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Date: May 2009
To: Conference Participants
From: World Board
RE: Living Clean Outline, Chapters One & Two Review & Input

We are happy to present you with review drafts of the outline, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 of the book, *Living Clean: The Journey Continues*. This cover memo will provide you with some background about the project and a set of questions to guide your discussions as you review the draft material.

Project Background and Purpose

This book is to aid members with the long term process of living clean and walking through life on life's terms. The project plan for this book-length piece was adopted at WSC 2008 but has been an item on the "literature wish list" since 1983. This project remained on the back burner until other literature priorities were completed.

This book will allow us to include many of the ideas gathered from the fellowship over the years regarding new literature. While *Living Clean* will not be able to capture all of the ideas submitted, it will touch on relationships, spirituality, living with success, dealing with challenges, health/illness, practicing principles in our daily lives, etc.

In order to realize the vision for the book we need input from our members. We are seeking examples of practical application of the tools of recovery, some real "boots on the ground" experience, things we hear that positively affect our recovery and the results of applying the principles.

We want this book to sound like us in much the same way that the Basic Text speaks to us, a lofty goal to be sure, but one that is attainable if we all work to contribute to the project. As with any literature development process, the beginning of this process is the best time to offer input which may affect the overall scope of the book.

Opportunities for involvement by the fellowship

Currently the fellowship has several avenues for participation in the project. In addition to commenting on these drafts in this process members can support us in the creation by submitting ideas and concepts using one of the methods outlined below:

There is a session profile for development of input for the project posted at: http://www.na.org/?ID=Living_Clean_Project so that members in local communities can have their own input sessions assisting in creating some of the material.

There is also a discussion board that is open to members of the fellowship. The link is: <http://naws.org/lc/index.php>. This discussion board is open to any NA member. Upon registering you have the option to hide your email address and develop a screen name of your choosing. Registration is required to keep the spammers off the board. The discussion board is divided up by chapter, and the topic outline is posted there for easy reference.

Members can also send input via email to: LivingClean@na.org or to our regular postal address: World Board ATTN Living Clean, 19737 Nordhoff Place, Chatsworth, CA 91311.

The Drafts

In this packet of material are the drafts of the outline, Chapter 1 “Practicing these Principles in All Our Affairs”, and Chapter 2 “Identity: Who We Are”. The material in these chapters sets the stage for the rest of the book. The remainder of the book will be sent out for review and input in two other staggered periods. The approval form of the book will be released in April 2011 according to conference policy. ***The deadline for input on the outline, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 is 15 September 2009.***

Review and Input Questions

It is our hope that this book will speak to all NA members. This will necessitate discussing all elements of our lives and may encroach on topics that at first glance appear to be outside issues, yet as NA members we navigate those issues on a daily basis.

It is worth keeping in mind that these drafts have not been fully copyedited and as a result may contain spelling errors or erroneous punctuation. The approval form of the material will have been fully edited to eliminate such occurrences so the focus of the review sessions can remain on the concepts being communicated rather than spelling or punctuation.

These questions will help to focus your review sessions.

The outline:

This outline represents our best ideas right now about what will be covered in each chapter. It is a work in progress.

1. What are your overall impressions of the outline?
2. Are there any ideas or concepts missing from the outline? If so, what specifically is missing?
3. Is there anything in the outline that should be removed or modified?

Chapters 1 & 2

Take each chapter separately. Many times it is helpful to read the material aloud as a part of the review process.

1. What are your overall impressions of the chapter? Please rate this chapter on a scale of 1 to 10; with 1 representing “don’t like it at all” and 10 representing “loved it.” Try to be specific about what you particularly liked or disliked in the chapter.
2. Are any ideas or concepts missing from this chapter? If so, what specifically is missing?
3. Are there concepts or ideas that should be elaborated upon or expanded in some way, including ideas that are inadequately explained? Please be as specific as you can.
4. Is there anything in the drafts that should be removed or modified, including anything that is not consistent with our NA principles? If so, what specifically should be removed or modified, and why?

The deadline for input on the outline, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 is 15 September 2009.

Enter your responses to these questions directly at http://www.na.org/?ID=Living_Clean_Project.

Or send your input to:

World Board
Attn: Living Clean
19737 Nordhoff Place; Chatsworth, CA 91311 USA

Or email to: Worldboard@na.org

Living Clean Outline

Introduction

- Not an introduction to NA — point to other material
- Purpose, direction, history of project
- Evolution of the fellowship since the publication of the Basic Text — more has been revealed

Chapter 1. Practicing these Principles in All Our Affairs

Once we've gotten clean, and we've stayed clean a while, why do we stay in NA? In this chapter we try to answer that question in terms of the Twelfth Step and the Tenth Chapter of the Basic Text: We try to practice these principles in all our affairs, and more is revealed to us as we go forward. But the truth is that recovery isn't always an easy process; there are crises and obstacles we all face, at some time or another. For some of us who are the oldest-timers in our areas, recovery can sometimes feel pretty lonely — even when we're in the middle of the fellowship. Finding the spark that makes recovery an ongoing, rewarding, and exciting journey requires an active change in our ideas and attitudes — not just once, but again and again.

- Desperation to passion
- Making NA a way of life
- How do we stay
- Why do we stay
- Moving from the disease versus moving toward recovery
- Spiral staircase — patterns in recovery not always linear

Chapter 2. Identity

The first time we say, "I am ... and I am an addict," we begin to change our identity, our understanding of who we are. Our recovery is a constant process of accepting ourselves and changing ourselves, and this chapter seeks to describe some of the ways that we get comfortable with ourselves and the people around us, and begin to let go of what no longer fits. As we allow the principles we practice to become a part of us, we find that we are deeply changed — and truly ourselves.

- Change can be messy
- Reinventing ourselves
 - Coming to grips with our former identities
- Life stage stuff — seeing ourselves as we are becoming
- Self-love/self-respect
- Breaking patterns
- Isolation
- Alienation
- Other aspects of addiction — symptoms of the disease
- Embracing the positives

- 44 • Race ethnicity gender sexuality prejudice
- 45 • Using new tools
- 46 • Attitudes becoming attributes — internalizing the principles

47

48 **Chapter 3. Physical Selves**

49 Learning to live in and with our bodies. This chapter is not intended to do the same work as the
 50 booklet, *In Times of Illness*. We hope here to talk about living with our physical selves more broadly
 51 — the way we treat ourselves in recovery, learning to find pleasure in being physically alive and
 52 aware — and facing our aging, our vulnerability, and our mortality.

