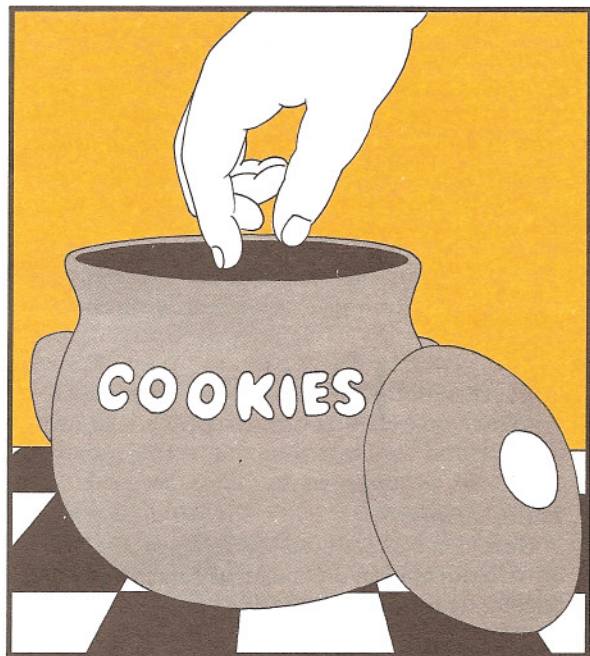


POCKET POWER

HONESTY



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Hazelden

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HONESTY

A Story

Once some people heard of a place called the Cave of Truth. They discussed this among themselves and made further inquiries. Finally, they decided to set out in search of the cave and after a long and difficult journey, they found it. At the entrance sat an old man who was the guardian. They approached him and asked if indeed this was the Cave of Truth. He assured them that it was. They asked if they might enter. In reply he asked, "How deeply into the Cave of Truth do you want to go?" At this question, they retreated and talked among themselves. They returned and said, "We would like to enter and go just deep enough to say we have been there."

This story may remind us of our reaction when we are told to grasp and develop a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. We may discover a part of us wants to be honest just enough to claim we have been there. Ongoing recovery, however, demands that we do more than simply visit truth and honesty as though they were a part of a scenic tour. The Alcoholics Anonymous program tells us we have to go deeply into the Cave of Truth by growing in honesty or run the risk of relapse. As some peo-

ple say, "Either grow or go."

For many of us, honesty was the beginning of recovery. We were finally able to ask for help. It was honesty with ourselves and others that broke through our denial and allowed us to admit we were powerless over alcohol or other drugs and that our lives had become unmanageable. Many of us struggled with that First Step, sometimes for years.

We may have been plagued by doubts surrounding a phrase in Chapter Five of the A.A. "Big Book" which says those people who do not recover cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually people who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. Such doubts about our capacity to be rigorously honest may be with us well into recovery. We discover that honesty is indeed an ongoing process and our tendencies to be dishonest, even in little things, can be a source of discouragement.

However, when we remember that honesty was the key to the beginning of our recovery, we can understand how important honesty is for our growth in all that sobriety and life have to offer. The A.A. program of the Twelve Steps is designed to help us grasp and develop this manner of living.

Blocks to Honesty

Why do we find it difficult to be honest even when we want to be? Perhaps one reason is that dishonesty had become for us a way of life when we were drinking or using. Dishonesty permeated our behavior as well as our minds and emotions. Frequently we lived in a world of illusions that we could scarcely discern from the world of reality. We found ourselves telling lies even when the truth was more convenient.

We developed a lifestyle around our drinking that demanded we be dishonest. We would lie concerning our whereabouts, about the money we were spending on drugs, and about how important drinking was to us. We became emotionally dishonest to the point that we did not know what our real feelings were because our emotions were under the sway of alcohol or other drugs.

Dishonesty had become such a way of life, that it will take time and effort to change. We are sometimes tempted in sobriety to think we have gotten "totally honest." A.A. as a program and a fellowship suggests that absolute honesty is impossible. Rather, we have the capacity to grow in honesty. To do this, we need to make the effort ourselves, but we also need to be with people who are becoming honest, too. As we experience their honesty, whether with

themselves in relation to their Higher Power or in relation to us, we discover our capacity for honesty grows and develops.

Another significant block to honesty is fear. There is a risk involved in honesty, and frequently we fear the consequences and pain that it may cause. It is helpful if we can be honest about our self-centered fear and share that with others. They may help us see that the consequences of our dishonesty in a given situation are more painful and dangerous for us than being honest.

