

Serendipity

A Journal of Recovery

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Responsibility in Relationships

November 5, 1996

I've been a recovering co-dependent for a little over three years. I was married 12 years, separated, got back together with my wife for 22 months, and am now separated again since September, 1995. My divorce is in the final stages.

Knowing who is responsible has been one of my issues. I must discover and admit, as the steps point out, where I need to improve and work on myself in areas of conflict; however, it would be unhealthy for me to accept *total* responsibility for all the problems in the relationship. At the same time, I must avoid finger pointing and blaming. Somewhere in the reality-middle is my self-growth, my recovery, my assuming responsibility for the areas where I can grow and change. I want to be sure I never use my recovery as the ultimate form of denial and say things like: "Well, my ex is not in recovery and it's up to her to deal with her stuff, blah, blah, blah."

While it is true the other party must deal with their stuff, as the person in recovery, I have a responsibility to live the steps (as Step Twelve suggests). I have a responsibility to find the path of serenity for myself and in so doing, lovingly point others to the path of serenity as well. If a relationship is so bad that I can't stay, and professional help is not an option (for example, my ex refused to consider counseling) it's my responsibility to take care of myself. I am also responsible to avoid using recovery as an excuse to abandon the other party or inflict more pain than necessary in the process of leaving.

For me, the insanity begins when justifying and defending my perspective of reality becomes more important than discovering God's will and waiting patiently in the calm center.

Thank You, God, for showing me how to live Your will in my life. Amen.

Letting Go of Fear

November 8, 1996

My recovery is mostly about letting go of fear. In fact, fear produces most all my insane moments. Any time I need a reality check, I try to stop and ask myself if there is a fear at the root of what I'm doing?

- fear of failure
- fear of loneliness
- fear of intimacy
- fear of risk
- fear of pain
- fear of abandonment
- fear of rejection
- fear of looking/sounding stupid
- fear of what someone might think
- fear of punishment
- fear of poverty
- fear of exploitation
- fear of missing the big chance

These are the fear demons I've identified in myself so far.

If I know when I'm acting from fear, or about to act from fear, then I can usually let go of the fear and remain in the calm center. For me, recovery works when this "check-up" is my first response to a fear producing situation.

If the fear overwhelms me, or I miss the cue and act out of fear, my life gets unmanageable.

What sometimes helps me identify fear are the emotions it produces in me: Anger and Self-pity (helplessness)

If anger is the corresponding emotion, I know I need to detach my "self" from who or what is causing the fear and the anger. I return to step 1 and admit powerlessness.

If distress or worry is the corresponding emotion, I know I need to let go of the fear, accept (which sometimes includes facing the fear), and quit focusing on feeling sorry for myself, or wishing someone or something would rescue/help me out of the fearful situation. I return to Step Three and reliance upon my Higher Power to show me how to take care of/help myself or regain trust that what is worrying me will be taken care of by my Higher Power.

Fear is always, for me, the opposite of trust (faith) that my Higher Power is big enough and powerful enough to see me through any situation. When I doubt that God is big enough, I try to become my own higher power, and that's when serenity and sanity fly out the window.

For me, serenity is the reality that God is always there for me, always available. It's my responsibility to remember I am not alone; I am one with God and God has a plan and a will for my life, even in the fearful moments.

Thank You, God for helping me overcome the fears of this life. Thank You for being there for me, to help me through. Amen.

One Day at a Time

November 12, 1996

A lot of my early recovery was learning the "one day at a time" habit.

In 1993, when I first had to face the stress of separation, child support payments, being a part-time dad, and struggling to provide for two households, I absolutely tortured myself with every possible combination of "what if?" thinking. I'm sure I suffered self-induced depression over the mental anguish.

What a relief when I found a CoDA support group where I could safely verbalize these issues rather than internalizing them. I realized that having "what if" concerns is normal, and that I had to confront my feelings about the situation rather than worrying. In other words, for me, the "what ifs" became one way of identifying and focusing on my feelings rather than denying them.

Since I could not deal with my whole life problem all at once, I took to heart "one day at a time" and for a long time, focused on that one principle. Also, a member of the local CoDA group gave me the "Just For Today" poem. I put it in my day planner and read it every day. Often, several times a day. Then, someone else gave me a bookmark with the same poem, and I still use it in my recovery books.

Most days though, it was one moment at a time, because the pain was so great. Slowly, I learned to face reality and deal with life on life's terms, rather than getting depressed, falling into denial, trying to control the people and situations causing the pain, or playing endless variations of "what if" to the point of jeopardizing my mental and physical health.

Eventually, the "one day at time" recovery tool became one of many recovery habits that saved my sanity and my life.

Thank You, God, for teaching me the secret of living life on a daily basis, rather than struggling vainly to solve my whole life problem all at once. Amen.

Boundaries

November 14, 1996

For me, healthy boundaries are limits I set on my own behavior, rather than rules and restrictions I place on the behavior of others. I only have power to set my own boundaries, not to set somebody else's boundaries or boundaries for someone else.

For me, unhealthy boundaries are overt or covert attempts to control another person's behavior according to what I want and desire, rather than as a path to my own self-growth and serenity.

As a recovering co-dependent, I have the right to define my personal boundaries. I set my own boundaries in order to enhance my relationships, to promote my own serenity, and to ensure that my process of self-growth continues. My right to set healthy boundaries carries with it the responsibility for me to clearly communicate my boundaries to those persons closest to me who may be affected by my boundaries. I never use my boundaries as bludgeons for punishing another person or as a tool to control others.

Also, I don't assume or expect others to intuitively know and respect my boundaries. That is a fantasy. In regard to boundary setting, my boundary is "no surprises." If you are in a relationship with me, you are entitled to know my boundaries and the price for violating them before you violate them. Also, you are entitled to discuss the boundary openly and honestly with me. If warranted, I'll negotiate and adjust the boundary to help minimize any resulting conflict.

For me, there is a distinct difference between "boundary setting" and the process of disciplining my children. Child rearing, training, and discipline is my responsibility to my children. One of the many areas where I am striving to teach my children is how to set boundaries for themselves. For example, "don't start smoking just because someone you look up to is smoking or so that someone else will accept you." I'm trying to get my children to set a "no smoking" boundary for themselves, based on my educating them and giving them knowledge that smoking is harmful to their health. That way, it's not just a "rule" of mine they must obey (and probably violate behind my back). It becomes their decision. It becomes a boundary they own.

If someone is violating my boundaries, and it is truly harming me or hurting me, I am responsible for doing something about the situation. I can express my boundary, but if they don't respect it, I can't make them respect it or own it, even if I take them to court. All I can do is protect myself from that person.

Here then, are the guidelines for boundary setting that are currently working for me:

- I will keep my boundaries as simple and as few as possible.
- I reserve the right to change my boundaries as I grow and change.
- I will communicate my boundaries lovingly and clearly, before they are violated, when possible.
- I will not become a boundary ogre. I will be mindful that my perspective of reality is unique, and will not use boundaries as a means of forcing my perspective upon others.
- I will endeavor to treat all people as my guests, especially those closest to me.
- I will be kind, yet firm with those people who choose to violate my boundaries. If they continue to do so, I will take the steps necessary to protect myself, with care and mindfulness, seeking the path of minimum psychological harm to myself, the other person, and any one else who may be affected.
- I will not use boundaries to intentionally create conflict in any relationship.

- I will re-examine and question my boundaries if unhealthy results occur because of the boundary (for example, a situation gets worse because of the boundary, rather than better).
- I will respect the boundaries that other people set and communicate to me.
- I will honor and accept that all people need room and space to grow; I will not expect the world to conform 100% to my expectations.
- Questions I ask myself about my boundaries:
 - Is this a healthy boundary? Am I setting this boundary for myself? to enhance my serenity?
 - Am I setting this boundary as an attempt to control someone else's behavior?
 - Am I setting this boundary merely to antagonize someone else?
 - Will this boundary honestly help me be a better person?
 - Is this boundary still necessary? Do I need to let go of it?

Thank You, God, for the recovery gift of boundaries. Amen.

Recovery and Discovery

December 16, 1996

One of recovery's biggest benefits for me has been discovery who I am and who I am not.

I had a lot of grandiose, co-dependent concepts of myself that I've had to overcome. Some of these concepts were:

- I am the strong, silent type
- I am my job and my career
- I am my successes
- I am my toys (car, house, stereo, favorite sports team, etc.)
- I am master of the castle
- I am master of my destiny
- I am the provider, protector, defender, and controller
- I am master of my universe

I never stopped to question whether these concepts were valid. I was clueless as to whether these concepts worked in real life, except to keep applying them over and over and over to the way life worked (and more often did not work). In other words, I had no self other than these concepts. I took for granted that these concepts were the sum total of who I was and how I was supposed to act and react.

In recovery, I have learned the process of self-discovery. I am a unique person, separate and apart from anyone's preconceived ideas or concepts. I accept that I am not a little god or a little general running around controlling everything and everybody.

By hitting bottom, I came to realize that there could only be one God in my life, and that I was not God (thank God!). I gave up the responsibility for running the universe. I gave up the insanity of believing that I could run my life and lives of those around me any way that might suit me at that moment.

I began discovering God and God's will for my life. Once that process and that focus were in place, I began discovering my true self.

Thank You, God, for loving me and helping me discover who I am and who You are. Thank You for this process called life that brings about a reflection of You in me. Amen.

Higher Power Concept

December 18, 1996

Many people new to a Twelve Step program have questions about the Higher Power concept. Some wonder if they will have to become Christians or put up with religious fanatics to benefit from the Twelve Steps.

Others, who by choice do not believe in God, wonder how to reconcile the Higher Power concept found in the Twelve steps.

If a FAQ for Twelve Step recovery existed, questions about the Higher Power concept would probably head the list, or, run close second only to: "What is God's will for my life?"

Some support groups are Christ-centered. They usually go by names such as "Overcomers" or indicate in some way that they consider their Higher Power to be Christ or the Judeo-Christian God of the Bible.

Other support groups strictly avoid promoting any concept of a Higher Power other than what that concept means to each individual. Hence the clause in Step Three: *as we understood God*.

Some support groups have a mix of people and beliefs. They encourage members during the meeting to abstain from "preaching" or using the sharing time as an opportunity to "share their faith" or "witness."

I had to attend several different meetings to find the right support group for me. I now attend a mixed CoDA group. Personally, I am a believer in Christ and consider my Higher Power to be the God of the Bible; however, I am open and accepting of the fact that some people are turned off by organized religion, or, have difficulty with the "Father" concept of God, etc. I don't push my faith or my beliefs, but neither do I hide them.

My belief in God didn't become real until I got involved with recovery. My idea of God before recovery was simply inherited from my family of origin. In recovery, I discovered the difference between organized religion and true spirituality.

I don't bash religion, but at the same time, I can see where a lot of ministers, clergy, and well-meaning lay people promote an identity *for* God, rather than teaching people how to get in touch *with* God. They tend to set themselves up as God's spokespeople, rather than teaching people how to find God or how to discover God's will for themselves and their individual lives.

Clearing away all the stuff I was taught and discovering who God really is has been a delightful and refreshing part of my recovery. Hence, I can not allow myself to believe in the god propagated by many religious groups, and I empathize with those who have been hurt by holier-than-thou attitudes or misguided by religious error or by those who emphasize the form of religion over the point of religion: discovering God's will.

In recovery, I am seeking to understand God's will for my life (Step Eleven). For me, the Judeo-Christian God is big enough and strong enough and "higher power" enough to fit that job description. By doing my best to honestly live the Twelve Steps, hopefully I can point people to the discovery of God's will, rather than getting in the way of their growth process. I believe this is God's will for me.

Personally, I needed to accept that I could not be my own higher power (Steps Two and Three); however, I needed to exude more godlike characteristics (i.e., loving, forgiving, compassionate, etc.) in my own life and in my own relationships.

The Higher Power concept is central to my recovery, because I learned to forgive myself, love myself, and be compassionate with myself. Now, I can give those same gifts to others. I could not have learned these characteristics unless I learned them from a Source outside myself—a Higher Power—in my case, a personal being of a higher order who created me, bestowed these gifts on me, and created within me the capacity for sharing these gifts with others). But I first had to empty myself of my way, my will, and my self-centered self-ish-ness.

For recovery to work, this same emptying of self must happen to all individuals at some level who are honestly working the Twelve Steps.

This giving up of self, or loss of self was the necessary ego-deflation I needed in order to be filled with God and the aforementioned godlike characteristics. I have found these characteristics, always coupled with a profound humility and gratitude, in people who are really recovering and really working a program. They change, they transform, they acquire these qualities by seeking God and seeking God's will for their lives.

To me, God is all One, regardless of what nomenclature I use: God, Higher Power, Jesus Christ, etc. God is bigger than any name or any concept I have of that Being. God is Enough. Whether a Christian perspective, agnostic perspective, or anything in between, the Higher Power concept is big enough to relate to any person, regardless of where they may be in the recovery process.

Thank You, God, for the wondrous relationship we share. Thank You for giving me this adventure and opportunity called life to discover You and to discover who You are creating in me. Amen.

Twelve Steps Before the Program

This is as good a definition of co-dependency as any:

1. We admitted we were powerless over nothing—that we could manage our lives perfectly and those of anyone else who would allow us to.
2. Came to believe there was no power greater than ourselves and the rest of the world was insane.
3. Made a decision to have our loved ones and friends turn their wills and lives over to our care, even though they couldn't understand us at all.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral and immoral inventory of everyone we knew.
5. Admitted to the whole world at large the exact nature of everyone else's wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to make others straighten up and do right.
7. Demanded others to either shape up or ship out.
8. Made a list of all persons who had harmed us, and became willing to go to any lengths to get even with them all.
9. Got direct revenge on such people wherever possible, except when to do so would cost us our own lives or at the very least a jail sentence.
10. Continued to take personal inventory of others and when they were wrong, promptly and repeatedly told them about it.
11. Sought through bitching and nagging to improve our relations with others, as we couldn't understand them, asking only that they knuckle under and DO IT MY WAY.
12. Having had a complete physical, emotional, and spiritual breakdown as a result of THESE STEPS, we tried to blame it on others and to get sympathy and pity in all our affairs.

Author Unknown

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Healthy Thinking

December 22, 1996

Setting boundaries on how I think and how I verbalize my thinking has had a profound impact on my recovery.

A major milestone in my recovery was learning to listen closely to the overgeneralizations I hear coming from my own head.

I first became aware of this issue in recovery meetings when I heard statements such as "I know so-and-so will never change." Or, I heard (myself included) spouses and coworkers over generalize about each other; parents about their children; children about their parents; employees about their bosses; bosses about their employees; and one sex about the other (for example: "all men / women are _____").

By verbalizing these overgeneralizations and false beliefs, I have discovered that I am only hurting myself. I reveal more about myself, my thinking, and my attitude than I do about the other party. I am unconsciously re-affirming my own version of reality; creating self-fulfilling prophecies; and falling prey once again to my own over-expectations (which the other person invariably lives up to). In other words, I had formed the habit of seeing what I wanted to see, believing what I wanted to believe, and thus creating a false reality that conformed to my over generalized thinking. For me, this type of thinking and talking is merely another form of self-inflicted insanity and delusion. So, I'm grateful that I became aware of this tendency in myself.

Now, when I catch myself thinking and verbalizing over generalized beliefs, I recognize it and immediately pause and question the statement in my mind: "Are all men / women really (fill-in-the-blank)?" "Is it certifiably true that so-and-so will never change?"

As a recovering co-dependent, I am learning instead to affirm the good and the best traits in myself and in others. I am working at practicing open-mindedness and an unconditional belief in the positive possibilities and potentials in everyone I know. I am choosing to make a conscious and mindful effort to verbally affirm and encourage these possibilities, so that the potential for positive change and transformation become self-fulfilling prophecies. Likewise, I want to form ongoing relationships with people who will reciprocate and verbally affirm the potential for good and for positive change they see in me. After all, I am capable of changing.

Slowly and painfully, I'm learning my mind has the awesome ability to create reality "as I see it." Therefore, for me, recovery has meant setting boundaries and limits on my own thinking, which in turn affects my attitude, which in turn alters and affects my life and my environment. I'm discovering that healthy thinking is affirming the endless potential for positive change and for good in myself and in other people. This results in the creation of the tremendous peace and serenity I now experience on a hourly basis.

All this is not to say that I now naively and blindly automatically assume that all people and all situations are good, honest, trustworthy, safe, etc. Rather, I'm finding true reality is in the middle ground, in the calm, balanced center.

When I assume the worst, my life is adversely affected; when I affirm the best, my life is positively affected. My boundary for my thinking is thus: "Affirm the best."

Thank You, God, for helping me to mend my unhealthy ways of thinking. Amen.

Open-Heart Sharing

December 23, 1996

My boundary in sharing my experience, strength, and hope is: "I speak only for myself."

I always share in the first person, always about me and always for my benefit first. This is an integral part of my recovery process. This is how I get down to the bare-bones honesty real recovery requires. And I can only be honest about my self and my feelings—not anyone else's.

By speaking and sharing in the first person, I work to express myself and my feelings. Often, I don't know how I feel until I begin sharing. Sharing is self-discovery. Sharing is vulnerability. That is why meetings must be safe sharing places for those who are new to recovery and for veterans of recovery as well.

By sharing my experience, strength, and hope, I indirectly help others see themselves in me and in my recovery actions and choices. The key word is indirectly.

As I struggle through my own issues, openly and honestly, my sharing (hopefully) encourages others to do likewise. I don't share in order to solve anyone else's problems or issues. That is advice-giving masquerading as sharing. I share to solve my problems and issues, 90% of which are common to most people. However, one of the reasons sharing is important in a meeting is because it lets people see they are not alone. That their problems are not so unique after all. That the universe is not singling them out and picking on them. That suffering is a common problem and that real solutions and options are available.

By verbalizing the solutions that work for me, I am taking responsibility for my recovery (and indirectly), being responsible to (not for) my brothers and sisters. I help the world by helping myself!

I help the world by helping myself.

This is what I call open-heart sharing.

In a meeting, I am simply carrying on a verbal dialogue with my soul, offering others a venue through which to listen to that dialogue. I open my mind, my heart, and verbalize my struggles. Perhaps some one will relate; perhaps not. But someone has been helped—ME. Other people can take what applies to them at that moment and throw out the rest. If some one else is helped, it is because they saw some part of themselves in me and made the choice to learn from my experience. That is wisdom. That is support. That is the universal Higher Power available and accessible through sharing.

I began sharing when I was ready. A CoDA meeting was my incubator. I sat and listened for a long time. Once I started working the Twelve Steps (and it is about the Steps after all), I had something to share. Once I started living the steps, I had something to share. I began sharing once I realized I needed to be totally honest with myself in order to grow. I choose to be vulnerable with myself and others who knew how to listen to a person taking those first baby steps in recovery.

Now, when I am silent, perhaps it is because I have discovered I am not working an honest program in some part of my life. Perhaps it is because I am back in the listening stage. Perhaps I am gathering renewed courage and strength. Perhaps I am praying. Perhaps I am simply reveling in the calm center of my serenity or the warmth of the acceptance and peace I am feeling. Perhaps I am connecting with God and enjoying God's presence. Perhaps I am learning to be more patient with myself. Perhaps I have quieted that scolding inner voice for the first time that day.

If I am silent, it is OK. I will share again when the time is right for me.

Thank You, God for the gift of communication. Thank You for teaching me when to speak and when to listen. Amen.

Serenity

December 26, 1996

Serenity is a primary goal of recovery. For me, serenity has come in increments. Early in recovery, I experienced brief instances of serenity, flashes of peace or calm associated with new insights and new discoveries. These were times when my fears and insecurities were momentarily suspended and I was given an opportunity to see clearly how much better my life could be.

I learned the art of "minute vacations" while at work: the quiet before the 8:00am rush; a cup of my favorite tea during the day; a mental break to read a brief article on recovery tucked into my day planner. Serenity became a result of taking care of myself minute by minute and doing what I needed to do in order to focus on my feelings, rather than running from them.

Gradually, the serenity became sustained for an hour or more. Usually in a CoDA meeting or when I surrounded myself with positive, compassionate people.

I remember the relief of realizing that I didn't need to be my own god anymore. That was the beginning of a new level of serenity in my life. For the first time, I was serene for an entire day. The day I honestly gave up seeking my will and my way and knew that God had a will for me that was infinitely better than anything I could choose for myself.

Serenity is recognizing sanity, and knowing how to stay out of the web of insanity. Serenity is knowing God and knowing myself well enough to let go and let God be in control. Serenity is the calm center where I choose how I will respond to life and my feelings, rather than reacting. Serenity is the choice to pause and reflect, to feel, to decide what is best for me in the moment or to wait for God to show me what is best for me. Serenity is choosing to enjoy the journey, rather focusing on attaining the destination.

Serenity is knowing God is in control; knowing my needs will be met in the time that is right; knowing that I have the power to remain in the calm center of God's presence while life rages all around me.

