

The Simple Genius of the 12 Steps and the College

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"No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

Albert Einstein

*"These are the only genuine ideas: the ideas of the shipwrecked.
All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce."*

Jose Ortega y Gasset

*"12 step program: A twelve-step program is a set of guiding principles outlining a
course of action for recovery from addiction, compulsion,
or other behavioral problems.*

Wikipedia

The feeling is unforgettably visceral. I am walking into a large room that I have never been in before. All of the sights, sounds, smells are unfamiliar—even the lighting is alien to me. It feels *other*. I feel hopeful, but also uncertain, insecure. The room is full of strangers, not a situation that is comfortable for me, and so I also feel intimidated and apprehensive and anxious. These feelings are all too familiar, and I really hate this about myself. *I feel like I don't belong, I feel different from everybody else here, I feel not quite up to this*—all of these weigh heavily on me as I take it all in. People infinitely more self-assured looking than I feel are milling about. Still, I push myself onward. I have to, I have run out of options.

The people seem nice enough. I guess. I immediately pick out a couple of innocent attendees whom I do not know the first thing about, but I am sure I am not going to like. Contempt before investigation. They seem to pull together. I don't like that. It threatens me. *Wait. Stop.* This is the kind of thinking, this discomfort in my own skin that I hope to lose. I have to lose it. It's bullshit and I'm sick of it.

There is so much that I fear. I describe this fear in different ways: *I'm different, life is unfair, I have issues that nobody else has, I'm not as confident as I seem (nowhere near it), I've been through too much, no one really gets me, I'm more than everyone else, I am less than everyone else.* These ideas are always running through my mind. I use them to distance myself from everybody else, to isolate. I wall myself off to protect myself. I've always done it because it works—at the cost of my happiness, serenity and peace. It sucks, it's exhausting, it needs to change.

And it is all fear-based. I don't really have any faith that it can change. I am utterly convinced that it is just me. I am one of the most fucked-up people in the world, and there's just nothing I can do about it...my cross to bear. It hurts, but it has been a

constant companion, this separateness, this isolation, this fear. I've taken 40 years to get used to it, but it still never feels right. Why doesn't anyone else seem as afraid as me? Why does it look so easy for others?

But one thing is clear to me: I am willing to try. So I search for someone who looks as isolated as I feel. I've spent a lifetime comparing my insides with other people's outsides. I always come up short.

These are my thoughts and feelings as I enter the large room in the church basement for my first ever 12-step AA meeting. These are also my thoughts as I walk into the Big Barn for my first night at the Trial Lawyers College in July 2011. These two experiences are so similar for me that eventually they become intertwined, so much a part of the fabric my life, that I am humbled still. I don't just like or enjoy these institutions—the College and the 12-steps—rather I breathe them, I need them. They are foundational. They managed to completely shift my paradigm. They changed the very way that I see the world, how I see reality itself.

One thing that is reassuring, comforting, and slightly amusing, is how many of our brothers and sisters in this tribe that we call the College, are active participants in 12-step programs. When I walked into my first Ranch 12-step meeting upstairs in the Johnson barn, it felt like a family reunion. Some of the people I respect and admire most in this College were there...and I had had no idea they would be there. Why are 12-step meetings so well attended at the College? Because of how similar the goals are. The various journeys we are on have more in common than we ever imagined. We learn that on day one of psychodrama: I am like you, you are like me, we all share the same pain, hopes, fears and dreams. People who believe in honesty, vulnerability and the power of love are attracted to the College. If they have

a problem involving addiction or behavior, they are attracted to the 12-steps. People who believe in honesty, vulnerability, the power of love *and* who have a problem are attracted to both.

The only thing required to be part of any 12-step group is a sincere desire to change; and if you are honest, open and willing, then you will change. I feel the same is true for the College.

All that follows is one man's ideas on how the College and the 12-steps work synergistically, and how similar they are in approach and goals: we are flawed, and it takes courageous self-discovery to find that inner self. To find that bright spark that we are born with, but that disappears in crap, delusion, the legal system, fear, armor, law, and all the little stories we make up that we think are real. I remember Gerry Spence telling us during those first three weeks, "self-understanding is an archeological dig, an exploration, an uncovering of the self that never ends..." I wholeheartedly agree.

Psychodrama is the tool the College gives us for self-discovery and of finding our way out of isolation and fear. "Working the steps" is the tool that 12-step programs give us for self-discovery and finding the way out of addictions and self-destructive behaviors. Both tools, used in the broader context of how we participate in the world, have the power to lead to an awakening. I consider it to be a spiritual awakening that has nothing to do with religion, but everything to do with what life is all about.

