

CHAPTER ONE

SO YOU THINK YOU HATE MEATLOAF

*”Did you ever have the feeling that you wanted to go,
and still have the feeling that you wanted to stay?”*

– sung by Jimmy Durante in
“The Man Who Came to Dinner” (1942).

This isn't really about meatloaf, of course. It's about dealing with spirituality in Twelve-Step recovery, and whether or not you want to include God or religion in your spiritual mix.

The word “God” shows up a lot in the Twelve Steps. This causes many people facing recovery to feel nervous, disgusted, or

even hopeless. For any number of reasons, as much as you want to jump into the healing waters of recovery, you might feel you've just discovered those waters are ice cold, too cold to survive.

If you are saying to yourself, "I'd rather die than to turn myself into a cult member," just keep reading. Far from being at a dead end, you may find that Twelve-Step recovery is the only place you can be absolutely true to yourself and to your own beliefs.

You do not need to believe in anything that doesn't fit for you. You don't need to mold your brain to anyone else's idea of a Higher Power, creed, code, or spirituality. The only requirement for membership in any of Twelve-Step recovery programs is a *desire to stop* the self-destructive behavior that got you there. That phrase, in one form or another, is part of every Twelve-Step program. It includes absolutely no requirement that you believe in God. In fact, the Steps were deliberately designed to include a large "spiritual loophole" that allows anyone, of any persuasion, to participate successfully in Twelve-Step recovery.

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"The majority of A.A. members believe that we have found the solution to our drinking problem not through individual willpower, but through a power greater than ourselves. However, everyone defines this power as he or she wishes. Many people call it God, others think it is the A.A. group, still others don't believe in it at all. There is room in A.A. for people of all shades of belief and nonbelief."

– from the AA pamphlet: *A Newcomer Asks*

This book is about that spiritual loophole and how you can use it in recovery. While the idea of spirituality is a core element of the Twelve Steps, the truth is that you can define exactly what this means to you – on your own terms. It means there is room for just about anyone – even if you are an agnostic or an atheist, even if you are repelled by traditional religions or the various names attributed to God, or if you once had faith that you let go of for any reason. By taking the Twelve Step Programs at their word – that you can develop your own personal spirituality – you can successfully override, and therefore come to terms with, “the God thing.”

What exactly do the Twelve-Step programs mean by “spirituality”? Most dictionaries link the word to religious ideas, but there is nothing that says you cannot define it in your own way, as long as it is meaningful to *you*. For example, one friend in recovery describes his spirituality as “my own personal set of values and my commitment to live by them.” Another defines it as her “relationship with the world.”

You get to decide all of this on your own terms, and nobody can tell you otherwise. That’s another part of the loophole – *there are no rules*. In fact, you can put this book down right now, ignore the idea of spirituality altogether, and still be part of any Twelve-Step recovery program. However, if you prefer doing things the easiest way possible, keep reading. The Twelve Steps have worked for millions of people, and you can be one of them.

One recovering alcoholic describes the individual journey this way: “While I was drinking, I did a lot of evil things. I don’t do those anymore. I do other little things, but they’re not major like they used to be. As long as I am on this path, I can be a better person – to my wife, to my children, to my friends – and I just feel better. So, for me, this is a spiritual journey, and I believe it’s the answer. It’s not money and power and all that stuff that makes me happy. I needed to be here with these little simple things, and over time, beautiful things have happened. Everyone is on a separate journey, and they have to hit the wall – to find out that what they’re doing isn’t working. It’s different for everybody.”

What’s God Got to Do with It?

As you have seen, the word “God” is everywhere in the Twelve Steps. Even where the particular word is not used, it is frequently implied, as shown in the original version of the Steps, the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (references to God are in bold):

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a **Power greater than ourselves** could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of **God** as we understood **Him**.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to **God**, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have **God** remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked **Him** to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
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.
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.

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What do these steps expect or even require you to do with “God” or a “Power greater than ourselves”? Thanks to the wisdom of the earliest members of AA, it’s up to you to decide.

Maybe you are like many others in Twelve-Step recovery who are looking at the Twelve Steps with initial wariness or confusion about the God concept. Or, you’ve been in recovery for a while and thought you had it sorted out, but are not as sure as you once were.

You may also be in another frame of mind: You may feel you have lost every shred of meaning in your life, especially any ideas of faith or spirituality. You may be feeling so much pain that you can’t

bear to go on, except that you somehow do. You may be one of those people who has ended up in recovery without really knowing why (except for the disasters you've experienced). The idea of God may seem irrelevant, ridiculous, or even abominable. If this is where you find yourself, *you've probably ended up in the one place where you can find something true and believable to hold onto*. In any of the Twelve-Step programs, you can believe whatever you choose, no matter how strange or personal.

