

# CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND THE RELIGIOUS SISTER — WHY DO I NEED 12-STEP SPIRITUALITY?

By Sr. Patricia C.

*The Blue Book, Vol. XLVIII, 1997  
Jacksonville, Florida*

Yes, the person described in that introduction is me; my professional, religious, and recreational career. But I need to talk about this other me; the me that took the anonymous part of the 12-Step Program so very seriously. That is, I have also been in AA, and am celebrating 20 years. I often say to myself, "It could have been twenty-three years." What happened to those other three years? Where did they go? That answer is going to weave into what I'll be talking to you about today.

My own personal story is that I went directly to AA and never did residential treatment. I never had any kind of a therapeutic intervention. In my story there were two informal, well intentioned interventions by people in my own community. But nothing formal that really put pressure on me to get into treatment. I went directly from my desk, in desperation, to AA. Sometimes I regret that I didn't do residential because I was so slow at getting it. I dragged my feet for years. I sometimes do the "if only's." If only I had done residential I really would have progressed more quickly, and I'd be light years ahead of where I am now. But God knows where that would be.

My story is that I'm from the South Bronx, a Catholic from a Catholic school and Catholic neighborhood. The type of ethnic neighborhood where everything felt secure because everybody did things in pretty much the same way. There was a consistency, a comfortableness about that. I remember as if it were yesterday the first black person that came into my neighborhood. I was totally intrigued.

I went into the Novitiate in the Midwest in a semi-cloistered community. We were surrounded by corn fields, and more corn fields. By the time I saw civilization again, which was in the mid '60s, the Catholic world had changed, the world had changed. It was bursting at the seams. But not my world! Certainly I was stuck. What had intensified for me at that period of my life is what I call the "spirituality of self-denial."

A spirituality of self-denial really feeds on an addiction to perfection. So I had this sense that this addiction to perfection was there and that motivated my move in terms of religious life. An addiction to perfection, or a spirituality of self-denial says things like, "more is better, harder is holier, penance is purifying." So the harder it could be, the better. Upon reflection, I do think it was a prevailing mentality, not just mine. The very first year I was teaching religion there was a question in the text something like, "What would you have to do to get to heaven?" One student responded, "You have to do things the hardest way possible."

What was the motivation of the hordes of people that went into religious life at that period of time? What is the motivation of any person seeking religious life or looking for a religious way of life? Sometimes it's the woundedness of the person. Sometimes it's pathological. Always it's God working with our human condition, whatever that may be. I had this mindset about perfection. I wanted to be perfect. I needed desperately to be perfect, so of course I was drawn in the direction of religious life. And harder was holier so I was fine. I picked one of the hardest communities I knew of. The reason I mention this is because my mind set became a hindrance, rather than a help.

Back to my own story, and how AA fit in. How did I lose all those years when I could have been sober, but wasn't? My first drunk, my first black-out certainly was before I entered the convent. I was nineteen. I was working. I knew before I entered that I had a problem. Admitting that I had a problem, interestingly enough, never was one of my difficulties. I knew it from way back when. I was relieved that I would never have to make that choice again, about drinking or not drinking — because it wasn't there. I never saw it. It really was six or seven years before I saw alcohol again. But the very first time I had alcohol again, I said to myself, "this is trouble." For several more years I chose not to drink. And then, I don't know how the change came about. Well, maybe I do, if I reflect on all that was happening in terms of everything becoming much more lenient and liquor being just more available.

My problem accelerated when I moved back to Rhode Island. I must have changed my mind; I must have said: "I don't care." I started to drink, and immediately it was a problem. I called on my spirituality of self-denial, better known as "control." I'll control this, I'll only drink in some places, at some times, some kinds

of drinks, with some people. But every single time I drank it was a problem and I knew it. I did not try to make excuses. I mentioned earlier that there were two interventions, and the reason they never got anywhere was because I knew I had a problem, I wasn't in denial. I didn't avoid. I admitted it. I just didn't change it. I thought I could, I wanted desperately to, but I just couldn't. I called on all my self-denial tricks, but at some point I said: "I need help. I can't do this anymore." A sister in my community made an appointment for me to see a priest. I went to see him just once.

