

Healing Our Relationships

Step Eight – Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

In step 8, we undertake the work that heals our relationships with other people. This may sound like a very big order – and, for most of us it is. Some of our personal relationships may have become the focus of frustration, heartbreak, or confusion, perhaps for a long time. Indeed, some individuals entwined in our histories may have died or exited from our lives. Healing change may seem at first glance, impossible.

Just what do people have a right to expect from each other, anyway? In the 12-Step programs of recovery we accept ourselves as being worth healing, as the spiritual children of a Loving God. As worthy, valued individuals we have spiritual rights, including the rights to feel secure, accepted, cared for, and appreciated. The promise of recovery is the promise of having these deep basic needs met, by the action of God in our lives.

Just as we joyfully claim and affirm these rights for ourselves, we must affirm them for others – all others—whether we are acquainted with them or not, whether we like them or not. Human beings harm each other in direct relation to how much they ignore or lose sight of this underlying spiritual common ground.

Of course we don't have the same degree of responsibility toward all people in our lives. Neither do all people have the same degree of responsibility toward us. Personal commitments and responsibilities depend on the kind of bonding we feel, along with responsibilities. Parents, for example, not only usually feel deeply bonded with their children, but a contract of responsibility exists from the moment of birth. Among friends, employers and employees, and neighbors, however, our connections include a mix of stated and implied agreements worked out in advance or over time. Greater and lesser degrees of intimacy depend on factors such as how much trust and contact exists.

How, then, do we determine what is reasonable to expect, of others and ourselves? What do we say to those who vocally insist we owe them, whether we like it or not? Where do we draw the line?

In Step 8, with the focus on our own experience, we review the boundaries of intimacy and commitment we learned and rehearsed growing up. What were they? Did we get what we needed to be whole and healthy spiritual beings by using that set of rules? Were our spiritual rights to feel loved, nurtured, included and recognized, respected and celebrated – or were they violated, neglected, denied?

Our job in Step 8 is to determine the boundaries separating the different kinds of relationships we have and have had, to admit where we've been let down and where we have failed others, and then to become willing to act in the present based upon this new perspective. We aren't dependent upon others in doing this.

Philippians 2:1-4

1 Your life in Christ makes you strong and his love comforts you. You have fellowship with the Spirit, and you have kindness and compassion for one another. 2 I urge you, then to make me completely happy by having the same thoughts, sharing the same love, and being on in soul and mind. 3 Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering other's better than yourselves. 4 And look out for one another's interest, not just for your own.

Matthew 7:3-5

3 Why then, do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? 4 How dare you say to your brother, "Please, let me take that speck out of your eye" when you have a log in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Philippians 3:12-14

12 I do not claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself. 13 Of course, my brothers and sisters, I really do not think that I have already won it; the one thing I do, however, is to forget that is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. 14 So I run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize, which is God's call through Christ Jesus to the life above.

Mark 2:17

17 Jesus heard them and answered, "People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick, I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts".

Jeremiah 31:3

3 I have always loved you, so I continue to show you my constant love.

1 John 3:1-3

1 See how much the Father has loved us! His love is so great that we are called God's children—and so, in fact, we are. This is why the world does not know us: it has not known God. 2 My dear friends, we are now God's children, but it is not yet clear what we shall become. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is. 3 Everyone who has this hope in Christ keeps himself pure, just as Christ is pure.

1 All scriptures taken from: Good News Bible: Today's English Version, American Bible Society, (1992: New York, NY) Holy Bible, New Living Translation.

In Twelve Steps For Christian Living, Vernon Bittner divides Step 8 into three parts.

The first part is embracing the pain of our lives and relationships instead of running from it. We embrace the pain by writing down what has happened and staying with the painful feelings as we allow the harm we have done, and the harm that has been done to us, to become clearly conscious... So much of our training is toward quick answers, quick prayer to get rid of the pain, not seeing that the pathway to wisdom and understanding goes through pain. We learn that our pain is just that – pain. It will not kill us. As we stand in our pain we are frightened, and it hurts, but by knowing God can teach us through it, some of us are losing our exaggerated fear of pain.

The second part of step 8 is writing down beside the names of each person with whom we have a bruised relationship our own part in what happened. By staying in the pain we can begin more clearly to see our part in much of our sin and failure. Some of the people who hurt us may have been trying to defend themselves (however unhealthily or abusively) against our controlling, fixing, advice giving, punishing, or interfering. We begin to see the way the disease works in our life. In going into surgery we take off all our clothes and get up on a table and let people look at us. That's not what we do every day the rest of our life. But for surgery to save our life it's necessary. Going back over the past this intensely is not going to be a way of life, but if we don't examine and experience the effects of the disease in our life and learn what behavior leads to the pain we continue to cause and experience in relationships, then it's hard for even God to change our selfish and abusive habits.

Finally, when we have looked at our list and lived with the feelings we had about what we did and what was done to us, we can become ready to do what we have to do to let go of our pain. Before going to make amends we need to gain humility and to release our pain and anger about what others have done to us. This comes through forgiving them. Humility is not fawning. Humility is an accurate estimate of ourselves. By seeing and experiencing the pain caused by broken relationships we see that we are not the smooth social operators we thought we were. We see that we are ordinary people whose self-centeredness causes pain and chaos.

Seeing ourselves with humility can allow us to forgive our friends and enemies who have hurt us before we go out to make amends and hope for forgiveness from those we have harmed. Forgiveness in this sense means simply that we release our need to punish, to get even, and to make the other person apologize, or do anything. We release our need to continue to be hurt or be angry about what they did.

Forgiveness of others is hard. We may not be able to do it directly. They may not know they have hurt us. Our job is not

to use this forgiveness as an excuse to tell other people how wrong they have been.

The main purpose of Steps 8 and 9 is to clean off our side of the street, regardless of the reaction of the other person to our amends. But, we are often so manipulative we want to couch our amends in a way that would almost guarantee that the people we have harmed would forgive us. We have to stop ourselves and simply become willing to just go to all the people we have harmed and make amends for the harm we have done.

Adapted from: Miller, J. Keith, **A Hunger For Healing: The Twelve Steps As a Classic Model For Christian Spiritual Growth**, Harper San Francisco, © 1991

Questions For Discussion and Reflection

1. Who has let me down? Who has hurt me?
2. Who taught me to be a victim?
3. Whom have I carried these over to in my life? Whom have I let down, abandoned, or abused?
4. How have some of the disappointments in relationships actually been the result of not looking to God to show me how to meet my needs and instead, expecting others to do so?
5. How does a person go about allowing God to meet their primary needs for love and companionship in day-to-day life?
6. How does it work, this putting things behind us in a healthy way rather than hiding, running from, or stuffing the pain?
7. In there someone I can't forgive yet?
8. Is there someone I can't forget?

Two step Eight Prayers

God, may I understand:

To be alert to my own needs, not to the faults of others

To remain teachable

To listen

To keep an open mind and

To learn not who's right but what's right.

Help me remember, God, that this is about me. I find myself wanting to judge and blame and accuse everyone but myself. I'm supposed to focus on those I've harmed yet my mind is full of those who have offended me. Help me to get over this stumbling block. I release those who hurt me. I forgive. I put those people in your hands, God. Vengeance is yours. Wait, God... don't punish them. I'm just as guilty... don't punish me. Help me to make things right.

Adapted

From: **Prayers for The Twelve Steps: A Spiritual Journey**, RPI, San Diego, CA, © 1993