That feeling of pointlessness and the inability to believe in God is exactly where **Regina** began her recovery:

“I walked into a meeting in so much pain that I didn't even notice the large poster of the Twelve Steps and their references to God hanging on the wall at the front of the room! If I had suspected God would be put in my face, I probably would have left, even though I didn't have much energy left for resistance to anything.”

“God had lost all meaning for me. Growing up, I had been force-fed ideas of a moody and condemning God. And the older I got, the less religion made sense to me. By the time I reached my teens, I was skipping out on Sunday Mass, hiding out with the other ‘misfits and trouble-makers’ in the schoolyard behind the Church.”

“Life in the 50's was supposed to be ‘swell’ – all Disney and Leave It to Beaver. But mine didn't seem so good. No matter how hard I tried, I wasn't happy. And, after many unsuccessful attempts

to get things ‘under control,’ I had run myself into the ground. By the time I sought recovery, I had dismantled a second marriage and left my adolescent son behind as I rode off into the sunset on the back of a motorcycle driven by someone else’s drunken husband. I had hurt lots of people, including myself, and the shame and guilt were destroying what was left of me. On one of my worst days, I stumbled onto a book that pointed out the insanity of living the way I was and led me to investigate Twelve-Step recovery.”

“Thank God nobody at my first recovery meeting tried to tell me what I needed to believe. That first group did contain some church-going members, but the group as a whole stayed close to the Twelve Traditions and upheld the idea of ‘attraction rather than promotion.’ I think it was because of the open-minded attitude of the people there that I was able to stay around and eventually uncover my own spirituality rather than having to choose between pretending or leaving.”

“My skepticism toward all things religious, even with people telling me I was free to define my own path, made it difficult to get through those Steps the first time through. I was trying to redefine the concept of God in a way that fit for me, but emotional residue of the ‘old God’ was still built up inside of me. My religious training had started at such a young age that the ideas seemed to be embedded in my cells. I felt bogged down, dishonest about my participation in recovery, and resistant to doing the Steps.”

“For several years, I explored various churches and philosophies while I continued to attend Program meetings. I traveled to Ireland to attend a writing workshop, and while there, explored the Catholicism I had abandoned years before. The ritual – the incense, the music, the Latin chants – restored some appreciation of the mystery I had embraced as a child, but the politics and dogma still left me cold.”

“I later traveled with a school group to Nepal to study Buddhism and to submerge myself in a culture that openly practiced spirituality. Again, the rituals pulled me in, but some of the precepts didn’t fit with my beliefs and values. I was attending Twelve-Step meetings during some of my travels, and while I felt welcomed wherever I went, I also felt like I was living a lie because of my nebulous, undefined spirituality.”

“It was then that I received one of the best pieces of advice I ever got: *Stop thinking so much about it*, and be willing to admit that you can’t figure it out with logic. That advice motivated me to give up on all of my old arguments about whether God exists or whether the whole idea was simply man-made wishful thinking. I didn’t have the answers, and nobody else did either.”

“Over time, I came to terms with my own version of spirituality, and it turned out to be something entirely outside the limits of those old arguments. I don’t know whether it could ever fit for anyone else, and it doesn’t really matter, anyway.”

I know many other people who have designed their own spirituality. **Michael** likes to say he belongs to the church of “Michaelanity.” He explains that while he got the idea of the name from Christianity, it’s his very own personal version of religion. He says there’s only one parking space and only one place to sit. It belongs to no one else.

It doesn’t matter what approach you take. But if you want to be successful with the Twelve Steps, the easiest way would be to find what works for you and let that be your foundation. Anything that’s meaningful to you will be fine, whether it’s logical, mystical, or completely self-invented and unique.

If you are someone who relies primarily on logic, it may help to read the next section, *The Reason for God in the Steps*, which discusses why, if believing in God is not necessary for recovery, the idea of God is used in the Twelve Steps.

If you’re not the logical type, you may actually be better off than most. Some ideas are just not defined by logic, and for many people, that’s *exactly* where their spirituality comes in.



“These ideas that we have about how things are or how they should be exist no where else except in our own minds.”

