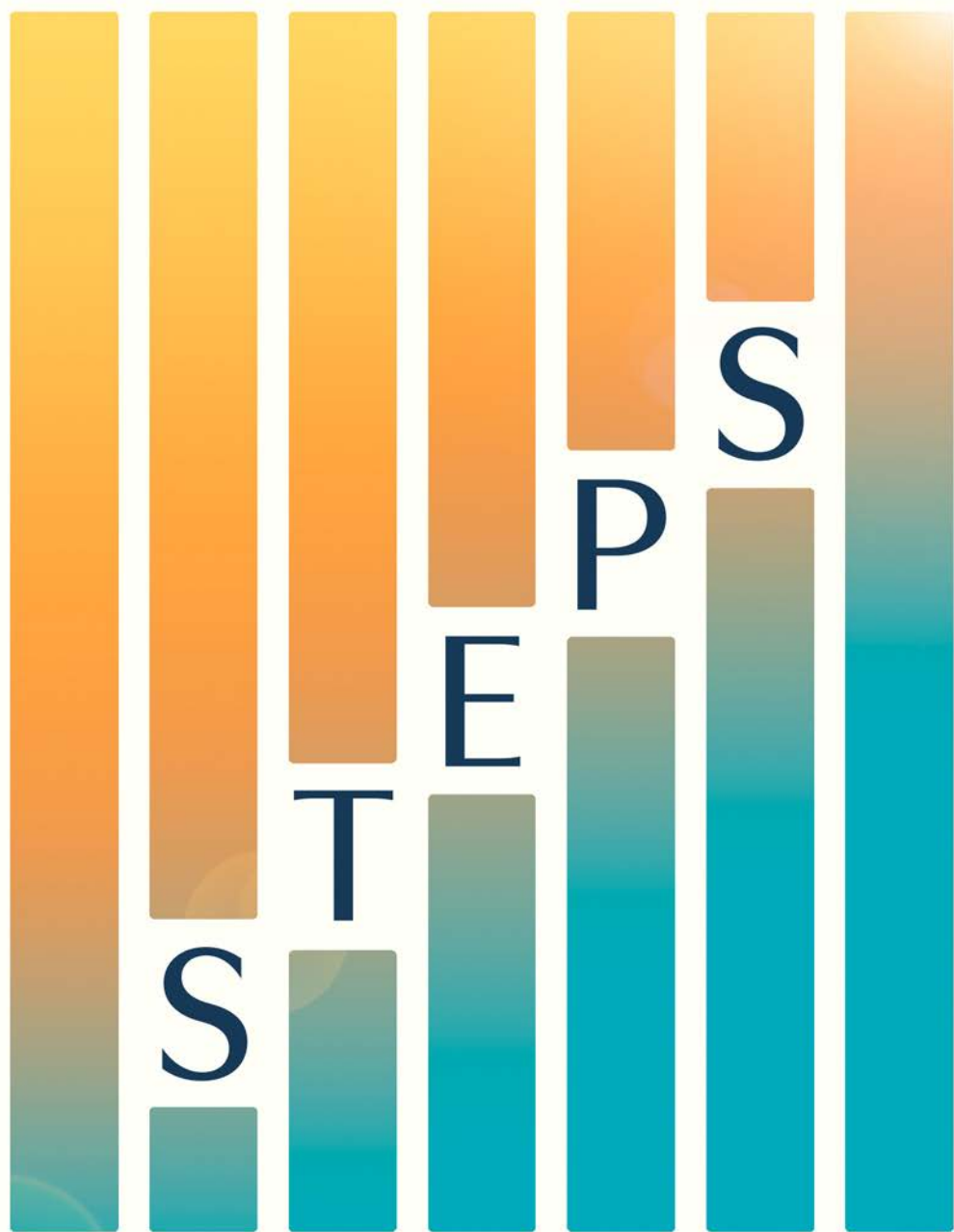


A guide to transforming your life when willpower isn't enough



JOHN ORTBERG

FOREWORD BY JOHN MARK COMER

John Ortberg has a unique voice: a combination of pastor, storyteller, well-read author, and dispenser of practical wisdom. This book adds a new sound, the raw confession of a fellow pilgrim who speaks from weakness and pain about the most difficult—and most essential—lessons of all.

PHILIP YANCEY

Author of *Where the Light Fell*

John Ortberg is one of the best storytellers I know. How does he do it? He lives his life in a way that is worth telling stories about. This book will take you on a roller-coaster ride from the lowest of lows to the highest of highs. Somewhere along the way, it will set you free!

MARK BATTERSON

New York Times bestselling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor of National Community Church

Love the Twelve Steps? You'll *love* this book! Not familiar with the Twelve Steps? You'll *love* this book! Birthed out of Ortberg's own pain, this is an inspiring, encouraging, and powerful guide to healing and hope!