Serenity is feeling OK with circumstances as they are; waiting to see how God will work things out rather than jumping in and trying to fix the universe on my own.

Serenity is feeling OK with who I am in the moment; secure in the knowledge that God is not finished creating me; calm in the face of uncertainty and the unknown, because God knows the future and will provide for me as richly tomorrow as today.

Serenity is enjoying God's presence in all the creation: In the faces of my children; in a sunrise; in a walk on the beach; in the positive affirmation of friends; in the giving of my self without any expectation of return.

Serenity is full awareness during every moment of my life, whether in turmoil or in peace (because serenity is not the absence of turmoil or pain or trouble). Serenity is the attitude and frame of mind I choose regardless of my circumstances.

Serenity is the serendipity of expecting life's daily surprises, rather than seeking gain, control, struggling for power, and the thousand other distractions tempting me into the frenzy of insanity.

Serenity is choosing to courageously face life on life's terms, to change what I can change, to accept what I cannot change, and having the wisdom to know the difference.

Thank You, God, for the gift of serenity. Grant me the courage to live my recovery every day, so that I may continue to experience, the peace, joy, love, and hope that recovery makes a reality. Amen.

Courage: A Tribute

December 28, 1996

Recovering people are the most courageous people I know.

If they are honest about their recovery work, they are examining every part of their lives, their relationships, their minds, and their past.

They are pioneers in the discovery of the frontier called Self.

They are unafraid to examine their fears, their actions, or their motives. They are unashamed to admit their mistakes. They are relentless in their pursuit of serenity, joy, and peace.

They are brave enough to set boundaries, learn what works, abandon what doesn't, and seek a clear understanding of why it doesn't work.

They are willing to uncover their past and learn from it. They are eager to fully experience today and learn today's lesson, so they can move on to the next lesson.

They are bold enough to affirm their worth. They are living their lives, rather than merely existing. They are awake, conscious, aware, and seeking the serenity of sane living in a world that is asleep, unconscious, and unaware that life can be more meaningful, more joyous, and more complete.

They have the fortitude to take their own moral inventory, to discover the ways in which they have hurt themselves and others. They have decided to do their part to stop creating pain and start creating joy.

They are mature enough to see that life is 99% attitude, and they have the gumption to adjust their own, knowing that by changing their attitude, they can change themselves and their perception of the world.

Thank You, God, for giving me the courage and the strength to continuously live this wonderful program of recovery. Amen.

What is Co-Dependence?

My good feelings about who I am stem from being liked by you.

My good feelings about who I am stem from receiving approval from you.

Your struggle affects my serenity.

My mental attention focuses on solving your problems or relieving your pain.

My mental attention is focused on pleasing you.

My mental attention is focused on protecting you.

My mental attention is focused on manipulating you. (To do it my way).

My self esteem is bolstered by solving your problems.

My self esteem is bolstered by relieving your pain.

My own hobbies and interests are put aside. My time is spent sharing your interests and hobbies.

Your clothing and personal appearance are dictated by my desires as I feel you are a reflection of me.

Your behavior is dictated by my desires as I feel you are a reflection of me.

I am not aware of how I feel, I am aware of how you feel.

I am not aware of what I want—I ask what you want. I am not aware—I assume.

The dreams I have for my future are linked to you.

My fear of rejection determines what I say or do.

My fear of your anger determines what I say or do.

I use giving as a way of feeling safe in our relationship.

My social circle diminishes as I involve myself with you.

I put my values aside in order to connect with you.

I value your opinion and way of doing things more than my own.

The quality of my life is in relation to the quality of yours.

Typical Characteristics

We assume responsibility for other's feelings and/or behaviors.

We feel overly responsible for others feelings and/or behaviors.

We have difficulty in identifying feelings—am I angry? lonely? sad? happy? joyful?

We have difficulty in expressing feelings—am I feeling happy? sad? hurt? joyful?

We tend to fear and/or worry how others' may respond to our feelings.

We have difficulty in forming and/or maintaining close relationships.

We are afraid of being hurt and/or rejected by others.

We are perfectionists and place too many expectations on ourselves and others.

We have difficulty making decisions.

We tend to minimize, alter or even deny the truth about how we feel.

Other people's actions and attitudes tend to determine what we say and do.

We tend to put other people's wants and needs first.

Our fear of other's feelings (anger) determines what we say and do.

We question or ignore our own values to connect with significant others.

We value others' opinions more than our own.

Our self-esteem is bolstered by outer/other influences.

We can not acknowledge good things about ourselves.

Our serenity and mental attention is determined by how others are feeling and/or behaving.

We tend to judge everything we do, think or say harshly, by someone else's standards. Nothing done, said, or thought is "good enough."

We do not know or believe that being vulnerable and asking for help is both okay and normal.

We do not know that it is okay to talk about problems outside the family; or that feelings just are—and it is better to share them than to deny, minimize, or justify them.

We are steadfastly loyal—even when the loyalty is unjustified—and often even personally harmful.

We have to be "needed" in order to have a relationship with others.

Source: Northwest Washington Co-Dependents Anonymous Intergroup

The Twelve Steps: A Perspective

January 1, 1997

If you are a newcomer to Twelve Step programs, welcome!

To help you begin your journey, there are a few concepts I have discovered that may be helpful to you. Please take this information only as it is intended: a perspective.

My recovery journey began by developing realistic expectations about the Twelve Steps.

First, this meant admitting the Twelve Steps, by themselves, weren't a magical, miraculous, quick fix cure for my problems. My problems centered on my inability to form and maintain healthy relationships, and the Twelve Steps alone were not going to undo overnight 33 years of harming others and myself.

For me, the Twelve Steps are not an end unto themselves. They are one means to an end: serenity. They are not the only means to serenity, but they are a proven component if a person will commit to working an honest recovery program. This I can say with all confidence.

Secondly, I realized the Twelve Steps are not a do-it-yourself program, despite what popular self-help books say. The Twelve Steps are an integral part of a complete recovery program. They are the foundation. They are the cornerstones of the recovery house that I am building one day at a time, one brick at a time. They are one tool out of many with which I am building my new life.

In reality, no system of recovery is perfect. Results don't happen by osmosis. I don't get the true benefits of recovery just by reading books, going to meetings, and talking about the Twelve Steps. I began real recovery when I made key decisions to change my attitude toward life. Changing my attitude began by making a commitment to recovery.

Commitment is the primary reason a lot of people come to recovery meetings one time and never come back. They have problems with commitment. They are looking for a miracle cure. They are coming with the intent of changing someone else, not themselves. Some like living in pain, and are only looking for someone or some group where they commiserate over a cup of coffee or bash the person, place, or thing they blame for their problems.

To recover from co-dependency, I had to make a commitment to an honest program of self-growth and self-discovery. The commitment principle applies to any worthwhile endeavor in life. I really did want to feel better. I really did want to find serenity. I really did want to set recovery goals and reach them. I really did want to develop and maintain fulfilling relationships.

Here then, are some secrets I've found to honest recovery and spiritual growth. These principles and decisions will also work for you if you are willing to make a commitment to work harder at recovery than anything else you've ever done...because the results are worth the effort.

- Make the decision, once and for all, to change what you can change (maybe the only thing you can change): your attitude. Give up, once and for all, trying to change what you cannot change: other people. Make these two decisions and never look back.
- Make the decision to accept yourself and your life situation, as they are, in this moment. Recovery isn't about becoming perfect. Recovery is about loving yourself enough to accept your imperfections, right now, and accepting that the agent of change will, gratefully, be a power greater than your own.
- Commit to attending real recovery meetings on a regular basis. Find a meeting where people are working at recovery, rather than having psychobabble coffee groups. You'll have to try lots of different meetings before you can tell the difference. A real recovery meeting is a supportive and nurturing environment, where people can safely talk about their feelings and no one will respond critically or presume to give advice. In a real recovery meeting, people talk humbly about themselves, not their significant other, not their boss, not their co-workers, not their

abusing spouse, etc. In a real recovery meeting, people are being honest with themselves and searching for answers, rather than using recovery as the ultimate form of denial.

- Surround yourself with positive recovering friends. Real friends who will support you without enabling you. Find at least one recovering person to whom you will be accountable. Someone who will confront you and challenge your thinking. Someone with whom you can safely share and with whom you can be honest, open, and sincere. If you can't find such a person, then ask your therapist to be that person. If you don't have a therapist, consider getting one. The Twelve Steps are not a substitute for professional help.
- Decide to be totally honest with yourself. Have the courage to look at and accept your strengths and your weaknesses; your assets and your liabilities; your successes and your failures.
- Decide, once and for all, to accept your past, learn from it, and start living a life filled with peace and serenity.
- Decide to get serious therapy to help you uncover the hidden parts of yourself that may be causing you grief and pain.
- Decide to discover God and God's will for your life. Build a relationship with God and create trust, faith, and confidence in a Higher Power outside of yourself. If you've been hurt by organized religion in the past, discover the vast differences between spirituality and religion. You are not required to be religious to recover. It's OK if you are uncomfortable with spirituality or the God concept; just decide to remain open to these ideas for now and be patient with yourself.
- Decide that you will courageously face your fears, your feelings, your past, your dark side—all parts of yourself. Embrace all the possibilities and potential for good within you. Believe that you are a beautiful person worthy of life's richest blessings. Love yourself unconditionally.
- Develop the willingness to courageously share your experiences, strength, and hope with those you meet along life's path who are hurting and searching for serenity. Search for those who are searching.
- Decide to work the Twelve Steps with the help of a local mentor or sponsor or therapist whom you can safely trust. Someone who knows how to listen and how to respond to a person in recovery. Some one who understands that unconditional acceptance and compassion and confidentiality are among the highest forms of love. Finding this person is essential.
- Dedicate your well being and your serenity to the ongoing study, discovery, and applied understanding of all the recovery resources and people available to you.
- Decide to love yourself, all of you, with all your heart. Develop a loving, esteeming, affirming relationship with yourself, because this is the basis for all your other relationships, including your relationship with God.

Thank You, God, for the circumstances in my life that brought me to this wonderful program of recovery. Amen.

The Calm Center

January 5, 1997

Prior to recovery, my life was one of extremes. Particularly in regards to my feelings.

Three primary feelings drove my thoughts, actions, and relationships: sad, mad, and glad. These three feelings controlled my life. They ruled me. I had no idea I could control my response to these feelings. I constantly fluctuated between them, often cycling through one to the other or all three in a few minutes. At one point, my therapist diagnosed me as bi-polar.

However, as my recovery progressed, and I grew emotionally, I discovered I had a choice regarding my response to my basic, primal feelings. I learned my responsibility in controlling how I handled these feelings. Believe it or not, in 33 years I had never learned that I am not my feelings!

Now, my feelings no longer control me. I also learned how to feel the broad spectrum of feelings between sad/mad and glad. There are many subtle variations and layers of feelings between these extremes, of which I was completely unaware.

Most importantly, between these extreme feelings, or perhaps, apart from them, I discovered a perfect center point of absolute stillness. Serenity is at the calm center of the storm. Serenity is the choice I make about how I choose to respond (not react) to my feelings.

Serenity is feeling all my feelings with the full awareness and realization I don't have to act upon them; I don't have to act them out; I don't have to judge them. I merely acknowledge my feelings, identify them, calmly accept them, observe the situation that is producing them, and then decide, consciously, whether a response is warranted.

When my feelings ruled me, my life was miserable. Once I began the practice of responding to my feelings, my life filled with serenity. The good stuff started happening.

The key to the balance of power between my head and my heart was in my possession all along, but I didn't know it. Emotional maturity was not in my educational curriculum. By giving away this power, by being unaware of it, I created untold misery in my life and in the lives of others.

Am I always living from the calm center? No. Sometimes my feelings still take over. (In fact, I am learning there are times when it is OK for my feelings to be in control.) Sometimes I still over-react. Sometimes I am still paralyzed by fear (a variation of mad). Sometimes I allow people to push my buttons and I react too quickly. But at least now I recognize the process, whether I always use it or not. I am learning how to use this process—I haven't perfect it yet.

Every day is a new lesson. Every situation adds to my repertoire of healthy recovery behaviors. Awareness of the process is a goal of recovery, and now I am gratefully aware of how to live cooperatively with my feelings and consciously maintain the balance of peace and serenity my life deserves.

Detachment

January 15, 1997

For me, detachment is the "permission" I give myself regarding any person or situation I want to control, but can not.

For example, I can not control another person's behavior, so I must practice detachment.

To be more specific, my ex-wife has no desire for the two of us to be friends. As much as I'd like for us to be friends, we aren't. I can not control my ex-wife into being friends with me. So I must detach from that situation. I must cease to invest emotional energy into wanting and wishing the situation would change. I can still act friendly toward her, I can still want her to be friendly toward me, but by detaching, I let go of the outcome. I let go of the mental agony of trying to figure out how we can become friends. I let go of worrying about a situation that is beyond my control.

Here's another example. In the town where I live in Florida, there is heavy "seasonal" automobile traffic during the winter months. Each winter, the so-called "snow birds" migrate to South Florida's warm climate, clogging the roads, driving too slowly, driving in the left-hand lane, and in general, getting in the way of the local drivers. For many years, I complained, whined, criticized, honked, gave dirty looks, and felt entirely justified in treating out-of-town drivers with rude contempt.

But I have learned to detach from this situation. I can't control it. Complaining doesn't help. Being rude certainly doesn't help. It's the perfect situation for me to practice my recovery. It's a great way to find serenity in the face of complete powerlessness.

Maybe the best definition of detachment is accepting my powerlessness over another person, situation, or thing.

Also, I've learned what detachment is not.

Detachment is not an excuse for treating another person cruelly. For example, detachment is not banishing someone from my life who fails to live up to my expectations.

Detachment is not withdrawing emotional support or intentionally setting boundaries to create conflict and strife.

Detachment is not another form of denial, in which I pretend a real problem in my life is non-existent.

Healthy detachment acknowledges the problem, accepts powerlessness over it, and chooses to no longer invest needless emotional energy into the problem.

Detachment is the healthy alternative to obsessing about a matter or seeking to manipulate or control a situation into conforming with my perception of what is best.

Where problems with people or significant relationships are concerned, detachment is giving the problem to God, who does have power. I step aside so God can solve the problem to the ultimate benefit of everyone involved, including me. It may take years for me to see God's plan unfold, so I must detach from seeking to control the timing as well.

In God's time, in God's way, by God's grace, to God's glory, the situation will be resolved.

If someone's problem is causing me harm or endangering me in some way, then I must detach. But I must also do what is necessary to protect myself. It may mean leaving that person (not abandoning), seeking an intervention (with professional help), or getting legal help. Again, detachment is not the denial of pain—detachment is always an action or a decision that brings me relief from the pain.

Detachment releases my attention and focus from a troubling problem, person, or situation over which I am powerless, and turns my focus and my attention to changing the things I can change. Detachment leads me back to serenity.

Self-Love

January 15, 1997

An important phase of my recovery program has been learning to love myself. Loving myself means I have given up the futile and endless search for a source of love outside of me, based on or drawn from external people or things. Self-love has meant discovering the limitless Source of love within me. I am no longer dependent upon externals to supply an unhealthy neediness for love, worth, or validation.

(In this context, love is broadly defined as unconditional acceptance and nurturing of myself and others.)

Ironically, part of what drove my neediness for love was shame. My shame grew from my acute awareness of my neediness. Because I was ashamed, I therefore did not perceive myself as being a lovable or worthwhile person. My shame, in turn, resulted in low self-esteem and deeper shame.

A significant breakthrough occurred when I finally admitted my shame about my feelings of low self-worth (both to myself and to another person). Admitting the shame liberated me from it.

Previously, I had worked hard to deny both my shame and my low self-worth, because I desperately wanted to deny that low self-worth was one of my core issues. Because of the denial, my shame and my low self-worth persisted—one feeding endlessly on the other. By denying my shame and my low self-worth, I remained bound to it. By admitting my shame and my low self-worth, and more importantly, accepting both as a part of myself, I released myself from the shame, freed myself to accept myself unconditionally, and gave myself permission to start loving and esteeming all of me.

Continued belief in myself as a lovable and worthwhile person no longer depends upon an external source or upon external affirmation. I no longer "need" another person to constantly affirm my worth or relieve my shame by loving me (i.e., since no one loves me, I must not be worth loving). I can give myself all the affirmation and love I need. Since my need for love and external affirmation is no longer an issue, the shame associated with my low self-worth is gone.

I am a lovable and worthwhile person!

Now I can affirm it and truly believe it. Equally important, I now have an abundance of genuine self-love, upon which I can draw for the purpose of giving love to others.

To use an analogy, it's just as if I had an empty account in my "love" bank. I was erroneously waiting and longing for someone else to make the needed deposits, unaware that I could have been making huge deposits for myself all along. Now I have an abundance of love to give away. Because I have love to give away, I am truly a love-able person. I am no longer needy; I am healthy, and thus, even more lovable. By embracing and accepting my shame and my low self-worth, I empowered myself to change. I have an infinite Source and reserve of love and self-esteem for myself.

The paradox of learning self-love is this—the more love I give myself, the more love I have to give away. The love account is never depleted. I can now give healthy love from the abundance of my own love and my own wholeness. True recovery is about giving clean, healthy, unconditional love, not getting love. My life is now characterized by an ever-expanding circle of love, rather than a downward spiral deeper into shame.

Finally, all this healthy self-love unlocks the door to true self-esteem. Self-esteem and self-love are co-requisite. Because I am able to love myself and others unconditionally, I esteem myself; I hold myself in high regard; I value myself; I perceive myself as an able-to-give-love, worthwhile person. The abundance of my self-love is the clean, healthy gift of unconditional love I can now bring to all my relationships.

Meditation

January 23, 1997

Practicing Step Eleven's call to meditation came easily for me. My quest for wholeness really started with an intense spiritual longing years before life led me gently into recovery.

I believe I was always spiritually attuned, but pain and recovery helped me focus and concentrate my dormant spirituality into a specific direction and goal: knowing myself, knowing God, and knowing God's will for me.

Elements of the quest were in place by early childhood: the longing for intimacy, the desire to "see" beyond the mundane, a search for the truth of life's meaning, an intense awareness of destiny. All these were present in my childhood, and through my teen years and into early adulthood, I was gathering the tools and ideas and concentration that would become essential for my recovery and my eventual spiritual awakening.

Throughout all my life, God was preparing me for the day when I would finally be ready to make use of all the tools and gifts I'd been given. The day when dire need would require an honest, spiritual perspective and a heart of light to help me navigate through dark, stormy days.

Despite myself and my mistakes, God planted within my heart a seed that would be watered and fed by suffering and by pain. Through that necessary discipline, my heart brought forth the ever-opening flower of a new person.

Meditation is life. Life is meditation. Every moment lived fully and completely, in total appreciation of the moment, is a moment lived in God's presence. Every day is a new level of growth and awareness. Awareness of beauty. Awareness of being a child of God. Awareness that love and joy and peace are mine for the choosing.

My entire life is meditation. My entire being is a prayer, offered to God, who gave me the grace, despite my mistakes, to walk in the sunlight of self-love and self-esteem.

Perhaps the greatest gift of recovery has been learning to see the spiritual in the ordinary. Commonplace things hold the most extraordinary depth and spirit. A flower. A smile. A sunrise. A newborn child. Holding someone's hand. Looking into another person's eyes for more than a fleeting instant. A tear. A snowflake. A clear blue sky. Moonlight reflected on water. The sound of water rushing over rocks.

I am immersed in the perpetual renewing act of a spiritual creation, ever-flowing, ever-growing, ever singing, ever meditating from the depths of lasting serenity and peace. All by grace. All by choice. All through a Source of love deeper than understanding.

Despite the pain, my days and my past have a purpose and a meaning. To have brought me to this point, I am grateful for the pain, I am grateful for the struggle. There is unexpected joy, surprising peace, and opportunity for growth in the most painful of circumstances.

Serenity awaits every courageous heart longing to love, to change, and to grow.

Responsible Recovery

January 16, 1997

As a recovering co-dependent, I want to maintain a healthy sense of adult responsibility for my choices—including my decision to recover and solve my problems in a healthy way.