— Cheri Huber, Center for the Practice
of Zen Buddhist Meditation,

The Key: and the Name of the Key is Willingness

The Reason for God in the Steps

If believing in God is not required for using the Steps, why do the Steps mention it in so many places? The first consideration is based on the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, the original Twelve-Step program. A lot of the groundwork for AA was laid by the Oxford Group, an evangelical Episcopal movement whose focus was to restore the spirit of early Christianity. The meetings were simple, without much in the way of rituals or pageantry, and its members were striving for the practice of universal spiritual values, including the “Four Absolutes” of honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. They also practiced meditation, which they called “quiet time,” and the sharing of and restitution for the harms they had done. These people were looking to the highest and best parts of themselves, and having been raised in a time and place where “God” was the name of the Highest Power, it was only natural that the name and the concept was used. Many of AA’s spiritual concepts were taken from the Oxford Group, and thus it was that the Steps included a similar concept of God.

Even in those early days of AA, some very vocal agnostics were part of the group to which Bill Wilson brought his first draft of the Twelve Steps. As Bill says in *The Language of the Heart* (AA Grapevine, Inc., New York, 1988), “Our agnostic contingent, spearheaded by Hank P. and Jim B., finally convinced us that we must make it easier for people like themselves by using such terms as ‘a

Higher Power’ or ‘God as we understand him.’ Those expressions, as we so well know today, have proved lifesavers for many an alcoholic.”

There is also a story, which has been both refuted and confirmed by various “reliable” sources, that when the printer sent a pre-press copy of the first version of *Alcoholics Anonymous* to Bill Wilson, Bill’s secretary noticed that the phrase “as we understood” had been inadvertently left out of the printer’s proof. Reportedly, Bill told her to let it go, that it was too much trouble to re-do the proofs at that late stage. She reminded him of the long discussions that had produced the phrase, and he finally agreed that it ought to be included after all.

No matter how that phrase found its way into the Twelve Steps, the word “God” was meant to be interpreted as the individual saw fit. There is no need to take the word “God” literally, and in fact, it’s preferable that you do not. Let it be a placeholder for whatever your idea of spirituality may be. *Seeing that word through new eyes is the most honest approach you can take, and could even mean the difference between success and failure in recovery.*

One other very important reason for being true to your own beliefs is revealed in hindsight by those who have experienced success in recovery. Part of their success was a sense of relief – the pain of living was replaced by a sense of meaning and a new sense of power. The first of the Twelve Steps asks only that you admit

that you couldn't figure things out and make them work. The remaining Steps, by using the idea of God, are simply recommending that you be open to a different way of seeing the world and how you fit into it.

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*“My friend suggested what then seemed a novel idea. He said, ‘Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?’ That statement hit me hard. It melted the icy intellectual mountain in whose shadow I had lived and shivered many years. I stood in the sunlight at last. It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning.” – Bill W. in *Alcoholics Anonymous**

If you are seeking recovery, you are seeking a new way of interacting with the universe. Logic dictates that you cannot continue on the same course with the same attitudes. Unless you establish a new or more focused set of ideas about your existence and what it means, you'll be stuck on your old path. This is the point of having God in the Steps: In this culture, the concept of God is the one most commonly used when we talk of a meaningful, inner perspective. Even for those who don't literally believe in God, we can use those words as a kind of shorthand for the inner awareness that we are not in control of the world. Unless you are certain that you understand every aspect of our existence and can clearly explain the meaning of life, you can probably accept that there is some mystery to it all. You could even use this idea to

explain your spirituality. As Iris Dement sings, she doesn't have the answers, so she'll just "let the Mystery be." And many people call this God.

Spirituality vs. Religion – The Difference That Makes All the Difference

What's the difference between spirituality and religion? Take a look at parts of the definitions of *spirit*, *spiritual*, and *religion* from *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*:

spirit from the Latin *spiritus*, lit., breath; to blow, breathe; an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms; a supernatural being or essence; the immaterial intelligent or sentient part of a person; the activating or essential principle influencing a person; a special attitude or frame of mind; a distillate (often used in place of alcohol); an alcoholic solution of a volatile substance; God.

spiritual of or relating to the spirit; of or relating to sacred matters; concerned with religious values; of or relating to supernatural beings or phenomena.

religion from the Latin *religio*, reverence; the service and worship of God of the supernatural; archaic: scrupulous conformity; a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith.

At first glance, you can see a few similarities. In each of the above definitions, God and the supernatural are mentioned. However, in this particular dictionary, many of the words in the

definitions are different from one to the next. This is not by accident. While there's usually some spirituality in religion, the idea of religion is very different from spirituality. Religion is a group system; spirituality is a frame of mind.