ADAM HAMILTON

Senior pastor of Church of the Resurrection and author of *Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith*

All of us experience pain and brokenness in our lives. If we deny this, we are either lying to ourselves or brain dead. Does that pain bring us closer to God or further from him? For most Christians, there is no single answer to that question as we experience ups and downs in our relationship with him. Indeed, we all struggle with various bad habits (the nice name for addictions), which we use to distract us from our problems. John Ortberg, one of the most insightful people I know, not only recognizes this, but has also thought long and hard about how we can move away from our harmful practices of self-soothing into the very presence of God. All of us need this book. Thank you, John, for guiding us toward a more honest understanding of ourselves and a deeper relationship with God.

TREMPER LONGMAN III, PhD

Distinguished scholar and professor emeritus of biblical studies at Westmont College

This book by John Ortberg provides a road map to a way of life that will lead to meaningful self-improvement for anyone who is lucky enough to read. While we may not consider ourselves addicts, we are all guilty of having attachments to a variety of things and ideas that get in the way of us becoming our best selves. The line between an attachment and an addiction is a fine one, and John helps us draw it. . . . This book will help you take an inventory of

yourself and understand, for perhaps the first time, who you really are. I found it very challenging but enlightening. Only by gaining an understanding of our true selves can we begin the journey of self-improvement or the “recovery” of the person God created us to be. Thank you, John, for providing a wonderful road map and doing it in your lighthearted yet heartfelt manner. I expect to return to this book over and over again.

RON JOHNSON

Executive leader at Apple, Target, JCPenney, and Enjoy Technology

We live in a culture that tells us that if we just do more and try harder that we can self-help our way out of everything and into anything. Most are left feeling exhausted or stuck. John Ortberg delivers timely, much-needed resources to give us the steps we need to find a way forward. Combining rich scriptural insights with the framework of the Twelve Steps of AA, readers will discover grounded, practical tactics to find freedom, not based on self-actualization but on the Jesus realization that you can live the joyful, connected life you were created for.

MARGARET FEINBERG

Author of *More Power to You*

In *Steps*, John brings deep vulnerability, insight, and humor in unpacking the very practical wisdom of the Twelve Steps. For all of us who are members of the Fellowship of the Withered Hand, this is a call and path to a deeper and more joyful journey with God and those we love.

JONATHAN T. M. RECKFORD

CEO of Habitat for Humanity International

With psychological and theological depth and a sprinkling of classic Ortberg humor, *Steps* unearths treasures of insights into this biblical spiritual growth path that every follower of Jesus (and every person aiming to be their best self) should learn to practice, simply because you will actually become more like Jesus. I have personally worked the steps for the past two decades after realizing I have an addiction—to myself, my will, my ways being done—and working the steps brought a freedom, peace, and joy I had read about and taught about as a pastor, but never really experienced. Ortberg makes the steps accessible, bringing new angles and insights along with practical exercises that will make this book a classic for spiritual growth. Do the work—you’ll be glad you did!

JOHN BURKE

New York Times bestselling author of *Imagine Heaven* and *Soul Revolution*

John Ortberg's brilliant, honest, and piercing exploration of the Twelve Steps may be exactly what we Christians need to revitalize our faith. It's clear that the church is at a turning point. This book points us in a very hopeful direction.

CAREY NIEUWHOF

Bestselling author of *At Your Best*, podcaster, and founder of The Art of Leadership Academy

Many of us who spend our days thinking deeply about spiritual transformation know instinctively that there is a powerful spiritual dynamic to the Twelve Steps and have longed for a resource that would make this apparent and accessible. That book is finally here, and I could not be more grateful! John's work here is inviting and challenging, brutally honest and relentlessly hopeful, deceptively simple and yet appropriately nuanced for the complexity of the human situation. Reading it left me feeling more hopeful about the possibility of real transformation than I have felt in a long time!

RUTH HALEY BARTON

Founder of the Transforming Center and author of *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*

Those of us in faith communities could learn a lot from people in Alcoholics Anonymous. Their embrace of brokenness as a pathway to peace and empowerment, especially in the context of tragedy, so accurately resembles the powerful paradox of spirituality that was always the intent of our faith journeys. In *Steps*, John Ortberg beautifully lays out a path before us, modeling these lessons courageously by sharing his own vulnerabilities along the way.

JOSEPH LEE, MD

So genuine, so deep, so true—*Steps* may be John Ortberg's biggest gift to broken people who have come to realize that only God can mend a broken life.

GARY HAMEL

Visiting professor at London Business School

I am grateful for John's ministry in ECO—the denomination I serve as leader—and for our walking together these past few years. I believe the wisdom and guidance that *Steps* offers can change your life.

