



<http://digital-dharma.net/addiction/the-religion-and-spirituality-thing/>

Spirituality and the Twelve Steps

(2 parts)

Part 1 — Spirituality and the Twelve Steps

I keep getting asked about the spiritual part of 12-step programs, and how that relates to the “God as we understood him” part of the steps. ...

Many folks in recovery have a problem with God. Let’s face it: if you were inculcated with the concept of a fire and brimstone, punishing, parental kind of God, and you’ve got the background of the majority of alcoholics and addicts, you can’t really *afford* – emotionally speaking — to believe in God. It’s much easier to deny the possibility than to contemplate the fate that — you’ve been told — *has* to be awaiting someone who’s carried on the way many of us did.

In my case, I determined to my satisfaction many years ago that if a God or Goddess exists, in the sense of a *transcendent being*, there’s no way that I or any other human will ever begin to be able to comprehend their ideas, motivations, desires and/or needs (if any). The idea of a supreme being who is so insecure as to require *my* obeisance has always struck me as ludicrous. Instead, I operate on the assumption that any supernatural power who’s interested can surely divine my intentions. That being the case, I figure He/She/They/It will figure out pretty quickly that I’m trying to do the right thing as I genuinely see it, and take appropriate action — if so inclined.

I’m *agnostic*, in the genuine, original sense. “*Agnostic*” means “unknowing.” I freely admit that I don’t know, and therefore feel constrained to carry on in the best way I know how. But that’s not the only reason I try to do “the next right thing.” At some point it occurred to me that when I did so, my interpersonal relationships benefited, as well. That’s where the spirituality part comes in.

Human beings are social creatures. We have names for folks who aren’t sociable: hermit, cat lady, recluse, witch, and so on. Only if the person has good interpersonal skills when s/he does come in contact with others do we modify that opinion and allow them to be “eccentric” or a “wise woman” or whatever. We all instinctively know, without referring to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, that people who think they don’t need people are not the luckiest people in the world

But when we alcoholics and addicts immerse in the morass of our diseases, one of the first things

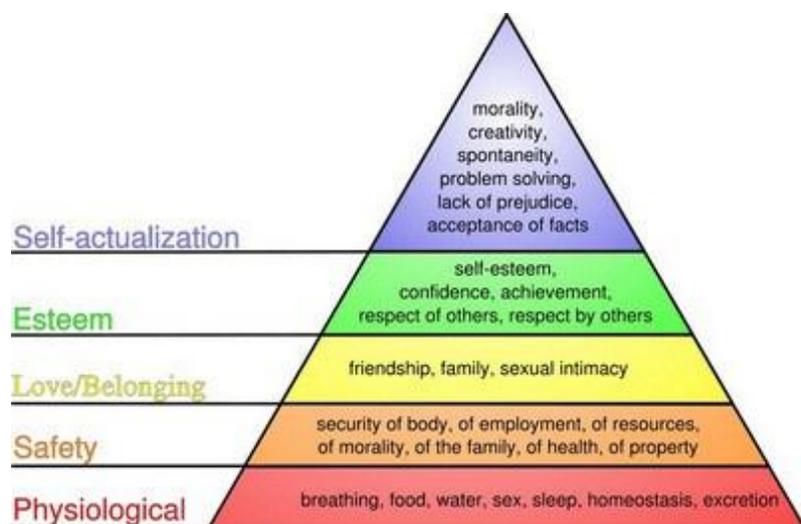


Figure 1 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

to go is relationships. We drive away, or withdraw from, people and focus more and more on the chaos of our lives. Often we mistreat those closest to us, and do what seems to be irreparable damage to their love for us (though “irreparable” is in fact rarely the case). Nonetheless, the years of placing chemicals foremost in our lives render us unable to relate to others in very many meaningful ways. Our *human spirit* becomes stifled — is forced to take a back seat — because we would otherwise have to confront the crushing loneliness that is the other spectre haunting our lives.

It is, in my opinion, this *human spirit* to which the program’s “spirituality” refers: the ability to open our spirits to the spirits of others, and begin to embrace the humanity that we have for so long rejected. Often this involves religious practice, but it need not. What is important is that we admit that we can’t recover without other people; that we need approval, affection, companionship, and that we need it in a way far more real than the superficial relationships we thought could fulfil us: the alcohol, the drugs, our drinking and using buddies, and those others who supported our addictions in various ways.

We need to establish new ties with new friends — with people who will support our decision to remain drug free, and who have the understanding to help us in that direction. Then we need to work at correcting the estrangement from families, employers, and the others who filled our lives before we replaced them with addiction. This isn’t easy, nor quick, in many cases. But it is essential. As the poet said, “No man is an island...”

It is that determination to open our human spirits to those of others, to once again embrace our humanity and become a part of, instead of a missing piece, which defines the spirituality we talk about in the various “anonymous” programs. It’s the essence of the Third Step: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him”....

