

**How to Cope
with an Alcoholic
(or with
Being One)**

**By
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Dear Pam,

I hope you won't mind the booklike format of this letter, but as I thought of how I could best do what you asked and cull from my philosophical writings what I knew that would apply to alcoholics, it occurred to me that I what I'd need to do is take some ideas from a lot of different places and put them together; and what started out to be a letter looks now as if it's going to be quite a bit more extended.

Quite a bit more extended.

Besides, it just might be that what I'm writing could be helpful not only to you, but to others. Much of what I'm going to be saying applies to the alcoholic himself as well as those related to him, and a great deal of it applies to drug addicts as well as others who for one reason or another find themselves out of control. I know, for instance, a severe depressive who would go to bed for weeks at a time, feeling guilty about not getting up, because she thought she could "if she just put her mind to it"—which made her that much more depressed and more incapable of getting up. That kind of person is one of the ones this book applies to as well as the alcoholic.

The approach is very different from the one you usually see, and I offer it for what it's worth to you and

yours. It may involve some rugged going, and a good deal (certainly at the beginning) that you will find abstract and wonder what relevance it has to your difficulty and your husband's. But there's so much that's said off the top of people's head these days that it seems to me that the background I'm going to give is necessary for the conclusions I come to (which will be pretty radical) to be plausible.

I think that, first of all, I have to say something about how the mind works, and then how something like alcohol or drugs affects it, and how that makes alcoholism or addiction a mental handicap which is as much a handicap as losing a leg. And just as with losing a leg, there is no way a person with a mental handicap can get back to where he was before; he and everyone around him has to live with it. But sometimes, just like a person who has had a prosthesis, it can happen that the person is able to get to a state where his handicap doesn't make much difference in his life; but there are other times when this doesn't occur.

There's no point in writing this, and no point in your reading it, if we're not totally honest. There may be no hope for a given alcoholic or addict to change his ways in this life. But there is this, and it is a fact, not a dream: Life goes on after death, and we will all be able to do what we want to do then. I can prove this, with as good evidence as paleontologists can prove that dinosaurs once walked this earth or that physicists know that there is

radio radiation.

Let me stress this for a moment. We have been so brainwashed by the kind of “religion” that some people have made of science that we actually believe that things like a life after death can’t be established scientifically, because “science,” as they say, “only deals with what is visible, tangible, observable.” But just consider radio radiation. You can’t see it, you can’t feel it, taste it, smell it, or perceive it in any way—and no one ever will. But it is simple nonsense to say that the existence of radio radiation hasn’t been scientifically established. If there isn’t radio radiation, then what happens when you turn your radio on is a miracle—because then, “scientifically,” there’s no connection between your radio and what happens in the studio. We know radio radiation exists because—and only because—what happens in radios and TV’s is nonsense without it, *not* because we can see it. Similarly, I can show that we know that there’s a life after death because certain aspects of life as we observe it are nonsense without it. It’s finding the scientific evidence for and against things like this that’s my job as a philosopher.

Now, I’m not going to give you in this little book the evidence for a life after death or the existence of God and so on. If you want that, you can wade through some of my philosophical works, like *The Finite and the Infinite* or *Living Bodies* (or if you really want some hard work, the three volume tome you saw me printing, *Modes of the Finite*).

I would be delighted to present this evidence to you, but I'm going on the assumption that what you're really interested in is the practical question of how to cope with your alcoholic husband—or if you give this to him, how he can cope with being an alcoholic. So I'm just going to give you the conclusions you'll need to know to make sense out of the directives I come up with; and I suspect that you'll find those quite enough of a chore without weighing the pros and cons of why I think they're established by the best evidence currently available to us.

One other thing. I am also going to take it for granted that Christianity is actually true. We're after what the facts are, not what can be established within the confines of this or that discipline. And so, even if, as a philosopher, I can't deal with whether the events about Jesus Christians believe in actually happened or not (because it's outside my field as such), I've explored the question, and come to the conclusion that the best evidence dealing with the writings of the New Testament is that the authors were reporting facts they actually saw, not retelling legends. Again, I have no intention of going into the labyrinthine ways of contemporary Biblical scholarship here; you can find my reasons for this in my translation of the New Testament which I call *The Documents of the New Treaty between YHWH and the Human Race*. Let me just say that what Christians believe are facts have a lot more going for them than wishful thinking or some kind of emotional commitment that

they are “comfortable” with believing. If there’s anything I’m dead against, it’s accepting something as true because “you’re comfortable with it.” I think you’ll see this as these pages go on.