Here's the gist of what happened. I'll tell you the last part of the session.

He said: "So you have a problem with alcohol, you drink too much." "Yes, I do." "Well, what else do you like to drink?" "Coffee, I like coffee." "So here's what you do," he said. "Every time you drink coffee, you don't drink to the bottom of the cup." "That's it?" "That's the advice?" "Yes, of course, every time you drink the coffee you put the cup down before you finish." Even in my weak mind at that moment, I knew I shouldn't be paying for this advice. Because any alcoholic knows what to do. You don't drink to the bottom, you fill the glass up before it's empty. We all know how to do that. He thought this was a great revelation. But do you see how he was really fitting right into my spirituality of self-denial? Well, clearly that man was not an alcoholic.

Then what I began to discover was that I was in tremendous pain. Later, when I was reading some AA literature, I discovered that Bill W. and Carl Jung had communicated on this subject of alcoholism. Bill was writing for advice, for some insights regarding alcoholism. Carl Jung wrote back to Bill and said that alcoholism was a spiritual illness, at the root of which was a desire for wholeness. Then it occurred to me that the more fragmented a person felt, the more pain that person felt, the more alcohol would become a solution. We all know what happens, we're experiencing pain, we use alcohol, or other drugs, to reduce the pain. And the solution to the problem becomes a problem in itself. We need more to deal with the increased pain. For me that was a great revelation. PAIN IS THE MOTIVATOR.

Pain is the motivator, and it is motivating us to wholeness because individuation and growth is really what we're all about. Some of us make the choice that is really creative and enhancing, and some of us, for whatever reason, need to cover the pain. The choice we make is to an addiction which accentuated the pain. Now there is a problem on top of a problem.

I came across a poem once that goes something like this:

The rain to the wind said

"You push and I'll pelt."

And they so smote the garden

That the flowers knelt, half dead.

I know how those flowers felt.

That poem conjured up the kind of perpetual pain that I was experiencing as my drinking accelerated. Many of you are probably familiar with Patrick Carnes and his writing on addictions, specifically sexual addictions. He defines addiction as: "a pathological relationship with a mood altering substance, process or relationship. The addict believes that he or she has found a constant, repeatable and ultimately dependable substance which is capable of relieving the pain of life." So addiction is about relieving pain. That brings me to one of the paradoxes of recovery. I was 32 years old. I had started drinking seriously at about 28. I'm 32, and very successful at what I do. I'm involved in a lot of things besides my work. I'm coaching a team and involved in some sports. And inside I feel horrible. I was sitting at my desk. No intervention. No one comes knocking at my door. But I said to myself: "I have got to do something about myself!" I got up and went to an AA meeting.

I sat in the back. I said nothing to anyone. I left as soon as it was over. I continued to do that each day, and, my goodness, I didn't drink. I came back day after day, and I didn't drink. I sat in the corner, I said nothing, and I didn't drink. That went on for days, weeks, months. I was the ultimately anonymous person. No one at the convent knew that I was going to AA. And no one at AA knew that I was coming from a convent. I talked to no one. This was my big character flaw. This is why it became so difficult for me. My God, weeks turned into months and I wasn't drinking. IT WORKED! Isn't that wonderful. It's as simple as that. No pressures, no motivations, nobody pounding down my door saying get help or get out. None of that! It worked!

Then I had a better idea. I remember the day well. It was as if a veil lifted from my eyes. (No pun intended.) All of a sudden I saw the STEPS, that must have been up there for the whole time I was coming. I started to read them . . . and that was my undoing, paradoxically. I read, "we admitted we were powerless over

alcohol and our lives had become unmanageable.” Well, yes. To a certain degree. But you see, my life was quite successful. It was hard for me to grasp that one, but I was powerless over alcohol, and I was willing to say that absolutely, 100%.

We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Well of course!

Turn my will and my life over to the care of God as we understand Him. Well of course!