53

- 54 • Physical part of recovery
- 55 • Thrill-seeking
- 56 • Sensation avoidance
- 57 • Sex & sexuality (This will be reflected in other sections as well)
- 58 • Wellness and health
 - 59 ○ Healthy behavior
 - 60 ○ Caring for ourselves
- 61 • Mental Health
- 62 • Illness
- 63 • Aging
- 64 • Dying

65

66 **Chapter 4. Relationships (who we are in relation to others)**

67 The Basic Text tells us that we come into recovery as “devious, frightened loners” and that the
 68 ultimate weapon against the disease of addiction is another recovering addict. Our recovery is based
 69 in relationships, but most of us struggle with them in one way or another. Our relationships with one
 70 another in the rooms, with the families we come from and the families we create, are all places
 71 where we learn to practice the principles. Creating healthy relationships with healthy boundaries
 72 outside of the rooms is another area where we may look to one another’s experience for guidance.

73

- 74 • Biological family
 - 75 ○ Family of origin
 - 76 ○ Creating new families
 - 77 ○ Adopted family/blended family
 - 78 ○ Parenting our children
 - 79 ○ Our parents
- 80 • NA as “family”
 - 81 ○ Relationship with other addicts — using or clean
 - 82 ○ Relationship with newcomers
 - 83 ○ Moving forward when you’re the longest-timer in the room
 - 84 ○ Relationship with the fellowship
 - 85 ■ Service
 - 86 ○ Coming over from another fellowship

- 87 • Romantic and non-romantic relationships
- 88 ○ Living together/marriage
- 89 ○ Divorce/breaking up
- 90 • Alone versus lonely
- 91 • Intimacy and trust
- 92 • Commitment
- 93 • Sponsorship
- 94 • Peers
- 95 • Relationship with non-addicts
- 96 • Core issues

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98 **Chapter 5. Moving Beyond Social Acceptability (how am I perceived/ what we do)**

99 As we get some time in recovery we get some time in the world, as well. Social acceptability does not
 100 equal recovery, to be sure, but that doesn't mean they're mutually exclusive, either: For many of us
 101 social acceptability is something we must learn along the way. Our work habits and our beliefs about
 102 work, education, money and stability change and grow as we stick around — sometimes in surprising
 103 ways. Learning to deal with success and failure, with risk and responsibility, with stability and change
 104 are all part of the process some of us call “growing up in recovery.”

105

- 106 • Transitioning into new ways of living
- 107 • Taking new risks — leaps of faith
- 108 • Gaining social acceptability
 - 109 ○ Finances
 - 110 ○ Education
 - 111 ○ Employment
 - 112 ○ Moving
 - 113 ○ Acquiring stuff — “can no longer move in your car”
 - 114 ○ “I can throw the boxes away”
- 115 • Institutions
 - 116 ○ Learning to live on the outside
 - 117 ○ Making peace with/working within/living clean on the inside
- 118 • “Success stuff”
 - 119 ○ Responsible, productive members of society
 - 120 ■ Public figures
 - 121 ○ Employment
 - 122 ○ Education
 - 123 ○ Disclosure of NA membership to others
 - 124 ○ Seeing ourselves as we are becoming
 - 125 ○ Self love/self esteem
 - 126 ○ Costs of success — challenges

- 127 ○ Failure in recovery
- 128 ▪ Professional
- 129 ▪ Financial
- 130 ▪ Marital

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132 **Chapter 6. The Journey Continues**

133 As we continue in recovery the gifts that we receive grow greater — and the difficulties we face
 134 deepen, as well. There seem to be some things we share in common along the journey. Most of us
 135 find ways to serve others, in or out of the fellowship, and in service we are confronted with our own
 136 limitations, including the limits of our compassion. We endure the loss of fellow members and
 137 sometimes of our loved ones, and learn to live through grief. We also find that the drama that once
 138 engaged so much of our time and energy no longer takes up as much room in our lives. Some of us
 139 also notice particular patterns at particular moments in our recovery — stages that we go through as
 140 we grow.

141

- 142 ● Transitioning out of “being a newcomer”
- 143 ● “The black hole”
- 144 ● Am I well yet?
- 145 ● Surviving our emotions
- 146 ● Post convention depression/blues
- 147 ● Loss
 - 148 ○ Grief
 - 149 ○ Survivors guilt
- 150 ● Adjusting to lack of drama — settling in, settling down
- 151 ● Complacency and how to reenergize ourselves and our recovery
- 152 ● Stages of recovery:
 - 153 ○ Anniversary blues
 - 154 ○ The Change at 5: a new awakening
 - 155 ○ The Change at 10: a new surrender
 - 156 ○ The Change at 20: a new perspective
- 157 ● When members leave
 - 158 ○ How do we keep the door open?
 - 159 ○ “Where’s the NA I used to know?”
 - 160 ○ Deciding whether to keep those relationships
 - 161 ○ What do we do with our anger
- 162 ● Service
 - 163 ○ Challenges/difficulties
 - 164 ○ Benefits of service

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166 **Chapter 7. Living Spiritually**

167 As we go forward as members with time, we find that our lives take on a richness and texture that
 168 we might never have imagined. More has been revealed to us; more is being revealed every day, if
 169 we are open to it; and more will be revealed as long as we continue on the journey of recovery. What

170 is our vision of hope today? How do we move toward that, and what are the obstacles to our
171 spiritual growth?

172

173 • What are spiritual principles, and how do I apply them?

174 • Opening us to all life and the world has to offer — therapy, religious, and spiritual
175 practices, etc.

176 • Living in harmony with our environment

177 • Priority setting

178 • Substitution as a part of recovery from addiction

179 • Accepting ourselves and our humanity

180 • Spirituality (mental, physical, spiritual disease)

181 • Prayer and meditation

182 • Desperation to passion

183 • Service

Living Clean – Chapter One

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Practicing Principles

The Basic Text promises that more will be revealed, and it's true: more has been revealed in the years since that promise was made, and more continues to be revealed every day we live clean and practice the principles of recovery. Our greatest treasure and resource is the depth of our personal knowledge of the recovery process. We share that treasure among ourselves, at meetings, at our celebrations, and over coffee. Once more we seek to share as much as we can of our collective experience, strength and hope in a book for our members new, and not so new, who wish to continue the journey.

Living clean is a lifelong process. We find that the work is ongoing, and the rewards of living the program are never-ending, as well. The NA program gives us tools for living a life that is infused with hope: no matter where we are in our journey, we believe it can get better, and that we can get better. That might be in terms of improving the circumstances of our lives, creating or recreating a life that matches our vision for ourselves; but often the change we seek is in our ideas and attitudes. We learn to see the world more clearly, and to understand our place in it.

When we step back and look at the experience of living clean—with its ups and down, miracles and struggles, dead ends and open doors—we learn that although we may live very differently from one another, we share the same journey.