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“Religion is concerned with God’s relationship with the universe; spirituality is focused on the way a person sees his own place in the universe.” – from *Steps of Transformation* by Father Meletios Webber,
an Orthodox Priest

The way we see the world, as shaped by our genes and our experiences, is the basic foundation for our spirituality. The idea of the sacred – something accorded great value and respect – is left to each person to define. No matter what you believe is valuable and worthy of respect, you can combine these ingredients to create a “spiritual recipe.”

Even if you have no belief in anything supernatural or beyond the scientifically proven, you can see that life exists. The first definition of the word spirit in this particular dictionary describes it as “an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms.” This means that, whether you believe that life emanates from a supernatural source or whether you think it started as a chemical reaction, you can still acknowledge that something caused it. The word “Cause” is often substituted for the word “God” by people who shun traditional religious references to a deity.

If you simply do not want to think about any of these spiritual or religious matters, ask yourself whether you are willing to take an honest look at what you really believe. It's one thing to be adamantly individualistic (in this book, it is considered a wonderful quality!). But, if you would rather die or have your old life back than to define your own idea of spirituality, consider whether you are being controlled by your need to be *against* someone or something else. It's a strange way to be controlled, but it can still keep you from making your own, unbiased decisions.

Complete resistance to identifying what you believe might also mean that you are simply not ready to stop the behavior that brought you to recovery. You might, consciously or unconsciously, be looking for an excuse to keep fooling yourself.

Finally, rejection of this kind of introspection may mean that you have a clearly defined set of beliefs about life that cannot fit the ideas presented in this book.

Whatever your reasons, if you cannot come to terms with *any* type of spirituality, even by your own definition, you still don't need to give up on the idea of recovery. You may be perfectly able to use the Twelve Steps while you avoid or ignore the spiritual aspects. And you may find another recovery program that better fits for you (see the *Resources* section at the back of this book).

There is a clear and simple motto used in the Program: *Take what you like and leave the rest for future reference.* You can take this at face value. No one with any amount of successful recovery will tell

you that you can't stick around just because you're not "spiritual."

Spirituality does not *require* God. Our ability to communicate with all parts of the Globe has given us information about other cultures, confirming that:

- The Judeo-Christian God is not the God to which most people pray.
- Many religions worship other "aspects" of God, such as nature.
- Some religions have no concept of God at all.

People's ideas about spirituality, religion, and God often depend on where they were born, to which parents, and in which century. It also means that, unless a few Judeo-Christians are the only ones in need of recovery, the Twelve Steps need to be flexible about spirituality if they are going to work for people all over the world. Fortunately, this is the case. As of January 2003, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, as well as many other Twelve-Step meetings, occur in more than 150 countries (from Alcoholics Anonymous World Services website) and this number continues to grow.

"While A.A. has restored thousands of poor Christians to their churches, and has made believers out of atheists and agnostics, it has also made good A.A.'s out of those belonging to the Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish faiths. For example, we question very much whether our Buddhist members in Japan would ever have joined this Society had A.A. officially stamped itself a strictly Christian movement.

You can easily convince yourself of this by imagining that A.A. started among the Buddhists and that they then told you you couldn't join them unless you became a Buddhist, too. If you were a Christian alcoholic under these circumstances, you might well turn your face to the wall and die."

– Bill Wilson, Letter 1954

If the Twelve Step Programs did not stand behind the words, “As we understood him,” they could never have grown and helped so many millions all over the world. This is an indisputable fact: No one group or religion “owns” these Steps, and if they did, the Twelve Step groups would wither away and die to all but a few.

The Bottom Line – The Least You Can Believe

No matter how you look at it, the idea of God, or at least spirituality, is in the Twelve Steps. Does this mean you can't use the Steps if you can't find or participate in spirituality? And what, if anything, is required?

Technically, *nothing is required*. Nobody has the authority or the right to tell you what you must think or believe. There's another way: Be willing to let go of your resistance. This doesn't mean turning into a mindless sponge with no opinions or thoughts of your own. It's about attitude more than anything else. Keeping an open mind does not mean placing yourself in danger of being swept up in religious fervor. But, if you are *willing* to take a look at new ideas, you may succeed in recovery – and you can do it with your own personal set of beliefs intact.

Most Twelve-Step meetings announce that “the only requirement for membership is a *desire to stop...*” drinking, using, or whatever self-destructive behavior that particular meeting focuses on. That’s it. That word “desire” represents the bottom line. You already know that the desire to quit was worthless by itself. This means that recovery had better be offering something more than just a group of people who *desire*. The real problem seems to be finding a way to change desire into reality.