Then I began to say: “What am I doing here with THESE people who have never made nearly the commitment I’ve made. I have dedicated my life, I have made vows; I have done a Novitiate stuck out in the Midwest. They are talking about turning their will and life over, they have no idea what turning their will and life over is all about! Oh no, I have a better idea. I’m going home to my convent. I don’t like this place anyway. These people smoke too much.” I went home to my convent and I said to myself: “It’s so obvious that these folks are just setting up some principles for themselves which are like a mini version of what I already do. All I really have to do is live my life more intensely, do it harder . . . harder is holier. I was free as a bird.”

Within a very short period of time, the pressure of this, the pressure of that, and the “I have a better idea” just sort of melts away. And very soon, I can’t remember time exactly, I was back drinking. That kept up for three more years. Three more devastating self-destructive years, during which, in fact, my professional life got better. The externals were getting better while the internals were falling apart completely.

For me the key is really an understanding of shame and guilt. Shame is such a horrible feeling about who I am or what I am. Guilt is a real judgment or statement about what I’ve done. I read somewhere just recently, “guilt is the shadow side of the Christian’s search for light.” We have guilt, and it is totally appropriate. I believe that sometimes I should feel a little more guilty about the screwball things that I do. Be guilty. Repent. Get over. Get on. That part we Catholics do pretty well. We have the ritual all set up for it. What we don’t have so well developed (but are getting infinitely better at) is this ‘shame’ thing. That’s where just deep down as a person I don’t feel good about myself. I say: “How could I have done something like that?”

This was the set-up for me when I saw the STEPS because I do believe as religious people who are aspiring to a more intense spiritual life, we hold ourselves to a higher standard. And so do most other people hold us to higher standards. We hold ourselves to a higher standard and then when we fail the shame is incredible. That basically is what happened to me, sitting in the back over there because I wasn’t feeling like a success. Oh I had stopped drinking, but I was feeling like a religious failure. I said to myself, Oh my God, look at these people trying to do this, when I have made a commitment to do it and I have done so poorly. It was that shame, and that big distinction between shame and guilt that really drove me out of AA. I just couldn’t see that AA had anything new to offer. And that was my undoing. My undoing for another three years.

One of the things I would say, as a therapist, is that that experience reminded me to never settle for the resolution of feelings of guilt. If therapeutically we’re getting people to resolve some of their guilt issues, never settle for that. Because right under that is the far more pervasive thing that we have to work with and that is their sense of shame. Guilt is RELATIVELY easy to work with compared to shame.

I read a book by Ernie Kurtz. He wrote about the fact that the human being is essentially limited. A great tension exists in us all of the time. We will always aspire to be more. But the human condition is such that we are always drawn in the direction of less. Now we could call that good and evil. We could call it virtue and sin. But it is a great tension within us . . . we aspire to be More, and we are drawn to do Less. This is at the heart of a sense of shame, this awareness that we are not God, that we are human. It is essentially human to be caught in this tension.

Back to the story. Three more years of crazy behavior, and I finally came back to AA. How did that happen? I woke up one morning and I was feeling sick, sick, sick. I was already going to be late for school and I couldn’t imagine how I was going to get out of bed. I know that all of us believe that God intervenes in our lives, and that is what happened that morning. I said out loud, “God, help me,” and that minute the desire to drink left me. I felt it. I never experienced that desperate need to drink again.

What was the turning point? All of a sudden it clicked for me that all of the running around I was doing was about MY doing it; and this time, “with all the desperation that the dying can muster” I said and I meant: “God help me.” That day I went back to AA, and I saw everything differently. I attribute this to no efforts of my own because my efforts were definitely going off in the other direction.

There’s another book I read recently, Weddings and Wakes. One character in it had left the convent. There’s a paragraph that I think describes my thinking towards the end of my drinking career. It said: “Six years ago when she had left the convent, she had understood fully that it was not because she had lost her

vocation, only settled into it too perfectly. She understood that it was because she had come to love too dearly the life she was leading. She had entered the convent thinking she would give her life to God, but found when she was there that she had given it to no one but herself.” And that really spoke to me about those years of spinning my wheels and insisting that I had given my life to God and, therefore, these things should fall into place for me. When, in fact, I was rejecting the very thing that God was putting right there in my path.