The longer we stay clean, the more we find that the principles we practice in NA have meaning throughout our lives. We find in these principles a way to stop using, and to free ourselves to be ourselves. Working the steps, practicing the traditions, and applying ourselves to service in and out of NA all help us to discover who we really are. When we try to carry the message, we don't just help the addict who still suffers. It brings us awareness of our gifts and limitations, and drives us to change.

As we practice these principles in all our affairs, they gain traction in our lives. They start feeling more natural. For example, in the beginning, we may have had to consciously practice being honest. As we continue this practice, we find dishonesty progressively more uncomfortable, perhaps even painful; and one day we notice that honesty has become normal for us, that we are basically honest people. We even like it. When our defects are removed we often don't feel them go. Some of us say this is how we know our Higher Power is involved. We may not even notice the change unless we fall back into old behavior and find that it is no longer comfortable or workable for us. We call our sponsor in distress over having "done it again," and realize how long it's been since that behavior had even crossed our minds. Learning to survive our impulses without acting out is a new freedom: we may not change our feelings right away, but we can change our behavior. We learn that mood follows action. Over time, the impulse to act against our beliefs begins to fade.

The message we carry has three parts: an addict, any addict can stop using, lose the desire to use, and find a new way to live. We talk a lot about the first two, because stopping is an emergency when we get here, and losing the obsession is necessary for us to start to enjoy our lives. But the hard work doesn't end there. Finding a new way to live is not something we do just once. Some of us experience great

38 upheaval in our recovery as we try again and again to find a life that makes sense to us and for us. But
39 we continue to carry the message, using our experience to help others. The more experience we have to
40 share, the richer our message can become. Our lives take on new meaning when we can help others by
41 sharing our experience.

42 Practicing these principles is how we find a new way to live. But we don't just "find it" and move on; we
43 continually practice living a principled life. We try new things, and some of them suit us better than
44 others. We explore deeper layers inside and higher levels outside. As our lives change, our values
45 change. And as our values change we change our lives. The process is like a spiral staircase: we come
46 again and again to the same view, only we're seeing it each time from a different level. When we put
47 love and commitment into action, we are often surprised at the results.

48 Sometimes we find that our lives are unlike anything we have experienced before; eventually, it might
49 seem that our lives are unlike those of the people we go to meetings with. That old sense of alienation
50 returns. It's no less a symptom of our disease than before, but now it feels like a consequence of our
51 recovery. We are swimming in deep water, and it feels like we are alone, but our lifeboat is always
52 within reach. When we come to meetings and reach out, we find some relief, no matter how much clean
53 time we have.

54 In the beginning we experience NA as a way of life because we can't risk stepping outside. It's the last
55 house on the block, as the saying goes. But in time our reasons to keep coming back change. We stay
56 not only because we must, but because we want to. We find here what we were desperately looking for
57 all along: connection to others, connection to a Higher Power, connection to the world around us—and
58 perhaps most surprising of all, connection to ourselves.

59 Staying connected brings its own rewards: these connections grow deeper and richer over time. As years
60 pass and our relationships with each other continue, the simple fact that we now share a history creates
61 its own kind of bond between us. Each time we surrender, each time we awaken spiritually, we find
62 once more that the desperation that drives us to our knees fuels the passion that carries us forward.
63 Each time, we find that our experience affirms what we believe. Belief grows into faith; faith grows into
64 knowledge, and we may even find that we are excited by the opportunities for growth that emerge from
65 our struggles.

66 Getting our feelings back can seem like a mixed blessing early in our recovery. We feel more deeply than
67 we imagined we could. When we got here, many of us needed to be taught to name our feelings. But
68 even before we can wrap words around the sensations, we notice that colors are brighter, food tastes
69 better, sex is more intense. And, on the flip side, we hurt more deeply. Our hearts break. We get angry,
70 and maybe we surprise ourselves with the force of our feelings. Our feelings are a great new adventure,
71 but they can also be overwhelming.

72 The bottoms we hit in recovery can be very frightening. Although we are clean, we are still capable of
73 doing great harm to ourselves, our environment, and the people around us. There are times when we
74 find ourselves in deep crisis even though the circumstances of our lives look pretty good. Sometimes an
75 external event—a breakup, loss of a job, changes in our family—triggers a flow of feelings, and we find it

76 doesn't stop. Occasionally we experience physical changes that bring emotional freight with them:
77 depression, anxiety, deep fear. It happens we go through dark times in our recovery. The faith that led
78 us to build a successful life may not be sufficient for us to sustain that life day after day. A crisis of faith
79 is a very real crisis: it is a moment of reckoning.

80 A new kind of surrender is necessary if we are to stay clean and keep growing. Spiritual growth can be
81 painful. It can be bewildering, frightening and very lonely. Some of us get loaded because we don't know
82 what else to do. Others of us consider killing ourselves. Some of us go to professionals to try to treat
83 what's going on—and sometimes that's necessary. But if we can get through it we find great gifts are
84 waiting for us. What we heard when we were new still stands: keep coming back, no matter what!
85 Recovery is like the ocean: the waves come in and out, and the way we feel today is not necessarily how
86 we're going to feel tomorrow.

87 Early in recovery we were told that if we kept coming to meetings, sooner or later we would hear our
88 story. It would be a mistake to think that our using story is the only one we need to listen for; our
89 recovery story is no less dramatic, and there are times when we need just as much to go to meetings
90 and listen for that. We hear it when we learn to listen with our heart as well as our ears. Sometimes we
91 may have to go looking for it—seeking new meetings, going to conventions, asking around, and sharing
92 about what's going on—to find the people who have been through what we're going through, and who
93 got through it clean.

94 We may experience a particular kind of opportunity or catastrophe we haven't heard about in meetings
95 before. It might be the excitement of stepping out into new territory—adopting a child, taking on a new
96 career, moving to a faraway place—that makes us feel like we don't belong in the rooms again.
97 Sometimes the experience of grief, financial hardship or betrayal makes us feel terribly alone. When we
98 are in pain, it can be harder to reach out, easier to see differences. We must remember that our Higher
99 Power is with us in those cold moments, and that there are people around us who really do want to
100 help, if we let them. One of the gifts of reaching out is finding that our most painful experiences can help
101 someone else. When we say, "I've been through that, and I stayed clean," we realize with gratitude that
102 we have gotten to the other side of something we imagined we couldn't get through. There is great
103 satisfaction in being able not just to look back but to reach back and help someone else across.

