

Step Nine

“Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

GOOD judgment, a careful sense of timing, courage, and prudence—these are the qualities we shall need when we take Step Nine.

After we have made the list of people we have harmed, have reflected carefully upon each instance, and have tried to possess ourselves of the right attitude in which to proceed, we will see that the making of direct amends divides those we should approach into several classes. There will be those who ought to be dealt with just as soon as we become reasonably confident that we can maintain our sobriety. There will be those to whom we can make only partial restitution, lest complete disclosures do them or others more harm than good. There will be other cases where action ought to be deferred, and still others in which by the very nature of the situation we shall never be able to make direct personal contact at all.

Most of us begin making certain kinds of direct amends from the day we join Alcoholics Anonymous. The moment we tell our families that we are really going to try the program, the process has begun. In this area there are seldom any questions of timing or caution. We want to come in the door shouting the good news. After coming from our first

meeting, or perhaps after we have finished reading the book "Alcoholics Anonymous," we usually want to sit down with some member of the family and readily admit the damage we have done by our drinking. Almost always we want to go further and admit other defects that have made us hard to live with. This will be a very different occasion, and in sharp contrast with those hangover mornings when we alternated between reviling ourselves and blaming the family (and everyone else) for our troubles. At this first sitting, it is necessary only that we make a general admission of our defects. It may be unwise at this stage to rehash certain harrowing episodes. Good judgment will suggest that we ought to take our time. While we may be quite willing to reveal the very worst, we must be sure to remember that we cannot buy our own peace of mind at the expense of others.

Much the same approach will apply at the office or factory. We shall at once think of a few people who know all about our drinking, and who have been most affected by it. But even in these cases, we may need to use a little more discretion than we did with the family. We may not want to say anything for several weeks, or longer. First we will wish to be reasonably certain that we are on the A.A. beam. Then we are ready to go to these people, to tell them what A.A. is, and what we are trying to do. Against this background we can freely admit the damage we have done and make our apologies. We can pay, or promise to pay, whatever obligations, financial or otherwise, we owe. The generous response of most people to such quiet sincerity will often astonish us. Even our severest and most justified critics will frequently meet us more than halfway on the first trial.

This atmosphere of approval and praise is apt to be so exhilarating as to put us off balance by creating an insatiable appetite for more of the same. Or we may be tipped over in the other direction when, in rare cases, we get a cool and skeptical reception. This will tempt us to argue, or to press our point insistently. Or maybe it will tempt us to discouragement and pessimism. But if we have prepared ourselves well in advance, such reactions will not deflect us from our steady and even purpose.

After taking this preliminary trial at making amends, we may enjoy such a sense of relief that we conclude our task is finished. We will want to rest on our laurels. The temptation to skip the more humiliating and dreaded meetings that still remain may be great. We will often manufacture plausible excuses for dodging these issues entirely. Or we may just procrastinate, telling ourselves the time is not yet, when in reality we have already passed up many a fine chance to right a serious wrong. Let's not talk prudence while practicing evasion.

As soon as we begin to feel confident in our new way of life and have begun, by our behavior and example, to convince those about us that we are indeed changing for the better, it is usually safe to talk in complete frankness with those who have been seriously affected, even those who may be only a little or not at all aware of what we have done to them. The only exceptions we will make will be cases where our disclosure would cause actual harm. These conversations can begin in a casual or natural way. But if no such opportunity presents itself, at some point we will want to summon all our courage, head straight for the per-

son concerned, and lay our cards on the table. We needn't wallow in excessive remorse before those we have harmed, but amends at this level should always be forthright and generous.

There can only be one consideration which should qualify our desire for a complete disclosure of the damage we have done. That will arise in the occasional situation where to make a full revelation would seriously harm the one to whom we are making amends. Or—quite as important—other people. We cannot, for example, unload a detailed account of extramarital adventuring upon the shoulders of our unsuspecting wife or husband. And even in those cases where such a matter must be discussed, let's try to avoid harming third parties, whoever they may be. It does not lighten our burden when we recklessly make the crosses of others heavier.

Many a razor-edged question can arise in other departments of life where this same principle is involved. Suppose, for instance, that we have drunk up a good chunk of our firm's money, whether by "borrowing" or on a heavily padded expense account. Suppose that this may continue to go undetected, if we say nothing. Do we instantly confess our irregularities to the firm, in the practical certainty that we will be fired and become unemployable? Are we going to be so rigidly righteous about making amends that we don't care what happens to the family and home? Or do we first consult those who are to be gravely affected? Do we lay the matter before our sponsor or spiritual adviser, earnestly asking God's help and guidance—meanwhile resolving to do the right thing when it becomes clear, cost

what it may? Of course, there is no pat answer which can fit all such dilemmas. But all of them do require a complete willingness to make amends as fast and as far as may be possible in a given set of conditions.

Above all, we should try to be absolutely sure that we are not delaying because we are afraid. For the readiness to take the full consequences of our past acts, and to take responsibility for the well-being of others at the same time, is the very spirit of Step Nine.