Here are some examples of irresponsible recovery (some from personal experience):

- Abusing recovery slogans and principles. For instance, interpreting and misapplying "Let Go and Let God" in a fatalistic sense. Suppose I need to find a job. Instead of pounding the pavement, networking, circulating my resume, etc., I sit on my couch in front of the TV all day, waiting for God to supply me with a job.
- Using the principle of detachment as an excuse for abandoning my spouse and children. "I just couldn't take another day in that situation, so I had to detach."
- Using recovery as a means of getting my needs met.
- Going to recovery meetings and so dominating the sharing time that no one else gets time to speak. Or, rather than exploring my own issues and finding my own solutions, I talk exclusively about my abusive spouse, whine about the unfairness of life in general, or give unsolicited, subtle, or insensitive advice to others. Or, I only attend meetings because I think it will help someone else.
- Transferring my addiction to recovery from drugs, alcohol, work, sex, religion, credit cards, pornography, or people. Using recovery to escape from my feelings or to deny responsibility for the problems in my life or in my relationships.
- Going through the motions of recovery only as a social outlet.
- Going to six meetings a week and neglecting my children or spouse. Spending excessively on recovery books and workshops. Becoming emotionally unavailable because I am focused on "working my program."
- Abusing the group phone list by extending my telephone addiction to include group members. Using the phone list to solicit for my Amway business. Using the phone list to find someone to date.
- Expecting my sponsor to wallow in self-pity with me. Calling my sponsor once every hour because I'm having a "really bad day."
- Spending excessive and inordinate amounts of time surfing the web for recovery sites and/or topics, IRC chats, building a recovery web site, running a recovery mailing list, or writing about recovery topics.
- Ignoring the Twelve Steps.

Responsible recovery is:

- A conscious choice to love myself, practice healthy self-esteem, and be a source of support for others as I work through my feelings, solve my problems, and explore my core issues.
- Taking my own personal moral inventory, holding myself accountable for my time, my actions, and my motives.
- Making the decision to change what I can about myself, and attaining a sustained measure of serenity.
- Maintaining a proper balance between my other life activities and working my recovery program.

- Building healthy, clean, relationships based on principles of good communication, being emotionally available, and creating a safe atmosphere of acceptance, compassion, support, nurturing, and love.
- An adult process of learning to recognize and practice healthy self-love, self-growth, self-discovery, and self-acceptance.

Responsible recovery is not about "getting" or "taking." It is about learning to supply my own needs; learning how to give—primarily to myself first. Then, from the abundance of my healthy self-love and self-esteem, I can give the unconditional gifts of nurturing, support, acceptance, and clean communication with others.

Being

January 23, 1997

I'm finally realizing that recovery is about being rather than doing.

When I am being love, my heart is full and giving.

When I am being serenity, my heart is peaceful and relaxed.

When I am being kindness, my heart extends itself to others.

When I am being compassion, my heart hurts with another's pain.

When I am being affirmation, my heart speaks the language of encouragement and unconditional acceptance.

When I am being peace, my heart has a calming affect on my environment.

When I am being meditation, my heart is attuned to God's creative force.

When I am being joy, my heart sings and dances with lightness.

When I am being emotionally present, my heart is unified with another's.

When I am being thoughtfulness, my heart makes choices based on awareness and wisdom.

When I am being courage, my heart thrills to life's unexpected pleasures.

When I am being forgiveness, my heart is able to make amends

When I am simply being, my heart is whole; my life is wonderful.

Patience

January 25, 1997

Patience has been essential to my recovery.

I'm constantly reminded that time is a factor in any worthwhile endeavor. No less so in recovery. Perhaps more so in recovery.

I have learned that time is God's tool. For creating wisdom and understanding in me. For so ordering events as to bring about my highest and best good.

First, I should explain that delaying gratification always proved difficult for me. I needed to learn the best life offers has a price. In my life, the price of serenity and understanding has consistently proven to be patience. Urgency always got me into trouble; patience always kept me out of trouble.

Secondly, patience has proven necessary for the proper preparation of my whole person—spirit, soul, heart, and mind—all of me had to be brought to a point where the desire for serenity became greater than the pain. For me, I had to hit bottom—emotional, spiritual, social, financial, marital—all the way down—and it took 33 years. And then, achieving a measure of sustained serenity took another three and a half years of incredible pain, sorrow, suffering, and conflict, coupled with the decision and the discipline to become better, rather than bitter. Recovery simply cannot happen without patience, just as a flower cannot bloom without water.

Third, patience was necessary to prove my commitment and perseverance to recovery. God didn't instantly bestow the blessings of recovery on my broken heart. The gift came through my long-term commitment to gain serenity and peace. It's almost as if God asked me, "How badly do you want to recover?" I finally came to a point where I desired peace and serenity and unity with God more than anything else. Even more than anything any addiction could offer me.

Fourth, the gift of patience taught me to concentrate my energy during the waiting times. I learned how to focus on the present, rather than obsessing about the future. Growth, for me, always came in the present; through an awareness of the present and knowing exactly what is going on inside of me in the present. There is a measure of growth from examining the past, but I have found that self-examination of where I am today, in the here and now, provides a quicker path to spiritual growth. However, a proper moral inventory (such as working Step Four) again requires time and lots of it.

Fifth, patience has been necessary for my recovery because my sense of timing has seldom coincided with God's. God has always been present for me, in the now, waiting patiently for me to catch up. God has always graciously extended patience to me. Through recovery, I am learning to be patient with God. I am learning to wait for the good stuff. I am learning to watch with joyful patience as day by day God reveals His miraculous plan for my life.

Acceptance

January 29, 1997

Acceptance is an attitude I am learning to extend toward other people and myself, and toward certain types of circumstances.

Acceptance toward People

Not everyone needs to be changed, just because I believe they should. "Should" thinking has become a warning sign to me.

In recovery, I have worked to acquire an open-minded willingness to receive people as they are in the present, with the understanding that all people are in the process of becoming. I need to allow other people their process, without any interference from me.

My alternative to accepting people was to reject them. By nature, I tended to reject any person whom I perceived as different from me, more or less gifted than me, would not listen to my unsolicited advice, etc. This was my ego—pure and simple. This was also insanity, because my thinking was based on the belief that others should perfectly match my expectations! When they didn't, I had a justifiable reason for rejecting them.

Now, I am learning how to make allowances for the fact that every person is unique and valuable despite background, ideology, religion, sex, etc. Most importantly, acceptance helps me to remember that each person is "in process" (i.e., at different stages of growth). For example, it is easy to accept that a newborn baby cannot eat a ten ounce steak. Adults allow a baby time and space to grow and mature. And in the meantime, the infant is given suitable baby food. Granted, this is an obvious example, but often adults expect children to behave like adults: "Big boys don't cry" and "You should know better" and "Don't be such a baby about every little thing." As an adult, I sometimes forget that other adults still carry within themselves that precious and vulnerable child. Where they are at this moment in their growth is different from me, and I need to be sensitive and accepting of that fact.

It was also important for me to distinguish the difference between acceptance and approval. I allow myself to feel approval or disapproval of other people's actions and choices. I am also free to express my feelings in healthy ways. When necessary, I can take steps to protect myself if another person's actions put me in danger. My boundary is: if another person's choices and actions do not affect me, then their choices and actions are none of my business.

Acceptance toward Myself

When I began my recovery, I was too hard on myself. I inflicted guilt on myself for all my problems. I blamed myself for my life circumstance. I berated and hated myself for being in the condition where I found myself. By choosing acceptance, I am learning to be gentle with myself. I am also learning to extend patience toward myself. Like others, I too am in the process of becoming. If I am accepting of others, I can extend the same courtesy toward myself. I can be patient and loving to my own inner child. Regarding guilt, it was necessary for me to accept responsibility for the actions and choices I'd made in the past. But the past is past, and I must accept the past. There is no reason to go on living in guilt, forever re-living the past in the present.

Acceptance toward Circumstances

Through recovery, I am also learning how to willingly suspend and set aside my preconceived ideas, desired outcomes, expectations, and personal agendas in the face of circumstances I previously would have sought to control or change.

I am learning to make a conscious and deliberate choice to receive circumstances as they are, with the belief that the eventual result will be beneficial. Acceptance is beneficial for me, because I am relieved of anxiety, controlling, "helping", and other unhealthy behavior. Acceptance is beneficial for my Higher Power, because it allows God to order circumstances for the best possible timing, again, without my interference.

Choosing the attitude of acceptance is a powerful and beneficial recovery tool.

Attitude

February 7, 1997

I believe attitude is one of the most overlooked secrets of recovery. By choosing to have a positive, healthy attitude about life, suffering, the past, the future, relationships, etc., I can actually control the quality of my serenity on a minute-by-minute basis.

Notice I did not say, "control my life" or "control my circumstances." These are not necessarily always under my control—but my attitude is always under my control. My attitude is one of the few things over which I maintain absolute and total control at all times.

If I fail to control my attitude, life invariably gets messy and out of control. But even if my circumstances are terrible and my life is filled with pain, I can control my attitude.

Attitude is simply a matter of choosing how I will respond to the situations life presents. Life is constantly asking questions of me, and my responses are all-important.

Any situation where I find myself is an opportunity for me to choose how I will respond. Any situation that life throws at me, I am capable of choosing an appropriate, healthy attitude and appropriate response.

Any situation that life throws at me. Even if my worst nightmare came true, I could still choose my attitude in that situation.

Viktor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning* chose his attitude in the Nazi concentration camps.

Jesus Christ chose his attitude when he was crucified as a criminal.

I'm unlikely to ever face either of those extremes in my life. More often, for me, the little annoyances of life are the ones I must guard against.

For example, I used to be hyper-vigilant about the scratches on my European sports car. Every little ding and dent was a blow to my ego. I would rant and rave and lambaste all the idiots and fools who were responsible for door dents, shopping cart bumps, cat claw marks, rock pings, and key scrapes.

Now, material things mean so little to me. There is hardly any thing or any body worth getting myself all worked up about. Life just isn't so serious that I must go ballistic over every incident that doesn't happen to sit well with me.

I knew I was making progress in my recovery when a neighborhood kid was going around smacking things with the just-discovered ball-peen hammer he'd found among his dad's tools. I was edging the driveway and looked up just as he decided to see the effect of popping my car's front fender.

I didn't get mad—although I could have. I didn't scream and yell—although I could have. I didn't get worked into a frenzy—although I thought seriously about doing so. The experience was a dream-like observation of myself, from above, simply noting what had happened, calmly, but firmly telling the boy to avoid doing it again, and letting him know his parents would be notified.

I never even bothered with the latter. Nor did I bother with getting the dimple taken out. I don't even own the car anymore. What good would I have done by over-reacting? None. I can look back on the whole incident and laugh.

How I choose to feel and to act and to be is within my power, controlled by my attitude. Through recovery, I am choosing to exude a positive, nurturing, supportive, relaxed, mellow, balanced, light-hearted attitude at all times.

Serenity isn't something I found. Serenity is an attitude of my own choosing.

Serenity Prayer

February 12, 1997

Following are some meditations on the Serenity Prayer.

How this prayer has changed my life! God has shown me that He is willing to grant me the petition stated in this prayer. I don't demand the gift of serenity, but neither must I beg for it. I simply ask God to grant me serenity.

God is the source of lasting serenity. God provides His serenity abundantly for the asking. My task is to find the true serenity that God alone grants. No other power or thing or person has the measure or the quality of serenity God is willing to provide.

God allows me to partake of all His serenity—an endless, infinite supply.

Why is God willing to so bless me with this level of serenity? Simply because God wills to give me serenity. God wills serenity for my life. I am so grateful God will grant me serenity. I am more than grateful.

Serenity is essential for acceptance; acceptance is essential for serenity. God is asking me to accept and I am asking God for the power to accept. Acceptance begins with God and ends with God. God is the cause of my acceptance and God's serenity is the result. Through serenity and acceptance, I move in unison with God's plan for me. I move in harmony with God's will for me.

God's will and my will become one through acceptance. God's will for me is serenity—a peace that goes beyond comprehension. I touch that peace; I become peace; I am God's peace through God-enabled acceptance.

What are the things I cannot change? I must rely on God's wisdom to make the determination. It is not within me to decide for myself what I cannot change—but neither is it ever solely up to me to discover those things. God grants wisdom to those who seek His will. His will is for me to be wise with His wisdom. I have no innate wisdom to discern the things that God grants me to know. Again, I must ask. Wisdom is God's gift to the seeker of wisdom. Wisdom is God's gift to those who are courageous enough to admit a power higher than self and ask that power for the gift of a higher wisdom.

Abundant wisdom is God's gift to those who seek a wisdom higher than their own—a wisdom to see all things within their proper context—what can be changed; what cannot be changed. Such wisdom can only come from a Higher Power. Such wisdom can only be granted. Such wisdom can only be sought.

I must accept the fact that there are things I can not change and do not have the wisdom to change. The request for wisdom is merely to know the difference between what I can change and can not change. What I can not change is left in God's capable hands. What I can change, God leaves in my hands, provided I am seeking His will and His wisdom. God's will is for me to change what I can, by first asking Him to change me.

The Serenity Prayer is really a prayer asking God to change me into someone who is serene, accepting, courageous, and wise. God's will is for me to ask Him to change me into that type of person. One of the things I can change is my attitude and posture toward God.

God's will is for me to allow Him to change me into the person He knows I can be. The process begins the moment I ask. The moment I pray. I ask in the full faith and confidence that God will grant me the request. The process of my change and my serenity begins as soon as I ask. As soon as I begin moving toward God, He moves to grant my request.

God's serenity is a well of sweet, miraculous, living water. Now that I've tasted it, I want more. More serenity is mine for the asking. The more I request, the more God gives. God's well of serenity is never empty. God's well is bottomless. How deep I drink is determined solely by my courage and my desire. No matter how deep I go, there are deeper, richer, depths to God's serenity. The level of my God-given serenity, acceptance, wisdom, and courage are as deep as my desire.

Therefore, as with all prayers, I must be careful with the Serenity Prayer. God, grant me the courage to accept the profound levels of serenity You are willing to show me. Respect for God's power to answer this prayer is necessary.

Just how far God takes me into the paradise of serenity is up to me. God never pushes me further than I am ready to go, but God is willing to lead me as far as I am willing to follow.

The path to serenity is never-ending; yet the destination is always just a step and a prayer away.

God, grant me the courage to follow You wherever You would lead and the serenity to accept what You are willing to show me when You lead me there. Amen.

Letting Go of Ego

February 16, 1997

Recently I have come to the realization that most of my co-dependent behavior was based on egotism. Somehow, I bought into the false concept that I was at the center of the universe. I believed the lives of other people needed to be centered around me.

Depending on the role of the people in my life, their whole person had to be focused on my feelings, my wishes, my expectations, my pleasure, and my pain. They were my rescuer, my sex object, my mind-reader, my care-taker, my ego-stroker, my source of affirmation and meaning, my "whatever-I-needed-at-the-moment."

If they weren't entirely focused on me, they didn't really love me.

Whew! No wonder no one wanted to be around me!

My false beliefs (i.e., survival mechanisms) were born out of a loved-starved, scarcity mentality. I had no self-esteem other than what others gave me. I had no self-love other than what others provided. I was a needy, wounded animal—savagely biting whoever tried to help me.

Sometimes I still wonder why God ever led me to recovery. It was certainly by grace. God loved me more than I loved myself. God willed to extend grace and mercy and compassion to me—at the point when I lost all faith and trust in life, people, and every other addictive thing I'd substituted for a true relationship with God and with myself.

Through the miracle of recovery and the Twelve Steps, God is showing me how to love myself, esteem myself, and be a unique, whole human being—I am learning to focus my heart on giving, rather than getting.

More and more, I find myself centered in God's will, totally surrendered to the serenity available to me for the asking. I am surrendered to accepting life, today, as it unfolds. I am able to let go of control, expectations, obsessions, and doing.

I am grateful for recovery. I am grateful for learning how to let go of my ego, for the opportunity to gain humility, and for the ability to focus on the process of being, rather than doing.

I am grateful I no longer need to merely survive. I am learning to live joyously, as God wills for me to live.

Faith

February 24, 1997

Much of the recovery process is based on faith. Not faith in a religious sense, but faith in a spiritual sense. For me, faith is the belief that the recovery process will work for me, coupled with the action of acceptance. Belief plus action equals faith. Acceptance is the work of recovery and serenity is the reward for the recovery effort I expend.

So how do I apply working faith to my recovery?

Faith in God

It's true I need help to recover. Not just human help, but the on-going, never-failing help of a Higher Power. A power outside of me that loves me, accepts me, and desires serenity for me. Belief in a Higher Power opens my heart to limitless possibilities. Belief in a Higher Power means there is purpose and design to my life—a reason for existing. Belief in a Higher Power stretches me to look deeper into reality than the mundane, but to also see the miraculous in the ordinary. A Higher Power created the miracle that is my life, and gave me my life as a free gift. Through recovery, I have gained a unwavering belief that God is ever working in my behalf.

Faith in Self

Yet, I must also have faith and belief in myself and in my God-given talents and abilities. I think, more than anything else, recovery has given me permission to be self-confident, assured, and imperturbable. There is power in recovery, but that power is transferred to me and through me. I am a conduit through which incredible power and love and kindness and compassion and joy and serenity can freely flow. For those gifts to benefit me and others, I believe I am an instrument for good, and I believe am capable of accomplishing wondrous things in my life.

Faith in Relationships

One of the most beautiful creations of which I am capable is healthy relationships. I have faith that by reaching out, by extending myself, and by offering acceptance and good will to others, good stuff will come back me. Joy and serenity are the fruit of a life focused on giving, rather than getting. I know that relationships can work in my life—that relationships can be rewarding and encouraging and inspiring. I have faith and confidence that by being the right person, all my relationships can be beneficial on some level. Even through relationships that do not seemingly work, I can learn something positive and helpful and nurturing about myself. I can carry that wisdom into the next relationship and make it even better. In all relationships there is a lesson for me—I need only believe and see and grow.

Faith in the Steps

To grow, I need a plan and the plan is found in the Twelve Steps. I believe the Twelve Steps are a powerful tool for personal change. Coupled with the attitudes of humility and courage and confidence, the Twelve Steps have life-changing and world-changing power for good. My world has certainly changed since I took a leap of faith and made the decision to recover. I've never looked back. Nor can I imagine my life without the benefits of recovery. I have faith that recovery works if I continue working to recover. The work of recovery is acceptance of myself, of other people, and of my circumstances at the moment.

Faith in the Journey

Yet recovery is not a destination. Recovery is a journey. A moment-by-moment journey into the complete grace and wisdom and will of God. Recovery is as limitless as God is infinite. There is no end to the joy and the serenity and the peace available to me on this journey. I am so grateful that I have seen, through the eyes of faith, the glorious rewards of letting go and letting God lead me through this adventure called life. No matter the turns my life may take, I have faith that ultimately, some benefit will come from every situation, every relationship, every heartache, every day lived one day at a time. I trust the process. I trust the journey. I trust God, who is daily creating a beautifully calm and serene life for me.

Remaining Neutral

March 12, 1997

In recovery, I am learning how to remain neutral in certain situations.

For example, the other day an acquaintance of mine (I'll call her Mary) called inquiring about mutual friends, who had recently gone through a divorce. Mary wanted to know all the details and started making critical remarks about one of the partners.

Rather than taking sides, I remained neutral. I could easily have defended my friend or joined into the criticism. I could have given out all kinds of supporting details. But I chose not to do so. Criticism, fault-finding, and blame don't help me, my friends, or anyone involved. It just doesn't help.

When Mary started asking me about all the gory details as to the "why" of the divorce, I responded by saying (in a polite tone), "You know, there really are two sides to the story and I've heard both sides. I'm sure they (i.e., the couple) would appreciate your wanting to get the story straight from them rather than from me."

This response allowed me to remain neutral and keep myself and my opinions and judgments out of the conversation. For me, this is healthy. For me, this is also honoring my friend, because I don't want Mary going to this person and saying, "Well, you know Phil told me thus-and-so . . ."

See what I mean?

Other situations where I am learning to remain neutral are arguments between my employees; arguments between my ex-wife and my kids; and discussions with my parents about my siblings. I practice the same principle at church, and whenever I'm around my ex-wife's friends and family.

Participating in destructive, unhealthy conversations and gossip circles only promotes harm, hurt feelings, and in the end, benefits no one.

As a recovering co-dependent, I refuse to be sucked into such conversations or situations where I become a go-between or a link in a gossip chain.

There are appropriate and healthy times to discuss and/or disclose such information. But there are more inappropriate and unhealthy opportunities to do so. In recovery, I am learning to discern the difference.

Having Fun

March 12, 1997

One important recovery principle I have re-discovered recently is how to have fun in life.

I actually had to give myself permission to start having responsible fun, rather than being constantly on guard or worrying about what is going to happen next in my life. Or even worse, letting what someone else might think keep me from doing something fun and beneficial for myself.

For example, some friends recently asked me to join them for an evening of live music and dancing at a weekly beach party hosted by a local hotel. My first thought was to say, "No, I'm not much of a dancer." But the alternative was to sit at home on a Sunday night, moping about my divorce or wondering when my life would be normal again. Well, here was an opportunity to do something different and fun. "I'll come out with you," I answered. "But I probably won't dance much."

Wrong.

I danced my buns off and had fun doing it. So what if I was sore for the next three days. Who cares? And besides, I lost two pounds over the three and a half hours we danced. The sunset was beautiful; I was in the company of people whom I enjoy being around; and the band was great.

I'm not recommending the party life for those struggling with addictive behavior. I'm recommending having some fun in life. Find something healthy you enjoy doing and do it just for you. Treat yourself. It doesn't have to cost a penny, either. Do it just for the sheer pleasure it brings you.