104 Many of the challenges we face have concrete symptoms, but are actually spiritual in nature. It's hard to
105 spot a spiritual crisis: usually they're disguised as a crisis in our relationships, finances, careers or
106 families. Loneliness may be a prime example: we look around one day and see empty places in our lives
107 where we imagine our partners should be, or our sponsors, or our friends. We may be a little short at
108 that moment on one or another of these—or we may have plenty of people around us, but we just don't
109 feel like we connect with them anymore.

110 Some members say that loneliness is our number one killer. As we work through it—by sharing in
111 meetings, talking with people, writing about it, working with our sponsors, applying the steps—we may
112 find that we drag those feelings with us in and out of relationships, in and out of social situations. Many
113 of us find that what we're experiencing as loneliness is actually a desire for a deeper connection with a

114 Higher Power, that the only way to fill that empty space is with spiritual practice and conscious contact
115 with something greater than ourselves.

116 When we stay clean through difficult or painful feelings and share our experience consistently with a
117 few people, we may realize (or they may point out) that we struggle not only when we're confronted
118 with big, serious challenges in our lives, but also when we haven't had enough sleep, or when we're
119 hungry, or when the seasons change. Staying through the rough times is crucial. When we say, "Don't
120 give up five minutes before the miracle," we don't just mean the first miracle. Our lives are full of
121 moments when we are faced with the difficult decision to grow or go. There are growth zones and
122 comfort zones, and when we're most uncomfortable, the love and humor of our fellow members can
123 remind us that we are on the verge of great growth and great spiritual gifts.

124 In the moments when we feel the deepest gratitude, we can look back and see that our path to that
125 moment was neither short nor straight, and that some of what seemed the worst decisions at one time
126 in our recovery opened the door for some of our greatest gifts later on. We may find that we have
127 simply outgrown some of our decisions. What was right for us at one point in our recovery may not be
128 right for the rest of our lives, but it can be very difficult to move on. Blessings can come wrapped in such
129 strange packages that we don't always recognize them when they arrive. We don't pretend that there
130 are no mistakes in recovery, but sometimes those mistakes can take us in a new direction we hadn't
131 thought of before. Mistakes can be one way we keep from doing something we weren't so sure about
132 anyway. We might look back in a Tenth Step and see that we were responsible for not doing very well in
133 a job interview; but, after we moved on, we may recognize that we really didn't want what we were
134 trying to get after all.

135 We find that we are able to continuously increase our honesty with ourselves and others through
136 consistent application of the steps. More often, and sooner in the process, we are able to recognize our
137 responsibility for our actions and our motives. Being able to identify what's driving us to act in the ways
138 that we do helps us to find relief from all the ways our disease shows up in our lives. It also give us the
139 ability to see more clearly what it is that we want, and to begin to be able to move toward what we
140 want, rather than just away from what we fear.

141 As we practice the principles, our understanding grows and deepens. We learn that there is no limit on
142 the process. There are no limits to where our recovery can take us, no limits to how much better we can
143 get. We sell ourselves short when we have a reservation in our Second Step, and think there are some
144 parts of who we are that cannot be restored. When we accept the possibility that we can get infinitely
145 better—that there is no end to what recovery has to offer -- we begin to understand that spirituality is
146 not just a way out. It's a way of life that will continue to bring us new gifts, new possibilities, and new
147 awareness as long as we practice it. We find that if we allow ourselves to be motivated not by fear of
148 what has been but by hope for what is possible, we are as excited to move forward when life is good as
149 we are when we are struggling.

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151 Spirituality is a relationship with reality; as we develop our spiritual lives we find that reality becomes
152 less frightening—and less rigid. We learn that a change in our perspective can totally shift the way we
153 understand our situation, large or small. When our lives are based in spirituality, our perceptions and
154 responses are based in an ever-evolving relationship to something greater than ourselves. Self-
155 obsession gives way to an understanding that we are not the main character in every play, but that our
156 supporting efforts can make a real difference in the lives of those around us.

157 Life gets hard sometimes. We experience loss, illness, and pain; there is no way around it. Even if we are
158 fortunate enough to feel love, we probably also know what it is to be so lonely we can't see a way
159 through. There is a joke that addicts are people who want to be held while we isolate; we are desperate
160 for a connection to others. NA gives us the ability to turn that desperation into a passion for life, for
161 service, a passion to help others.

162 When we keep coming back to meetings we develop relationships with ourselves, our Higher Power,
163 and other human beings. These relationships, tangled up with the common bonds of recovery, are deep
164 and complicated and sometimes difficult. But some of these relationships become the strongest bonds
165 in our lives. They teach us about love and intimacy. For many of us, our NA fellowship becomes our
166 family; and in turn, the experience of membership in NA teaches us how to be members of our family
167 and society as a whole.

168 As we practice the principles in all our affairs, we gain a keener understanding of our own belief
169 systems, and what it means to live in harmony with our beliefs. The program changes us, and in that
170 process, our beliefs change. Recovery is a process of evolution. It is lifelong, but there are periods of
171 extraordinary transformation and times of comfort and ease.

172 We progress in the journey by applying what we learn in recovery to the rest of our lives, and bringing
173 all of our lives into our recovery. This is what Step Twelve calls “practicing these principles in all our
174 affairs.” The Basic Text goes on to tell us that, “the steps do not end here; they are a new beginning.”
175 As we try to practice these principles in all our affairs, our lives take shape in new ways.

176 We come to know that whatever we are experiencing will change—even if it feels like forever, or like we
177 can't possibly get through it. Good or bad, feelings are always in motion. Change comes whether or not
178 we seek it. We have a choice, however; we can simply struggle through the changes that life throws at
179 us, or we can participate in creating ourselves and our lives. Having people who know us and really
180 believe in us allows us to try new things, even when they seem frightening, and to begin to trust the
181 changes we see in ourselves. It's at this point that many of us come to believe that life is not happening
182 to us, it's happening for us.

183 The program of Narcotics Anonymous is the way we found to escape lives of desperation and pain,
184 institutionalization and untimely death. But that's not all NA is: it's a path, a process, and a way of life.
185 As we live the program, we change in ways we might expect, and in ways we might never have dreamt.
186 When we stop using, we begin to free ourselves to be more fully who we are. We define our values and
187 do our best to live by them. As we listen to our heart and our spirit, we are brought to ever greater
188 awakenings.

Living Clean – Chapter Two

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Identity: Who We Are

Connection to ourselves...

Narcotics Anonymous is a program of action, not of theory. We don't think our way into a new way of living; we live our way into a new way of thinking. Before we got clean, our identity was built on fantasy: who we could be, or would be, or should be, or even who we used to be. In recovery we start connecting with reality through action: we move in the world, we act, we show up. We do things. We take risks; sometimes we succeed and sometimes we don't. We experiment with jobs, relationships, and service commitments. Some of us begin simply by trying to keep a houseplant alive. Wherever we start from, each of us ventures into the world, clean, and tries. We learn who we are by stepping into the world, taking a stand, taking a risk, being vulnerable. Even when we are wrong, we can learn something vital about who we are.