REV. DR. DANA ALLIN

Synod executive of ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

STEPS

A guide to transforming your life when willpower isn't enough



JOHN ORTBERG

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Steps: A Transforming Guide for When You Want to Change Your Life and It's Going to Take More than Your Own Willpower

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To Nancy. Fiercely.

And to the Fellowship of the Withered Hand.

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FOREWORD

Take a deep breath . . .

You stand on a threshold.

Before you is one of the best books I have *ever* read. A book laden with the kind of wisdom that cannot be learned by sitting through a university lecture or hearing a brilliant sermon or, for that matter, by reading a book. It's the kind that only comes through the experience of pain.

They say some things we never get over; we get *through*.

John has been through a lot, and he has come through, with more grace, humility, wisdom, and serenity than you could possibly imagine. It's fitting that John quotes the Greek poet Aeschylus: "Pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God above."

Wisdom *has* come to John, and now he is graciously offering it to *us*.

So take your time with this book. Let your soul metabolize it, which may take a while. You can "read" this book in a few hours; I did. But by about chapter 3, I realized I was going to have to come back and work through this book again, slowly, with a few close friends. There's just too much goodness to absorb with your mind alone. Or by *yourself* alone. Besides, it seems only fitting that a book about the Christian spirituality behind Alcoholics Anonymous should be read in community. As John writes, "We generally sin alone, but we heal together." Or as they say in the recovery community, "*I* get drunk; *we* stay sober."

But let me follow John's lead (following AA's lead) and cut to the chase: This book will not "fix" you. It doesn't offer a quick, easy formula for change,

a clever acronym for spiritual bypassing, or the false promises of quasi-therapeutic self-help.

So few writers—outside and, tragically, *inside* the church—are honest; so few tell you the *truth*. John does: “Spirituality is not a skill to be mastered but a life to be lived.”

We never arrive; we’re never fixed. We may be “healed,” but health is a function of the immune system, and we’re always vulnerable, always contingent, always one microscopic particle away from disaster.

No, this book will not offer you false promises or easy solutions.

It will offer you something *much* better—hope. Hope that there is a program, a path, what Jesus’ earliest followers called the Way. And *if* you follow it, it *will* lead you to life.

As the AA saying goes, “Keep coming back. It works—*if* you work it.”

But that’s no small *if*.

So read this book, slowly. Read it with others. Read it to stay sober. Read it to *get* sober. Read it to grow wise. Read it to bear the crushing weight of your pain. Read it to keep going when hope is a dim light on the horizon. Read it because spirituality in the Way of Jesus isn’t a fix; it’s “a life to be lived.”

John Mark Comer
Founder of Practicing the Way and
author of The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry

Introduction

I can't fix my family.

I can't keep my job.

I can't salvage my reputation.

I can't protect those I love.

I can't stand the pain.

I can't stop drinking. Can't stop binge-eating, binge-watching, binge-spending, binge-working. Can't stop looking at porn.

I can't find a spouse. Can't stay married. Can't forgive my ex. Can't make a friend, manage my temper, save money, be grateful.

I can't get my skin/teeth/hair/thighs to look right. I can't get no satisfaction.

Can't cure my cancer through positive thinking.

Can't please my parents.

Can't have kids.

Can't get the kids to leave.

Can't get my child to come home.

Can't open up. Can't shut up.

Can't sleep. Can't stop worrying.

Can't quit comparing. Can't feel joy.

Can't see my abs. Can't get enough s, s, s.

I can't understand what I do, for I have the desire to do good but cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but instead I do the evil I do not want to do.

I can't bear criticism. Can't stop criticizing. Can't believe. Can't walk away. Can't make myself want to live. Can't fix the world. Can't fix myself.

I can't *run the show*.

THE PROBLEM: I CAN'T . . .

In grad school, although I was studying to become a clinical psychologist, I started working at a Baptist church. I discovered then that I loved to preach . . . until one weekend when the sermon wasn't going well and I started to feel anxious and dizzy, and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the platform, looking into the concerned faces of the congregation. I had fainted in the middle of my own sermon. What made it worse was this was not a Pentecostal church where you get credit for that sort of thing. These were Baptists, and they expected preachers to stay on their feet.

I was in the middle of finals, about to get married, and preparing to travel overseas for a year. I thought perhaps this was a one-time occurrence due to all the stress in my life. I went to get help from the dean of my program, Arch Hart, a psychologist who wrote books on stress management.

But a year later, the very next time I got up to preach, I fainted again. I also fainted a third time in a stressful private conversation.

I went back to Arch. "This is not good," I said. "I can't preach if I faint regularly. It makes people nervous. The more scared of fainting I am, the worse my preaching gets, and the worse my preaching gets, the more scared I am. Give me more stress reduction exercises. I want a guarantee this won't happen again. I will try harder not to faint."