To get back to what I was saying, then, it can be established pretty safely that life does go on after death in such a way that we will be just what we choose to be. Ultimately, the handicaps we all have will be still part of us, I think, but they will no longer be handicaps, any more than it is a handicap that I don’t have wings and can’t fly like a bird.

The basic secret of what I am writing is that those of us who have handicaps—and your husband’s being an alcoholic is a handicap for you and your children—can deal with them if, like blind and crippled people, we look at what we can *do* rather than what we *could* do if we didn’t have the handicap. The handicap is a special limitation that we have that other humans don’t have; but in the last analysis, it’s like not having wings—and, in fact, like all of our other limitations, it’s what makes each of us unique. If you can’t fly, you can spend your life trying to fly and thinking about what you could do if you could fly, or you can pay attention to all you can do on the ground, and forget about flying, and be the ground animal you are. This applies both to the alcoholic and those who have to have dealings with him.

There are two points to this book, then. The first is that there are a lot of things about each of us that are

limitations, and in reference to other people are handicaps; but because they don't involve physical deformations, we don't tend to think of them as handicaps or even as limitations. We think of them as something that "you could really do if only you put your mind to it," when in fact the whole issue is that you *can't*, for one reason or another, "put your mind to it." I mentioned the depressive woman who couldn't get out of bed. I told her, "If you'd fallen and broken your leg, would you feel guilty about not getting up?" She said no, of course. "Well," I said, "what you've got is a short circuit in your brain that's keeping you in bed just as much as if your leg was broken. What's there to feel guilty about with that?"

I want to explain why this kind of "bug" in the computer of our brain means that "will power" will simply not produce the desired behavior, as well as why it will always *seem* as if you could control yourself if you just wanted to badly enough. You have to understand this, I think, if you're going to be able to cope with an alcoholic husband—and cope with yourself as coping with an alcoholic husband. The second is the practical one of being able to deal with something like alcoholism as a handicap and not as a "disease" or a "problem." You're never going to get anywhere in coping with alcoholism (or with drug addiction, or smoking, or overeating, or even something like homosexual orientation) if you think of it as something to be corrected, any more than you can deal with blindness by thinking of it as

something to be corrected. An alcoholic, let me stress, will never again be a non-alcoholic; an addict will be an addict for the rest of his life, and so will a smoker; and a homosexual will never turn into a heterosexual, no matter how much any of these people want to. Some alcoholics may be able to stop *drinking*, or smokers stop smoking, but they can't stop being alcoholics or smokers, and some addicts may stop taking drugs, but they'll be addicts forever. Similarly, if a homosexual believes that homosexual sex is wrong, he might possibly be able to stop having homosexual sex, and conceivably even be able to have heterosexual sex; but he'll never be a heterosexual and have the satisfaction in heterosexual sex that a heterosexual has.

And even if the alcoholic never is able to stop drinking, then this does not imply moral guilt (even granting that deliberately getting drunk is immoral)—unless he's "satisfied with himself" as an alcoholic (as opposed to accepting the fact that he is one) and actually *wants* to be the way he is. The fact that he knowingly *gets* drunk is not the same as his deliberately *choosing* to get drunk, or even as his *being willing* to get drunk, any more than the fact that a cripple knows he stumbles when he walks is the same as his deliberately choosing (or even being willing) to stumble.

As I say, we've got to be honest about this and stop trying to redefine reality to be what we would like it to be. If you want your husband to be the way he was

before he became an alcoholic (or before his alcoholism showed up as “problem drinking”, if you want to put it that way) forget it; it’s like Jack Fogarty’s wanting his son to be the way he was before the tree limb fell on him and took off his arm and his leg. (I saw Jack’s son in the Xavier gym the other day, by the way. He took off his artificial arm and leg and went swimming in the pool. He seemed happy enough. You see, you can accept the fact of what you are without being “satisfied” with the way you are, and you can be happy being the handicapped person you are.)