The 12 Steps

What exactly are the 12-steps, and what do they do?" The steps are an outline which, if rigorously followed with a willing heart, leads to a spiritual awakening centered on honesty, authenticity, service, and helping. It is this process that, over time, eliminates the need for addictive behaviors which are ultimately centered on the toxic mixture of ego and isolation. The Steps were originally used for alcoholics to recover from alcoholism, but they are now utilized for addictions to drugs, spending, gambling, adultery, overeating, harmful sexual behavior, porn, and even work, as well as co-dependency (the unhealthy desire to control relationships). If there is an unhealthy relationship with something, there is a 12-Step program to deal with it. I have heard the Bible called the original 12-step program. I have also seen the Buddhist Eightfold Path referred to in the same way.

Here are the 12 Steps as first published in 1939, in a book commonly referred to as "The Big Book"¹, which lays out the program of AA:

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol² - that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God³ as we understood Him.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Step 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

This general formula is followed as a roadmap in the recovery from any type of repetitive unhealthy behavior, typically one that is highly repetitive despite unwelcome consequences.

This is how I would translate them:

1. I'm screwed up....and I can't fix it.
2. There has to be more to life.
3. I'll trust that there is.
4. Take a hard look at myself. What are my defects of character?
5. I need others—I can't fix myself.
6. There is a way forward.
7. Commit to being better, really commit.
8. Think of all the ways I have not lived with integrity, and all the people I have hurt.
9. Do the best I can to fix it.
10. Being present and emotionally healthy is a full time job.
11. Strive to keep getting better.
12. Helping others as a way of life, indeed, the purpose of life.

It all boils down to some pretty basic and simple stuff, but as a lifestyle it is powerful. The same is true of what we do at the College.

The College and the 12 Steps

There are many striking similarities between what we teach at the College and what the 12 Steps stand for. I'll touch on some of the most striking of those similarities, and why I feel that the College and the 12 Steps both qualify as great schools of thought in similar ways. The following 10 similarities correspond roughly to the steps:

1. **Something is begging us to change.** As they say at AA meetings, "you don't come to AA because you're on a winning streak." Most of the people, myself included, who walk into an AA meeting or any 12-step meeting, are there because they have reached a level of dissatisfaction, even despair, that requires action. One can no longer sleepwalk through life with lame rationalizations,

empty resolutions, excuses, and self-centeredness—it leads nowhere. What drives us to the College, while perhaps not as painful and empty as addiction, is still compelling. The students who arrive in September and July of every year, along with our 7-step brothers and sisters, have a reason for being there. It may be clear to us when we arrive at the Ranch, it may not become clear for years, but there is a reason. There is a longing to find more meaning in the practice of law and life, and in the practice of human being.

2. ***We have faith in the process.*** It is a leap of faith to believe that anything embracing love and empathy, changing from within, will actually work, but we forge ahead... at personal cost—time, energy, vulnerability. Like many things of enormous value, we sense meaning, feel it, long for it before it becomes intellectually clear. Sometimes it remains a mystery, but it works, and it makes us better. AA and the TLC have both given me strength, courage, conviction. I'm not exactly sure how, but at the end of the day the "how" doesn't matter—they both bestow incredible gifts on those who stay the course. Those who have faith.
3. ***We are part of something much bigger than ourselves.*** The fact is, as difficult as it is to accept, we are not the center of the universe. There are things greater and more important than we are. Programs utilizing the steps call it a Higher Power. We all have one, or several, or many, but unless we believe that we ourselves are the highest power, then there must be one. In the TLC, we have all found something bigger than us—each other. We love what we have in the College. My 13-year-old daughters called the Ranch "sacred ground" when they visited the Ranch in June. They felt what we feel, a higher power calling.
4. ***We open our hearts and critically examine, with love, what's inside.*** We call it "working on the horse." 12-step programs call it getting sober. They are the same thing: the surrender of our false egos to the greater good. When one lets go of pain, resentment, wrongs, anger and fear we get happier. We get more fulfilled. We find meaning where meaning was lacking. Psychodrama is the foundation of the College. Surrender to the 12-steps is the foundation of emotional sobriety.
5. ***We share bravely and honestly.*** As Don Clarkson reminds us, *if you can't talk about it, it is already out of control.* This is why 12-steppers attend meetings to hear the stories of others over and over. We use psychodrama and psychodramatic techniques to share our stories over and over. To share is infinitely more powerful than to simply know. It is through sharing that we see our common humanity. It is through sharing that we know we are not alone in any of life's struggles.
6. ***We value and love each other.*** Anybody who is new to a TLC and attends an event almost always remarks how much all the "veterans" genuinely care for each other. I've

heard it at every Regional I have ever attended—usually by someone with a huge grin on their face. The same thing happens at a 12-step event. People who barely know each other become instantly connected, and that feeling never goes away. Those attending their first 12-step meeting are surprised to see how much fun everybody is having.