Although living clean isn't all about crisis, for many of us in our first few years, it can seem that way. Our feelings are so powerful, and there can be so much wreckage to clean up, and so much change in our lives. And change can be messy. It can be a while before we really have the opportunity (or the need) to ask, "Okay. Who am I now?"

We identify as addicts, and the principle of anonymity teaches us that this is the most important thing: if we forget that we have a deadly disease, it doesn't really matter who or what else we think we are. But once we get clear on that, and get used to the idea of being clean, all kinds of possibilities open to us. As recovering addicts, we are free to explore our world, and to consider who we are or who we want to be.

Identity is a confusing word: it indicates the things that make us distinct or different from each other; and it's also used to mean the things that make us exactly the same. Our identity is composed of the things that distinguish us, either as part of a group or as separate from it. At some point, our identity as using addict may have overtaken many of the other things we were—at the end of the road, it seemed like we were nothing but our addiction.

As we get and stay clean, we begin to discover who we are. For some of us, this is a return to a self we once knew and had lost; others of us come into the process not really knowing who we might be. For some of us, our experiences in our lives have come to define us in particular ways that make it hard for us to see ourselves any other way. For that matter, we might not want to see ourselves otherwise: those experiences made us who we are, and we embrace that. Some experiences we may have had seem to define us throughout our lives—the honor of military service, for example, or the ordeal of having been incarcerated. But how do we make that part of ourselves in recovery—how does that experience become something that informs our progress, rather than keeping us bound to our past?

Some of us have the experience of "lost dreams awakening," picking up our desires where we left them and finally being able to have the lives we had always wanted. Others of us find that the dreams we left behind don't really fit the people we've become. We find that the things that make us happiest are

37 things it never occurred to us to want. We come in with a regrettable history of broken promises and
38 broken dreams, of dishonesty and betrayal and failure. Believing that we are worthy of the things we
39 want can be its own process. Some of us punish ourselves in recovery for years, holding ourselves back
40 from joy because we don't feel we deserve it.

41 Of course there's not one easy answer to how we make peace with our past, and it's not a simple
42 process. Returning again and again, in step work or in dreams, to "the scene of the crime" is part of the
43 experience many of us share in recovery. It is almost like a children's game: with each step forward, we
44 must turn around and retrieve a piece of our past. Sometimes this is a peaceful process, and sometimes
45 it's terrifying. That we bring those pieces with us does not mean we are not progressing. We find
46 throughout recovery that different bits of ourselves become available to us, and other parts are ready to
47 be let go. Each of the steps we work, each time we work the steps, gives us back a piece of ourselves
48 and relieves a little of our burden of regret, shame, and fear. The ways in which we change can be
49 surprising, letting go of some parts of ourselves and finding others. As distance grows between our using
50 lives and the present, we feel safer returning to some of the things we once cherished, and finding out if
51 they still suit us today.

52 Sometimes it can take a while for our sense of ourselves to catch up to who we are. We may even
53 sabotage ourselves to return to familiar chaos when our lives start seeming too different from what they
54 had been. Gradually, we learn that much of the unmanageability we struggle with is the result of the
55 choices we make. When we begin to get comfortable with new choices, our lives change—sometimes
56 radically.

57 When we come to recovery we have been devastated in many ways. Our personalities and our sense of
58 who we are were destroyed by our addiction, and when we get clean it's only more confusing. We
59 change in recovery, but we also uncover who we were all along. We find ourselves. For many of us, this
60 is the restoration the Second Step talks about. It may be a restoration to a state we've never
61 experienced before, because we've never really had the chance before to be who we truly are without
62 pretending, without hiding, without trying to be something else.

63 Many of us share that when we first come to meetings we notice that people seem to glow, that there's
64 a shine on members who are recovering and happy with themselves. That light of the spirit is the most
65 beautiful thing we have to offer the world, and it's less fragile than we think: after all, it survived our
66 addiction! Tending that light is partly about nurturing the passion inside of us, and partly a process of
67 trimming away all the stuff that blocks the sunlight of our spirit. Our defects grow in the dark; in the
68 bright light of recovery, our assets begin to blossom.

69 There's a reason we call our new way of life "practicing these principles." We practice, and in practicing
70 we don't always get it right. The Basic Text tells us in the Sixth Step, "We know we are growing when we
71 make new mistakes." There would be no earthly reason, really, for us to be good at it when we begin
72 practicing. But regular practice, beginning with the basics and gradually progressing from there, is
73 exactly how we get good at anything, from learning to play an instrument or speak a new language to

74 learning how to live a spiritual, principled and rewarding life. So we're not just learning new skills; we're
75 breaking old habits, some so deeply ingrained they feel like a part of who we are.

76 The tools we use to build our foundation may not always be the tools we need later on. It's not that they
77 lose their value—the basics are always important—but we may find that they are not enough to sustain
78 us. When we arrive at a moment where everything we know is not enough for us, we may find ourselves
79 doubting if recovery still works for us, or if it is still relevant to our lives. We turn to members with more
80 experience to seek new tools, new ways of working our program. For some of us, consistent practices of
81 prayer, meditation, writing or physical exercise are useful in the beginning but grow richer over time.
82 The simple fact of having maintained a practice for a long time offers a kind of structure for our program
83 that we can depend on.

84 ***Connection to a Higher Power...***

85 NA teaches us that we can live a spiritual life whether or not we believe in God. Building a relationship
86 with something greater than ourselves is a project we undertake the first time we approach the steps,
87 and we never stop building it. As our relationship with that Power deepens, it comes to really impact
88 who we are. For some of us, spiritual disciplines, including prayer and meditation, shape our day. Others
89 of us try to live our lives as a prayer, offering all of our actions as gifts to our Higher Power, asking at
90 night if our actions were worthy gifts today. Some of us find that when we are in tune with a power
91 greater than ourselves, we seem to flow more easily with the currents in our lives, and need less often
92 to question our actions or our motives. However we practice or experience it, we find that our
93 relationship with our higher power comes increasingly to shape our understanding of who we are, and
94 who we are in relation to our world.

95 For many of us, the biggest changes in recovery happen when we're not looking. We wake up and find
96 ourselves in lives we hardly recognize as our own: where it seemed we were always struggling to get by,
97 we find there is some stability in our lives. Degradation has been replaced with dignity, and honor in our
98 dealings with others. Where we were lonely, we find we are surrounded by a loving fellowship.