So if what you’re looking for from this book is another one of those methods for achieving earthly paradise, you’d better stop reading right here. I’m a factualist, not an idealist. I’m trying to help you face what the facts are, and develop a plan of action based on what the facts are, whether that will “solve your problem” or not. Some people create impossible hopes and then find life bearable pursuing this dream which can in fact never be realized. If that’s the kind of person you are, this book is not for you.

But this is not to say that if you look the facts squarely in the face—*all* the facts—life is grim and hopeless. No. Life, the whole of life, including this one and the one that comes after it, makes sense and is beautiful if you live it consistently with what it really is, and don’t get scared and try to invent a world which doesn’t exist because that seems more like something you

can deal with. Inventing an unreal world is a beautiful way to mess up your real life; and in fact, your husband probably got the way he is because he was inventing a world that wasn't quite like the real one.

And I might add that if you *do* deliberately try to pretend that the world isn't the way it really is, then you not only mess up the life you're living now, but the eternal life that's coming after this one. If you want to do this, that's your privilege, and no one, not even God, is going to stop you. But there's no percentage in it.

So there's a good deal at stake here, not only for you but for your husband, and for anyone who's got a handicap. But you have to know what the facts are and where you stand before you can do anything realistic with your life. That's what I'm going to try to outline for you.

I

How the mind works

Your first job, then, is to understand this handicap your husband has, to see in just what way his mind doesn't work the way yours does. Then you can have a realistic attitude toward him—and even perhaps help him, if he can be helped in this way, have a realistic attitude toward himself. I mentioned “tough love” in the conversation we had that prompted this book. It works at only one stage. “Sloppy love” doesn't work at all. What has a chance of working is the kind of love God has for his creatures—absolute respect for what they *are*, with no goals or ideals for them. But this doesn't always work either; look at what happened to Jesus, and how few take advantage of the chance he gave them.

But to see what your husband's mind is like, and to see how it differs from a normal mind, you have to see basically how any human mind works in general. And this is not all that simple; it turns out that all of us are very peculiar creatures indeed.

We have two different sorts of conscious acts: sensations and spiritual acts. Sensations are not only seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling, but

perceiving (seeing organized units of these sensations in a location in space), *imagining* (storing and recalling perceptions), *arranging* these perceptions and images in chronological order, and finally, the set of *drives* (conscious as *emotions*): the “program” which monitors the state the body is in, connects this state with the “input” coming in from perception and remembered events from imagination, and in complicated ways directs energy toward behavior patterns which are supposed to be appropriate for the body given this situation.

The spiritual acts of the human being are *understanding* (knowing what the relation *is* between sensations or parts of sensations, and consequently knowing *facts*—relations—about the corresponding objects); and *choosing* (deliberately setting goals—“This is what I will be”—and directing energy toward behavior which will achieve them). Notice that choosing is an act that results in the same sort of thing (brain-energy causing overt behavior) as drives result in.

When I talk of “spiritual” acts here, I don’t want you to misunderstand me. They’re not something divine or mystical, or something that belongs to religion, necessarily. All I mean by a “spiritual” act is one that can’t be measured because it hasn’t any degree to it (though it is limited—in every case but God—to being a given *kind* of act). Spiritual acts aren’t energy, because energy, in addition to being a given kind of act (like heat), also has a degree by which a given instance of it is not the same as

another (as 70° is not the same as 80° , even though they're both heat). But one spiritual act differs from another as heat does from sound; they're different sorts of acts. To show you what I'm talking about, the *idea* that $2 + 2 = 4$ is not in any sense half of the idea that $4 + 4 = 8$; they're just different ideas. And if two people in a room are thinking that $2 + 2 = 4$, there isn't twice as much of that idea in the room as if only one of the people is thinking it.

Now then, both of the classes of consciousness I mentioned need examining, if you want to understand a mental handicap; because what is going on in a mental handicap is that the brain's program, with its drives, has got messed up, and has so much energy in *its* direction of energy that the spiritual act of choosing can't control the energy-flow (which it has to do if it is to direct us toward our chosen goals). Hence, the *person* is out of control in various ways.