Honesty and the Steps

There are times when we think, "I have worked the Steps. I have done a Fourth and a Fifth Step once and I don't need to do them again." That may, in fact, be true for many of us. However, some find it helpful to do these Steps over again after some length of sobriety. Others make it a regular practice to do a Tenth Step, not only on a daily basis, but on a semi-annual or annual basis as well. The inventory Steps can help us grow in honesty. These Steps, particularly later in sobriety, can reveal patterns of denying our good qualities, patterns in which we tend to avoid opportunities for growth.

At first, honesty regarding ourselves tends to focus on the negative dimensions of our behav-

ior and personality. This honesty about ourselves, particularly as we share it with others, begins to free us from the self-deception we have engaged in because of our addiction. Perhaps it is more difficult for us to be honest about our good qualities and the basic goodness of our personalities.

Many of us were mental and emotional wrecks and spiritually bankrupt when we began the program. Honesty serves first to clear the ground regarding our past and present condition. But as we grow in recovery and personal awareness, we become conscious of other more positive dimensions of our lives that the disease kept hidden. Sometimes we are even fearful of acknowledging our good qualities. It may seem like grandiosity, or we may fear the responsibility that comes with this recognition. But this personal awareness of our talents and abilities can open new vistas of growth. We discover, for example, our lives have purpose and meaning; we can be useful to others, and we have something to contribute to life. Frequently it takes as much courage to be honest about our goodness as it does about the negative dimensions.

The A.A. program of the Twelve Steps continually encourages us to be honest with ourselves by being honest about ourselves with others. Through the Eighth and Ninth Steps we are

led into a new quality of honesty with other people. These Steps suggest that we examine our past and acknowledge the harm we may have caused others. The "Big Book" devotes a number of pages to these important Steps. One point that seems to emerge is the importance of discussing our amends with someone we trust before we make them. Making amends is different than making an apology. Many of us are experts at saying, "I'm sorry." However, an amend implies a willingness to change our behavior toward another person. We are not only saying, "I'm sorry," we are saying, "I intend not to treat you that way in the future." Honesty in these Steps may also mean we need to repay, as best we can, someone we harmed financially or emotionally. Step Nine tells us we are to do this except when it would injure the person we are making amends to or others.

To do the Eighth and Ninth Steps honestly, we need to examine our motives and intentions in a detailed way. In early sobriety we may have thought we were making amends when all we were really trying to do was get our own way, or get someone out of our hair, or bring about reconciliation. To work these Steps honestly is to acknowledge the harm we have done to others in an honest and forthright manner and to be willing to accept the consequences of our

actions. Sometimes a nagging discontent in sobriety is due to our unwillingness to really make amends to people whom we may have harmed. The "Big Book" clearly suggests that we need help on these Steps in special ways. The "Big Book" reminds us that we are experts at hiding dubious motives beneath good reasons, and sharing with others can help us avoid this. Discussing amends with people in the program can help us discover when we need to make amends and how we can best do this.

What is Honesty, How Does it Flourish?

One way of defining honesty is to say it is simply the lack of intention to deceive. When we intend not to deceive ourselves, others, and God as we understand Him, we are making solid progress in developing that manner of living which requires rigorous honesty. We discover we can go deep into the Cave of Truth and become more free and at ease. We lose our fear of being honest with others and of their being honest with us. We find the consequences of being honest are better than continuing dishonesty. Developing honesty may at times be difficult and hard work. It may require time and trust in others to discover what honesty is for us in a given situation or at a particular time in our lives. But as we grow in honesty, we will appreci-

ate its benefits.

We need to be careful about being brutally honest. When we, or someone around us, is being brutally honest, chances are we are being more brutal than honest. Honesty flourishes in an atmosphere of care. For people in recovery, honesty is nourished by the care we have for one another as fellow sufferers from the same addiction and disease. Without care, honesty becomes false.

Another quality surrounding honesty is patience. Many of us have been dishonest for a long time, and it will take a while for us to develop an honest way of living. We tend at times to fall back into old patterns of behavior. Our honesty and the honesty of others in A.A. can help us avoid these patterns. It is sometimes said, "I am no longer the person I was. The person I was drank and used. If I start acting like that, I will drink and use again." When we attempt to develop honesty and other qualities, we need to be aware of the A.A. principle of *progress not perfection*. Honesty is the work of a lifetime. We need to acknowledge the progress that has been made, but at the same time we acknowledge the distance from our goal. Having patience with ourselves and with others can help us develop an honest quality of life.