I'm learning it's OK for me to have fun. It's OK to laugh. It's OK to be with friends and have a good time together. It's OK to lighten up and wear a smile.

Recovery is about giving up taking life so seriously. Recovery is about learning to live. And laugh. And love. And having fun in the process.

Becoming Whole

April 27, 1997

Over the past three months I've narrowed my recovery focus to the healing process. Specifically, healing from my marriage of 15 years (including 3 years of intermittent separations) and my pending divorce. I took this time just for myself, because all the emotional turmoil surrounding the legal wrap-up was slowly driving me crazy. Believe it or not, I was also trying to date earlier in the year, but kept getting strong signals that the people I was picking out as dating partners were exact duplicates of my ex-wife—especially in regards to their lack of emotional availability.

So, I put the brakes on the dating scene and got involved in a 13-week divorce recovery group, along with my regular CoDA meeting. To further direct my thinking, I began reading Deepak Chopra's new book, *The Path to Love*. This book was so affirming and encouraging, I bought the condensed version on CD-ROM.

The lesson I'm learning is that I am a whole, unique, self-affirming, self-loving individual. There is no need to frantically search for love, meaning, or a care-taker for my needs outside of my relationship with myself and God. Depending on external people or things for a sense of identity and wholeness is a vain pursuit! Everything I need to feel loved, whole, cherished, and un-dependent is inside of me. There is a spiritual reality within that cannot be touched or contaminated by externals. Sometimes it's called the Inner Child, the Spirit, God, Higher Power—whatever—yet this spirituality has been accessible to me all my life. I simply wasn't aware of the power or its availability. I'm learning that my responsibility is to work in harmony with this power, to take care of myself.

Just knowing that I have the power and the ability to take care of myself has been a huge boost to my self-esteem and my self-confidence. But this power is not just my self alone. My perspective is that I am a God-enabled self—a Spiritual self—who can respond to my human needs, rather than depending on another person.

I believe my co-dependency was a search for another person—another half—to complete the half of me I thought was missing. My co-dependency was a frantic, external search for love and affirmation that could (so I thought) only be fulfilled in a relationship. I've learned that such thinking was complete illusion.

The illusion is perpetuated by the myth of romantic love and illusive chemistry in popular songs, movies, novels, etc. Messages such as, "I'm nothing without you," and "we were meant to be together," are media lies that feed the co-dependent frenzy to find completeness in another person.

Through recovery, I am discovering how to be a whole person for the first time in my life. I'm discovering that within me is the power to heal, the power to live passionately, and the power to love and cherish myself completely. Everything I've ever needed has been right here, in my heart, all along.

I'm no longer searching for that magic chemistry, my soul-mate, or my cosmic-twin to make me a complete person. I'm learning that love between two spiritually-attuned people is a mature decision, a choice, a partnership, where two whole people unite their resources to create a wondrous new reality for themselves, interdependent of their individuality and free from the mind-games of ego-dominance and control. I believe such a relationship is the goal of recovery from co-dependence. Perhaps most importantly, I believe that such a relationship is also possible with God—and when that relationship is realized, all other relationships become icing on the cake.

Letting Go of Perfectionism

May 7, 1997

In my former life, I was a rabid perfectionist. Swirling around inside my head were images (where did they come from?) about the way reality was supposed to be. These images centered around home life, career, church, other people, and myself. The only trouble: reality seldom, if ever, conformed to my idealized mental images and expectations. And try as I might, I could not force or control or change reality into conforming to my standards. Eventually, I began to expect disappointment, which I always got, thus setting myself up for depression, anxiety, and frustration.

Even worse, I rarely lived up to the perfectionist ideals I set for myself. My words and actions never matched what I should have done or said. Consequently, I spent inordinate amounts of time berating and demeaning myself for circumstances beyond my control. I obsessively measured myself against my perfectionist ideals and invariably came up lacking. Again, causing myself needless frustration and bitterness.

Perfectionism is not a healthy way to live.

Eventually, I gave in to an imperfect world and imperfect self. The truth, as I see it now, is that reality is supposed to be imperfect! Life is difficult so that I can grow. And as for me, giving up false expectations about myself is possibly the best thing I've ever done to raise my self-esteem. I learned how to forgive, to accept, to be compassionate, and to see other perspectives beyond my own nose.

Surrendering to an imperfect universe freed me to simply enjoy life as it unfolds. Accepting my personal limitations freed me to be comfortable with myself and freed others to be comfortable around me. There is tremendous power and serenity in surrendering and accepting. There is a lasting joy and happiness living in the present moment, without expectations, without filtering people or events through idealistic, judgmental attitudes. There is much beauty (and even perfection) in people and things just the way they are. Just being aware that life is beautiful and good and acceptable goes a long way toward curing the unhealthy desires I used to feel compelled to fix, change, control, coerce, and alter.

For me, letting go of perfectionism was a giant leap along the path to lasting serenity.

Clean and Empty

May 19, 1997

Lately I've had a growing emptiness within me. Not a negative kind of emptiness, but a positive, satisfying, *clean* emptiness. More like the emptiness of a desert, or a mountain top, or being out at sea, beyond the sight of land. This emptiness comes from a beneficial, healing place—not from loneliness, self-pity, futility, or isolation—but from the spiritual, refining fire of experience.

My life is finally ready to be filled with good stuff—positive relationships, healthy communication, being alive and aware in every moment. I'm like a cup or water jar, empty and clean, anticipating cool, clear, refreshing water. For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm really living and being, rather than just existing and doing, doing, doing.

This sense of emptiness makes me realize how much recovery has helped me unlearn. Learning that pain has purpose. That hurt holds a healing paradox. That suffering is never meaningless. That my ego can finally surrender and deflate and simply accept, waiting silently to see what God wills to do with this life.

Like that line from Psalm 23, "my cup runneth over . . ." I first had to be emptied of ego and self, before I could be filled.

Thank You, God, for the clean, emptying grace of recovery. Amen.

Letting Go of Outcomes

May 21, 1997

A recovery issue I've been dealing with lately is letting go of the compulsion to:

- predict the future
- figure out situations in advance
- obsess about alternative paths
- calculate every move to perfect timing
- avoid risk by remaining indecisive

While I realize that planning ahead is both smart and beneficial, for me planning can easily disintegrate into second-guessing the "what ifs" to the point that no plans get made and nothing gets accomplished. Before I know it, I've spent days or weeks procrastinating over the outcome rather than making a decision. Some of my "what if" demons about future outcomes include:

- What if I lose my job?
- What if there isn't enough money?
- What if I can't make my child support payments?
- What if the car breaks down?
- What if my kids don't like this decision?
- What if so-and-so doesn't love me?
- What if so-and-so leaves me?
- What if so-and-so says no?
- What if the next relationship is worse than the first?

The truth I have to remember is that life includes so much risk-taking. I want to avoid the extreme of jumping into situations without pausing to think. But I also want to avoid over-analyzing a situation to the point of paralysis. Both extremes are equally dangerous.

So the solution for me has been to find that position of positive, healthy balance. Somewhere between leaping and procrastinating is the calm, balanced center. A place where I am capable of making sound decisions (rather than reacting). A place where I can weigh the risk of moving forward with the risk of remaining static. A place where I can separate and determine God's will from my egotistical self-will. A place where my final decision rests on what is best for my life rather than what is best for today.

Most of all, I must remember that life cannot always be perfectly calculated. Sometimes it is OK to wait, and sometimes, it is OK to leap spontaneously into the unknown.

Letting Go of the Past

May 22, 1997

The time has come for me to let go of the past. I've carried this realization for a while now. I've grieved over the past long enough. The time to say good-bye, once and for all, has arrived.

Am I rejecting my past? No. Part of letting go is accepting and admitting the past is over, done, finished, and complete. Nothing is left back there for me to do. Nothing is left back there for me to cling to, except some wonderful memories.

But life is about making memories. So life is quietly urging me to move on, embrace the future, and create new memories. Life is asking me to look ahead, rather than looking behind. All that I have been and once was is important, but now, it is more important for me to forge onward, to grow, into all I am capable of becoming.

Getting to this point was not necessarily a conscious goal on my part. The process required many months of preparation—working all the way through my pain, false hope, anger, frustration, humiliation, discouragement, and disappointment. My recovery lesson is to learn that letting go cannot be forced. Letting go must come easily, naturally, at just the right time. I cannot let go until I am fully prepared to let go. I cannot let go until hanging on causes more pain than letting go.

Clinging to the past has become far too painful for me. Yesterday's solutions and answers to my life problems no longer work. New solutions, new answers, new situations—a new life await me. What's over the next hill? Only God knows. But I'm keeping a prayerful, positive, hopeful, attitude. I'm patiently anticipating the future, rather than obsessively trying to control it. I'm waiting to see what will happen next, moment by moment by moment.

Embracing the Moment

June 16, 1997

The importance of "living in the moment" to my recovery needs to be emphasized.

Before recovery, I lived in constant fear. I was obsessed with finding security—financial security, emotional security, job security, etc. I wanted to ensure that nothing rocked the boat in my carefully constructed little world. Yet the more I pursued such goals, the faster they eluded me. As I desperately tried to cling to material and physical stuff, I saw it literally vaporize between my fingers.

I've read somewhere that living is really about giving up. The final thing we give up or surrender is our very life (i.e., we eventually surrender to physical death). I remember when my Grandfather died in 1982, the doctors said, "He fought hard for life, but his heart was just too weak." The same principle applies to other areas: no matter how hard we fight to hang on to someone or something, we eventually give in and give up.

In a sense, as soon as we are born, we begin the lifelong process of giving up.

We give up the warmth and security of the womb; we give up the bond with our mother; we give up baby food; we give up being carried everywhere; we give up crawling; we give up holding a parent's hand; we give up three-wheels for two-wheels; and so on throughout all of life. Life is constantly changing, moment by moment all around us. Every passing minute is one less to call our own.

Thus, every moment is indeed precious. Every moment has a lesson to learn. Every moment brings me closer to something else I must eventually give up. Every moment must be embraced and lived fully, and then released. Maybe fully embracing each moment is the only way to surrender each moment.

Yesterday was Father's Day. My children are twelve and nine. Only a moment ago they were new born. Only a moment from now, they'll be graduating college, creating lives of their own. I try to embrace every moment I spend with them, but I also surrender and let each moment go. For example, my 1997 Father's Day was special. I spent the day with friends who care about me, because the kids are off vacationing with their mother in another state. Sure, I missed seeing them, but all the times we've spent together are here in my heart. All the moments we'll spend together in the future still await.

I've learned how to embrace the moment, in the now, and my life is better for having done so. I'm no longer dependent on the past or the future. I'm no longer chasing the illusion of security. I accept things as they come; I release things as they go. This is balance. This is peace. This is serenity. This is recovery.

Healthy Communication

June 17, 1997

How I communicate with other people is vital to my recovery. Although I'm sure I have many other poor communication habits, I've had to work diligently to stop:

- overreacting (taking a message too seriously, too personally, etc.)
- making assumptions (failing to clarify the other person's true intentions)
- projecting (expecting that another person holds my exact views on an issue)
- mind-reading (instead of talking openly and forthrightly)
- biased listening (rather than genuinely hearing the other person's heartfelt message)
- chattering nervously (when it would be better to remain silent)
- arguing (rather than focusing on areas where agreement is possible)
- generalizing (rather than getting the specific details of a whole story)

Healthy relationships require healthy communication. One of the major reasons for my failed marriage was poor communication. I assumed too much, refused to listen, and argued far past the point of reason. Yet I believed (erroneously as it turned out) that I was communicating.

What I actually did was to shut down all communication. Because my mind was made up, I made true communication impossible.

Recovery has taught me to be open-minded, accepting, patient, and forthright in my verbal communication. Most importantly, recovery has given me the right to be wrong, to admit the fact when I am wrong. No part of my life is perfect, including my communication. Rather than egotistically assuming I'm always right, now I leave myself room for doubt. I give the other person the benefit of the doubt too. I understand that the other person may also be struggling to achieve clean, healthy communication.

As a writer, I know the limitations of words. Combine words with emotions, and you have all kinds of possibilities for misunderstanding. Good communication is hard work. Maybe the hardest work of all.

For me, real communication occurs when I'm big enough to temporarily set aside the need to express my ego, my agenda, my beliefs, my intelligence, and give the other person the time and opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and dreams in an uninterrupted, accepting way. When I permit myself to listen, unbiased, to the words coming from the other person's heart, I create in them willingness to do the same for me when it comes my turn to talk.

I can disagree with the other person. They can disagree with me. That is OK.

But each of us has the right to express our thoughts and feelings in a fair exchange. We allow and even value each other's differences. That makes for interesting conversation and leaves room for growth on both sides. We understand that beliefs, ideas, opinions, facts, and feelings are separate and apart from the other person's worth as a human being. Communication is a tool for self-expression, not a tool for demeaning other people or taking their words, twisting them, and using them against the person in a verbal battle.

Communication opens the door for me to learn who I am by listening to who you are. Healthy communication is understanding that we all have enough in common, as fellow human beings, to learn something valuable from each other.

Trusting God, Again

June 25, 1997

Over the past few weeks, I've been revisiting my trust issue again. Sometimes, circumstances lead me into thinking that perhaps someone new is entering my life or that somehow, my life is finally changing in a positive, constructive way. My hope starts to build, I begin anticipating the change, but then the bubble bursts. I'm left with the stunned realization that once more, it was all just in my head.

Once the bubble pops, I start asking the old questions all over again. Is God really taking care of me? Am I really making progress in my recovery? Am I totally focused on loving myself, rather than looking for love outside of myself? Can I ever trust myself to leave my co-dependencies behind me, once and for all? Can I trust significant others with my innermost feelings and intuitions, even when revealing them will make me out to be a fool?

I've never enjoyed that "pick yourself up and dust yourself off and move on" feeling, when realization sinks in and what looked promising vanishes into thin air. Maybe I should take that kind of event as a signal that deep down inside, maybe unconsciously, I'm still looking and hoping for some external person or thing to save me from myself and my problems. I stop trusting God and start trusting all the false gods that never deliver on their false hopes and promises.

I suppose trust is the whole reason for addictions in the first place—something or someone promises to be better for us than we believe God can be. It's easier to trust in the tangibles rather than the intangibles. To escape the trap of constant self-awareness and pain, we desperately cling to whatever addictive agent we can literally get our hands on, promising a way out of self, a way to numb the pain, a way of forgetting, even if just temporarily.

Someone said to me recently, "I am a runner. I run away from my problems instead of facing them."

I, too, am a runner. All my life I've run from myself and my fears. All my life I've hoped and prayed for a way to escape the responsibility of dealing with life. Maybe we are all runners.

Recovery has taught me the safety of trusting God rather than someone or something. It is safe to trust God, even in the dark, when I can't see the next step. It is safe to trust God when I am afraid and don't know what to do next. It is safe to trust God when the pain is too great to bear for another minute—yet another minute somehow passes. It is safe to trust God when the only tool left to me is to simply trust God some more. But for some reason, I have to be reminded to trust God, again and again. Maybe that's the reason there is so much suffering and pain, to remind me where to place my trust.

Let me always run to God then, who consistently delivers on the promises of real inner peace and serenity and safety, despite the outer turmoil.

Letting Go of Urgency

July 15, 1997

In the movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda says of the young Luke Skywalker, "Long have I watched this one. Never his mind on where he was. What he was doing."

For much of my life before recovery, I'm afraid Yoda would have said the same thing about me. I seem to have grown up with the false belief that rushing through life, always getting to the next goal, was the right way to live.

When I was a baby, I wanted to be grown up. When I was in grade school, I couldn't wait for high school. In high school I was constantly worrying about getting into college. In college all I thought about was finding someone to marry or getting started in my career. Once into my career, my focus shifted to retirement. While at work I thought about being at home; while at home I thought about being at work.

Insanity.

I don't know where my sense of urgency and lack of focus came from. But I'm glad that I've learned to let go of it. My whole life was passing by and I wasn't enjoying one single minute of it. What helped me let go of the urgency?

Hitting bottom

Hitting bottom got my attention. Everything I worked so hard to attain was suddenly stripped from me and I was left with only myself. And I was the one who was responsible. I had rushed myself into a corner of my own making. Of course, at the time, I kicked and fussed and blamed and pointed fingers. It took about a year of hard recovery work to accept responsibility for my own life and my own actions. My life had slipped through my fingers while I rushed about searching for and attaining external, meaningless things.

I know it sounds trite, but recovery is about learning to smell the roses. Enjoying a sunset. Taking a hot bath. Taking the kids to the park and riding all the rides ten times. Recovery is about treasuring what you cannot hold onto. Recovery is about relaxing into the moment, being spontaneous, and enjoying life. What a concept!

A friend recently invited me to Jacksonville, Florida for the July Fourth weekend. I decided to go. We left on a Thursday afternoon, took her car and drove six hours up the Florida coast. We visited with her parents. We visited with her childhood friends. We visited with some of her extended family she hadn't seen for seven years. We went to the mall. We went out to eat a few times. We watched a firework display on a sailboat in the St. Johns River, right in front of Friendship Park. On Sunday, we went to church, then drove back home to Naples. Every moment was lived to the fullest. Every moment was great fun.

We focused on the rewards that every minute can bring when you let every minute be the serendipitous event it is meant to be.

Today, I'm focusing on where I'm at. I've let go of the urgency. I've let go of rushing through life. I've let go of charting a course and then racing like hell to get there. (And a hell on earth is exactly what I ended up with.) On the other hand, I've found heaven enjoying the gift of the present.

The Empire Strikes Back (c) Lucasfilm Ltd.

Choosing to Love

July 21, 1997

In my own life, I've found that "falling in love" is initially a kind of trance, where the two people involved feel all kinds of wonderful feelings for each other. This type of love starts out as a euphoric high, in which both partners focus on their similarities. They believe their match is made in heaven. They are convinced the magical feelings of friendship and love they share will conquer all barriers and problems and last happily ever after. Also during this initial phase of love, the accompanying sexual attraction and activity is generally quite intense and can, if allowed, "drive" the relationship.

Eventually, however, the euphoric feelings associated with falling in love give way to reality. Both partners come down from the euphoric state of rapture. They wake up, in essence, and suddenly begin noticing their differences for the first time. They discover they have likes and dislikes—about each other. Their individualism begins to re-assert itself. Ego dominance and control issues arise, and can, if unchecked, eventually lead to abuse. The logistics of life start crowding out the in-love feelings and the relationship begins, seemingly, to crash and fall apart. The couple loses the feelings of attraction that initially brought them together and they begin, once more, looking for love by turning to a new partner, thus starting the whole cycle all over again.

According to Peck, Chopra, and other leading psychiatrists, the emotional high and the inevitable crash can take as long as two years to cycle through to completion. This is why long term, non-sexual courtships tend to result in healthier, committed relationships. The courtship is also healthier and more relaxed when both partners are aware of and understand the course that "falling in love" takes.

At some point, then, the euphoric high reaches an end. Crises ensue. Rather than falling out of love and ending the relationship, partners who are aware of love's process can now begin the work of real, lasting love. At this critical juncture, where many relationships fall apart, a couple is ready for the next, higher phase of love, based on the initial feelings of attraction that first brought them together.

The euphoria of love is falling in love; the work of love is choosing to love.

- Choosing to treat each other with kindness.
- Choosing to keep the relationship alive and healthy.
- Choosing to give to one another.
- Choosing to remain friends despite conflicts.
- Choosing to negotiate conflicts to mutually-agreed resolutions.
- Choosing to combine their resources.
- Choosing to value and respect their differences.
- Choosing to create a beneficial partnership of independent, yet interdependent individuals.

Real, lasting love is a choice.

The only prerequisite for real love to continue is for both partners to simultaneously choose to engage in the work of love together. Both partners choose to build the relationship. Both partners are committed to creating a healthy home, where each of them is free to be their best self and where each of them is willing to encourage the other to be their best self and reach their greatest potential as individuals. Both partners agree to maintain the relationship, not out of need, but because each has a contribution and benefit to bring into the relationship. Both partners chose, together, despite any or all logistical problems that arise, to create and maintain a new reality of disciplined love for themselves and their children—a healthy reality where both partners can grow mentally and spiritually and can nurture, support, and encourage one another. In such a relationship, both euphoric love and love-by-choice will flourish and last.

Activity and Stillness

July 6, 1997

The past few weeks have been hectic for me. I had an apartment full of company for over a week, got out of my usual routine, and spent lots of time and energy in a whirlwind of activity.

Now the company is all gone. The apartment is quiet. And my life is settling back into that comfortable, safe, and even pleasantly boring, routine.

I've learned that it's OK for my life to get a little frenzied and unpredictable at times. It's OK for me to be spontaneous, get out of my comfort zone, and do some new and different things. But it's also beneficial for me to have a routine, some peace and quiet, and spend quality time alone.

It's that all-important balance.

