

## Getting Honest With Ourselves

MIKE SOBERED up once again in January 1972. He had bounced around AA for years with a pattern of many meetings, drinking, hospitals, jails, many meetings, drinking, and so on. He would stay sober for a few weeks or months and then return once more to that dreary round of alcohol and misery.

Mike says, "I never stayed sober for any length of time and never paid much attention to the fact that I was dishonest to the bone. Since that last drunk, in 1972, I've been trying to live honestly and have been working the Twelve Steps, and I've been staying sober. I was around AA for fifteen years before I began trying to live honestly and responsibly. Today, it seems obvious to me that these are fundamental requirements if I'm going to stay sober.

"Cleaning up my life by working the Steps and trying to practice honesty in every facet of living enables me to see more clearly what is really important and gives me a much clearer understanding of my relationship with God and with other human beings. I believe that honesty is essential for me to stay sober and become sane. It's heavily emphasized in the Big Book, and I never could stay sober or know what the program was about until I made a persistent effort to stop lying, stealing, and cheating."

Although I stayed sober from my first contact with AA, my experience with honesty has been much like Mike's and that of a number of other friends of mine. If we work the Steps, the program brings us sanity, along with other solid benefits. To be sane means to see and report things as they are. It means to perceive events and surroundings accurately and then report them truthfully. Lying, on the other hand, clouds my perception of truth and instantly impairs my relationship with God. Lying about anything corrodes my ability to see the truth about everything. Everything is connected to everything else, and dishonesty in one part of my life creates damage in other areas. There's no way I'll become sane unless I quit lying, stealing, and cheating.

For me, being honest requires living responsibly and openly. Dr. William Glasser is best known for his book *Reality Therapy*, published about fifteen years ago. Glasser wrote: "People who are not, at some time in their lives, preferably early, exposed intimately to others who care enough about them to discipline them will not learn to be responsible. For that failure they suffer all their lives." No one in AA will "discipline" me, but I can learn responsibility in AA through openness--letting others know me completely by continuing work with the Steps, especially Four and Five.

Honesty, openness, and responsibility involve dual concepts: (1) to do what I say, and (2) to say what I do. *Doing what I say* means that I keep commitments, honor agreements, meet responsibilities. If, for some reason, I cannot do something I promised, or if I find a good reason not to do it, then I renegotiate with the person to whom I gave the promise, rather than just ignoring my commitment or changing it without telling the other individual. *Saying what I do* goes back to openness. Letting others know me at depth and keeping them up-to-date on my life reinforce my capacity to live up to the principles of the program. Allowing others into my life strengthens my conscience and gives me the ability to function on a better level.

As with many useful concepts, *doing what I say* is important, but not always easy. "It completely upset my life," says Frank, a Denver lawyer with fifteen years of sobriety. "I was sober ten years when I began trying to practice this, and almost immediately found how dishonest I was. It sickened me and provided a powerful incentive to change. Until a person intends honesty, he doesn't realize the extent of his dishonesty.

"Looking at myself, I discovered irresponsibility, fraud, a constant failure to keep commitments. I had two tough years of working to improve and failing in my attempts. Because I'd promise anything in my work, there was no way of setting priorities or delivering what I promised. Doing what I'm supposed to in the program and in my life has invariably simplified everything. This happened once again with my efforts to do what I say. Trying to be honest and responsible has enabled me to live a more disciplined life that is, at the same time, simpler and far more enjoyable. In addition, I can accomplish much more, because procrastination often resulted from failure to honestly appraise the state of my life and what needed to be done."

Frank's difficulties in moving toward honest, responsible living mirrored my own. I found that the second concept, *saying what I do*, was a critical part of the equation for change. I had lied so much about so many things by the time I sobered up in AA that I had confusion piled upon confusion, caused by a severely damaged capacity for seeing things as they are. Disorganized, disintegrated, and ineffective, I had a poor memory created by endless lying that blurred my perceptions of everything. Rotten work habits were only one product of this condition.

Gradually understanding the critical role of truth in my recovery, I started aiming for rigorous honesty. That's been a number of years ago, and the time has been heavily scarred by my recurrent experiments with "selective honesty." Opening up with others became the key to increased honesty. Often, simply being honest with others about my own dishonesty started me back on the road to spiritual health.

Spiritual growth requires at least two commodities: time and energy. When I'm corroded inside with the trash of dishonest, irresponsible living, it chews up my vitality. Over and over, I've experienced the vigorous healing generated by thorough Fourth Steps followed by honest Fifth Steps. Again and again, this has liberated a vitality for change and enabled me to pick up my life and move in the direction intended.

There's another benefit to openness, of course. Persistent effort with this brings consciousness of one's real identity. We gradually understand that who we are is not dependent on someone else's opinion of us. It lies within us and not in the eyes or mind of another person. We come to know who we are and who we are not and start to live on the basis of the truth about ourselves. This knocks out all kinds of unrealistic hopes and ambitions.

Martin Buber, the Hasidic scholar, used to tell the story of Rabbi Zusya. An ardent admirer of Moses, Rabbi Zusya constantly berated himself because he fell short of his hero. One night, in a dream, a voice said to him: "When you die, you will not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' but rather, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

Persistent, continuing work with all the Twelve Steps, emphasizing honesty, openness, and responsibility, dissolves the urge to convince others I'm something that I'm not, because I start to understand that who I am is sufficient. I don't have to be anyone else. That's part of sanity, too.

Honest, responsible living supported by the Twelve Steps and membership in the AA community provides a climate for growth that delivers what we need each day. Decisions based on a realistic appraisal of ourselves gradually deliver us from the pain created by that familiar "self-will run riot." As honesty expands understanding of ourselves, we begin to grasp the wisdom in the words of that improbable philosopher, Wilson Mizner: "The cuckoo who is on to himself is halfway out of the clock."

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