99 There are some questions we can only answer alone, but in order to face those questions alone, we
100 must have the support of people we trust. The balance between solitude and isolation is another fine
101 line we learn through experience. One question we learn to ask ourselves is, "am I acting in the service
102 of a greater good right now?" Sometimes we need to be alone to connect with our Higher Power or with
103 ourselves. Sometimes the best thing we can do for ourselves is to rest and unwind, watch a movie, and
104 let go. This is not the same as isolation—though the difference may not be apparent to anyone else. The
105 difference is inside. We come to identify for ourselves what is restorative time alone and what is
106 destructive withdrawal.

107 It is said that those wishing to discover a new land must spend a long time at sea. Sometimes when we
108 feel like we're lost between one shore and another, we may doubt whether the program still matters for
109 us. It can be a crisis that brings us here, but often it's a quieter kind of shift—as we develop an identity
110 beyond "addict," we wonder whether that label still applies, whether we still belong in the fellowship.
111 We are afraid to doubt because we know it can kill us, but the fear of questioning our new way of life

112 can sometimes seem like pressure to conform to something we're not fully comfortable with. When we
113 share our new reservations with other members with time, they often share similar experiences with us.
114 If we are lucky, our friends give us space to question our recovery, but don't quite let go of us, either. In
115 moments of extreme uncertainty, "fake it til ya make it" is exactly the wrong prescription. Out of these
116 moments of doubt can grow a faith that is truly our own. But they must be handled with care: we can
117 neither deny nor indulge them. We learn balance, often, by bouncing off both extremes.

118 We learn what's true for us, and that sets the direction for our lives. When we forget what is true for us,
119 we lose our way and drift dangerously. On the other hand, when we find that what is true for us is
120 changing, we may feel much more lost than we actually are. Our moral compass is very much at work
121 and it is leading us in a new direction. We survive these periods of grave doubt and uncertainty; we find
122 a new surrender, a deeper faith, and often a very different sense of who we are.

123 We learn to trust our process and allow it the time it needs to work. When we set deadlines or timelines
124 for how well we should be, or how long we will grieve, be afraid, or not know the answer to a question,
125 we can set ourselves up to believe that recovery isn't working. Recovery works very well, but not always
126 on the schedule we set for it. There is no substitute for time.

127 Action doesn't always involve movement. Sometimes in order for us to move forward we must stand
128 very still. Meditation can be hard for us because it's so uncomfortable to be quiet with ourselves, to
129 simply stand in the moment and be present. It's in this time that we can begin to ask for help, to listen
130 for answers, and to look ourselves in the eye and see who we are, where we are and how we are. When
131 we can be still and observe without judgment, we are given the clarity to see what is right for us and
132 what is not. We leave pieces behind along the way—defects of character that are removed, but also
133 other things as well. We change jobs and find out how much our identity was tied up in what we did for
134 a living, or we experience a change in our relationship and find that it changes us in other ways, as well.
135 This can be upsetting: we may not want to admit that what worked for us yesterday is no longer in our
136 best interest. As we start to know ourselves, we may be afraid to change more because it opens the
137 possibility that we might lose the self we've only just gotten to know. Experience teaches us that the
138 more we are willing to move forward in our lives, the more fully we become ourselves.

139 Some members say addiction is a shame-based disease: at the core of our diseased thinking is the belief
140 that something is wrong with us. Others say that addiction is a severe case of the human condition: we
141 struggle with the same fears and insecurities that everyone else does, but we experience them to a
142 degree that makes us willing to die to escape them. When we are looking at the world, or at ourselves,
143 through eyes of shame, everything we see is further evidence that we are wrong or bad, or that we
144 cannot be restored to sanity. But there is hope. When we listen to others share their pain and how they
145 get through it, we get a broader view. We see new tools in action, and we can learn to use their
146 experience to go forward in our own lives. When we change our attitude or perspective we may find a
147 new sense of compassion, or of gratitude. Perhaps the most valuable of all is empathy: when we can
148 relate with one another and see each other's growth, we begin to believe in the possibility of our own.
149 Listening to another addict share without judging them is the beginning of learning to listen to our own

150 heart without judgment or punishment. When we have compassion for ourselves we give ourselves
151 permission to be in the world—and that makes us much more useful to the world.

152 There is a balance between living in the moment and stepping back to be self-aware. A lot of the step
153 work we do after the first time through is about making our lives clearer, learning to listen to the voice
154 inside that tells us when what we are doing is right, and when it's not in line with our values. We are set
155 free to be ourselves; we are no longer contained by our addiction and no longer contained by a narrow
156 view of what life is supposed to look like. We learn that the power we gain in the Eleventh Step is
157 available to us when we are doing our Higher Power's will and living in self-acceptance, but when we
158 step away from what we know is right—either in our actions, or because we let our feelings run away
159 with us, we feel frustrated and powerless and trapped. Each time we get free, we leave behind more of
160 what ties us to false expectations and old beliefs of who we are. Giving ourselves the freedom to do
161 that, and giving each other that same freedom, is part of the promise of our Third Tradition: because we
162 have only one requirement for membership, the desire to stop using, we are given permission to be who
163 we are and how we are, and to be accepted for that. We no longer have to lie to gain acceptance.

164 Strangely, the simple act of accepting ourselves changes us. The process of gaining self-esteem is very
165 circular. When we begin to regard ourselves more highly, we start treating ourselves better—and we
166 respond to the world with a new humility. The Basic Text says at the Eighth Step that “we want to look
167 the world in the eye with neither aggressiveness nor fear;” increasingly, as we clean up our wreckage
168 and live differently, we find that this is the case. We can respect our actions and find respect for
169 ourselves in the process. Part of the charm of many of our older members it that they often seem so
170 eccentric. One suggested that this was a consequence of not having defenses in the way anymore: more
171 and more, we appear in the world exactly as we are.

172 We gain self-esteem when we follow through on commitments. These may begin with group service
173 commitments: making coffee, chairing the meeting and so forth. As our ability to follow through on
174 commitments begins to grow, we take on larger challenges. Perhaps the biggest one is following through
175 on our commitment to work the steps. One of our members shares that it's not just the work we do in
176 the steps, but the way we work the steps that sets the pattern for our lives: taking on a big project in
177 little pieces, working consistently on something that is important even when it's hard or unpleasant,
178 teaches us different things than does pushing through in a rush, getting it all done to meet a deadline
179 even if that means working all night.

180 Through the steps, we learn to peel back the layers of things we mistake for ourselves. We learn that we
181 have a disease, but that our disease isn't all we are. We learn that we are not God. We learn that we are
182 not our past or our defects of character. We notice when we are mistaking how we are for who we are.
183 And as we work our way deeper and deeper through the illusions, some of us wonder what will be left.
184 We run back to our old ways for fear that we may become someone we don't recognize or won't even
185 like. Some of us suspect that if we go all the way inside, what we will find is... nothing. That can be
186 terrifying.