This is exactly where the idea of a “Higher Power” comes in. Since your willpower obviously wasn’t enough, you need another form or source of power. This alternate source, no matter how you define it, needs to exist or there is no hope. Whatever you believe, some idea exists in your mind about who you are and how you relate to the world – whether it’s swirling electrons, total chaos, natural law, or God. If you haven’t been able to quit on your own, you can turn to this source of power. This is your spirituality.

The Possibilities – Ideas about Higher Power from Others in Recovery

Jack claims to be adrift without a spiritual anchor, yet we have had hours-long conversations about spirituality. He no longer feels resentment toward the God he knew in training for the Catholic priesthood, he just doesn’t have the same ideas about who or what God is. He’s still searching for the words to use when he refers to a Higher Power, and isn’t even sure the word God will ever fit. He

just knows there's a mystery that he cannot fully explain. The rest of his strength seems to come from the groups and the people he has met in the Program.

Derek points out that nothing in the Twelve Steps says you need to believe in God. The Steps tell you which actions to take, but not what to believe. Without knowing what he means by "God," he takes the actions as if he knew. For example, when he turns his will and his life over to the care of a Higher Power, Derek tells himself that since he is obviously not able to control everything in the universe, it's easy to imagine that a power greater than himself exists. He just uses that idea whenever Higher Power or God is mentioned.

Li says that, "When one considers that generally Buddhism is a non-theist spiritual path based upon the development of human potential motivated by a desire to benefit others," she is not surprised that the Twelve Steps work well for her. When Judeo-Christian prayers make her uncomfortable, which they still do, she repeats the Medicine Buddha mantra under her breath.

Joan, a woman who grew up a Pagan, was ready to run when she saw the spiritual basis of the Program. "What kept me in my seat was the desperate fear that if I picked up one more time, I would die." She eventually came to see that "... the spiritual principals of recovery are far-reaching and non-denominational."

Paul, an atheist, states that “One of the greatest things I ever heard in AA is that we all have faith if we have fear, because fear is faith that everything will go horribly wrong. Thus, if I can have faith in the negative, why can’t I have faith in the positive? This is the kind of faith that has proof that it works without beads, drinking red wine on Sundays, or getting on your knees.”

And **Joe**, a Native American, talks of discarding the creator of his own ideas (ego) and traveling on a path given to him by his ancestors “... made visible to me by the Twelve Steps.” He participates in ritual and ceremony, including Twelve-Step meetings, “not to impress God, but to humble myself before the Creator of the way things are.”

You are completely free to see, or not to see, your own Higher Power. Free to use whatever word or phrase reminds you of what you believe. You do not need to know what gravity is in order to believe that you are securely fastened to the Earth’s surface. You do not need to understand the workings of electricity in order to flip the light switch. Probably most who are entering recovery are on shaky spiritual ground. Those who are fortunate are able to stay around and listen and learn until they grasp their own, personal ideas of what the words God and Higher Power mean to them. There is nothing to fight against, and there are no rules to break. Whatever you believe, you can probably find a way to weave it safely and with integrity into the Twelve Steps.



“As soon as we admitted the possible existence of a Creative Intelligence, a Spirit of the Universe underlying the totality of things, we began to be possessed of a new sense of power and direction, provided we took other simple steps...To us, the Realm of the Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive or forbidding to those who earnestly seek. It is open, we believe, to all men.”— from Alcoholics Anonymous

The Turning Point – Where to Go from Here

Now you need to decide between using the rest of this book to sort out your own spirituality or moving on to some other way of recovery. If you think you can keep an open mind, or at least be tolerant of the ideas of God and spirituality in the Twelve Steps, the exercises and ideas in the next chapter can help you zero in on what you really believe.

You will have a very good chance of recovery if, in addition to looking at your own spirituality, you also follow these suggestions:

- Talk to others, including your sponsor.
- Read some of the other books out there.
- Go to a variety of meetings and listen carefully for similarities.
- Follow the leads that turn up as you continue to search for your own spirituality.

If you are just not able to get any sense of meaning from this or other parts of this book, you can still use the Twelve Step programs for recovery, simply by observing the process in others.

Finally, if you absolutely cannot consider the possibility of anything beyond the realm of your own logic and self-sufficiency, you may need to look for other recovery possibilities. The Twelve Steps are a good way to achieve recovery, but they are not the only way. See *Resources* toward the end of this book for some other ideas.