This morning I woke up about 4:30am to heavy rain, thunder, and lightning—typical pre-dawn weather for Southwest Florida. I stayed in the bed, got still, and just listened. A wondrous clarity, calmness, and serenity filled me. I realized that a balanced mix of activity and stillness nurtures my growth as a person. Without the activity, I fail to appreciate the stillness. Without the occasional frenzy, I forget the blessings of serenity. Hours filled with people, places, and events help me to value equally the hours of silence, prayer, and meditation.

Stillness brings clarity and insights, but activity helps me understand the necessity for interacting, communicating, reaching out, giving and receiving, and being emotionally present—so I can live and share the experience, strength, and hope gleaned from the solitude.

Milestones

July 6, 1997

August 1997 marks the fourth anniversary of my continued recovery from co-dependency.

In a way, such milestones are beneficial, because the best way to gauge recovery is to look retrospectively and introspectively. Looking back, I'm amazed at how far I've come. But in another way, the milestones are insignificant because after four years, I realize I've still got a long way to go. Seems almost every day I garner some new insight into how co-dependency has (or is still) manifested in my relationships. I'm no closer to "graduating" from the program. There are no caps and gowns in recovery.

Today, when I think about the future, I'm excited. Four years of recovery taught me how much I have to be grateful for—thank God I've got the rest of my entire life, one day at a time, to continue learning about myself. Learning about the dynamics of relationships. Learning why relationships work and why they don't. Giving and receiving love in healthy ways.

I realize I'm just a toddler; I'm still taking baby steps. I've just barely glimpsed the wondrous light of how good my life can really be.

Somebody hand me a pair of sunglasses; the future looks bright indeed!

Healthy Relationships

July 6, 1997

I recently finished reading Patricia Evans' book, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*. Her ideas gave me some new insights into my failed marriage and gave me an excellent model for a better understanding of healthy relationships.

Evans says there are two types of relationships: Level I (the verbally abusive relationship) and Level II (a healthy relationship). To reach Level II, the two partners in a relationship need to be aware that both partners are equal. As long as inequality exists (i.e., one partner exercising power over the other), then the relationship will remain at Level I. In order to exercise "power over," the dominate partner must protect their position at all costs. Initially, that protection relies upon verbal insults, put-downs, demeaning jokes, mind-games, emotional withdrawal, name-calling, condescending tone, and several other verbal weapons. The dominant partner must win every verbal exchange to keep power and control. If these tactics fail, then the power-over "game" can (and over time probably will) escalate to physical violence.

I've decided that if I'm ever going to be involved in another significant relationship, both my partner and I are going to have an awareness of why relationships work and why they don't. I want a relationship of equals, partners, and friends—who mutually affirm, encourage, and support each other.

I have to admit, I sometimes wonder if a healthy relationship is possible. Sometimes I wonder whether I'm worthy of such a relationship. Books like Patricia Evans' give me hope. It's exciting to think about the possibilities.

As a co-dependent, I want to focus on being the best person I can be, so when the opportunity for a healthy friendship or relationship comes along, I can participate in helping create a mutually-beneficial partnership. Being the best person I can be means taking care of myself, loving myself, being un-dependent, and having a deep reservoir of love, kindness, compassion, gentleness, and unconditional acceptance to offer myself and another.

Healthy relationships exist between two whole, aware, conscious adults, deciding together to give the best of themselves to a partnership where both are nurtured and where both are growing spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. A partnership where both partners are equal, where both partners are independent, yet interdependent. A partnership where the dynamics result in creativity, spontaneity, emotional safety, and spiritual growth.

Dear God, lead me to healthy, aware relationships. Grant me to bring wholeness and safety, on my part, to the relationship. Help me to always remember I am worthy of healthy relationships.

Letting Go of Painful Situations

July 20, 1997

I recently vacationed in the Florida Panhandle, in a beautiful seaside resort community called Destin. The week was spent living in a spacious condominium, walking the beach, riding waves, sitting in the sunlight (and the moonlight), enjoying the gulf breezes, and getting really relaxed.

In fact, I can't remember a more relaxing vacation in my entire life. The location and the company certainly helped. And I was really ready to chill from work for a while, too. Anyway, for that week, I experienced a refreshing lack of mental and emotional pain.

Yes, I live a fairly serene life anyway, but the quality of my serenity this particular week was somehow turned up a couple of notches. I felt totally immersed in deep serenity, peace, and comfort.

Coming back to reality after the vacation was difficult for me. It took about two days of working again to realize that I was actually feeling withdrawal pains! Withdrawal from that week of quality vacation time, when I let go, forgot about the clock, and just lived.

Of course, I realize it is a fantasy to think my life will ever be totally free from pain or from stresses. But it is OK, from time to time, for me to insulate myself from my sources of pain in a responsible, adult manner. That is called taking care of myself. In addition to vacations from real life and work life, I have also learned the art of taking "minute vacations" to temporarily withdraw, center, slow down, relax, and just let go. I never want to avoid pain or run from pain or ignore pain—I must deal with pain. However, getting away now and then is a responsible, conscious, healthy way of dealing with painful situations.

Sometimes, a particular situation is so painful or so toxic that I must permanently remove myself, physically or emotionally (or both) from the source of the pain to keep my sanity. Maybe the source of the pain is beyond my ability to really make a difference or change. If so, I can walk away, guilt-free, in order to take care of myself. But if I can make a difference, then it is OK for me to try. It is beneficial to resolve conflicts, negotiate, and improve a situation. And the resolution will differ, depending on the situation. It only becomes insanity when I keep trying to fix a situation that cannot or will not be improved, despite my best efforts. Ultimately, I am the one who decides how to deal with pain-causing situations, learn from them, or get out of them, if required.

Dear God, grant me the clarity to see all the sources of pain in my life. If I cannot stop the pain, give me the courage to let go of painful situations and take care of myself to the best degree possible. Thank You for teaching me how to relax and enjoy serene, pain-free moments when they occur. Amen.

Powerlessness

July 22, 1997

The role of powerlessness in recovery is a wonderful paradox. At first glance, one might think that powerlessness suggests vulnerability or defenselessness. But in actuality, powerlessness is the better advantage.

As with all recovery tools, the secret is awareness. Powerlessness is an awareness of where the true power lies. Armed with this awareness, a recovering co-dependent is freed from the insanity of power and control games.

For example, I am powerless over a family member's addiction. I jeopardize my own sanity when I invest my own emotional time and energy into figuring out how to coerce, control, or threaten another person into giving up their addiction. I can best help that person with a professionally-guided intervention that keeps me out of the middle.

The same is true for separation, divorce, abuse, and any other relationship issue. I am powerless over the parties involved; however, I do have the power to help them get professional help. I have the power to let go and let God handle situations. I have the power to own my power when others try to exercise power and control over me. I have the power to choose my responses to a given situation, rather than jumping in and getting enmeshed in someone else's stuff. I have the power to maintain my own serenity and sanity and take care of myself, with the help of my Higher Power.

Dear God, help me to see when I am powerless over people and situations and turn those people and situations over to You. Help me to own and exercise the power I have to care for myself, so I can be the best, whole person I can be. Help me to remember that knowing where the true power lies is a clean, healthy gift I can give others.

Happiness

September 5, 1997

Over the past few days, I've felt an increased awareness of deeper happiness growing inside of me.

First of all, I am choosing to be happy. I am choosing to see recent events in my life in the best light. I am choosing to believe the best, wait for the best, and see myself as worthy of the best life has to offer. The power and freedom to choose my perspective on life is a great source of happiness and contentment and serenity.

Second, I have consciously let go of outcomes and expectations regarding recent developments in my life. I am letting each moment bring whatever it brings. I am fully enjoying the serendipity of each moment. And each moment is either a blessing or a lesson. I receive the blessings; I learn the lessons. Whatever happens, happens. As it happens, I am choosing to be happy and content, no matter the outcome.

Third, I am fully trusting God and turning my life, moment by moment over to Him. My ongoing serenity and renewed happiness are the results of a cooperative effort with Him—not something I've created using my own resources. God is taking care of me and has shown me how to care for myself in many ways. By taking care of myself, I have a greater amount of healthy emotional energy to invest in relationships worthy of my attention. Paradoxical, but true—I love others best when I love myself first.

Fourth, I am happy because my life is healthy. Mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually, I see myself today as a whole person, fully capable of giving the best of myself to myself and to the significant people in my life.

I've filled myself to overflowing with love, acceptance, encouragement, and strength—and now I'm just learning how to give love, acceptance, encouragement, and strength from my own self-sustaining abundance. And giving these gifts to healthy people who appreciate them feels really nice.

Fifth, I am carefully choosing where to invest my emotional energy. I've let go of some negative people and some negative situations. I've turned my back on certain negative influences and decided that my life is not going to be affected by the expectations or "shoulds" of people who don't really know me or understand what is best for me. I'm happy because I'm taking care of myself, focusing on what is best for me, and choosing to do what I can to make my life the best it can be.

Sixth, I see myself as having arrived at a new plateau in my recovery. Plateaus are exciting places to be, because plateaus mean more growth is on the way. When I'm ready, I'll move on. But for now, I'm catching my breath. I'm enjoying the view. I'm reveling in the health I've attained and anticipating what lies ahead.

Seventh, I've realized that my ego has been through a refining, transforming process. I am no longer the needy, emotional black-hole of a person I was before recovery. I have no need to fear that the demon of my past self will suddenly reassert himself and ruin all the good that has occurred since I began recovery. Sure, I'll have setbacks and new issues to deal with, but I am a new person, with a new perspective on reality and on myself. I am becoming better and better each day.

I am fully focused on expressing love, rather than seeking love, and for me, that is the greatest happiness of all.

Thank You, God for the renewed sense of deep happiness in my life. Thank You for the awareness to see and know that my happiness comes from within me, through the power to take care of myself and through trusting that You are taking care of me, working out details, and that You desire for me to have an abundance of happiness. Thank You for teaching me how to express all the love that is within me.

Letting Go of Old Beliefs

September 25, 1997

As I continue growing in my recovery, I'm constantly gaining new spiritual insights, discovering new ways of thinking, and acquiring new beliefs. In addition to letting go of the past, I've realized that unless I also let go of the old beliefs that governed my past actions, then I will repeat the past.

Like most people, I act from my beliefs, so the key to breaking free from the cycles of the past is to fine tune my thinking process and my beliefs in the present.

Avoiding a repeat of the past is why recovery is so important to me. Recovery (in particular, the Twelve Steps) is a re-education process. Recovery gives me the transformational power and the permission to change my beliefs, and thus change my actions. Not by osmosis (i.e., just showing up at meetings), but by actively working the Twelve Steps and making conscious, aware, choices in the day-to-day decisions that affect the quality of all my relationships.

Prior to recovery, I acted on my old beliefs and old scripts automatically. I didn't have to think—I just did what I learned from my family of origin.

Through recovery, I learned to pause and question my actions, and eventually, to question the beliefs on which those actions were based. Once I gave myself permission to question and let go of the old, worn-out beliefs and attitudes that caused me pain, I began to understand that only through new beliefs, new thinking processes, and new attitudes would my actions arise from different motivations (and thus change). I still regress at times and I still make mistakes, but the overall pattern of my life and my actions now arise from new ways of thinking, believing, and being.

Here are some of the old beliefs I released:

- I will only find love outside myself.

New belief: All the love I need is within me. Life is about giving love, not getting it.

- I will only find security and happiness in material things.

New belief: Simplicity is the road to security and happiness. Less really is more.

- I will only find fulfillment in another person.

New belief: Fulfillment is my choice. I am most fulfilled when I choose to love myself, take care of myself, be aware, and continue growing emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

- I must create a life purpose and destiny for myself.

New belief: My life purpose and destiny is already mapped out. I am responsible for living today, to the best of my ability, giving love unconditionally, remaining spontaneous, and staying aware of what is happening as my life unfolds.

- I will only get I want and need by taking it, fighting for it, or controlling others.

New belief: Whatever I truly need will come to me. I can let go and let God take care of my needs. I am responsible for being aware of options as they arise, to maximize the blessings and resources that come my way.

Thank You, God for showing me how to change my life by changing my attitudes and my beliefs.

Single-Minded Focus

October 13, 1997

Before recovery, I thought all my relationships required equal amounts of energy and effort. I tried to be all things to all people in my life. I didn't know that I could focus on creating one or two really great relationships—the most important ones—and that it was OK for other relationships to be just acquaintances, friends, activity-partners, etc. But most of all, I didn't know that I didn't have to become enmeshed into, or even worse, the self-proclaimed answer to, the problems of the people I knew.

I like this quote, written by Dag Hammarskjöld:

"It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses."

For me, this principle was life changing. I was slowly driving myself crazy attending to all the issues of all the people that surrounded me. I thought I had to fix their problems. I thought if I didn't fix them, no one else would. I thought this was showing love, care, and concern. And when they didn't take my advice, I was offended and resentful for having wasted valuable emotional energy.

After alienating just about everybody from my life, I finally woke up and began looking at myself. I decided to fix my own problems, resolve my own issues, live my own life, and let others be. If they asked for my advice (and seldom does this happen—then or now), then I'd give it—but if not, I'd keep my own counsel, keep my mouth shut, and just listen.

What a relief to free myself from the burden of being the world's savior! That job description has already been filled—by Someone eminently more qualified than I am.

I now have more energy to devote to the truly special relationships in my life. I also have more time to focus on the quality of those relationships and more time to invest in discovering ways of enhancing and developing them. I'm careful, too, about who receives my time and attention. I'm not afraid to say, "no" if I can't accommodate the needs or demands of a specific relationship (e.g., someone recently asked me to be their CoDA sponsor and I declined).

I do want all of my relationships to be healthy; but it's OK to concentrate my best efforts and my best energy on the people who are most important to me.

Thank You God, for showing me how to focus my emotional energy into creating a few truly fantastic relationships. Amen.

Changes

November 11, 1997

Over the past several weeks, I've experienced some major life changes—living conditions, work conditions, relationships, leisure time—all have been affected or will be affected in one way or another. I guess it is a time of testing for me, a time of transition, a time of growth, a time to take my recovery "on the road" so to speak.

First, the condo I am renting is up for sale. About mid-October a realtor called me one night out of the blue and said, "I'm coming by with a client tomorrow to show your unit. The landlord has put it on the market, so I'll need to take a key as well." First I had heard of all this.

Naturally, I began to wonder whether I'd have to move, find a new place—all the attendant worries of being suddenly uprooted. I still don't have an answer, but the realtor has shown the condo at least once per week since the call.

Then, during the same week (at work this time), one of my best employees suddenly resigned. I was caught off-guard, then was immediately too busy for a couple of weeks, scrambling around, re-assigning assignments, filling out new employee requisition forms—all the attendant worries of being suddenly short-handed. I still don't have a new employee, but do I have a couple of folks to interview later this week.

Then, there have been problems with the car (a "lifter" in the engine is rattling), communicating with my ex-wife trying to work out holiday visitation times with the kids (Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's), making some travel arrangements to attend my niece's wedding on New Year's day in Arkansas, planning Christmas gift purchases—all the attendant worries of being a one-man show during the holiday season.

But so far, I've survived. Yes, everything—literally—about my life is up in the air right now. I have no idea where it is all going to land. And you know what? I really am fine with the idea.

Of course, I'm worried—but it's not a sick kind of worrying, not an obsessive worrying. Maybe it's not even worrying per se—but I do have more on my mind these days concerning the future and its uncertainty than I have had in many months prior to October.

Maybe it is time for me to be jarred out of my routine. Maybe it is time for me to grow some more. Maybe it is time for me to re-evaluate my priorities and my recovery goals. Maybe it is time for me to sit up and pay closer attention to my needs and take better care of myself.

There is one thing I am certain about—I trust God that all this change will be for my good and the end result will be for my ultimate benefit.

Recovery has taught me that no matter how bad things get, good stuff comes my way through every life situation. Therefore, I can anticipate the changes rather than dreading them. I can look for the ways my life is going to get better, rather than getting letting myself get bitter.

These are the times when recovery pays off. These are the times when I reap the rewards of all the work I've put into meditating, reading, going to meetings, praying, and focusing. These are the times when I trust God, let go, and let my faith grow even stronger. Above all, these are the times when I know, without doubt, that external circumstances may change, but I am still me. I will be OK, no matter what happens.

Thank You God, for giving me more opportunities to trust You. Thank You for all the changes I am going through, because You have taught me that change brings new growth and good things into my life.

Doing Fine

April 28, 1998

After a whirlwind of activity over the past few months, my life is starting to slow down—a little.

Regarding my condo, I didn't have to move. My new landlord has been good to me—installing a new dishwasher and responding quickly when something needs to be fixed. My fears about moving and having to find a new place to live took care of themselves—as such issues usually do. The whole incident reminded me never to go borrowing worry. In the end, everything works out for the best.

I spent the 1997 holidays traveling, and over New Year's, ended up in my home state of Arkansas with family and friends. During the visit, my niece was married in the church where I grew up. It was a romantic, story book wedding, complete with a horse-drawn carriage. True love and romance are still alive, still to be found. Seeing the happy newly weds restored my faith in loving relationships.

Later in January, I had the opportunity to travel in Europe. I got to see some of Paris and Mulhouse (a city on the French / German border of eastern France). What an eye-opening and awareness-expanding trip! Most memorable was a night spent chasing through the Paris subways, seeing and hearing so many young people up close. I learned that pain and suffering, as well as laughter and fun, are universal languages. The barriers between cultures and people really don't exist, unless we work hard to create them. Why do we labor to build walls when it is so simple to dissolve them? But of course, philosophers and missionaries and gurus and prophets and spiritual leaders have been asking that question for centuries.

In February and March, the software company I work for acquired another company and I was kept extremely busy integrating a new product, setting up a marketing department, hiring new staff, working with translators, and pulling together product specifications. It was a time of intense stress and creativity for me, in addition to allowing me to fully test recovery principles in practical ways. For example, one employee was angered by a memo I wrote and responded by lambasting me in an e-mail (which was also copied to my boss). I did what I could to save the relationship, including meeting one-on-one with the employee and honestly trying to open the lines of communication. In the end, the employee left the company—mad and hurt. From that experience, I learned that some issues just cannot be resolved unless both parties are willing to work toward a resolution. Also, I learned that sometimes misunderstandings intentionally remain misunderstandings because one party is simply too proud to admit that a misunderstanding took place!

In early April, my parents came down and spent a week with me, here in Florida. They brought along a couple of my nephews from Oklahoma and we had a great time. We lounged around the pool, worked on our tans, went shopping, went to movies, and ate out. Nothing special, just golden opportunities to converse, get re-acquainted, and be together for a while.

Through all these events, I've remembered to live my recovery. I've kept a relaxed, open, patient, and prayerful heart. I've had a few bad days, doubtful times, and second-guessing. But I've remembered that God is watching over me, keeping me safe.

Thank You, God for Your care and attendance over the events in my life. Thank You for blessing me with family and friends and opportunities to explore Your wonderful creation. Thank You for blessing my life with circumstances that enhance my serenity. Thank You for providing new opportunities for me to express love. Thank You for reminding me of the goodness and graciousness of life. Thank You for increasing my awareness that today, just for today, I am doing fine.

Letting Go of the Future

July 10, 1998

Sometimes I amaze myself. I think I'm making progress, but then suddenly, something happens and I'm picking myself up off the recovery floor again.

This past week it happened when I had a wreck in my car. Actually, to call it a wreck is an overstatement, but I rear-ended another car and did \$1000 damage to mine. Not even a scratch on the other car.

Naturally, the police determined it was my fault, as it is 99.99% of the time in the case of rear-end collision.

But I didn't believe it was my fault. I was pulling out into a lane, making a right-hand turn, and the car in front of me stopped suddenly. I was accelerating and so accelerated right into the back-end of a big Ford Taurus. Then, the driver hopped out and started yelling, "You rammed my car! I can't believe you just rammed my car!"

Rammed her car???

I hopped out of my car. "Get outta here," I yelled back. "It was an accident."

To make matter worse, the police talked to the other driver first and then me. Not good. The officer's opening statement to me was: "Why did you get out and start yelling at the other driver?"

What???

"That's not how it happened," I protested. "The other driver stopped right in front of me, while I was pulling out onto the street."

"They said you rammed them," said the officer. "Then you got out and started yelling."

Needless to say, I felt there was no justice in the matter. I paid my \$83 dollar fine and took 4 points on my driving record. It just seems that in some situations, the truth is not going to be heard.

Of course, some would argue truth is relative to one's point of view. I tend to agree with that more and more. The officer said, "We've seen hundreds of these cases and they're pretty much all alike—the driver in back isn't paying attention."

"Look at my driving record," I begged. "I've not had an accident in 20 years. I'm a safe driver on my license and with my insurance company. I've not even had a speeding ticket in over 5 years. My kids were in the car with me. Do you think I'd carelessly endanger their lives?"

Words cast upon deaf ears.

It's happened to me before. I tried so hard to be heard, to be understood. After my divorce, I promised myself that in the future, I would do everything it took to work out differences in understanding. I promised myself that in the future, I would be a better listener. In the future, I'd keep working on communication until the situation was resolved.