"Not a good plan," he said. It turns out that if you have a fainting problem, trying really hard not to faint actually makes you more likely to faint.

He went on. "Here's an idea. Next time you preach, just set a chair out on the platform. Then, when you're about to faint, sit down. It's much harder to faint when you're sitting down. Plus, you don't have so far to fall."

"But it would be humiliating," I said. "People keep telling me to just trust God, to have more faith. This would be a public reminder of my weakness."

"Yes."

So in my early days of preaching, I preached standing next to an empty chair. And when things didn't go well, I would sit down.

Forty years later, I wonder now if fainting was perhaps a divine invitation to recognize that preaching, like life, is not something that can be mastered. It was

only the beginning of the battle to resist acknowledging my weakness, which continues to this day. My final church job many decades later ended in a much darker experience of weakness and defeat and humiliation than the first one. And there was no chair big enough to hold me up that time.

Human agency is a wonderful gift. We are not passive victims in life. We are called to courage and initiative. And yet . . .

I have experienced powerlessness in the areas of life that are most important to me. I have experienced deeply painful failure as a parent. I have experienced deeply painful failure in my calling as a pastor. This has left brokenness around me and within me that I cannot solve and cannot fix.

This is my reality. My life must incorporate this painful, broken weakness if it is to be a life at all.

Paradoxically, the true spiritual journey depends on our sincere, desperate recognition that we are not in control. So God will send us people, places, or things we cannot control. Here are three you might consider for a moment: birth, death, and everything in between.

Our daughter Laura first told me about her pregnancy on a trip to Wyoming by putting a surprise pair of baby cowboy boots in a box where I thought a cake was going to be. We gave the little unborn baby a nickname and dreamed dreams.

And then one day she called to tell us that little baby had not made it.

And then it happened again with another little baby.

And then a third.

And by the fourth time, there were no more nicknames or dreams. This time the pregnancy stuck, but with it came daily, violent nausea, and worse: clinical levels of anxiety that would not go away. On many days I would sit with her, trying to relieve her anxiety for a few moments by what I'd learned in grad school. It was like telling the tide to go back out. Her pale, pinched face and furrowed brow, her nightmares of giving birth to a stillborn baby, her battles against retching and panic attacks and despair seemed almost more painful than the miscarriages. The baby survived a delivery that was even worse than the pregnancy. The baby and Laura are both fine now. They are daily prompts to gratitude. They are also daily reminders that I cannot control what is most precious to me.

At the same time that Laura was pregnant, my dad was diagnosed with a cavernoma—a tumor-like growth located so precariously in his brain stem it could not even be biopsied.

My dad had always loved athletics. He put a tennis racquet in my crib to let

me know what to expect. But now his body began to betray him. His speech grew garbled. One side of his face froze. He needed a cane.

Dad had a lifelong dream to go to the Galápagos, so I took him that November. We saw the blue-footed boobies and equatorial penguins and dive-bombing frigates, and to his great delight, on the last day we got a Jurassic Park–like private viewing of twenty giant tortoises in a pond. It was the last month my dad could have handled such a trip.

Watching Dad’s tortured, slow climb from the boat down a ladder into the rubber Zodiacs used to tour the islands was excruciating. At night, when we sat around the dinner table with other passengers, they usually could not understand what my dad was trying to say. Food would drool out of the paralyzed side of his mouth. But he didn’t care. He loved it.

I watched as the powers my grandchild began to acquire were, one by one, lost by my father, the contrast dizzying. His ability to walk. His speech, which came only with great difficulty. He had to go on a feeding tube, then a catheter, and eventually diapers, followed by bed sores and shingles, and finally he could not even sit up. We are born powerless, and we die powerless.

When we were on the boat in the Galápagos and I was embarrassed for my dad’s awkward moments, a number of passengers said to me, “Your dad is an inspiration to me. I can’t believe his courage. I hope I can be like that.” One day near the end of his life he gave gifts to two different people that, because of his condition, had a profound impact on them. “Even when I’m dying, I can be flourishing,” he told me. But he still died.

THE SOLUTION: HE CAN . . .

God can create the world. Make the sun rise. Answer prayer. Move mountains.

He can provide wisdom. Offer hope. Restore moral sanity.

He can guide the confused. Comfort the lonely. Liberate the oppressed. Embrace the stigmatized. Topple rulers. Bless the humble.

Part seas. Calm storms. Invent beetles.

Bring justice. Forgive guilt. Redeem the past. Secure the future.

Make life. Give breath. Feed sparrows. Clothe lilies. Know everything. Be everywhere. Love everybody. Give the knowledge of his will and the power to carry it out.

He can *run the show*.

None of these statements are glib promises that we can have the circumstances we want if we just believe enough. They are Reality 101: There is a God. It is not me.