7. ***It becomes structural in how we live.*** I have now had the pleasure of being present for somewhere around eight or nine graduations at the Ranch. It is a beautiful experience, but one will never again have the exact experience of that final day at the Ranch—the optimism, the joy, the satisfaction of a job well done, and the sense of belonging that comes from being a member of our tribe. Those feelings can fade. If one doesn't stay active in the College, if one doesn't take our principles and make them a part of your life, then that feeling on that last day will slowly fade. It'll diminish if not disappear altogether. What we learn in the 12 steps is that we must practice these things and all our daily affairs, which is step 12. The awakening which takes place during the practice of the steps, like the awakening that takes place at the College, must be practiced or will be lost. It's that simple.
8. ***We keep searching for ways to get better.*** As we all know, the journey is never done. Just as we never stop working on the horse, those of us in some form of recovery, never stop working on ourselves either. The path to awaken to what is real and important always starts within. Self-examination and rigorous honesty are the ways of the College and of any 12-step program. And the amazing thing about being in recovery, is the concept that you are always in recovery. You are never recovered, although some people choose to describe themselves as such. You may no longer suffer from your addiction, but the process goes on. And it's true that with enough work, we will all arrive at a place which is much better than where we started. This is the nature of the beast. We are looking for progress, not perfection.
9. ***We help others.*** At the end of the day, it's all about being of service. In any 12-step organization, one of the first things that happens is you find a way to be useful. Some sort of a job, even if it's just making the coffee once a week before a meeting, is critical. Why? Because we are here to be of service, we are here to be useful, we are here to be part of something bigger than ourselves. To serve is to be humble, to be humble is to understand that I am not any more or less special than anyone else. The reason I introduce myself at a 12-step meeting by stating "I'm Mike, and I'm an alcoholic" is not because I might forget. I say it to humble myself, to admit my flaws, and to show I am no different than anybody in that room. While the work we do at the College is great, it is not for personal aggrandizement, power, or bragging rights. We are here to help those who are not yet as fully capable of

helping themselves. We have a skill set, to not use it for the betterment of our world is a waste. To worship at the altar of the self, is the biggest waste of all.

10. ***We are grateful and humble for what we have learned.*** Humility is a way of life, as is gratitude. Nothing is really about us. It is about our role and what we can do to make the world a better place. If everybody on the planet devoted energy to making this world a better place, what could we accomplish? When we approach what we do in our world with humility and gratitude, amazing things happen. You can see that when you look around a 12-step meeting and see all the lives saved by that humble gathering. When I look at everybody sitting in the Big Barn, I think about all the good that will go out

When I attend a 12-step meeting, I hear stories of despair and self-destruction, which are horrifying and yet inspiring—inspiring because of what the speaker has overcome to just tell her story. Nothing is off limits. What is remarkable about a 12-step meeting is how joyous it is. Each and every person there represents a glorious success story. Each and every one of them represents hope. Each and every one of them I am proud to say that I know, and I am brimming with joy to call a friend.

This is exactly how I feel every time I am with my TLC family. I feel like I belong to something bigger than me. I have purpose. My very affiliation and belonging to this group makes me swell with humble pride. We do serious work, we can suffer for our art at times, but we love doing it—and we have a heck of a lot of fun. We love our tribe, and we love those who share the journey with us. For this man who has more than my share of flaws

and character defects, the TLC and the 12-step programs I have grown to love are the keys to the kingdom. To unlock the door and step through is a gift that has been given freely to me. The purpose of it all is to give it back. ☺

Endnotes

1. The exact authorship of the Big Book is not clear, but Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA as we know it today, is generally considered to be the driving force and primary author.
2. This is the only time alcohol is mentioned in the 12-steps.
3. The 12-Steps, as originally written, made liberal use of the word 'God'. This has changed over the years to 'Higher Power' or 'God as I understand him'. Generally speaking, 'God' refers to something (anything) bigger than oneself.

Mike O'Connell is a plaintiff's lawyer in Golden, CO where he now coparents his two twin daughters Emma and Amy and blessedly lives his life one day at a time.



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