Sensation

First, then, about sensation. These acts (seeing, perceiving, imagining, emoting) all have this in common: they are *conscious* acts, and so are aware of themselves, and therefore are spiritual; but they are simultaneously acts of *energy*, with a certain amount or degree to them (unlike purely spiritual acts), and are in this way measurable and subject to the laws of energy.

As to their conscious "dimension," a conscious act

contains the whole of itself within itself; so that as you read these words, you simultaneously *know* the words and *know that you know* the words. In fact, you *see* the words, and one of the “dimensions” of that act of seeing is *knowing that you see* the words, and another “dimension” of that same act is *understanding the meaning* of what you are seeing (or being puzzled by it), and another “dimension” is *knowing that you understand* the meaning of what you are seeing, and so on. All of these “acts” are actually one and the same act, which knows itself as well as knowing what it knows.

This has to be a spiritual act, since you can't count “how many” there are, and you can't measure “how much” of it (them) there is. For various complicated reasons we don't need to bother with, it turns out that each “dimension” is different from every other one, but contains all the others as “parts” of *itself*, since there's really only one act here. Another way you can look at this is that the conscious act “does itself” over and over again without actually repeating itself; all these multiple “times” it repeats itself are actually one and the same act.

If you don't understand this, don't worry about it. The point is that an act of consciousness is spiritual because it “contains the whole of itself inside itself,” and the objects we're familiar with can't do that; a part can't contain the whole inside it as a part of itself.

Energy, however, isn't spiritual, as I said. It has a definite amount or degree, and is describable by numbers

as well as by what kind of act it is.

Now what makes sensation a distinct class of conscious act is that *one* of the “dimensions” of this (in-itself-spiritual) act *is in fact the energy-output of some nerve or set of nerves in the brain*. Seeing this page, for instance, involves a certain set of nerves “firing” in the visual centers of your brain; and how strong that energy is appears in consciousness as how vividly you see the page. So *one and the same act* is *both* the act of consciousness (which in its conscious “dimensions” contains all of itself inside itself—or “does itself” over again many times) *and* this energy, which has an amount and is subject to the cause-and-effect laws of energy. In other words, one of the “times” the conscious act of sensation “does itself over again” it “does itself” to a limited degree, and this energy is the energy of a definite nerve-output.

Notice that the energy-“dimension” itself of the act (the electrical aspect of it) is *not* conscious as such; there is only a “dimension” in consciousness that *refers* to it somehow (the vividness). Energy as such can’t be conscious because it can’t contain itself in itself (because then it would have to have double the amount it has, and it has only one amount). Hence, the electro-chemical workings of our *brains* are not conscious, even though these same acts *have* a conscious “dimension” to them.

This can get very complicated to describe; but that is enough for our purposes.

Instinct and Drives

Now the brain itself (with its nerves that have the conscious “dimension” of sensation to them) functions very much like a very complex computer. The inputs of this computer are the five senses; and things like perceiving and imagining are ways in which this information is processed. The basic “operating system” of brain is the set of drives we were born with; and in this respect, the brain is like a computer that has a whole bunch of programs (a word processor, a filing program, an accounting program, etc.) all as subprograms of one big directing program, which calls them up as the appropriate tasks need to be done.

Let us call this basic directing program *instinct*. What it does is two things: (1) It monitors (a) the state your body is in, (b) the information coming in from the five senses, integrated by perception, and (c) past experiences stored in imagination; and on the basis of all three of these, (2) it has built-in rules for calling up one or another of your *drives* as subprograms: flight (with its emotion of fear), rigidity (with its emotion of terror), appetite (with its emotion of hunger), sex (with its attraction), aggressiveness (with anger), passivity (with despair), etc., etc. All of these have many many variations, with variations on what the actual emotion is, depending on just what the input is from the senses, what your past experience has been, and what state your body is in at the moment.

Consider, for instance, your emotional reaction to a strawberry shortcake if you haven't eaten for a whole day, or if you just ate six of them, or if you've eaten fairly recently but once were made sick by eating twelve of them in a row. Each situation calls up a different sub-program or drive, with its own distinctive emotion.