This is not a book about how you can triumph over your problems. This is a book about a way of life to follow when you can't.

Kate Bowler is a brilliant scholar and writer who was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer as a young wife and mom, kept alive six months at a time through immunotherapy. She writes of how she fought to be in control from childhood and doesn't know how to stop:

Control is a drug, and we are all hooked. . . . When I was little, my dad would read stories from Greek mythology, and I loved one most of all—that prideful King Sisyphus, who was doomed to roll a boulder up an impossibly steep hill only to have it roll down again. He would discover for all eternity that not every burden can be shouldered. *Yes, I would think, learning nothing. But at least he kept trying.*¹

This is not a book about making it to the top. It's about the importance of hitting bottom, of handing the boulder over to someone else.

When we try to run the show, we only make things worse. We will need help that comes from beyond ourselves. There is another ancient story about another King who rolled a stone away—only when he rolled it, it stayed rolled.

Powerlessness and pain will be helpful in this way of life, because although it is not complicated, it is demanding and humiliating, and it requires a willing heart. You don't have to be desperate, but it helps. A failure in business. Or neglected or abused at the hand of a parent. Betrayed. Facing a broken marriage. Cancer. Loneliness. Addiction. Depression.

Or you may be inspired to this way of life by a compelling vision that could never be achieved under your own power: life as a courageous adventure in a noble cause with a generous spirit in a sacred Presence—which on your own eludes you.

Either of these is a good place to start. If you don't feel much faith, it's okay. Desperation will do until faith comes along. If you don't feel much desperation, just keep living. Desperation will be provided. Even Sisyphus eventually gets sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Spiritual life always starts with a recognition of powerlessness. Jesus said he didn't come for the healthy but for people who were sick.² The people who met him were a needy bunch—lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes and adulterers and pagans, the unclean and the impure and doubters and deniers. Religion, wealth, status, health, and beauty often get in the way because they diminish our sense of desperation.

Where in our day can we find a community of people authentically desperate for spiritual help?

I can think of one.

THE DECISION: I THINK I'LL LET HIM . . .

“Not my will, but yours be done.”

“Your kingdom come, your will be done.”

Try Softer.

Do the Next Right Thing.

“Half-measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon.”³

“There is a God. It is not me.”

I think I'll let him *run the show*.

I think I'll let him . . .

The instruction “let go and let God” is especially associated with the recovery group Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Writer Philip Yancey noted that when he first attended an AA meeting in solidarity with a friend, he was overwhelmed by finding what felt like a New Testament church. Millionaires and celebrities mixed freely with unemployed dropouts and needle-marked gang members. Radical honesty, welcome, and dependency seemed to rule the day.

Over the years, this observation has been made by too many Christian writers and preachers to count.⁴ One book even has this question as a title: *Why Can't the Church Be More like an AA Meeting?* The short answer is that it can, as long as the people who attend it are willing to be more like alcoholics. Too desperate to hide, too humbled to judge; too weak to solo, too needy to skip.

An early letter from cofounder Bill W. to AA members described how people recovering from addiction can never “forget that *only through suffering* did they find enough humility to enter the portals of that New World. How privileged we are to understand so well the divine paradox that strength rises from weakness,

that humiliation goes before resurrection: that pain is not only the price but the very touchstone of spiritual rebirth.”⁵

This rebirth into sobriety and usefulness came through following spiritual practices eventually known as the Twelve Steps: admitting powerlessness, surrendering the will, ruthless self-examination and confession, making amends, living a life of spiritual dependence and service. Mostly they came from a fellowship called the Oxford Group that was trying to rediscover a way to follow Jesus in contemporary life. When Bill W. wrote them in a burst of inspiration, his first thought was that they mirrored the number of Jesus’ disciples.

AA got the Twelve Steps from the church. And now the church needs them back. Actually, all humanity needs them.

Dallas Willard once wrote,

It is one of the all-time greatest ironies of human history that the founding insights and practices of the most successful “recovery” program ever known—insights and practices almost 100 percent borrowed from bright spots in the Christian movement, if not outright gifts of God—are not routinely taught and practiced by churches. What possible justification or explanation could there be for this fact?⁶

Hence this book. Its purpose is to help you practice the Twelve Steps as a program for life. It is written for anyone hungry for more, whether you have an identified addiction or not. It is not a “recovery” book. It’s written to help *anyone* enter into an actionable, non-legalistic, spiritual way of life that—oh, by the way—has had the empirically verified side effect of freeing millions of people from addictions when random “spirituality” could not.