I began to read the STEPS. Then the realization of why AA works began to dawn. It works because we all come to the same playing field. I realized that I had so much in common with the people that I was sitting with and talking to. Once I accepted my imperfection, my limitation, there was a whole world full of people I could relate to. It was great. There was a lot of company out there, all of a sudden.

How did it actually work in my life? How did the fact that when I read and worked the STEPS, they changed my life? Obviously I have not left religious life in thirty some years, and neither have I left AA in twenty some years. I will tell you that I’m not doing either of those perfectly in all these years, but I’m still at it and still trying to integrate the two.

**STEP TWO.** It was a revelation! In reading Step Two, “we came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity,” I was introduced to the innumerable paths that we have trod to arrive at this place. It talks about some of those paths, and it talks about some of the belligerent people who simply do not want to believe. The belligerent people who insist that there is no God. Or that God was not nice to them. Or God was not nice to someone else and, therefore, they refuse to believe. Then there is another whole paragraph describing those folks who once had faith but lost it. And finally the description of those who “are full of faith and still reeking of alcohol.” I said to myself, wasn’t it nice of them to write this just about me. Because the whole explanation, the struggle, the dilemma that I was constantly in was all about, “how could I be doing all these things (prayer, retreats, reading etc.) and still be drinking?” That little paragraph explained it so clearly. What I was doing was all on the surface. I had a multitude of religious acts and no depth. I had a lot of ritual and very little faith. Very little faith in God. I thought that all these little ritual things that I was doing would prove me acceptable to God. Then God would do me a favor in return.

At whatever level of spirituality, or whatever spot on the spiritual journey we find ourselves, surrender and turning our will over to the care of God is essential. What I really needed to do was accept and surrender genuinely, as I had done that particular morning, and have tried to do every morning since. Is it always with the same intensity? I’d like to say that it is, but quite frankly, it isn’t. But I make the effort anyway. The comparisons that I was making the first time I read the STEPS that actually drove me out of AA were very helpful comparisons my second time around. Part of what changed is that I got older, wiser, more sober, and hopefully my brain worked a little better. But some of it was the genius, the wisdom, contained in the STEPS.

At one time in my life I had made a thirty-day retreat, and during that a general confession. I can remember laboring over that. I always had a hard time with confessions. But I thought about my whole life. I made a big long list, and went to see the priest. He sat there politely, and when I was done, I was done. Washed clean and away I go. While in the Program I did a fourth and fifth step. I picked a married man with a family who had been a monk at one time in his life. He read my fifth step back to me. Out loud! I’m telling you that having your teeth pulled without anesthetic, having your heart cut out, could not have been more painful than having him read that back to me. I thought my life would end — talk about pain — but my life didn’t end. I was as light as a feather, and then there was discussion to help me with some things. It was wonderful. It opened a door for me that no other experience in terms of reconciliation had opened for me before. That was a turning point for me, because a few years later I went on another retreat. I had a spiritual directress who was a Sister of Mercy. She said: “Tell me a little something about yourself.” And I responded, “Sit back, because I am going to tell you everything.” That’s what step five had done for me. My life just wasn’t a big secret anymore.

I have another story about the big drama I created around steps eight and nine — make a list, make amends. I can tell you the details later, but for now it is sufficient to say that it took years for me to recognize some of the damage I had done while drinking. Then I was inspired to make amends to a sister who had been very good to me, who had been a mentor for me, and whom I had hurt. But I was inspired at a gathering of the whole congregation. It was a very powerful experience for me as I made amends to her for the hurt I had caused as a result of my alcoholism.

A big part of the work I do is giving retreats to persons in 12-Step Programs. So I focus on Steps ten and eleven. And I share my own experience, and I learn from the experience of others.

Time is running out, has run out. I must stop story telling and wrap this up. AA worked for me even when I didn't want it to. AA isn't my whole life, nor is it my whole spiritual life. But it was, and is, a critical part of my life as a recovering person. There is a genius, a wisdom, a holiness about the 12 Steps, that I as a recovering person haven't found anywhere else. To anyone else who suffers with the shame of being a committed religious person who is also an addicted person, I can only plead with you to give the 12 Steps a genuine wholehearted chance. They are a gift from God. You are a gift from God. What do you have to lose?

© Copyright 2003 National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, Inc.