187 One of the greatest benefits of attending meetings regularly is that people get to know us and see us as
188 we are, over time. When a fellow member can point out to us, “you know, you always get depressed at
189 this time of year,” we can take action to address a pattern we couldn’t see ourselves. When someone
190 we don’t know that well points out our generosity or loving kindness, we learn that people see goodness
191 in us that perhaps we don’t see in ourselves. Our fellows reflect us back to ourselves and help us to see
192 who we are today, not as we remember or wish to be.

193 We talk to members we respect and trust, and they remind us that working a program isn’t going to turn
194 us into anyone other than who we truly are. As we develop a conscious contact with a Power greater
195 than ourselves, we grow into the awareness that our Higher Power doesn’t want an image of us, or an
196 idealized version of ourselves: we come as we are, and find that we serve best when we are most fully
197 ourselves. The simple act of being present without trying to pretend works to peel away the distortions
198 and lies we tell ourselves, our defects, our baggage and our nagging sense of inadequacy. We learn who
199 we are precisely when we forget ourselves in service to others.

200 ***Connection to the world around us...***

201 There’s an old joke about how many meetings a member should go to: “just back away ‘til you use, then
202 you’ll know how many meetings you need.” But the truth is that there are times in our recovery when
203 we can’t be around as much as we used to, or even as much as we would like. We notice the difference
204 in our recovery but we may also notice the difference in how it feels when we are around: when we’re
205 not as closely connected it’s easy to feel left out. People ask where we’ve been and we take offense. We
206 can be in grave danger when we start feeling angry at meetings because people aren’t responding to us
207 the way we’d like. Finding the balance, for most of us, is finding the point at which we can feel
208 comfortable with ourselves, in meetings and out, and still maintain our responsibilities in society at
209 large.

210 For many of us, getting and staying clean is our greatest accomplishment, no matter what else we do in
211 life. Others of us see it as the most beautiful gift we have been given. That the thing we’re proudest of,
212 or most grateful for, can’t be shared with people outside of our recovery sometimes feels like a little
213 barrier between us and the world. Some of us stay entirely in the sphere of recovery: all our friends are
214 in recovery, our whole world is tied up with the fellowship—not because we’re afraid to go outside, but
215 because there seems to be such a language barrier. The way we share with each other, talking openly
216 about feelings, our ability to find humor in some of the darkest, most frightening things that have
217 happened to us—this level of deep identification that makes NA feel so special to us is not always
218 available outside the rooms. For some of us, that’s fine: we are very happy making our lives in NA. For
219 others of us, this presents an exciting challenge and we seek to create outside the rooms the same kinds
220 of intimacy and community that we’ve learned to love in recovery. Still others of us find that there are
221 some kinds of connection we feel in NA and some kinds we feel in other places—with our families,
222 religious communities, professional peers or neighbors—and are comfortable having some of our
223 identity here and some there. There are no rules, and no models of the recovering addict, as the text
224 says. Each of us finds the blend that works for us, just for today. We build our foundation in recovery,
225 and as we feel more secure we go off and do other things. Many of us go back to school, pursue careers,

226 start families. We come back regularly to check our foundation for cracks and shifting, and to reinforce
227 where it's necessary. Such a big, sturdy foundation isn't necessary to pitch a tent. We build skyscrapers
228 on those foundations: there is no end in sight. But we must make sure they are grounded securely, and
229 that a design change in one part of the structure doesn't bring the whole thing crashing down.

230 We may also find that our tools can be weapons if we use them that way: even something as simple as a
231 tenth step inventory can be an opportunity for us to abuse ourselves about our imperfections. We may
232 begin a program of healthier eating and become obsessed with food; we may seek to improve our
233 performance at work and become obsessed with our jobs. Some members say that our defects are just
234 survival mechanisms that stopped working; our best tools, likewise, sometimes grow from our worst
235 defects of character. We learn how to balance self obsession with productive work on our recovery as
236 we move from one extreme to the other. We find balance between the extremes, and we learn to spend
237 progressively more time closer to the center.

238 What we see when we look in the mirror often bears only the most casual relationship to the person
239 other people know. When we are locked in self-obsession, we may have no idea the damage we are
240 doing to the people around us, or even to our selves. As we recover, we may also not see the positive
241 effects we have on the world around us. We may still see ourselves as we were when we got here, not
242 recognizing that the principles we have been practicing really have become a part of who we are. We
243 trust our sponsors and friends to show us the changes we cannot see in ourselves.

244 When we hit our thumb with a hammer, our sense of proportion changes and it feels like our thumb is
245 enormous. We think about every movement in relation to that thumb and whether anything might
246 touch it. The same is true of our egos: when we are damaged in some way, or hurt, we feel larger than
247 life. Every conversation seems to be about us, everything people do around us seems to be with
248 deliberate regard to how it will affect us. Humility is about "right-sizing" ourselves in relation to our
249 world: finding where we fit, and how much space we actually do take up. Most of the time we find that
250 we are neither as big nor as small as we might think: we are important in the lives of the people around
251 us, but that doesn't mean that they are always thinking how their actions will affect us.

252 Self obsession is rooted in fear. One of the deepest, strangest fears many of us have is that we will lose
253 ourselves entirely. We are afraid to let go of what we know about ourselves in order to change, afraid to
254 let go of our sense of ourselves in the world in order to meditate, afraid to let go of our beliefs about our
255 place in the world for fear we will never fit anywhere. Letting ourselves go may be the first step for
256 many of us in finding ourselves—we don't have to hold on so tight. One of our members shares that
257 "when I turn it over but don't let go, I'm just upside-down." Letting go gives us the freedom to right
258 ourselves again, naturally and gradually, rather than forcing ourselves into the mold of how we think we
259 ought to be.

260 We struggle with self-obsession throughout our lives. This is not a defect we let go of once and are done
261 with. It comes up again and again. Often a feeling will send us into self-obsession: addiction is, after all, a
262 disease of ideas and attitudes. Meditation can be an important tool for us: when we practice
263 acceptance, we get a step back from our reactions and reflexes. This gives us the ability to step back and

264 see more of the picture than our own point of view. The Serenity Prayer is a tool we use again and again
265 in our recovery: considering what we can change and what we cannot becomes increasingly powerful.