It’s intended to be a guide to action so that you can practice these steps. Wise people say the Twelve Steps are numbered because they’re meant to be taken in order. It’s only when we see our powerlessness that we’re ready to surrender to God. It’s only after we’ve taken inventory that we can confess to another or make amends to those we’ve hurt. This is not a smorgasbord. No substitutions, no skipping around, no cutting in line. If we find ourselves not liking a step, there’s a good chance it’s because we really need it. So we humble ourselves. One step at a time.

I didn’t write this book because I’m an expert. I wrote it because I’m desperate. When I first began attending twelve-step groups, I didn’t think I had any addictions. Now I think their name is Legion.

When I first began to study the Twelve Steps years ago, a longtime AA-er told me that it would not be long before I would be jealous that I was not an alcoholic. He was right. The low-level motivation of people who lack an identified addiction is why a priest and longtime friend of AA named Father Dowling wrote an article—the last before he died—called “A.A. Steps for the Underprivileged Non-A.A.”⁷

Harvard historian Ernest Kurtz wrote the definitive history of AA. He called his book *Not-God* because the basic problem addicted people have is that they think they’re God.⁸

This would also be the basic problem non-addicted people have, if there were such a thing. The truth is that we are all overly attached to something—starting with our egos—that we are powerless to control. We all need to be freed. Apparently the word *attachment* itself comes from a French word for holding something fast with nails or stakes,⁹ like the hands of a condemned man being nailed to a cross. Everybody gets crucified by something.¹⁰

One of many mottoes in AA is “Keep it simple,” some of the last words spoken by one cofounder to the other. The Twelve Steps are sometimes described as a simple program for complicated people. In light of that, this book is organized into short chapters that describe different facets for each step—the first three chapters for Step 1, the next three for Step 2, and so on. At the start of each step I’ve also included a prayer to use as you read that step to prepare you to put it into practice. My hope is for this to be a handbook that will help you do the steps rather than just read about them. You may well want to find a friend to talk with about this journey.

GOING DOWNSTAIRS

Traditionally, twelve-step groups meet in places like church basements rather than sanctuaries, unadorned rooms with metal folding chairs and weak coffee and stale cookies. The humble setting is a reminder that this is a place to leave grandiosity behind. The liturgy is always the same. If I say, “My name is John, and I’m an alcoholic,” I know the group will accept me with “Hi, John.”

Upstairs people usually seem to have their lives together, while downstairs people are trying not to fall apart. But paradoxically, desperate and needy weakness is embraced and becomes the place of great power. That’s why folks in AA sometimes say that when you come to church, you can go upstairs and hear about miracles, or come downstairs and see them.

Let’s go downstairs.

STEP 1

THE PROBLEM: I CAN'T

STEP 1:

We admitted we were powerless over our deepest problems—that our lives had become unmanageable.

God, direct my thinking today so that it be divorced of self-pity, dishonesty, self-will, self-seeking, and fear. God, inspire my thinking, decisions, and intuitions. Help me to relax and take it easy. Free me from doubt and indecision. Guide me through this day, and show me my next step. God, give me what I need to take care of any problems. I ask all these things that I may be of maximum service to you and my fellow human beings.

In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.¹

STEP 1A

Join the Fellowship of the Withered Hand

Eventually, if you are very fortunate, you will be invited into the Fellowship of the Withered Hand.

I was first introduced to it thirty-five years ago. Another minister named Paul and I had been invited to speak for two days to a small group of pastors in Ethiopia. Churches met underground in those days. Ethiopia was ruled by a genocidal Marxist dictator named Colonel Mengistu, under whom hundreds of thousands died, including the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Church leaders were often imprisoned. They referred to prison as “The University” because that’s where their leaders often experienced the most growth and learning.

So those two days had an intensity unfamiliar to me. Paul and I took turns speaking for ninety minutes at a time from early morning until bedtime in a cramped, crowded, sweaty room.

Paul spoke in the final session, using a story told three times in the New Testament about a man with a withered hand.¹ His primary point was the man’s weakness and inadequacy.

We are not told whether the man was born this way or suffered some injury. One ancient commentary says he was a mason and so could not practice his trade. In Luke’s version we’re told it was his *right* hand that was shriveled—the more important hand, the hand that made work and agency possible. Maybe he was a beggar. Maybe no woman would marry him.

He attended synagogue, so he was a person of faith. He knew the stories in Scripture of healing, including one about a shriveled hand restored.² Why not him? He had surely prayed for this. But he had received no healing.

Most of the people who receive healing in the New Testament come to Jesus and ask: a group of ten lepers, a man with an epileptic son, blind Bartimaeus who shouted so loudly people tried to shut him up.

The man with the withered hand did not ask. We don't know why. Maybe he was being polite. Maybe he'd given up. My wife says her favorite answers to prayer are for the prayers she forgot to pray.

Disability in the ancient world—as in ours—carried a stigma. Perhaps God was punishing him. Maybe the man hid his hand in his robe, hoping no one would notice.

