

Powerlessness & Empowerment

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"The Twelve Step Recovery process is so successful because it provides a formula for integrating different levels. It is by recognizing that we are powerless to control our life experiences out of ego-self that we can access the power out of True Self, Spiritual Self. By surrendering the illusion of ego control we can reconnect with our Higher Selves. Selfishness out of ego-self is destroying the planet. Selfishness out of Spiritual Self is what will save the planet."

Quote from Codependence: The Dance of Wounded Souls

One of the many things which confused me in early recovery were some seemingly contradictory statements that I would hear at meetings and from other Recovering people. There were several areas where this came up but the one which I remember puzzled me the most had to do with the concept of "selfishness." I would read or hear how negative self-seeking, self-pity, and self-will were, and how selfishness and self-centeredness were the root of my problem. But then I would also hear, in a positive context that this was a selfish program and "to thine own self be true."

Luckily, it wasn't important for me to figure out this paradox in order to stay sober. I was in my fifth year of recovery when something that I heard in a meeting reminded me of my puzzlement and started me thinking about this paradox again. Someone in the meeting talked about how there were three steps that mentioned power. The first tells me that I don't have it; the second tells me where to find it; and the eleventh tells me how to access it - through prayer and meditation.

So the steps tell me that I am powerless and then tell me how to access power. Were these two different kinds of power? I was real clear that the moment I accepted my powerlessness to stop drinking and using I somehow got the power to do exactly that. How did this work? How can powerlessness lead to empowerment?

It was while writing a book (not the one that has been published but the next one to be published) about Spirituality that I started to see why there was paradox in life. I started to understand that there were different levels of reality. These different levels were the reason that what seemed to me to be tragedy (quitting drinking) could in the larger perspective, on a higher level, actually be a great gift. It helped me start understanding why there is always a "silver lining" - there is always more than one level of reality at play in any life experience.

That was when I started to understand that there were two very different levels of "self." There is my ego-self which was traumatized and programmed in early childhood. The ego-self got the message that I wasn't lovable or worthy because my parents believed that they weren't lovable or worthy. In very early childhood my ego-self got the message that there was something shameful about my "being" - about being me. So the ego tries to defend me against the pain of not being good enough by trying to keep me separate from other human beings so they won't find out about my defective nature. My ego built up huge walls to defend me and keep me separate. The only ones allowed through those walls were the people that felt familiar - in other words the very ones who were wounded in such a way that they would recreate the messages I received in childhood.

So the very defenses that the ego adapted to protect me actually kept me replaying the old patterns. This is why Codependence is a dysfunctional defense system - it doesn't work to defend me.

What the Twelve Steps did for me was to help me start letting go of the ego-self's faulty programming. When I surrendered trying to control things out of ego-self and started looking to a Higher Power is when I started to access my Spiritual Self. My Spiritual Self is the part of me that knows that I am a Spiritual Being who is related to everyone and everything - that we are all ONE. Through my Spiritual Self I have access to all the power in the Universe.

So when I started praying and meditating I started to access the power to change my life. And it was very important for me personally to realize that prayer and meditation did not just mean formal prayer and formal meditation. What I came to realize is that prayer is "talking to" my Higher Power and other Recovering people, while meditation is "listening to" my Higher Power and other Recovering people. I learned to talk to and listen to my Higher Power all day long - to keep the energy flowing between the physical level and the Spiritual level - between my self and my Self.

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