No Higher Power has ever written on a wall with a fiery finger for me, nor spoken to me from the bushes (at least not when the *shrubbery* was lit), but *something* speaks to me when I meditate, and through the other people in my life. If we need to give it a name, God will do just fine.

Part 2 — The Religion and Spirituality Thing

The issue of religion arises at least once a month at any 12-step meeting that includes newcomers. It’s amazing how it causes confusion. Religion involves things like beliefs, dogma, ritual, prayer, salvation, an afterlife, and faith in a supernatural or metaphysical reality. Although our literature refers to a God held in common by many of us, the 12-step programs are not about religion. However, they are in their very essence programs of spirituality.

It seems to me that spirituality is about how my way of living relates to the human spirit—the thing that makes me human, not just another critter. *Whether or not I am a religious believer, I can aspire to a spiritual life, taking those aspects of the program that apply, and leaving the rest for those who feel them appropriate.* Here, for whatever it is worth, is my take on spiritual awakening, and the aspects of spirituality.

Tolerance, the disposition to allow freedom of choice or behaviour is, I think, the absolute foundation of spirituality (and of recovery). It is the basis of all reasonable systems of ethics, because it permits me freedom as long as I do not harm others. Tolerance does not mean that I agree with you, or even that I approve of you. It does mean that I recognize your right to follow your path, as long as it does not interfere with mine. It implies, “Do not do to others what you would not have done to you.” The flower of tolerance needs constant tending.

Patience goes hand in hand with tolerance. If I am to allow you to pursue your happiness—your bliss, as Joseph Campbell called it—then I must allow you the time and room to do so, as well. The old woman in the grocery line, fumbling in her change purse, becomes a person much like the one I will someday be, just trying to get through her day in the best way she can. To deny her the right to find the correct change simply because *I* want to save a few seconds—to glare, to raise eyebrows, to make comments to others—is to take away some of the shine (what little there may be of it) from her day. How selfish! The spiritual life is not a theory.

Forgiveness, a willingness to set aside the past, is a gift that I can give myself. It means recognizing that others can make mistakes, too. It means recognizing their worth to me, and being willing to make allowances—without being a doormat—because of what they may mean to me in the future. If this is not possible, it means putting the matter aside and going on with my life (one of the purposes of the 4th and 5th Steps). Are long-lived resentments worth the dissatisfaction they bring with them? I need to remember that the resentment that knots up my belly whenever I think of wrongs done in the past is my problem, and that it probably isn’t bothering the other person much — if at all.

Compassion is the logical outcome of tolerance and forgiveness. In being patient and forgiving, I need to look at my relationships with others in a new way. I need to see things as they may have been from their

points of view. Compassion, a humane understanding of others and the way they may be feeling (especially in the case of suffering), is not only inevitable when I recognize another's humanity, it is essential to healthy relationships based on recognition of mutual needs. It is another foundation of recovery programs. Compassion is not pity, it is understanding and a willingness to help to the extent of my ability.

Love means different things in different situations, but I like to think of it as an inevitable result of tolerance, forgiveness and compassion, or perhaps they are the results of love. In any case, a willingness to love and allow myself to be loved, with the trust and openness that are necessary for that to happen, are clearly essential traits of the human spirit. To feel and act otherwise stifles the spirit, at the same time that I am trying to set it free.

A sense of *Responsibility* has grown as a result of these steps, the understanding that my actions affect the lives of others, that theirs affect mine, and that we are all needed in order to create a world that will sustain us with the least pain. "When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA to be there—and for that, I am responsible." Over my years of sobriety there has come the realization that this principle extends far beyond the walls of the rooms, and beyond AA itself. We "try to...practice [it] in all our affairs."

Harmony, too, is a natural result of spiritual growth. This is the feeling that I am moving through the world with as little friction as possible. A sense of harmony allows for the bumps and scrapes, as well as the smooth stretches. As a grown-up in recovery I understand that I cannot have my own way all the time, but that the way in which I *grant others theirs* is of great importance. I choose to live a life of harmony—or not. As a feeling, it comes and goes; as a principle, I try to keep it firmly in mind.

Joy is extreme happiness; a feeling that all is as it should be; the knowledge that this will pass, but that it is ok—that it will come again. Joy is the reward, occasional but real, mundane but spiritual, that awaits me when I remain willing to allow my life to change, and to awaken to reality. If I have had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, and if I am truly practicing the principles of my program and the spiritual life in all my affairs, how could I not achieve this last as well?

Both religious and secular thinkers can benefit from these pursuits. Spirituality can be—and ought to be—an integral part of the religious experience, but it is available to non-believers as well. It is, simultaneously, the goal, the reward, and the absolutely essential aspect of a sober life.