. Wilson chose this clever path so his new 12-Step Fellowship wouldn't be identified with the Oxford Group they were leaving behind. So instead of focusing directly on UNSELFISHNESS, the Big Book warns about, “*Selfishness – self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles.*”

Now I don't know that alcoholics and addicts are any more selfish than some of the other troubled people you'll find in the world; but I was taught, long ago, that we “*drunks and druggies*” have a definite leg up on the rest of the world's so called “*Normies.*” It seems, we're blessed with having a huge hammer that hangs suspended directly over our heads. It's a hammer that's sure to fall and pound us hard us if we stray too far from our newly found, spiritual path. The Big Book says, “*What we really have is a daily reprieve (from that hammer) contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.*”

The 12-Steps aren't some spiritual, new-age pathway leading us sublimely and effortlessly upward to the throne room of God; instead, they're really a pathway meant to take us down – they're meant to take us deep down *inside our own selves* there to meet the very demon of “*selfishness and self-centeredness*” that resides and reigns inside our own minds. His or her name is “Inflated Ego” or “the Big I.” If we're serious about the recovery journey, what we each

find inside us – *“the root of our troubles”* - is an inflated ego that demands we serve him and not our newly found God. When the Big Book says, *“This is the how and why of it. First of all, we had to quit playing God”* most people take these words as some cute, little metaphor. But they are really anything but! They are probably the most accurate diagnoses of the inner battle every alcoholic, addict or spiritual seeker must face: The death of the false self and the birth of the true Self. Jesus said it best a couple of thousand years ago, *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*

So how do we die to *self*? I believe we do it by shifting our consciousness, shifting our spiritual center away from the perceived *self* we know – the *self* that we think of as **“I”** - the *self* that has run our lives and done such a lousy job of it that we almost died physically — and, through the 12 Step process of humbling and chipping away at our egos - we come to the experience of a new **Self**, an unfamiliar **Self**, a far more humble and teachable **Self** – a **Self** that is, for the first time in its new, young life, rightly related to its Creator and Lord. *“We gotta serve somebody”* Dylan sings – which one will it be? The old, false *self* will never serve anyone but its *self*. It may look like its not – but that’s exactly why this illness is *“so cunning, baffling, and powerful!”*

The Big Book goes on to say, *“So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of our selves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn’t think so. Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must or it kills us!”* Then it points us toward the solution when it continues, *“God makes that possible. And there often seems no way of entirely getting rid of self without His aid.... We had to have God’s help.”*

When the great Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote about the alcoholic’s desperate need for **“a psychic conversion,”** as the only viable pathway to recovery, he was speaking about the inner landscape of the mind that he had explored and that he knew so well. He wrote to Bill Wilson that the needed change that must go on deep inside the addict’s mind, *“... appeared in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements.”* He said the, *“Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were the guiding forces of the (lives) of these people are suddenly cast to one side and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them.”*

Deep inside our minds, moment to moment, recovery demands that we make a choice. Do I listen to the voice of the ego – the false, destructive, frightened *self* – *the self that has nearly killed me, time after time, the self that robs me of peace, feels guilty over my past and projects its fears onto my future* – or do I take seriously the 11th Step words and seek “conscious contact” with the new Self – the God-Self – the Self that lives in the Now and brings us all into right relationship with God and with all our brothers and sisters. Dylan got it exactly right: *“we gotta serve somebody”* – which one will it be? God leaves us free to make our choice.

Fr. Bill Wigmore is President/CEO of Austin Recovery. A complete copy of this series is available at <http://www.austinrecovery.org/TestimonialsArticles/RecoveryTodayArticles.aspx>

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Fr. Bill Wigmore, President/CEO / Austin Recovery / 8402 Cross Park Dr. / Austin, Texas 78754
or email: BillW@AustinRecovery.org