But Jesus did. And he spoke: “Get up and stand in front of everyone.” Not just “get up,” or even “get up and stand.” But “Get up and stand *in front of everyone*.” Expose your shame. Reveal your weakness.

The man sat for a moment, with his lifeless hand twisted inside his sleeve. And then this: “So he got up and stood there.”

We don't know how long. Everyone was staring at his hand. Worse yet, the people he most wanted not to be there were there—able-bodied religious people with strong right hands they used to greet each other and to do work and to shake their healthy index fingers at the sinners and the shamed and at rabbis who might heal someone on the Sabbath. This was the last place he would want to reveal his withered hand.

And Jesus knew this. He knew how religion could wither people's hearts. He knew how it could make them exclusive, superior, unloving rule-followers. Mark tells us that he “looked around at them in anger.”

Then Jesus spoke a second time. Now things got worse: “Stretch out your hand.”

Jesus drew attention to the man's disability, to that part of which he was most ashamed. A child could obey this command, but not him. He'd tried a million times. It must have been one of the worst moments of his life.

Until it wasn't.

Over and over in that hot, dark, crowded room in Ethiopia, Paul kept reminding us that Jesus asked the man to do the very thing the man could not do: “Stretch out your hand.”

And so it is with us, Paul said. What God asks us to do—what we know we *should* do—is precisely what we are unable to do.

Then something happened. These leaders began to do what the man in the story did. They revealed their weakness. They cried out for help. They got up from their chairs and began to confess. They spoke of their fears of the government

and of being arrested. They spoke of their jealousies of other people's ministries or families or appearance or homes. They lamented deep inadequacy. They spoke of their bickering little churches.

And somehow power was there. Relationships were healed. Spirits were renewed. Hope was rekindled.

But it did not come through giftedness or training or inspiration. It came in powerlessness. It came when people felt a need so desperate, they had nothing to lose and nothing to hide. It came with the wrenching confession of ugliness, fear, and shame.

It came through the Fellowship of the Withered Hand.

The Fellowship of the Withered Hand is the name we might use for a community of people whose pain and brokenness are no longer hidden and who draw unexpected strength from God and others precisely in the free and grace-filled disclosure of their weakness. It is a paradoxical place where the confessions you think would kill you instead bring you to life, where the spiritual commitments you think will bind you instead bring freedom, and where the story of your helplessness brings you a new power to help others.

It is also a place where shame loses its power because stigmatized persons are particularly welcome. Sociologist Erving Goffman wrote in his classic study *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* that the term *stigma* originated with the ancient Greeks, roughly during Jesus' time. Initially a "stigma" was a mark branded on the body of a disgraced individual—a criminal or a slave. The term came to refer to any characteristic that makes its bearer unwanted, such as those related to physical disability or mental illness or sexuality or ethnicity.³

In Jesus' day, religious leaders viewed the exclusion of stigmatized people as a sign of holiness. But Jesus *especially* associated with people in each of those stigmatized categories. In fact, Jesus eventually *personified* each of the stigmatized categories Goffman lists.⁴ Not only that, he bore the literal stigma of crucifixion in the palms of his nail-pierced hands. Not only *that*, his resurrected body continues to carry those marks—he invited Thomas to see them and touch them.⁵ His stigma has become his glory.

In fact, the word is used once in the New Testament, when Paul—who had also been arrested and beaten and branded a criminal—says, "I bear on my body the marks (*stigmata*) of Jesus."⁶

And so began this strange community of the disgraced and disappointed

and powerless, the Fellowship of the Withered Hand, where the worst stigma the ancient world could inflict became a medal of honor. In this Fellowship, our weaknesses somehow become more useful than our strengths.

When Paul and I went to Ethiopia, we had been asked to smuggle in fifty study Bibles for church leaders. Then I was handed an extra on the way to the airport, so we actually brought in fifty-one. It didn't occur to me to pray about the smuggling (this was not covered in my seminary classes) until I'd landed. I was afraid of being arrested and had no idea what to do.

One Bible-filled suitcase was discovered and confiscated at the airport. The customs official said it could be released in exchange for a bribe. I felt relief, then surprise at his asking price: that the official be allowed to keep one Bible for himself. So the original fifty Bibles got delivered; the extra one went to the customs official of a Marxist genocidal dictator.

Sometimes the best answers come to the prayers you forget to pray.

After our trip to Ethiopia, Paul and I gradually lost touch. But I never forgot his message or what happened that night among the Ethiopian pastors. Recently I was telling this story when a member of the audience stopped me. Paul had been his best friend, he told me. Paul had died in a fluke accident a few weeks earlier.