I was playing right into the biggest co-dependent traps of all—people pleasing, living in the future rather than the present, believing that truth is truth no matter the point of view, believing that good communication would give me more control over a situation.

Life just isn't as simple as my co-dependent self wants it to be. People are unpredictable. Some situations are beyond my control no matter how hard I wish or work to make it different.

For a recovering co-dependent, there can be no such thing as "tomorrow." In the end, tomorrow doesn't make a lot of difference. The only thing that makes a difference is the attitude I take toward today, right here, right now. This moment is the only moment I have any power to change and all I can really change is my attitude in the moment.

That's all.

Recovery honestly is living one day at a time. That's why we have that slogan—to remind us that today is the only day we have to work through. Tomorrow doesn't count. Let go of the future, because life is today.

When the crashes, spills, tumbles, hurts, disappointments, misunderstandings, lost opportunities, changes, shocks, and storms start rolling in, I smile and wait. It's only for today that I must endure and be strong. It's only for today that my answers will come. I can relax into the joy that tribulation brings knowing that I can survive anything for 24 hours. Grace will take care of tomorrow.

Thank You, God for reminding me that difficulties are part of living. Thank You for giving me just enough strength and serenity for today. I turn tomorrow over to You. Amen.

Recovery and My Marriage

August 17, 1998

A reader recently posed this question which gave me reason to pause and reflect: "Why did your marriage fail in spite of the fact you began recovering? It seems that recovery would have helped to improve your relationship."

After nearly three years of separation and divorce and many hours in counseling offices and support groups, I still cannot give a definite answer to this question.

Therapists have told me that usually when one partner starts recovery, one of two things happen: 1.) the non-recovering partner starts to recover, too or 2.) the non-recovering partner leaves and the relationship ends.

I did not want my marriage to end, but I did want improvements in the way my ex-wife and I related to one another. I worked extremely hard at recovery in order to effect changes in myself. However, a relationship is comprised of two people. Although I began a recovery program and maintained it, after about 22 months, my ex-wife decided she could no longer live with me and left.

There were lots of factors involved, but basically, throughout our marriage, she had the upper hand. To maintain her dominant position, she would withhold herself from me both emotionally and sexually as a way of controlling me into meeting her expectations. Kind of like saying, "If you aren't a good boy, I'll take away your privileges." Initially, the periods of punishment would last a few hours, but the longer we were married, the longer these periods became—lasting days on end—and then overlapping. Punishment was triggered by any action or word that did not comply with her expectations of me as a husband. Being co-dependent, the idea of being emotionally and physically abandoned was terrifying to me, so I became compliant early on in our marriage to keep her happy. But I also developed a deep-seated anger toward her. Initially, I manifested this anger as depression.

However, once I started recovering and getting a healthy perspective on relationships, I challenged her dominance and our own relationship digressed into a fierce power struggle. It was as much my fault as hers. I refuse to say it was all my fault, or the result of my depression, as she and her family desperately wanted me to believe. I began manifesting my anger late in the marriage through rage, name-calling, and fighting (which, I admit, was inexcusable behavior on my part). This was also facilitated by the fact that I was sporadically taking Wellbutrin, a psychotropic which has been clinically proven to bring out dormant hostility.

We agreed to separate in January of 1993 and after about three weeks, I wanted to end the separation. She refused and filed a restraining order, which required me to attend anger management treatment. This actually worked out as my introduction to the benefits of group therapy. After about five months of separation and counseling, I discovered that I could survive on my own. My recovery began in August of 1993 when a therapist suggested I attend a CoDA meeting.

When we got back together again in December of 1993, I was still not fully aware of all the dynamics of our personalities and how much the power play was warping our marriage. I didn't want to be in control, but neither did I want to be controlled. She still wanted to be in control, and didn't seem to be happy unless she was. This time, the struggle for dominance manifested itself primarily in our decision making process. We could not agree on anything (this is no exaggeration). She would probably rebut by saying I never made any firm decisions, but from my perspective, she was never happy with the decisions I did make and constantly second-guessed me. What I wanted was for us to make decisions together, rather than one of us forcing a decision upon the other. In order to make her happy (a major warning sign of co-dependency), I tried giving in for a while, hoping she would change. But eventually, one tires of giving in all the time. It's that mature, delicate balance of both individuals being big enough to give and take that makes a relationship healthy and fulfilling.

I must also point out two additional factors that helped destroy our marriage. She came from a strict, legalistic religious background and had unrealistic expectations of Biblical proportion about how marriage was supposed to be. Along with that, her mother exercises passive / aggressive control over her father. So my ex-wife was just doing what had been engrained and modeled for her. Because it was church and parents, she never questioned whether these ideas were best for our situation.

I honestly don't believe it was a malicious, mean-spirited intention on her part. I honestly think she just had unquestionable expectations about marriage and our marriage did not measure up to those expectations in her mind. One of those expectations was that the wife calls all the shots and "rules the roost" so to speak. This is exactly how it is in her parent's marriage—her mother is in complete control of her father. I believe from conversations with her mother, that she probably gave my ex-wife lots of advice in the area of "man-handling" tactics.

The difference between me and her father is that her father complies to keep the peace. He even suggested I do likewise. With us, however, the struggle eventually became a "deadly embrace" because I rebelled. I didn't want to be controlled—I didn't want us to play passive / aggressive games. I wanted a healthy, mature relationship; however, she didn't want to give up her position of dominance or question her expectations.

The end came one night in September of 1995 when I woke her up yelling about a decision I wanted to negotiate. But she had already made up her mind on this particular decision. No, it wasn't mature of me to yell at her. But neither was it mature of her to be non-negotiable. We both should have handled it differently. I came home from work the next day to find her gone again. After months of fruitless pleading with her and her family to work things out, I filed for divorce in February, 1996. The divorce was final in May, 1997.

I believe that part of her motivation for refusing to work things out was to control me on a spiritual basis. Her form of religion states that I cannot divorce her and re-marry without sinning. In other words, if I wouldn't live by her rules, she'd could leave me and force me into a life of married celibacy, or force me into compliance with her demands on my knees. (Of course, her actions fly in the face of Christ's injunction: treat others as you want to be treated.) But I am not bound by her legalistic interpretations of the Bible.

My view is that I have been abandoned. I am now free to form a new relationship with someone who loves me and will treat me as an equal, rather than trying to control me through the grossly misguided use of the tough love tactics espoused by psychologist David "Dare to Discipline" Dobson.

It's an awfully sad story, and it didn't have to end the way it did. In fact, I even asked her on the final day we sat down with our lawyers to settle whether we could work things out. She would not answer, nor would she explain why. Her lawyer merely laughed and suggested I was mentally ill for even asking.

Come to think of it, perhaps I was.

Hindsight and new relationships have shown me that our marriage really was a living hell. I think my ex-wife would probably agree. So I guess the fact our marriage ended actually was a happy ending for us both.

Thank you, God for happy endings. You have shown me that You will work things out for the best, though, from my limited perspective, I cannot see it at the time. Thank You for showing me how to recover. Thank You for being my friend. Thank You for loving me enough to bear patiently with me through my growth process. Thank You for the new relationships You have brought into my life that are healthy, supportive, loving, and nurturing. Amen.

Embracing Love

September 18, 1998

November 21st is the opening of a new chapter in my life. Someone wonderful and special has come into my life and we plan to be married on that date.

We first began seeing each other in August of 1997, and quickly became good friends. We went to concerts together, movies, dancing, and in general, we just began to enjoy being companions on the road of life together.

I've come to the conclusion that healthy love is maintaining a close friendship, giving and receiving mutual respect, granting each other the little common courtesies, giving and receiving compliments and encouragement, and taking time out together just to relax and have fun.

While that definition sounds easy, it's actually easier to let these things slip. It requires discipline to keep doing the right things over the long term. And because I love and respect my new wife-to-be, I'm committed to embracing this definition of love and keeping my love for her fresh and alive in our relationship. The items I mention above are the glue of our relationship. We both recognize that if we start to ignore these fundamental aspects of love, then our relationship will likewise begin falling apart.

Both of us have been through a previous divorce. Both of us know what we want and what we don't want. Both of us have a keen sense of how healthy relationships work. Both of us want this marriage to last 'til death do us part.

Seeking and finding companionship and friendship is normal and healthy. It's part of what helps a person grow emotionally, spiritually, and socially. My time of healing and being on my own is over. It's time for me to move on and let go of the failures of the past. It's time for me to take my lessons learned and apply them to the wonderful new relationship that has come into my life. I embrace and accept the love that life has brought me.

Thank you, God for healthy relationships. Thank you for healthy love and showing me that love can be a wonderful, fulfilling experience. Help me to be the right person and to do the right things that will keep this love vibrant, refreshing, and new. Amen.

Letting Go of Conceptual Limitations

September 23, 1998

Vital to my sustained recovery has been the realization that I must give up rigid thinking about the recovery process itself.

To gain the full benefits of recovery, there is no rule book, per se, that I (or anyone else) must follow. There are no definitions of recovery cast in stone, inflexible, or immune to change. Sure, there are steps, traditions, and personal histories, but these are merely guidelines, pointers, signposts, and bread crumb trails.

What exists in the way of organized groups, printed materials, slogans, definitions, and books are merely resources (albeit valuable resources) at my disposal, to be tailored and used as best fits my life situation and my ongoing recovery needs.

No one person has all the recovery answers. No single recovery group has a corner on the truth about how to recover. What all true recovering individuals and groups are encouraging is this: "Get started on the road to recovery and stay with it." The purpose of group therapy is to share experience, strength, and hope and to emphasize the freedom of individuality and creativity of each person as they walk the road. It's a chance to say, "Here is where I was—maybe you can relate. Here is where I am. This is what worked for me."

Recovery gives me the freedom to be the single best person to determine what successful recovery means to me. What level of recovery is sufficient for me. Ultimately, my personal definition of recovery, as it applies to my life situation, is all that matters. Likewise, your personal definition of recovery, as it applies to your life situation, is all that matters.

As individuals in recovery, we are all striving for the same common goal. We are all climbing the same mountain, but finding different routes up the mountain. The goals are: serenity, balance, wholeness, emotional peace, healthy and fulfilling relationships, openness to learning, and sustained spiritual growth.

The very nature of the goals themselves excludes rigid and dogmatic thinking about the process used to achieve these goals. My personal responsibility, as a recovering individual, is to be open, receptive, and teachable regarding the process. These attributes, perhaps more than any other, are the hallmarks and traits of a person who has discovered a serendipitous and sustainable recovery.

Thank you, God, for opening my mind and my heart, my intellect and my emotion, to the wonderful blessings of recovery. Keep me teachable. Keep me learning. Keep me growing. Amen.

Letting Go of High Standards

November 7, 1998

There are a couple of people I deal with on a daily basis who have both used the term "people-pleaser" to describe my demeanor and my behavior. Along with that label, they offered their analysis that "I need people to like me."

Actually, I could care less whether people like me or not.

On the surface, what must look like people-pleasing is actually a concerted effort on my part to overcome and to contain my natural tendency to let people know, with brutal honesty, when they don't measure up to the exacting standards I set for myself or for them.

I do have high standards and expectations, which I have (and to a certain degree) continue to work on letting go of—in particular, in my relationships with other people.

But I do work to maintain my high standards in certain areas of my life. For example, in my work as a technical writer, I set certain standards of quality for what I produce. At work, my striving for a certain standard results in high quality output.

In relationships, however, my striving for too high a standard has proven to cause conflict and pain, which I now prefer to avoid.

Rather than going to any length to get people to like me (which is the major manifestation of a people-pleaser), I am actually going to great lengths, internally and externally, to avoid the clashes and conflicts that naturally result from my seemingly innate ability to be extremely harsh, cruel, and brutal with my words.

I am in the process of learning how to use my "talent" for words in positive, constructive, and encouraging ways. And I am learning to let go of the high standards and expectations I set for myself and for others. Most importantly, I am learning to let go of my need to inform others when they do not meet my overly high standards and expectations.

Thank you, God, for showing me where my relationships undergo stress—from my need to express too harshly that others don't live up to my standards and expectations. Thank You for teaching me that kindness, gentleness, and politeness lead to rewarding relationships. Thank You for showing me how to let go of my high standards. Amen.

Friends and Lovers

December 17, 1998

Relationships can be wonderful indeed! My new wife and I have decided that our honeymoon will never end. We've committed to keeping our relationship as happy and fulfilling through the years as it is today. But both of us are experienced enough with bad relationships to know that good relationships don't happen by magic.

One of the ways we are going to accomplish our goal is through mutual respect. Rather than taking our relationship for granted, we treat each other as we would treat an honored guest in our home. We freely give sincere compliments and praise to each other. We thank each other for the little things that make our lives smoother and easier (like taking out the trash, riding along on kid-taxi trips, or unloading the dishwasher). It's this kind of mutual respect and kindness and helpfulness that defines what being a healthy "family" means.

Our relationship is valuable, so we hold each other in high esteem. We treat each other as we want to be treated in turn.

A very wise man gave the same prescription for healthy relationships long ago. Seems his advice works equally well for marriage partners, too.

Thank you, God, for showing me how to keep my relationships healthy and happy and growing. Help me to continually cultivate the wonderful, fulfilling relationships You have brought into my life. Amen.

Messages of Love

January 18, 1999

As a co-dependent, one of the hardest realities for me to accept was that I am worthy of love and life's richest blessings.

I don't know how I ever started believing that I was unworthy and undeserving of the good and the wonderful things that are available in life.

Some of it came out of my divorce. Some of it came from religious legalist. Some of it came from people who wanted to hurt me for one reason or another. But the message I received is not accurate.

As a human being, I am deserving of self-love and love from others. I am permitted to recognize the good in me and seek ways to continually develop my capacity for giving and receiving love. I am worthy of healthy relationships. I am a worthwhile person, no matter what anyone else says or does. I don't have to believe or accept the negative messages that others send my way. I don't have to sellout my self-esteem to the values or expectations of anyone who happens to overlook or refuse to see the good in me.

If you have negative people in your life who are sending you messages that you are inferior in some way, you don't have to believe their lies. If you yourself are telling yourself negative messages, you don't have to continue doing so.

My new wife found a little formula that she shared with me. It goes like this. Everyday, give someone (including yourself) each of the following compliments:

- You are wonderful
- You are beautiful
- You are amazing
- I'll always love you

Just think how your life would change if you started telling yourself this everyday. Think how your relationships might improve if you started giving these compliments to the significant others in your life every day.

Thank You, God, for showing me and telling me that I am wonderful, beautiful, and amazing. Thank You for always loving me. Thank You for teaching me to always love myself and to always express positive messages of love to others. Amen.

Celebrate Yourself

February 25, 1999

You'll find, I think, that as you learn more about co-dependency, every person has some of the traits. Don't be too hard on yourself. Just remember that we are human beings. That we are, each one of us, extremely valuable just the way we are. That includes all our characteristics, regardless of how we might label them. Co-dependency is just a label, a way of defining how we, as humans, learn to cope with life, relationships, emotions, and events. Some of what we've learned can be unlearned. Some of what we've learned can be kept or expanded or changed to fit our particular situation or relationships.

The wonderful news is that YOU get to decide what you need to change, and YOU get to determine how and when.

Recovery is all about self-examination, growth, experimentation, keeping what works for the moment, and moving ahead with life at your own pace. Be glad that you are learning about co-dependency now. I had to struggle for 33 years before I figured out what was going on in my relationships and how I was contributing to making my life so hard and miserable. I was too focused on the other person, rather than focusing on improving myself.

One of the traps we can fall into is letting others define our self-worth, define our meaning, or tell us how we ought to change our lives for the better.

Often, we let those closest to us do this, when we should be doing this for ourselves. Sure, we can learn about ourselves from others, but remember that others tend to see us through their own filters. Often, we end up feeling like failures because we didn't live up to someone else's expectations of us.

But you can step outside all of that stuff and keep your sense of self-worth and value—that's the beautiful thing about recovery—you get to discover exactly who you are and what you want. You get to treat yourself the way you want to be treated and look for others who will treat you the way you know you deserve to be treated—with kindness, respect, patience, love, and encouragement. Those wonderful types of relationships are out there, waiting just for you.

One place to find these affirming relationships is at Co-dependents Anonymous meetings. Find someone who has been in the program for a long time. (Preferably someone with whom you would NOT be romantic—who may have serious relationship or co-dependent issues and may not be totally aware of them yet.)

Another good place, perhaps the best place, is to find a professional counselor who understands co-dependency and can be an empathic listener and affirmer in your life. Someone who will help you see yourself without judging you, and will help you grow through your issues and see yourself in new ways.

Above all, affirm yourself. Rejoice in who you are. Appreciate yourself as a unique, wonderful, expression of God. You are the most precious, special, and amazing you that ever was or ever will be. As Walt Whitman says, "celebrate yourself." Take good care of you and be as loving and tender with others as you can.

Thank You, God for affirming that it is OK for me to love myself and celebrate myself. Thank You for creating the unique human being that I am.

Revealing Riches

March 12, 1999

"The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own." —Benjamin Disraeli

I recently found this quote and realized that it is a profound formula for building healthy relationships.

A desire common to all people is to somehow, someday, make a positive difference in the world. Who wouldn't want to leave a mark that benefits our fellow human beings and ensures that we are remembered for some good and wonderful accomplishment?

Sometimes we may have the mistaken idea that making sweeping, global changes is beyond our individual capabilities. We may not be able to see ourselves as a Gandhi, a Buddha, a Mother Teresa, or an Albert Schweitzer.

But we all, each us, can make a positive difference in the lives of the people in the next office, across the street, or in our homes. Sweeping, global changes are no more significant than simple acts of kindness, generosity, and unconditional love to the people who are closest to us.

As co-dependents, we may have retreated from giving away something so valuable. We may have been abused or mistreated or taken advantage of by those closest to us for doing so.

But we can also choose how we respond to the ill treatment we may have received. One response is to treat others like we want to be treated or desire to be treated. We can even treat ourselves as we want to be treated.

Regardless of our circumstances, there is someone in each of our lives who will appreciate and benefit from our treating them in such a special way. Find that person in your life. Share with them how wonderful, special, unique, and precious they are, just because they are alive. Appreciate someone in your life by loving them in a way they want to be loved.

Recovery is not just about fixing ourselves. It's about sharing ourselves and spreading good feelings around. Recovery is about helping others to help themselves. Recovery is about joining our hands and our hearts for a greater good and a better world. Recovery is about something bigger than ourselves, maybe even bigger than the world—giving away unconditional, positive, healthy love.

Thank You, God, for showing me how to make a difference in the everyday situations. Help me to be a messenger of love and good will to all around me. Help me to be the kind of loving, giving, and compassionate person I am looking for and appreciate in others. Amen.

The Best of Life

May 2, 1999

I've been married now for five months. I can truly say that I have never before in my life so enjoyed being in a relationship with a woman.

For many months during and after my divorce, I gave up thinking that I would ever experience the best that life has to offer. I felt that I had failed, miserably, at being a person with value to offer the life of another human being.

But with the advantage of perspective and time, I can see that the whole experience, as terrible as it was, was necessary for my growth as a person. I needed an extended time-out from a wearying, battle-scarred, failure of a marriage to realize that I, as a person, am not a failure.

So many people with whom I talk and who write me are going through their tough periods—their own personal time-out. If there was one thing I could say to you all, it's this:

- Be patient.
- Relax.
- Take a deep breath.
- You are loved.
- You are lovable.
- The best of life is not "out there; somewhere."
- The best of life is inside you, with you, caring for you, loving you.
- What you are going through today, as hideous and as traumatic as it may be, is your event to cherish.
- Learn from today.
- Embrace today.
- Feel your pain.
- Acknowledge that you are a human being, deserving of the best life has to offer.

Search within yourself; you are the treasure you are seeking.

Thank You, God, for showing me how valuable and beautiful and wonderful I am. Thank You for my circumstances. Thank You for being with me and teaching me that life is what I make it, and I am, as a person, who You and I, together, are creating in me. Amen.

Responding to Feelings

May 4, 1999

I don't really have a reason to feel depressed today...but I do. The feeling just sort of came over me this morning.

What to do about it?

First, I accept it and try to remember that eventually it will pass.

Second, I dig underneath the emotion and look at possible causes:

- Feeling overwhelmed at work
- Anxiety about pending project deadlines
- Ache in hands and fingers from yard work
- Ache in teeth from recent crown work
- Tiredness from entertaining guests last night
- Wishing I could stay home from work
- Anxiety over possible investment losses
- Restlessness and boredom from lack of personal goals
- Children-related stresses and issues
- Worn down from lack of exercise

It all just sort of starts piling up after a while. So, I focus on:

- Relaxing
- Living in the moment
- Being patient
- Doing what I can today
- Letting go
- Breathing deeply
- Asking for help
- Feeling my feelings
- Going for a long walk
- Doing some invigorating exercise

Recovery is learning to respond to my feelings in positive, constructive ways—rather than reacting, seeking to lay blame, taking guilt trips, or even just outright whining and complaining.