One thing that is characteristic of instinct in humans and the higher animals is that the input-behavior path can be *trained* by creating *habits* by repetition of responses to a given situation. Thus, when you get yourself into the habit of brushing your teeth on waking up in the morning, you don't have any built-in drive urging you to do this; but you deliberately (we will see this shortly) do this several mornings in a row, until it begins to become automatic; and you keep pushing at it for a while, until finally it becomes something that you don't have to bother to decide to do; it just happens, the way you try to get something to eat if you feel hungry.

Habits don't have emotions connected with them unless they are habits you got into *because* you keep repeating something that some built-in drive leads you towards. When this happens, the drive becomes *strengthened* by the habit; and the input-behavior path has a great deal of energy in it, and becomes more and more like the instinct in the lower animals, which is completely automatic and never changes, no matter what the circumstances are. A bee, for instance, will dump honey into any hexagonally shaped cell, even if she can see that

the back of the cell is open, and the honey is spilling out onto the floor.

An interesting thing happens with the emotions connected with drives reinforced by habits. You would think that the emotion gets stronger, but it doesn't; it gets weaker. If, for example, you eat chocolate every time you feel an urge to eat chocolate, the time comes when you can't refuse to eat chocolate, even though it doesn't taste particularly good to you any more. Smokers, too, find that they get no *satisfaction* from smoking any more, except rarely; but it becomes less and less possible to imagine certain situations (like finishing a meal) without lighting up—and it is even less possible not to do the act in this situation.

One other thing instinct does: it governs *attention*. What happens here is that the conscious act occurs as a “dimension” of the brain's energy *only above a certain intensity of that energy*. Below that critical intensity (called the “threshold of perception”) the brain's energy is just energy, with no consciousness.

This allows the basic program to turn consciousness on and off selectively. If there is enough energy directed into one nerve-complex, then the sensations that are the conscious dimension of *that* complex become conscious; when energy is pulled out of it and it drops below the critical level, you aren't conscious of it any more, even though there may be energy there (and even enough energy for some

subprogram to cause behavior).

Thus, as you read this page, you are probably not aware of the pressure of the page against your fingers, until now, when I call attention to it. What was going on before was that the subprogram that was operating (the reading habit) was putting all the available energy into the words on the page; and even though there was energy coming *in* from various outside sources, like your fingers' touch-nerves, this energy was "borrowed" by the program to enhance what was coming in through the eyes—and so the touch information dropped below the threshold of perception until I called attention to it, after which some energy was sent there, and it also became conscious, and the page that much less vividly conscious.

So your basic instinct, in picking out which subprogram or programs to run at the moment, is also going to make you conscious of only a *very small amount* of the information that is actually coming into your head. That information, however, is there, and can modify your behavior without your realizing it, because what is going on in the subprogram is below the conscious level. Thus, if you are reading with music in the background, you may not hear it, but it is having some effect on the emotional tone of what you are reading; and it's quite possible that if the music stops and the news starts, you stop reading, realizing that it's time to do something else—without quite knowing why you know.

Basically, then, what instinct does is direct

energy-flow in systematic ways in the brain; and when this energy is strong enough, consciousness occurs. If the program is one of the built-in ones, the consciousness has an emotional overtone; but if it's a pure habit, like brushing your teeth, it doesn't.

Understanding

Let me now briefly describe what you need to know about the spiritual acts of understanding and choosing. Understanding, as I said, knows what the relationship is between associated sensations (or between parts of a sensation). Since the input sensations are caused by forms of energy produced by objects, the *relations* between the sensations will (other things being equal) be the same as the relations between the objects. Thus, you always react more or less the same way to light of a certain wave length; and so when you look out and see the grass, and then you get the same reaction to the trees, and to emeralds, and to certain traffic lights, you know that the objects "out there" are all the same color, which you then call "green."

This knowing of relationships allows us, then, not simply to *react* to the outside world, but to *know the world as it is*, not simply as we react to it—though we know it *through* our (subjective) reaction. Trees *do* in fact emit the same color of light as emeralds. We *are* in fact in important respects the same as higher mammals, and in important respects different.