It made me wish I had been able to thank Paul for what I learned from him so long ago and has helped me so many years later. Indeed, I have learned much more about this Fellowship in the past few difficult years of my own life. Hearing about his death made me grieve for his family and church. It was another chapter of pain in a suffering world where there is so much I do not understand. We are not in control of anything, not even our own lives.

IDENTIFY YOUR “WITHERED HAND”

So the starting point is to name the place of powerlessness in your life. The good news is that's the one thing we have the power to do. It is sometimes said that the first step is the only one we have to do perfectly: “Admitted we were powerless.”

We can start with the easy stuff. We write down forces we *know* we're powerless over: Weather. Traffic. Airplane flights. Gravity. The economy. Hiccups. Death. Reality starts with the acceptance of our limitations. There is a God. We're not it.⁷

Then we move on to what is more personal.

For most of my life I believed, without ever reflecting on it much, that I could

mostly do what needs to be done. I can find and keep a good job. I can grow an organization. I can raise a family. I can be a good dad. And I've come to realize I can't. I have known deep pain and failure in each of these areas.

I can't heal those closest to me. I can't fix my heart. I can't control how people think of me. I can't make my fear go away. I can't make my sadness go away. I can't fix my shame or my envy or my anger. I can't stop my awful dread of what might happen in the future. I can't stem an anger that sometimes wants to kill. I can't keep from waking up at 3:00 a.m., staring at the ceiling.

I don't mean that I *used* to not be able to do those things, but now I'm strong and all is okay, and I will share with you the secret of how I did it. I mean that I *cannot* do it. *Now*. I live in that pain from one day to the next. I will never know a daily peace in my life apart from the pain that is a daily piece of my life.

I can't.

GET UP AND STAND THERE

Ironically, it's often hard for church people to admit brokenness. We want to be thought of as "spiritually mature," and we mistakenly think spiritual maturity is incompatible with admitting deep personal struggles. We have an image to maintain. For this reason, writer Stephen Haynes says that for Christians, Step 1 "has to be preceded by an even more fundamental admission that might be called Step 0: 'We admitted that, despite all appearances, we were not fine.'"⁸

So try that one right now, by yourself, honestly, as a prayer: *I admit that, despite all appearances, I am not fine.*

This is not merely an intellectual admission. It must be an emotional acceptance of powerlessness at the gut level.

Fortunately, God will allow something to come your way—whether it's a crisis, a conflict, or a person—that considerably slugs you in the stomach with the absolute certainty that you can't manage it on your own.

I am not fine.

■ ■ NEXT STEP

Identifying Where You Are Not Fine

Actor Russell Brand recommends starting with this question: "Do you have a problem? Is there some activity—drinking, eating, spending money, gambling,

watching porn, destructive relationships, promiscuity . . . [you] are struggling to stop?”⁹ We could easily add worrying, lying, hoarding, cheating, judging, gossiping, compulsive TikToking—*any* behavior that betrays your values—to Brand’s list.

Brand continues, “If the answer is no, well done, carry on, you should have plenty of time on your hands to help others less fortunate and generally serve the planet and its people.”¹⁰

If you’re not sure, stop. Take a deep breath. Release the tension in your face and shoulders and hands. What happens when you get still? Where do the troubled thoughts or anxious feelings turn?

Maybe it’s a divorce. Or a child who broke your heart. Or a boss you can’t please. Or a disease you can’t shake. Or a habit you can’t break. Or a loss you can’t redeem. Or a dream you can’t revive. Or anxiety you can’t overcome. Or hatred you can’t melt. Maybe you’re bored. Guilty. Afraid. Ashamed.

The first step is not to fix it or solve it or manage it or minimize it or claim victory over it. It’s to *name* it—write it down even.

But before you do, here’s one more instruction to raise the challenge (i.e., pain) level. Don’t write simply about an external situation or person, apart from your reactions. This is about *your* powerlessness. “My anxieties . . . My fears . . . My envy . . . My discontent . . . My drinking . . . My bitterness . . .”

This is your moment. Write it below if you want to. Stretch out your hand . . .

If you have done this, you have joined a new kind of community, where people who are needy and imperfect and deformed are particularly celebrated. My friend Mike says that in this fellowship, the worse your story, the warmer your welcome.

That’s not a normal motto. It’s not written over many offices or dating websites or even church doors, for that matter. It’s pretty much just for groups of losers like alcoholics and addicts and convicts and other friends of Jesus. Don’t lose hope—the desperation we feel over our helplessness is what motivates our willingness to keep going.¹¹

Summary:

- We can all join the Fellowship of the Withered Hand, a community of people whose pain and brokenness are no longer hidden and who draw unexpected strength from God and others in the free and grace-filled disclosure of their weakness.
- We often struggle to admit brokenness.
- The first step in joining the Fellowship of the Withered Hand is to name the place of powerlessness in your life.