Searching within myself for the root causes of my feelings works best. Exploring my feelings, acknowledging them, expressing them in a journal or speaking them aloud—these actions work.

I feel better already.

Thank You, God, for teaching me how to respond to my feelings instead of reacting to them. Amen.

Happiness Is...

May 25, 1999

This past Sunday my 14-year-old daughter needed my assistance on the computer. She was working on a school assignment and needed some clip art for a Happy Book that she was writing.

Some of you may recall the book, *Happiness is a Warm Puppy* by cartoonist Charles Schultz. It consists of several "happiness is..." statements, as the title suggests.

My daughter's assignment was to create her own Happy Book and come up with several "happiness is..." statements. When she mentioned the project to me, several pedantic thoughts started going through my mind: we get so busy looking for happiness in a relationship, in a job, in our toys, and in our goals and dreams, that we forget to just be happy. We really don't have to go searching for happiness. We carry happiness inside us. We create happiness. We are the source of our own happiness. Sure, a certain type of happiness is derived from externals, but the externals should merely be reminders that we have access to all the happiness we want or need.

So together, my daughter and I searched the Internet for clip art that would prompt her thinking. It was a wonderful father-daughter exercise and it allowed me to see a creative side of my daughter I'd never seen before. She sat for a couple of hours going through image after image, chuckling and brainstorming over what she found.

Her favorite image was a grinning Zulu dancer. She wrote: "Happiness is looking at this cool dude in a grass skirt banging on his drum."

She showed me the image and it immediately brought a smile to my face. But so did the fact that my daughter had taught *me* an important lesson:

Happiness is what you decide brings you happiness.

We Can Be Heroes

May 26, 1999

Yes, I've been following all the hoopla surrounding *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. Being an avid fan of the characters, the story, and the mythological connotations, I just had to be among those who saw the movie during its first week. I was quite impressed—the computer-generated graphics are as realistic as I ever seen. I definitely recommend the movie if you want to escape reality for a few hours.

I happened to pick up a copy of the April 26 Time magazine the other day, and of course, it featured an interview with the movie's creator, George Lucas. Here is a quote I took to heart:

"Heroes come in all sizes, and you don't have to be a giant hero. You can be a very small hero. It's just as important to understand that accepting self-responsibility for the things you do, having good manners, caring about other people—these are heroic acts. Everybody has the choice of being a hero or not being a hero every day of their lives. You don't have to get into a giant laser-sword fight and blow up three spaceships to become a hero."

Now that is recovery in a nutshell. As co-dependents, we tried to be giant heroes. We tried to save the universe and everyone in it. We worked hard to convince others that we had their best interests in mind as we sought to control their actions. We talked ourselves blue in the face. We wore ourselves out from all the good we did, all the help we gave so selflessly, and all the advice we dispensed unsolicited.

First, we drove ourselves (and those around us) crazy with our giant heroics. Then we got depressed because no one appreciated us. No one noticed our flashing light saber. No one listened to our words of wisdom.

But in recovery, we have learned to live quietly. We've learned the value of letting go. We detach. We rest. We save the world by saving ourselves. We admit the craziness of seeking to control what we can't. We free ourselves to be ourselves. We free others to be themselves. We revel in today, in the moment, and we let tomorrow take care of itself. We seek to live in harmony with others. We take joy from the tiny surprises of a baby's breathing, a cool breeze on our forehead, or offering a friend a backrub and a hug.

We can take care of ourselves. We can love without becoming enmeshed. We can give without being taken. We can live peacefully and serenely. We can experience serendipity in every moment.

We can be heroes.

Thank You, God for allowing me to be a hero. Amen.

Feeling Overwhelmed

June 7, 1999

The past few days I've felt emotionally and physically exhausted. I've been through some major changes in the past six months—getting married, buying a house, moving (twice), adjusting to a five-person household (seven-persons on weekends), tripled living expenses, the legal ramifications of my 14-year-old daughter moving in with me, my wife being in the hospital for a week, teaching a weekly Bible class, and being involved in a new startup Internet business.

It's enough to bring anyone to the point of a nervous breakdown. I can't imagine how people without recovery tools survive. I do have the tools, and I haven't handled it well at all.

In the middle of a three-ring circus, it's easy to forget about the recovery tools and feel like your sinking in the storm. It's reminded me of how most, if not all, of my readers feel when they write me—overwhelmed.

Yesterday I stayed home from church. I got up and got dressed, but couldn't motivate myself to get out the door. I sat down on the floor, at the foot of the bed, and just cried. I let myself have a super-duper pity party for about 30 minutes—and it felt wonderful.

Then, I got up and went on with my day. Today I feel OK, but not serene, balanced, or adjusted. I feel out of sorts, unsynchronized, and a little dazed by the realization of everything that's happened in my life over the past six months.

Yes, sometimes even those of us in recovery for years lose ourselves in the struggle. It's a struggle that never really goes away—recovery just helps you manage and cope and keep your sanity. Every life gets unmanageable now and then. It's a normal part of life. At least, that's what I've been telling myself lately.

One thought I've held onto throughout today—maybe tomorrow will be better. Right now, just that little bit of hope is keeping me going.

Thank You, God for reminding me that life is sometimes messy. Thank You for helping me cope with reality right now. Amen.

Options

June 13, 1999

One of recovery's principle benefits and tools is the realization that we do have options.

When life gets overwhelming and stressful, we have the option of taking a time-out, getting re-focused, and taking care of ourselves.

No matter what situation we find ourselves in, we always have the option of self-care .

Sometimes self-care means trusting God when we can't see the solution. Other times, we just pray and wait and watch. We can take minute vacations, breathe, and relax

We can meditate in a quiet place, listening for the voice deep within us that speaks when we get still enough.

We can remember to laugh at life and its struggles and hardships. Keeping our hearts light and a smile close at hand is always good food for our souls.

We can spend time with a friend—some who listens without judging. We need that at times to shut out the voice of self-condemnation that we co-dependents tend to let live rent-free in our heads.

We can go to a meeting and listen while others tell their stories. We can offer our strength, hope, and encouragement to them. We can get out of ourselves and our problems and focus on someone or something other than our own lives for a while. Getting a different perspective is always valuable.

We can remember not to sweat the details—and it's all details—typically the most mundane that we allow to cause us the most stress.

Most of all, we can remember that ultimately, God is in control. There is a grand design and plan to all that we experience in this life. A wonderful Grace is at work in us and in those with whom we interact. We are exactly where we need to be to grow and become the beautiful person we are becoming.

Thank You, God for being in control. Thank You for the recovery tools and the options You have given me. Help me to use them. Help me to trust You completely. Help me to remember that I am not my problems, nor my relationships, but that I am Your child and You love me and care for me, no matter what circumstances I may be experiencing. Amen.

Morning Meditation

June 13, 1999

Today was one of those beautiful, serendipitous days when time just stopped and balance, peace, and serenity were all available to me in joyful abundance.

I awoke around 5:00 a.m. to the warm and loving arms of my beautiful wife. She smiled at me as we relaxed in our bed, listening to a gently falling rain outside our window.

As the sun came up, I arose and got a bite of breakfast, unhurried and uninterrupted by the usual hustle and bustle of our seven-person household. School is out now and all the kids are away visiting their other parents. It was wonderful to feel like I had the whole house to myself for a change.

So, I put some soothing, peaceful piano music on the stereo—Rick Wakeman's *Romance of the Victorian Age* and immersed myself in the mood set by his serene piano and strings orchestrations.

As I ate breakfast, I looked out the French doors leading to our patio and pool. The rain drops fell into the pool forming tiny ringlets in time with the music.

I felt suspended in love and grace and serenity. I felt the close presence of God in the depths of my heart and in my soul. Although I did not verbalize a prayer of thankfulness—somehow I knew that God was communicating with me, gently reminding me of His care and His plan and His purpose for my life.

Thank You, God for loving me. Thank You for the quiet moments we spend together. Thank You for consciousness and awareness and the beautiful, poetic, spiritual reality that Life can be. Amen.

Forgiveness

July 11, 1999

Recently I have meditated on the power of forgiveness available to those of us in recovery. My thinking was sparked by a letter I received through the alt.recovery.codependency newsgroup. In particular, these words struck deep in my heart:

"Forgiveness is a natural process that occurs when you have reached a certain stage of acceptance about another person's limitations, character flaws, and their incapacity to behave in a way you had hoped and expected. When you get some glimmer that it was impossible for that person to respect and honor you in the way you wanted, you can forgive them for not having that ability."

For so long, I was bitter toward my ex-wife and her family for the way they treated me during our separation and divorce. I resented them taking away the privilege of seeing my children on a daily basis. I detested them for taking the stance that they were so right and I was so wrong. I despised them for the one-sided and narrow-minded myopia they displayed when I asked to be forgiven. I resented how they turned their back on me and ignored me for the past five years—though they claim to be Christians. No matter what I did, I could not earn their forgiveness.

Yet, I was unable and unwilling to forgive them as well.

Oh, yes, I thought I had forgiven them—until I caught myself the other day—actually grinding my teeth at the mere thought of how my ex-wife used to treat me.

I still have much recovery work to do!

But I also realized that my wife and her family have a basic incapacity to behave in the way I expect them to behave. I used to think they were unwilling. But now, I see their incapacity to truly forgive, to really love, and to be honestly open-minded.

And it's not their fault. They are just products of their environment and training and their choices.

They can't do any better, because they don't know any better.

Oh, they may have intellectual knowledge of what forgiveness and love are about—but they can't live it when the opportunity arises.

I, on the other hand, am also incapable of understanding deep in my heart and soul, how hurt they were by my behavior. How much they are still hurting—whether by choice or not. I cannot live up to their expectations, either.

But recovery has taught me that I can (and must) forgive them for their incapacity to forgive. That is powerful stuff. So powerful that it has raised me to a totally new level of awareness and perspective on life and relationships.

I can also forgive myself for my incapacity to forget how I was treated. I can forgive myself for expecting too much of them.

So, what I am now impelled to develop is my capacity to forgive my ex-wife and her family—to overlook what appeared to me as simple-minded, intransigent, stubbornness.

I must develop this same power in all my relationships. The capacity to forgive others for not living up to my expectations. And, the capacity to forgive myself for expecting others to live up to my expectations.

Thank You, God for the power of forgiveness. Thank You for the power You have given me to forgive and be forgiven. Thank You for bringing me a few steps closer to heartfelt forgiveness of myself, as well as others. Amen.

Spaces in Your Togetherness

July 20, 1999

Lately, I've realized how essential boundary-setting is for a healthy relationship.

When a relationship is new, it can be easy to let your Significant Other ignore your boundaries, especially if you have been starved for love, affection, or attention. You can become so enthralled at finally being real to another person, that you forget to take care of yourself. (You might even get spoiled and forget how to take care of yourself.)

By nature, I tend to be the solitary, independent type. I don't need a lot friends around me. I enjoy reading, listening to music, watching movies, exercising, and meditating—all of which I can enjoy quite contentedly by myself. But I also have a need for a healthy, fulfilling relationship. My nature requires that my relationship be one in which there are clearly defined times together and times apart. What Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran calls "spaces in your togetherness."

M. Scott Peck uses the mountain-climbing analogy. Each partner needs time to scale the mountain of self-growth in solitude and time to be in the base camp to give and receive support and encouragement. It is not necessary (or healthy) for two people to be constantly joined at the hip. Each partner needs the freedom to follow his or her own pursuits, unhindered by the other clinging on. In fact, each partner cannot grow as a person, without sufficient time for solitude, reflection, and synthesis of experiences and emotions.

Relationships, by their very nature, are about meeting needs—but without suffocating (or getting suffocated) in the process. It requires maturity and watchfulness to maintain and sustain the delicate, healthy balance of spaces in the togetherness. Boundaries are the tools that build the necessary space.

I know that if my wife becomes too needy and too demanding, requiring my constant attention to "take care" of her needs, I become resentful and angry. And vice-versa. No relationship needs that kind of pressure. Clearly defined boundaries, like these, ease the pressure:

- I can meet my wife's needs, but not to the point of neglecting my own needs.
- My wife can meet my needs, but not to the point of neglecting her own needs.
- I can meet my wife's needs, but I also understand that she can take care of herself.
- My wife can meet my needs, but she also understands that I can take care of myself.
- I can "be there" to meet my wife's needs, but she cannot suffocate me with her needs.
- My wife can "be there" to meet my needs, but I cannot suffocate her with my needs.

Such clearly defined boundaries help preserve a relationship's peace and friendship and attraction—the good stuff that we are all seeking.

Thank You, God, for blessing me with recovery and self-awareness. Thank You for showing me how to build a healthy, fulfilling relationship without losing myself in the process. Amen.

The Answer

July 22, 1999

Last night I was browsing through a used CD and DVD store and came across an unusual DVD called *Earthlight*. The DVD features NASA film clips of the planet earth taken during various shuttle missions. The clips are enhanced with ambient music, perfect for meditation or just relaxing.

I took the DVD home and was absolutely amazed.

Watching the earth slowly spinning, I became mesmerized by the swirling cloud formations, all the resplendent shades of blue, and how the sun's reflection sparkled in the ocean waters. Seen from space, our home world is a gleaming jewel—wondrous and beautiful!

How awesome to think that we, as humans, are just as wonderful and just as beautiful. Each one of us is an equally unique and special creation. If only we could keep a similar sense of awe for ourselves and each other! If only all our relationships could be filled with love, respect, and encouragement.

So how come we don't dedicate ourselves to more love, kindness, compassion, trust, honesty, patience, forgiveness, tenderness, and focused attention on those we hold dearest? Perhaps we have. Perhaps we have been too giving, too understanding, and too loving—and been rejected, taken advantage of, or worst of all, taken for granted.

Just because relationships are risky, we don't have to stop extending ourselves or our love to the people around us. We still have the choice to treat others as we wish to be treated. The good stuff we spread around will eventually come back to us—that's a law of the universe as certain as gravity.

Our world doesn't need to be changed. It's perfect just the way it is. It's designed to test us, to prove us, and to question us. How we choose to live our lives and extend genuine love and acceptance is The Answer. We change the world by changing ourselves and changing our attitudes. That is our privilege and responsibility and joy as recovering co-dependents.

Thank You, God for creating this beautiful world and placing me in it. Thank You for the adversities and opportunities that arise in this life. Thank You for the choices You have given me to choose my answer to Life and to those with whom I interact. Amen.

Every Little Thing

August 1, 1999

I experienced a recovery breakthrough this weekend. Ironically, August 1999 also marks the sixth anniversary of my recovery from co-dependence.

My wife and I had traveled by car to Tampa on Saturday night. Our plan was to relax and spend some time together alone before picking up my daughter, who was scheduled to arrive Sunday evening at Tampa International Airport—on the return flight from her recent trip to Jamaica with her grandparents.

During the day on Sunday, I decided to take a long, hot shower. As I let the water massage my neck and back, my thoughts wandered to 1988, when I, too, had taken a summer trip to Jamaica.

I was suddenly filled with a profound sense of calm and peace. It was as if the recent cares and problems and issues of my current life were simply being washed away.

What induced this sense of calm and peace was the memory of a shopping trip in the Montego Bay straw market. In particular, I was looking for a T-shirt which read: Every Little Thing's Gonna Be All Right.

I think that today, August 1, 1999 God was touching me and sending me a gentle reminder.

I've been taking life too seriously lately. I've been worrying far too much about the future. I've been letting the recovery principles I've proven many times over slip from my awareness and my responses to life.

I needed to be reminded that every little thing *is* going to be all right. *I'm* going to be all right. My life is going to be all right. No matter what happens to me, I will be OK.

I am not my circumstances. I am not my relationships. I am not my possessions or my job. I am simply me. I am a person who is trying to be the best person possible. I am a person who is dealing with life on life's terms.

Yes, everything in my life is going to be all right. Because everything in my life has a purpose and a grand design. That purpose is to bring me closer to emotional maturity, closer to my Higher Power, and closer to those people whom I care about most.

Really, nothing else in this life matters but giving and receiving unconditional love, acceptance, and encouragement. All we are asked to do is realize that our lives consist of a few, precious moments to give love, joy, peace, and hope to others. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how they respond—our task is to keep up the work of developing our capacity to give, without losing our sense of purpose and self-esteem in the process.

Thank You, God for reaffirming to me what really matters in this life. Thank You for reminding me that every little thing is gonna be all right. Amen.

Recovery Is...

August 9, 1999

So now that I've been a recovering co-dependent for six years, what I have learned? Here is a summary.

Recovery is about restoring a meaningful relationship with God, others, and myself. All three are co-requisite. All three are interdependent. In order to grow in one area, I must also be growing in the other two. No one area takes priority over the other two. None is less important or more important.

Recovery is about finding a delicate balance in these relationships and discovering healthy, productive ways to maintain that balance. I am finding the balance between self-care and taking care of others. I am finding the balance between healthy, functional relationships and dangerous, dysfunctional ones. I am learning how to relate to others. I am unlearning what destroys my relationships with others. I am growing in my awareness of how relationships work and where they go awry. I am finding the balance between what I can change and what I can't.

I believe that every single human being on this planet is making the recovery journey. Those of us in recovery are aware of our journey; however, we find ourselves in a world where most of the people we live with don't know where life is taking them.

Life is a steep mountain road, filled with twists, falling rocks, and dangerous drops over sheer walls. Those of us in recovery are aware of the dangers, but it's OK. We are enjoying the drive and marveling at the beautiful scenery. We have a sense of our destiny and purpose. We know where the road of life is leading us, even if we temporarily lose sight of the goal along the way. We know the joy of the journey and we experience the connected grace of moving in harmony with life.

But others have no idea what they are trying to recover or re-discover. They simply feel disconnected from God, from people, from themselves, and from life. They are frantically looking at their road maps, searching for the answers. They are unaware that peace and serenity could be theirs. But instead, the twists and turns and falling rocks fill them with dread and they feel an uneasy compulsion to react to every situation.

The only real difference between those who are in recovery and those who are not is our perspective. Perspective is the result of awareness. Awareness leads us to knowledge of our choices and options. It is the awareness of our choices and options that sets us free.

Recovery is about abundant living. Abundant living is not about the pursuit of wealth or fame or beauty or any ephemeral definition of success. Abundant living is experiencing the success of being happy with who we are, today, and letting tomorrow bring what it may. Recovery is peace and joy and serenity and laughter—as much as we need—whenever we need them.

Recovery is serendipity—the joy of finding unexpected value and meaning in the mundane, in the commonplace, and in the pain.

Recovery is discovering the unfathomable, secret grace of God and giving it away to others by the way we choose to interact with them.

Recovery is about our choice to live our lives to the fullest, every single moment.

Healthy Giving

August 11, 1999

The topic of giving is important for all recovering co-dependents. I think co-dependent individuals tend to be giving by nature. In regards to our significant relationships, we want to feel that by our giving, we are contributing to another person's growth or well being. This is the "helping" and "care-taking" role we often fall into.

Giving is also dangerous for co-dependents. Whether we are giving our affection, our money, or our time, we want to be appreciated for our giving. Our egos want the gift to be recognized. At the same time, we also don't want our significant others to take advantage of our generous nature or take our generosity for granted. We can become resentful if our gift is not acknowledged or received with the proper gratitude.

We may also give with an expectation of getting something in return. We give in the sense of striking a silent deal—since I'm doing something for you, I expect you to do something for me. This is a form of co-dependent manipulation and we tend to let such deal-making substitute for honest communication.

But what is healthy giving? How do we, as recovering co-dependents find balance in this area?

First we must realize that healthy giving is *our* choice. We must give our gifts freely because we want to. If we are giving from a sense of obligation or guilt, we are not truly giving. Healthy giving comes from the heart, based on our conscious decision to give a particular gift.

Second, healthy giving is for *our* benefit—not the recipient's. In fact, the recipient need not even be aware that we are giving something of value to them. We give for the joy that we derive from our ability to give. By giving freely, we are developing our capacity to give more. Like exercising a muscle. Healthy giving does not need to be proclaimed for all to see and hear, nor does it need to be acknowledged by anyone but the giver.

Third, we give what we can give at that moment. Perhaps we say a prayer for an addicted friend. Perhaps we give a smile to someone who is grouchy. Perhaps we forgive the cross remark a spouse or child cast our way. There are hundreds of gifts and opportunities for us to give without giving up our power or our sense of calm and balance. We never have to feel compelled to give beyond our means—emotionally, financially, spiritually, etc.

Fourth, we give without expectation of return. We give an unconditional gift, with no strings attached. There is a blessing for us in this type of giving. Giving is not about the other person. Giving is about us. We do not give in order to receive—we give for the joy of giving. Our motivation is love, kindness, compassion, and treating another person the way we would like to be treated. If we are giving in order for someone to like us, approve of us, love us, or do things for us in return, then we have fallen back into unhealthy giving.

What are some healthy gifts that we can give?