(Incidentally, the main difference is that we can perform this act of understanding relationships, and the only thing other mammals can do is make the connections, without knowing what the connection is. To show you the difference here, consider the situation when seeing Mr. Smith reminds you of a house on Turkeyfoot Road. You've made the connection; but the *relation* of Mr. Smith to the house is unknown, and it could be any one of a number of things: he might own the house, he might live in it, he might have once been seen beside it, he might have clothes the same color the house is painted, etc. Animals can make very complex connections, and even chains of connections, but they give no evidence of knowing what the connection is; they can't understand. But this is beside the point. *We* can understand, and that is what understanding entails. You *understand* the relation behind the connection you've made when "the light goes on," and you say, "Oh, I see; that's the house he told me he sold last week.") So basically, what we understand about the real world is *facts*: relationships; and this is the basis of our *objective knowledge* about what really exists. We don't "know" the things "as they are in themselves," as God knows them, but as they are *like* other things, as they *cause* other things, as they are *the effect of* other things, as they are *beside* other things, etc.

One of the things to note here is that you can't *understand* another *person*, because *that* kind of knowledge implies the knowing of the other person as he

is in himself, not as he is related to something, nor as his parts are related to each other. The other person as that something-or-other who reveals himself in behavior is basically a mystery to us (and to himself too) and is known in this sense only by God. True, we can argue that the behavior is the *manifestation* of the person; but not even this (as we will see shortly) is completely true—and it is much less true of the alcoholic than of other people. But even when we understand that the person did such-and-such because he chose to do so, all we really understand is the *relation* (the fact) that that act came from his choice, not what was going on in the choice or even how the choice produced the act.

You can't even understand yourself in this intimate sense. When you are conscious, you *know* your conscious act in this "knowing what it is in itself" sort of way; but this isn't understanding it; it is *being* it. The only way we could *know* even our full selves would be to have our full self *contained within* our act of knowledge, as the act of knowledge is contained within itself.

But this is not possible for us in this life, for two reasons: First of all, the *energy-"dimension"* of even our conscious acts is not capable of being contained within our consciousness; and any of our other energy-acts (the act of our heart, what goes on in our stomach when we eat, etc., etc.) is unknown to us, except insofar as it causes some sensation (e.g. a pain) in some nerve. Secondly, *because* our sensations have an energy-"dimension," they

can be turned on and off, as I said, depending on how much energy is in the nerves that they belong to; and since we have only a finite amount of energy in our brains at any one time, we can never be conscious of anything but a small part of our consciousness at any one time (in this life). It turns out that understanding itself (which is a spiritual act and doesn't have an energy-“dimension”) *uses* the conscious “dimension” of the sensations as the “range” within which it can understand relationships. You can't, for instance, get the concept of “liberty” from studying trees, because that relationship just isn't in the objects (and so not in the sensations caused by them). But since we are single beings, not a spirit that “got inside” a body, understanding shuts off when the relevant sensations are not conscious. Hence, when we go to sleep, we not only lose sense consciousness, we lose all consciousness together.

This happens all through life. At death, however, since there no longer is any brain with its energy, this means that either we are not conscious at all (and so don't exist), or *all of our consciousness is freed from this dependence on energy, and the whole of our consciousness is present all at once, as one single act, with its “dimensions” being every single act of consciousness we have ever had.* They say that drowning people “have their whole life flash before them” when they die. They have apparently experienced this release of consciousness from its dependence on energy.

I'm not going to try to prove this here, because it takes a long time and presupposes a lot of stuff I'm leaving out. Suffice it for now that in this life, we can't have a complete grasp of ourselves, even though we are, in one "dimension" of ourselves, spiritual.

Now then, even though we can't know ourselves in this intimate way we will after we die (when all we will be will be consciousness); still, we can understand facts about ourselves.

And one of the things we can do is *imagine* ourselves as different from what we are. "What would it be like to be President of the United States?" we say, and picture ourselves in the White House. Children do this all the time, and it is a normal part of growing up. What they are doing in these "pretend" games is understanding in a very abstract way what "what it is like" to be this or that sort of human being. And when children reach adolescence, they realize that some of these imaginary lives, because of their talents and interests, are more possible than others. That is, they begin to understand relationships between what they are and this imaginary self, and the imaginary self is then understood as more or less possible for them, given what they are now. They also understand what they would have to do to make this imaginary self real.

So it is because we can imagine ourselves as different from what we are and can understand the relationship between our present self and our imagined

self that we can consciously control our lives: we can direct our actions toward the imagined self as toward a goal.