Perhaps another story will illustrate how hon-

esty flourishes. Michelangelo was a great sculptor. Every day a small boy would come by his studio and watch. One day after the boy had been watching Michelangelo work for months on a particular piece of marble, the child asked, "What is it that you are really doing?" Michelangelo looked at him and said, "There is an angel in this stone and I am trying to let him out." His work demanded care and patience, and so does honesty. As we strive to become more honest, we discover that we need care and patience, too. We may not be trying to free angels from stone, but we are trying to discover and free our selves.

Sometimes it may seem that honesty is a dangerous thing. At an A.A. meeting on the topic of honesty someone said, "What would happen if the whole world suddenly became honest?" The reaction of many was that it would be a disaster, a total catastrophe. They assumed the dishonesties of the world are what keep it going. Before this mood could catch on, a young woman said, "Perhaps if the world were suddenly honest, the sheer beauty would overwhelm us all." It is not the dishonesties in the world and in our lives that keep them going. In fact, dishonesties make life harder. Honesty, the willingness to live with the intention of not deceiving ourselves, others, and God as we under-

stand Him, enables us to be the people we truly are.

Help in Being Honest

One way of viewing the disease of alcoholism is to look at what is hidden by it and through it. Certainly we hid our drinking and using from friends, family, and even from ourselves as best we could. As our disease progressed it began to hide other things. We covered up many dimensions of our lives as well. The process of getting better can be understood as uncovering, recovering, and discovering accomplished through honesty.

We need to do more than simply uncover the truth about our powerlessness over alcohol and other drugs. We need to uncover the truth about ourselves as human beings. This demands a willingness to look at aspects of our lives which we may want to hide from others. This continuing willingness to uncover the truth is a necessary step before we can move further in recovering.

As we go more deeply into the Cave of Truth and are more willing to uncover things that in the past we feared looking at, our process of recovery continues. We begin to discover new and glorious things about ourselves and others that we never knew before. This discovery can

be an exciting and adventurous time of growth. We may discover talents we did not know we had; we may discover we are willing to take new risks in our growth that amaze us; we discover we have something to offer other people.

Again, honesty is the key to discovery. Many times we need others to help us discover these new dimensions of our personalities. When we can accept their honest evaluation of us, we are in the real process of self-acceptance and growth. Step Ten continues the uncovering process by taking a personal inventory and admitting when we are wrong. This Step presupposes that we will be wrong for it says *when*, not *if*. This reminds us that we aim at making progress and have not become perfect. It also enables us to guard against old behaviors and attitudes coming back into our lives. We continue the process of uncovering, recovering, and discovering by taking note of motives, intentions, and actions toward others and ourselves.

If honesty is the lack of intention to deceive, a daily Tenth Step may reveal that there are many ways in which we can, and often do, deceive ourselves and those around us. Sometimes it may be in words, other times it may be in gestures or actions. The willingness to look at this on a daily basis can be a freeing experience. And a Tenth Step based on honesty can make a

significant difference between a mediocre and somewhat uncomfortable sobriety and one that is deep, joyous, and fulfilling.

We may find taking a Tenth Step not only on a daily basis but on a quarterly or semiannual basis is also helpful. This gives us an opportunity to look at our lives and see what patterns we need to be aware of. The willingness to share a written Tenth Step with a trusted friend, spiritual advisor, or sponsor can be a tremendous tool in our growth. Many of us have found that we cannot be honest with ourselves unless we are honest with another person. This does not mean that we have to call someone every day and tell them of our dishonesties. But the willingness to share with someone what is going on with us is a certain aid in our growth and honesty.

Many people have found doing a Tenth Step in the form of a journal can be a helpful experience in recovery. For example, we could record not only the dishonesties of the day, but also those things we have to be grateful for. We can go into detail about our hopes, dreams, fears, and the relationships in our lives.

There are many books available on keeping a journal. What we need to remember most of all is that this is our private journal, to be shared only when we wish. It is a place where we can be

honest with ourselves, and an opportunity to explore what is important for us. We can write in our journals as though no one else would ever see it, even though we may choose to share it with someone later. Most of us know ourselves well enough to recognize that if we are writing with the possibility of someone reading it, we will write more for them than for ourselves.

Honesty seems to be one of the central qualities of continuing sobriety. As the "Big Book" says, we are attempting to grasp and develop a manner of living that demands rigorous honesty. This does not always need to be a frightening process. Pain may be involved, but there is also freedom, joy, and fulfillment as we are able to grow in honesty with ourselves, others, and our Higher Power. Should someone ask us why we are making such an effort at honesty, we can reply as Michelangelo did. "There is an angel in this stone and I am trying to let him (or her) out."

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