- Acceptance
- Encouragement
- Hugs
- Smiles
- Good deeds
- Forgiveness
- Affirmations
- Compliments
- Cards and letters
- Time
- Prayers
- Telephone calls
- Listening

- Healthy favors
- Volunteer services
- Hospitality

Healthy giving is a way for us to get outside of ourselves and our problems (and all co-dependents need to do that!). Giving allows us to focus on helping others without enabling them and without getting caught in a web of crazy, co-dependent expectations.

Adjustments

August 16, 1999

Over the past couple of months, my new marriage has required me to make some significant adjustments. I've had to adjust to new living arrangements, adjust to new household members, adjust how I spend my time at home, and of course, adjust the finances.

And these are just the adjustments I've thought of quickly, off the top of my head. I'm sure there are many other adjustments going on that I'm not even aware of yet.

In short, there's been a lot of upheaval in my life lately. And lots of instability and uncertainty in the situation as well. Whose kids are going to stay? Whose kids are going to move? Whose kids are going to this school? Or that school?

Lately, the only constant has been change.

I can honestly say that I've handled some of the adjustments well. But others are proving extremely difficult for me, especially the lack of a quiet, creative work space closed off from the flow of human traffic through the house. On this topic, my patience and tolerance have been stretched seven ways to one too many times. I've been known to be mad, sad, and glad—sometimes several times—in the course of a single day.

Deep down inside, I'm forced to admit that I'm not handling the associated stress of all these adjustments very well. I do my best to respond to situations as they arise, but sometimes, my old behaviors, old attitudes, old expectations, and old doubts (fears) come creeping up on me and jump out.

The situation is testing my serenity and my sense of balance to the maximum. I am going through one of those times when I have deep serenity for a day and then wild chaos for a day.

I'm struggling.

I'm trying to look at the situation creatively. I'm trying to grow through these difficulties and become a better person through the struggle. I'm trying to make sure my expectations don't cloud my perceptions. I'm praying daily for a clear vision, a pure heart, and an open mind.

I guess this new marriage is one of the hardest things I've ever been through. Definitely much harder than the divorce.

So again, I find myself in a period of transition, when the answers aren't coming quickly or readily. At least not quickly and readily enough for me. I'm feeling agitated, impatient, and uncomfortable—like I'm wearing new clothes or breaking in a new pair of shoes. I need to work on pacing, timing, and keeping a balance between:

- home / work
- wife / kids
- household chores / relaxation
- time together / time apart

I'm sure there have been times when I've tried too hard to make it all fit together—and times when I haven't tried hard enough. Blending a family is tough business. I feel like I'm being asked to work a jigsaw puzzle with a thousand pieces, but with the added requirement that each piece must be kept face down.

Right now, I'm just thankful that I don't have to go through any of this alone. Family and friends have expressed their understanding and offered their help.

Dear God, thank You for this opportunity to struggle and grow. Thank You for my new wife and the wonderful love You are showing me through her. Amen.

Patterns

August 24, 1999

Lately, the only constant in my life has been change. Both at home and at work, I'm going through a series of rapid, dramatic changes. During the past few weeks, even my dreams have centered on scenarios in which I am suffocating, drowning, or finding myself trapped in a tightly confined space. Last night, I woke up coughing and my throat remained tightly constricted for two or three hours. In addition, I haven't been able to write for at least a week, because my mind is so focused on all the upheaval.

On Sunday, I was telling my adopted Mom how I was feeling. She gave me a little book by Richard Carlson called *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff—It's All Small Stuff*. I keep trying to remember that my current issues are just small stuff. I've survived far worse than this.

But I don't think it is the small stuff, per se, I'm struggling with. I accept that as long as I'm alive, I'll have changes and difficulties to manage. I think what I'm really struggling with is the fact that this lack of stability seems to be *ongoing*.

I realize that chaos and frenzy are part of family life to a certain degree. And I admit to needing (sometimes demanding) a certain pace to my days. I do like a predictable pattern (but not too predictable or too mundane!). Is this a manifestation of my co-dependency or just a part of my personality? Maybe some of both. I don't know for certain; however, I do know that stability is one of my basic needs. Maybe stability is also a basic need for families.

The reason I need stability is because I equate stability with safety. Stability gives me breathing room to live serenely and creatively. I have a better quality of life when my basic survival needs are met. And for me, lack of stability is a basic survival issue. I think it probably comes from feeling so abandoned and rejected during my divorce.

I'm also trying to approach this problem from the standpoint that I am not alone or unique. If I'm struggling with this, then others can probably relate. Perhaps there is a level of predictability that we all require to survive; a level of safety in which we can find our focus and our balance. When we feel stable and secure, we can attend to our higher level needs—analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating our contributions to Life. Perhaps as co-dependents, what we are seeking in recovery is a way to deal with the unstable people and circumstances that have been slowly choking the life out of us.

Right now, I only know that I need more stability and predictability in my life. It is OK for me to take care of myself in this area. It is OK for me to struggle and make sense out of everything that is happening. It is OK for me to learn from this situation.

Today, I give myself permission to develop healthy, workable patterns and routines. I give myself permission to develop a degree of predictability and renewed serenity in my life. I give myself permission to find some level of order in the chaos.

Thank you, God for reminding me that I can survive. Thank You for bringing me through so many challenging situations. Thank You for teaching me to take care of myself. Thank You for showing me how to seek and how to find Your answers. Amen.

The Heart of God's Love

September 4, 1999

Held in a sweet calm
wrapped in an intense bliss
surrounded by heaven's precious gifts
a heart, a soul,
an echo from the silent stillness of eternity
I am love
You are love
We are the love we seek
Is any soul out there seeking
Is any heart out there asking
rest from your seeking
cease from your asking
you are loved beyond measure
beyond the capacity of your heart's
cavernous, aching, expanses
you are loved wholly
you are loved incredibly
just as you are
you are a perfect
soul perfected through pain fire suffering anguish
release yourself to the gift
answer to the calling that whispers softly
faintly trembling
answer to the questing faith and hope
all else vanishes
all else transcends
love and be loved
hold and be held
you are safe for
you are the heart of God's love

Walls and Bridges

September 11, 1999

Today I've realized that I am a wall builder.

This isn't easy for me to admit, because it means I don't know myself as well as I thought I did.

When I say "wall builder" I mean I do more to separate myself from people than build bridges between myself and others.

Ironically, building bridges is my honest intention. But when others interact with me (right now I'm thinking particularly of my boss, co-workers, and employees), they get the opposite impression!

Up until yesterday, I was blind to how people at work were perceiving me.

Now part of me (the egotistical me who has proudly been a recovering co-dependent for six years) wants to say, "Look, it isn't how people perceive you that is important—what is important is that you are true to yourself." My answer: "Being true to myself means becoming a bridge builder."

Another part of me (the me who wants to grow and overcome my relationship problems) is *devastated*.

I've worked so hard for so long to become more accommodating, open-minded, congenial, and giving. Yet now I learn that I come across as defended, close-minded, arrogant, and selfish. I've even been labeled a people-pleaser and found guilty of duplicity.

What to do?

Again, I go back to my heartfelt intentions. If I spread my gut-wrenching, deepest honesty on the table—in my heart of hearts I want to be a bridge builder.

How other people perceive my actions and my attitudes *is* important. I simply can not keep turning these perceptions aside and saying, "Well, I know what my intentions were." Something in my behavior and my demeanor has to change.

I've concluded that to be human is to be misunderstood. I simply can not see, with any real clarity or insight, into another person's heart. Nor can other people thus see into my heart. All they can do is read my actions and my words.

If I come across as arrogant, close-minded, and inflexible, then somehow, somewhere, between my heart and my actions, my recovery is disconnected and dysfunctional.

Now I realize that people are going to think what they are going to think about me. I accept that. But I also realize that people can reveal to me facets of my personality that I cannot see. Relationships are mirrors. Sometimes they are fun-house mirrors—the images are distorted. Other times, however, they are perfect mirrors and I see the flaws in myself I've never noticed or never wanted to admit before. How do I know that Grace didn't bring these relationships into my life to reveal these very traits to me?

Relationships are for learning about myself so that I can grow. So that I can become a bridge builder rather than a wall builder. By accepting that I have been a wall builder in some of my relationships (in this case, work relationships), then admitting it is my first step toward becoming a true bridge builder.

Dear God, let me be a bridge builder between myself and others—particularly in my work situation. Let the true intent of my heart shine forth in all my actions and in all my words. Amen.

Snow on the Mountain

September 23, 1999

Lately I've been taking care of myself by exercising. I've taken up walking and have set a goal for 2 to 3 miles every day. Rather than going to a gym, I've simply mapped out some routes through the neighborhood where I live.

It takes a solid 55 minutes for me to complete a 3-mile round trip, but it feels wonderful to work up a sweat and to know that I'm burning calories and exercising my heart. I'll be 40 in February and I've realized it's time for me to start taking better care of myself physically.

Exercise is mentally stimulating as well. It wards off depression and sluggishness. After just 1 week of regular walking, I feel better prepared to handle the stress of my work day—especially if I walk in the morning. Also, the discipline of getting up and doing something physical every morning enhances my self-esteem, which has suffered lately from work situations. I just feel better about myself when I exercise regularly.

During my walks, I've been revisiting the Twelve Steps rather than listening to music or news on a radio. When I'm outside walking, it is just me and God, reflecting on how I can continue growing spiritually.

Walking is also a fantastic way to enjoy nature. I see twice as much—things I would never notice from a car. One route takes me past a canal full of aquatic birds—cranes, egrets, wild ducks—which aren't afraid of me in the least. They watch me pass by, but don't run or fly away. One evening, I noticed a gorgeous woodpecker—a black and white body and a vibrant, red head—it was like looking at an Audubon Society picture-book.

Of course, in Florida, there are also endless varieties of flowers to see. In fact, the word *florida* is Spanish for *land of flowers*.

Just last night I walked past a house which had an unusual shrub next to the mailbox. This plant was covered with tiny pink leaves. Pink flowers are not unusual, but a pink shrub? It was so unusual and so beautiful I made a point to walk past it again. This time, an older woman, whom I presume was the resident, was pruning the shrub, so I paused to ask her about it.

She was delighted I had taken notice and was obviously proud of this particular addition to her yard. She offered me a handful of the trimmings for closer inspection. Turns out she was not pruning, but making a bouquet. "Take some home with you and enjoy looking at it," she said. "It's called *Snow on the Mountain*."

I smiled at the poetic name, perfectly descriptive of the plant's natural beauty. I asked her if I could stop by and photograph it. Of course, she agreed.

Serenity is making the time to see the world and its natural beauty. Serenity is feeling good about our place in the world, regardless of our present circumstances. Serenity is knowing unexpected treasures and gifts await us along the path of self-discovery and healing. All we are required to do is open our hearts, start walking, and partake of the grace and love in which we are held.

Dear God, thank You for the process of self-discovery and self-growth. Thank You for teaching me valuable lessons from the little surprises You place along my path every day. Amen.

Admitting Powerlessness

October 12, 1999

One manifestation of co-dependency in my life has been the recent realization that I am, to a certain extent, always going to be dependent on others in some way. My independent nature rebels at this. I let myself get extremely frustrated when these imposed dependencies are not honored (to *my* way of thinking) for whatever reason—even after I've asked in a healthy way. Prior to recovery, I resorted to control and manipulation, thinking these techniques were the answer.

But even in recovery, asking in a healthy way is no guarantee that my dependencies upon others will be honored. I still have to exercise patience and discipline when the answer differs from my expectations.

Here is the perfect metaphor for the type of real-life dependencies I am talking about:

My whole experience of putting up a web site, dealing with hosting companies, IP addresses, e-mail aliases, and DNS files has been a refresher course in Step One. Over the past several days I've had to interact with four different Internet companies, mostly by e-mail, trying to extract information from them or get them to do something to keep my web sites operating. I usually have to submit e-mail requests or open web-based problem tickets and then patiently wait, wait, wait for the answers to arrive in my e-mail inbox.

On top of it all, somehow, through the process, I managed to break the e-mail function at Serendipity-web.com. *It still* isn't working correctly. Because I dislike being dependent upon anyone or anything, Life keeps teaching me the same lesson again and again. When will I learn?!

For co-dependents, the Twelve Steps begin with an admission of powerlessness over others. The end is the beginning. We usually begin a serious Twelve Step program when we've reached our wits end with *somebody*. We begin by saying "pretty please" and end up resorting to cajoling, manipulation, pleading, throwing tantrums, and getting others involved who don't want to be involved. And we get the same result—nothing. At least not what *we* wanted or what *we* expected.

We are powerless over others. We can cry, scream, throw a pity-party, and jump up and down as much as we want. And usually the other person will just stand there and watch.

So we are then forced to look ourselves in the mirror and confront reality. The only person we can really control is the person staring back at us. The person inside our head.

Our power is within. Our response to life's turmoil dictates whether we continue playing the co-dependent role or whether we wake up (Step Two) and become Undependent. Undependent is deciding to take care of ourselves. Undependent is letting go of our expectations in love. Undependent is admitting that we are important instead of being a doormat, accepting all the blame, or cowering in fear of the other person's disfavor or withdrawal of love.

Sure, we can have reasonable expectations of others. They may even be obligated to us in some way—but we still can only control how *we* respond when life gets unmanageable or unbearable. When others don't honor their commitments to us. When others are addicted to a substance. When others don't care how we feel or what we think. When others ignore our pleas.

We respond peacefully by going back to Step One—admitting, once again, that we are powerless over others. Our lives became unmanageable again because we gave our power to another person or to a situation that is not going exactly *our* way.

As a co-dependent, I've come to realize that I am very selfish *and* very giving—sometimes at the same time. I am a walking paradox. I give and give and give until I'm sick of giving. Or, as someone suggested to me this week, I take it and take it and take it until I'm sick of taking it. At either end of the spectrum awaits the monster named Unmanageability. When I see him lurking at my doorstep, I know that it's time for a change. A change in *me* and how I respond to the people and events in my life.

I am co-dependent by nature, but I give away or reclaim the power in my life by my choices. I must remember that life is not *always* about me. Nor is life *always* about the other person. Life is about building healthy, rewarding, balanced relationships with people whom we honor and who honor us in return. Life is about giving and taking and finding ways to live wholly and serenely with the trials life hands us.

Dear God, thank You for the power of powerlessness. Amen.

A Power Greater

November 8, 1999

Sustaining my recovery from co-dependency requires a power greater than myself. I can not, nor do I want, to work this program alone. Achieving balance, serenity, and sanity requires meditation time to get outside of myself, outside of my circumstances, and break free of my isolated thinking patterns. Recovery is about learning to see myself, my relationships, my circumstances, and my emotions objectively and then learning how to best take care of myself within the context of that reality.

In recovery, the "Higher Power" concept of Step Two can be any or all of the following:

- God, as you understand God (Yahweh, Judeo-Christian, Allah, Jesus Christ, Heavenly Father, etc.)
- Meeting synergy / group consciousness (a CoDA meeting, AA, Alanon, etc.)
- Spirituality, as you understand spirituality
- Trusted mentor relationship (sponsor, therapist, etc.)

Everyone has to start somewhere in recovery. There are no set rules. You may start with one concept of a Higher Power (say, a therapist) and then move to another (spirituality). Or you may, over time, combine all of them as your Higher Power.

True recovery is not about imposing upon you any definition of a Higher Power except as you define this concept at the moment. Each of us comes to recovery from different backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, etc. Recovery is the place to be open-minded—especially about this concept. The Higher Power concept of recovery is not about religion, church, evangelism, legalism, good versus evil or salvation in the afterlife. There are other organizations better suited for these pursuits.

Without a solid, working relationship with a power greater than yourself, your progress in recovery and in the Twelve Step process will be slow. You will need time to nurture, meditate upon, and fully experience this unique relationship. Most importantly, it is this relationship that can become the model and training ground for all your other relationships.

Finally, remember that recovery is not a perfect process. There is no cookbook, per se, that contains the formula for success. The joy and serendipity of recovery is that you and your Higher Power become co-partners, co-explorers, charting the course to your personal growth and destiny. Recovery grants you the opportunity to carry a Higher Power within your heart, to guide you, strengthen you, encourage you, sustain you, and love you.

Dear God, Thank you for your ever-abiding presence in my life. Thank you for being with me as I explore what it means to be human, as I attempt to understand the joys and pains of this life, and as I struggle to grow and love and learn the lessons of life. Thank you for being the source of peace, balance, hope, and objectivity in my life. Amen.

What I Believe

November 11, 1999

Step Two is about coming to believe in a power greater than ourselves. Here is an inventory of the beliefs I have come to hold regarding the Higher Power of my recovery, whom I choose to call God.

- God is actively working in my life, for the benefit of myself and others with whom I interact.
- God has a purpose and design for my life.
- God is moving and shaping all events in my life toward that design and purpose.
- God actively communicates with me through the people and circumstances in my life.
- God wills for good stuff to come to me through other people.
- God wills for good stuff to come to other people through me.
- God provides exactly what I need at exactly the moment I need it.
- God provides exactly what I want at exactly the moment it will best benefit me or someone in my life.
- God provides grace for my imperfections, mistakes, and poor choices.
- God instructs me by, and wants me to learn from, my imperfections, mistakes, and poor choices.
- God is ever present in my heart, but I must consciously seek to commune with God.
- God works in my life in many mysterious, miraculous ways that I, as yet, cannot comprehend.
- God wants me to trust sometimes, rather than rely on what I know.
- God wants my trust (faith) to become greater than my knowledge.
- God's face is visible to me in the faces of the people with whom I interact.
- God loves me, cares for me, watches over me, and protects me.
- God is the agent for change (growth) in my life.
- God brings people into my life to show me where I need to grow and mature more.
- God is accomplishing through me some wonderful plan that, as yet, I cannot see or understand.
- God is willing to do for anyone what God does for me and through me.

Dear God, thank You for being the Higher Power in my life. Amen.

First Anniversary Celebration

November 21, 1999

Today Linda and I celebrated our first year anniversary!

As part of our anniversary weekend together, we took a drive down to the beach where we were married and looked through our wedding vows, giving ourselves a kind-of report card on our first year together. The past year had its rough spots, its ups and downs, its doubts and fears, and its co-dependencies. But we have hit the one year mark and that is an achievement that stands on its own.

I've finally learned that, yes, relationships really can be full of fun, excitement, and fulfillment. But I've also learned that a "meaningful" relationship with Linda requires putting my whole self into the effort of creating and sustaining the meaning and love that relationship offers to us. Good, healthy relationships simply don't happen by accident. Nor are they merely the by-product of attraction.

I must credit Linda for her deep level of commitment. Many times I wanted to quit or regress to the safety of my past. But she kept loving me unconditionally through it all. She kept offering me acceptance and forgiveness.

Taking a Step Four inventory of myself, this marriage has helped me see that I still have many, many miles to go on the recovery road. But that is OK. What makes recovery exciting is the fact that this journey never ends. Every day offers new insights and new puzzles and new glances in the mirror. Every day offers new opportunities to grow and mature. Every day is the beginning.

My job is stay mindful and respectful and keep learning from the experience. And this holds true not only for my marriage, but for all the relationships in my daily round.

Maybe that is the essence of recovery—learning to live in mindful respect every single minute of the day, seizing every opportunity to show kindness and good will to each person I encounter. At least, that is the goal I am striving to attain through recovery.

Dear God, thank You for my wonderful marriage and the many lessons You are teaching me through my beautiful wife. Amen.

Respect and Co-Dependency

November 22, 1999

When I talk about living mindfully and respectfully of others, I don't want you to misunderstand me.

Treating others with respect never means we have to become a doormat. We never have to demean ourselves in the recovery process.

Just the opposite, recovery is about *redeeming* our self-esteem enough to respect others *and* ourselves. Recovery is about our freedom to stand up for ourselves when others treat us disrespectfully.

When you think about it, co-dependency is the ultimate demeaning behavior. Co-dependency saps us of our self-esteem and self-respect. And we do it to ourselves when we let others treat us as less than. Recovery gives us back our power and our right to esteem and respect ourselves. To expect esteem and respect from others. And recovery gives us the power to choose to respect others and esteem them—not so they will love us (or even like us) in return—but because respect is the key to effective human interaction.

Recovery is not difficult, mysterious, or dark in what it seeks to accomplish in us and through us.

If others don't have to put up with our controlling, manipulative behavior that we practice when acting out our co-dependency, then neither do we have to put up with the same stuff when others dish out similar behavior to us.

My message, in everything I have tried to say about co-dependency is this: Because we are individuals, we are worthy of respect. In our relationships, who we are looking for are other people who offer us co-equal respect—not as a favor or to get something from us in return, but simply because we recognize that we are all fellow human beings. Each of us is on the same road, but each of us is carrying our own load. And when each of us is mindful enough to offer supportive and encouraging treatment to others on the journey, we become the restful and refreshing sunlit vistas along their path.

Dear God, thank You for teaching me to treat others the way I wish to be treated. Amen.

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