II

Values and Morals

Now then, how do we use all this apparatus?

First note these facts: A *purely* imaginary self (such as imagining yourself as a crocodile) is just imaginary. An imaginary self that for some reason you would *like* to be is an *ideal*. We not only have ideals for ourselves, of course; we have them for other things. You form an ideal of what kind of a pet you would like to have; you form ideals about the kind of clothes you like; you form ideals about your neighborhood, your country, your world.

Ideals and Evaluation

As you see the relation between the actual world and your actual self and this imaginary ideal you have created, you are not really in the process of understanding any more, you are *evaluating*.

The difference between evaluating and understanding is that understanding tries to “tune itself in” to the way things actually are; if your idea of things disagrees with the way things are (and you find out), you say, “Oh, I’m making a mistake,” and you correct your idea of the facts. Evaluating considers the *facts* in relation to your *idea* and uses the idea (the ideal) as the standard that the facts are supposed to live up to. And if the facts don’t

match the idea, you don't in this case say you're making a mistake, you say that there's something *wrong* with the object.

Understanding, then, is *objective*, because it adjusts the idea until it agrees with the facts; evaluating is *subjective* because it wants the facts to agree with the idea, which obviously (since it doesn't agree with the facts) was subjectively created, and isn't the way things really are.

Notice that saying that "something is wrong with X" is always a *mistake looked at backwards*. Your idea of a house has a basement that doesn't leak. The basement of your house leaks. If you say, "The basement of my house doesn't leak," you have simply misunderstood the facts, and are making a mistake. But if you say, "The basement of my house *shouldn't* leak," you have *evaluated* the house and found something wrong with it, because it doesn't agree with your ideal. Notice that you *can*, if you want, make your house have nothing wrong with it if you change your ideal and don't include a tight basement in the kind of house you like. There are people who have no problem with a leaky basement. "So what?" they say. "It's no health hazard, it doesn't smell, so why should it bother me?" To take a less silly example, some people have as their ideal a house where everything is in its proper place and neat; others don't have this as an ideal, and for them the house is perfectly acceptable if the beds aren't made.

The point here is that since the ideal is *subjectively created*, then neither of these people is *objectively mistaken*.

The *fact* is that the beds aren't made; but whether the beds *ought* to be made or not isn't a fact.

Before you say, "But there's something objectively wrong about murder, and you can't tell me there isn't!" I agree with you. But that's *right and wrong*, which we'll treat shortly, not *good and bad*, which is what evaluation is all about. Part of the problem with alcoholics is this confusion of good and bad with right and wrong. But as I say, we'll get to that later.

Goals and Choices

To come back to where we were, you can (a) imagine yourself and your world as different; or (b) you can imagine yourself and/or your world as different and pick out the imagined world as the ideal to use to evaluate the world; or (c) you can go one step further, and this is what leads us into the second spiritual act: choosing.

When you say, "I refuse to accept myself as I am; my real self is the ideal," the ideal now ceases to be a *mere* ideal and has shifted into being a *goal*. It's not any longer something you would *like* to be real, it is something you *intend* to be real. You can do this for your world also. "I refuse to accept my basement as leaky; it has to be sealed up."

What the choice does, then, is *freely* make the ideal a goal, just as before it freely chose the ideal; and it now *directs energy into areas of the brain causing behavior that will lead to the reaching of the goal*. You have to figure out

(deliberate about) what steps to take to make yourself or your world over into this ideal state; and this involves *understanding* once more.

Once you make an ideal into a goal, your present state is now a *problem* to be solved, because you're not *at* the goal, and hence you don't "really" exist as your "true" or "real" self. You aren't yourself. You now have to figure out how you can get yourself out of where you are in the direction of where your ideal is; and so you have to *study* your reality to see what in practice you can do to yourself (or your world) to achieve your goal. The reason for this is that you and your world are bundles of energy (even though you are also a spirit); and energy has its own laws. You can't make yourself a crocodile; and you can't make yourself into a philosopher in two days. Some things can't be done by you at all, because they are outside what is in principle possible for this kind of body; and some things can't be done at once or easily, but only by great effort and through various complicated routes.

Hence, it is not enough to have ideals.

