

*Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles*  
*Step 1: Admitting That We Are Powerless*

Romans 7:15-24

We lean forward a little when we hear someone else describe what they're feeling in a way that makes us want to say "Me too!" I remember the first time I read that passage we just read from Romans. I was in high school, and I remember feeling stunned, completely blown away, by seeing those words in the Bible. *The Bible* knows what my life feels like? I felt seen and understood, all the way through.

"I can will it, but I can't do it. [Paul says in this letter he writes to the Christians in Rome] I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me. It gets the better of me every time." There is something deeply comforting in those words. Just knowing that I'm not the only person who struggles with the gap between my intentions and my actions, my best self and the self who shows up every day, makes me feel less alone. I needed that when I was 15, and I still need it today.

Maybe this is the human condition. John Ortberg, who's the pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, someone whose faith and writing I admire very much, has written this:

*"I am disappointed with myself. I am disappointed not so much with particular things I have done as with aspects of who I have become. I have a nagging sense that all is not as it should be...."*

*I always had the idea as a child that adults were pretty much the people they wanted to be. Yet the truth is, I am embarrassingly sinful. I am capable of dismaying amounts of jealousy if someone succeeds more visibly than I do. I am disappointed at my capacity to be small and petty. I cannot pray for very long without my mind drifting into a fantasy of angry revenge over some past slight I thought I had long since forgiven or some grandiose fantasy of achievement. I can convince people I'm busy and productive and yet waste large amounts of time watching television...."*

*And sometimes, although I am aware of how far I fall short, it doesn't even bother me very much. And then I am disappointed at my lack of disappointment."*<sup>i</sup>

I know this sounds insensitive, but hearing his struggle just makes me want to smile. I want to say to him, "You too? You mean I'm not the only one?"

The writer Anne Lamott often does the same thing for me. In her own raw and honest way, she says things that we've all felt but hesitate to say out loud about ourselves. In a book written when her son Sam was young, she told this story about what bedtime was like:

*"It's your child's bedtime and all you want is for him to go to sleep so you can lie down and stare at the TV...and it starts up. 'Mama, I need to talk to you. It's important.' So you go in and muster your patience, and you help him with his fears or his thirst, and you go back to the living room and sink into your couch, and then you hear, 'Mama? Please come here one more time.' You lumber in like*

*you're dragging a big dinosaur tail behind you, and you rub his back for a minute. The third time he calls you, you try to talk him out of needing you, but he seems to have this problem with self-absorption, and he can't hear that you can't be there for him. And you become wordless with rage. You try to breathe, you try everything, and then you blow. You scream, 'What? What? What! Can't you leave me alone for four seconds?' Now [she says] your child feels infinitely safer, much more likely to drift off to sleep. And the worst part [she really gets this] is the fear. The fear about who you secretly know you are...I lay on the couch [she says] with my hands over my face, shocked by how hard it is to be a parent...''iii*

She gets it. Every one of us who has tried hard to be a good parent knows something about how that awful night feels. That terrible feeling of isolation, the fear that everyone else can do this, and somehow I can't.

Maybe hearing these admissions from other people makes you feel like you are not alone. Or maybe you feel like these little self-image gaps don't come close to describing the kinds of failings and disappointments you have to live with in your own life. Or maybe it's not even your own life that is disappointing you so much as it is the life of someone else, someone whom you *need* to do better, so that you can be OK too...and he or she just won't do what *you know* would make his life, and yours, the way it's supposed to be.

The pattern of behavior you can't break free of may be your impatience with your child, or your well-hidden inability to forgive a slight, or a blinding addiction to alcohol or drugs. It doesn't make much difference whether the life you can't control is your own or someone else's. No matter what the symptoms are, the problem that plagues us all is the same. It's something deeper and much better hidden than any of those little misdeeds—the things we might call 'sins'—that we're likely to focus on.

Underneath it all, there's a distance that's grown between us and our best selves—who we want to be, who we know we can and should be. Who God created us to be. Somehow, through years of struggling and compromising and making do, we've lost our way, wandered off-track; and it's hard to find our way back. Maybe now you're not even sure what "on-track" would look like.

Our culture tells us that with discipline and determination, we should be able to whip ourselves into shape. We should also be able to control the people and circumstances around us. They too should cooperate in the way *our* world is supposed to work.

But few of us have gotten to this point in our lives without learning that re-arranging our circumstances doesn't work very well, or very consistently. Something breaks, and it feels like an earthquake powerful enough to shake and demolish the order you've carefully built. Other people refuse to take up the better way you've set out for them. Sometimes it's your own inability—stubborn and unexplainable—to actually carry out all those good intentions you set for yourself.

The first step in 12-step spirituality asks us whether we're ready to admit that we simply can't fix either ourselves or the people around us. To **admit that we are powerless** over the bad behaviors and ugly thoughts and unhealthy attachments that keep tormenting us. To realize that even with all those self-help techniques that seemed so promising, trying to fix ourselves only gets us deeper into what plagues us. To acknowledge that getting better has little to do

with wanting it more, and that as long as we think we can get better by controlling things, we're just going to keep getting in the way.

Do you remember learning how to swim? The first time you get into water that's over your head, you're so sure that you're going to drown that your instincts just take over. You wave your arms and legs frantically. You grab for whatever there is nearby that's stationary and you hold on with a death grip—whether it's the side of the pool or someone else's neck. But eventually someone convinces you that you can only survive if you learn *first* to trust the water. To give up flailing around, trying to push the water down so that you can stay up. To stop fighting the fear that if you don't hold onto something as tightly as you can, the water will carry you somewhere you don't want to go. You can only swim *after* you've learned to lie back and float in the very same water that threatens to drown you. It isn't because there's no danger. It's because there's something buoyant underneath you, something *in that dangerous water itself* that will hold you up. You just aren't helping with all your thrashing.

I'm not suggesting that you should live passively, just lie there and wait for the gulf stream to transport you to the promised land. That doesn't happen in swimming or in life. The point of admitting our powerlessness over our sins or our addictions or our bad habits is not to leave us helpless or inert. It's not to give up the hope of a better, more fulfilling life. The idea behind the first step is that if you can stop *struggling*, focusing on the things that are killing you, *then* you can turn, finally, toward a way of being that really does have the power to save your life.

Until we are exhausted, most of us cling to the notion that if we try hard enough, we can change even the most stubborn bad habits inside of us. Who wants to admit that they're powerless? Recovering alcoholics talk about how they needed to “hit bottom” before their lives could begin to turn around. They've learned an important truth: It's an illusion to think that we can control the most persistent problems in our lives if we just keep fighting with the things that stand in our way. You can only take hold of the help you need if you've surrendered; if you've softened your heart and unclenched your fists; opened your hands to all that your life holds, including your own imperfection. You have to say “yes” to what is, before you can be changed.

To do this, you have to know that there is something more. You can't risk floating until you can trust that there's a power at work in the world and inside of you that can hold you up like water. A power that will turn its full force toward helping you see, and then have, life with freedom and fullness. Does that power exist? Is there something trustworthy enough to catch you when you fall, strong enough to keep you from drowning?

Come back next week for Step 2.

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<sup>i</sup> John Ortberg, *Living the Life You've Always Wanted*, Zondervan, 2002, p. 11-13.

<sup>ii</sup> Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Riverhead Books, 2005, p. 122-124.

### Resources for more reading

Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, HarperOne, 1988

J. Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing*, Harper San Francisco, 1991

Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, Franciscan Media, 2011

Rami Shapiro, *Recovery—The Sacred Art*, Skylight Paths, 2009