266 Practicing compassion is one of the ways we get away from comparing ourselves to others. We start
267 seeing the deep connections and similarities between us. We let go of the false belief that we need
268 somehow to establish a ranking of better and worse, or more and less important, even like us or not like
269 us. Our traditions teach us that we are all equal to one another. This doesn't mean we are the same; our
270 differences are striking and sometimes very entertaining. Many of us share that part of what makes us
271 feel comfortable in our earliest meetings is that there are so many different kinds of people in a single
272 meeting, sharing and appearing friendly with one another. This is a sharp contrast with what we have
273 seen before, in or out of addiction.

274 Some days it seems really easy to identify with others and to feel welcomed and welcoming in a
275 meeting. Sometimes all we hear are the things that set us apart from the group. When we start noticing
276 the differences more than appreciating what we share in common, it's usually a red flag indicating we're
277 uncomfortable with ourselves. When we focus on the personalities of others, we may gossip, bicker and
278 contribute to disunity; when we focus on our own personality, we quickly become self-centered and
279 self-obsessed. We find that our personalities grow best; when we focus on living the will of our Higher
280 Power and carrying the message, our personalities grow and flourish all on their own. The Tenth Step
281 offers us ample opportunity to tend to that development, nurturing the growth we want to encourage
282 and pruning back the wayward branches before they grow out of control.

283 ***Connection to others...***

284 Those of us who have felt like "the only" in a meeting—the only one of our race, or our religion, or of
285 our sexuality, for starters—find that what sometimes feels like alienation or loneliness can give way to a
286 larger sense of connection. We learn to take pride in who we are whether or not we seem to "match"
287 the people around us; we learn to identify with people on other levels, where before we might not have
288 tried; and many of us "keep an eye on the door," paying special attention to newcomers who seem like
289 they may feel like "the only." In many local fellowships, it's taken one or two members to stick around
290 through that isolation to create a community that is large and thriving. One or two very young addicts in
291 a meeting make that meeting feel safe for the next kid who walks in, and so on. We learn that what once
292 felt like a reason to identify out is actually one more reason why it's important that we're here: we are
293 each uniquely qualified to carry the message to the addict who sees himself in us. And we never know
294 what it will be that makes the next newcomer feel connected with us; we might think it's our shared
295 culture, when really it was our dry wit, or the way we talked about our sponsor.

296 This doesn't make the facts about who we are or where we come from less important. It does make
297 them less alienating: when we find a sense of connection based on our shared disease and shared
298 recovery, the ways in which we differ from each other become enriching rather than limiting. As our
299 circle grows in NA, we meet more people, attend conventions out of town, connect with other members
300 in service or online, and we find people who share our experience. But more surprisingly, we find people
301 who share our feelings – and even our sense of connection and disconnection – where we might never

302 have thought to look for them. When we share honestly what our experience feels like, rather than just
303 describing what it looks like, we find that our experiences make us different but our hearts make us all
304 of a kind.

305 The easy thing to say here is the bottom line: that these things that separate us in the outside world
306 don't matter here in NA, that the disease does not discriminate and neither do we. In principle that's
307 true, though in practice we struggle sometimes. Some patterns of prejudice and discrimination are so
308 deeply woven into the fabric of our lives that we don't even notice them. For some of us who've had a
309 lifetime of experience dealing with oppression or discrimination, we're so ready to experience it that we
310 see it even where it doesn't exist. For some of us, "hearing our story" or identifying in is all about finding
311 someone who shares our background or beliefs, and not finding that right away can be frustrating or
312 frightening. "I can see it works," some of us have said, "but not for someone like me." When other
313 members tell us that our need for that companionship is overstated, we don't feel welcomed—we feel
314 even more invisible. Many of us have found that despite our initial discomfort, we do thrive in a more
315 diverse fellowship. We notice at first that we need addicts who share and understand our sexuality, for
316 example, or our heritage; later we find that we need even more to have members around us who really
317 understand us, no matter what we share. We may be surprised at the members whose stories we relate
318 to, or who we feel comfortable talking with.

319 We reconcile the selves we have become with our identity as recovering addicts. We come to see
320 ourselves not as we were but as we are becoming. We live with the consequences of our changing, and
321 NA helps us do that. Tradition Seven tells us that everything has a price, regardless of intent, and we find
322 the profound truth in that as we move forward in our lives and our recovery. Every choice we make,
323 good and bad, means there were options we left behind; we can get lost in infinite webs of "what if?" as
324 we start thinking through our lives. The Fourth Step warns us about getting caught in the "binge of
325 emotional sorrow" that can result from thinking too hard about that. We make ourselves by our choices.
326 The decision to have a family means leaving behind the independence we knew before; the decision not
327 to have a family means letting go of that version of connection. And so on.

328 There is no returning to center—there is just a new center, and another new center, and another. Each
329 time we find ourselves feeling like we're "right where we're supposed to be," we are in a new spot from
330 the last time we felt that way. It's important to remember we can keep moving and be okay. Many of us
331 are frightened to change, once we've gotten reasonably comfortable with ourselves and our lives,
332 because this comfort is better than anything we've known before. We want to be aware that settling for
333 the middle can keep us from the top. . Being willing to fall forward means that we can find the next right
334 thing to do, even if it's not the ultimate answer to all of our questions.

335 For people who've been through so much, we can be surprisingly sensitive. We feel deeply and
336 experience our emotions at great extremes. We dive into life face first or hide under the covers, afraid
337 to move. And we get stuck in patterns so quickly. Vigilance is always necessary in our recovery to keep
338 old patterns from resurfacing. Our thinking is a fine example: when we're thinking positively, living just
339 for today, we find that we have courage we never expected, that we can go forward into our lives with
340 joy and excitement and great hope for what is possible. But when our thinking sours, we find ourselves

341 trapped again almost before we know what happened. Something needs to break the circuit of our
342 negative thinking. It may be an action we take, like meditation or going to a meeting; or it may be an
343 action someone else takes. Our friends and sponsors come to know us well enough to recognize when
344 we're off course, and help us to make the shift. Often, after the fact, we recognize that our negative
345 thinking had cascaded. Perhaps we started with allowing a resentment to fester, and found gradually
346 that we were less honest. Withholding the truth gave way to lying, and then sharing got harder, and so
347 forth—until we found ourselves dealing with the consequences of a whole lot of bad behavior. Addiction
348 and recovery are both progressive. We find that very rarely are we standing still: we are almost always
349 either getting better or getting sicker.

350 Although our destinations may be different, there are things that make our journeys very similar: we
351 travel through many different ways of being before we find ourselves comfortable; we move forward by
352 practicing spiritual principles; we propel ourselves by using the tools we all share; when we are derailed,
353 we end up in much the same place. When we are moving forward by spiritual principles, we go very
354 different places in our lives; when we fall back into relapse, we end up in a common hole. And perhaps
355 that is the thing we share most of all: not where we are going but where we come from, and how we
356 move forward.