Note that it is not even very useful to have ideals at all, if you don't have ideals that you can turn into achievable goals. If my ideal of myself as human were to be able to fly like a bird, all I could do would be to suffer that I can't be what I would like to be. If my ideal were even to be something humanly possible, but not possible *for me*, like being a woman, say, the only thing I could do would be to complain that I wasn't a woman. I *could*, of

course, turn this ideal into a goal, but since it's not achievable, then all that would happen is that I would be *frustrated*, because a "sex change" wouldn't actually make me a woman (it wouldn't give me a woman's musculature, skeletal structure, metabolism, way of thinking, etc.) but only a mutilated man, who could *pretend* he was a woman, but would no more *be* a woman than a statue of a woman is a woman.

Right and Wrong

Here is where right and wrong come in. The moral obligation says, *Never set up a goal for yourself which contradicts your genetically given possibilities*. That is, never *choose* to act inconsistently with what you (understand that) you really are.

Thus, for instance, the woman who chooses to have an abortion, if she knows the fact that her fetus is already a human being (it is, by the way) may not want the fetus to be human yet, because she doesn't want to be a mother; and if she aborts him, she has only in fact made herself the mother of a dead child, she has not "unmade" herself as a mother. The *fact* is that, once she is pregnant, she *is* a mother (because she has a child, in fact), and she can do nothing about that fact now. She will never ever be again a non-mother.

Similarly, when a man and a woman marry and promise, "I will be faithful to you for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, until

death parts us,” they *are in fact married* until one of them dies. If they divorce, they have *not in fact* got unmarried; they only have the appearance of not being married; because once you make a choice like that (or any choice, for that matter), *you can't undo it*, since it is a spiritual act. The choice is not simply imagining yourself as different; it is a spiritual act by which the “true you” *is to be* this different self, and it *makes* the actual self into the chosen self. So you can't make a promise that “the only thing that will part us is death” and then say, “This isn't death, and it parts us.” It's as if you cut off your arm; it's gone from then on, and if you're sorry afterwards, you still haven't got your arm. Note this carefully. The reason you expect people to keep their promises is that not doing so contradicts what it means to be a person who can choose to change his reality (into the one who will in fact perform what he promises).

So *immorality* really means *pretending that things aren't what you know they are*, and *setting up as a goal for yourself something you know you can't reach, because it contradicts reality in some respect*.

To be immoral, you have to have *evidence* (facts which *you* are aware of) indicating that what the facts are, and then *deliberately pretend* that these aren't facts, and that the facts are the way you want them to be. For instance, a woman who has no idea that her fetus might in fact be a human being is not being immoral in having an abortion; but if she has reason to believe he might in fact

be human, she can't have an abortion without *being willing* to kill her child—because as far as she knows, this is what she might very well be doing; and so her choice says, “Well, if that's what it is, I'll do it anyway.”

Right and wrong, strictly speaking, deal with what the facts are, whether anyone knows them or not; moral and immoral deal with the facts *as known* by the person who is making the choice in question. Neither have anything to do with emotions or “feeling comfortable with yourself.” If Hitler “felt comfortable with himself” as slaughtering the Jews, (a) the act was still wrong, and (b) if he realized that it was inconsistent with him as a respecter of rights, he was immoral. In the latter case, he would have set up as a goal for himself being superhuman (i.e. “I have the right not to be killed by anyone, but no one has a right not to be killed by me.” But he has the right not to be killed precisely because he is human like everyone else.)

Anything *possible in principle* for you is fair game to make a goal, no matter how unlikely it might be; but if you go beyond the limits you are given by your genes, or if you contradict the self you have already made of yourself (as in abortion or divorce), you bring frustration on yourself, because you can't be what you can't be; and in an immoral choice you intend to be what you can't in principle—and so can't under any circumstances—be.

“Well,” you say, “who is to say what's really right or wrong?” The answer to that is the same as “Who is to

say whether the earth is flat or round?” The people who know what the facts are. Clearly, fetuses are in fact either human beings or they aren’t; one or the other of those is true, no matter who “believes” one way or the other. The people who have the evidence dealing with this fact are the people who can tell you whether abortions are right or wrong. You don’t ask your neighbor questions about astronomy, and you don’t go to a politician to find out if you have a brain tumor or whether your headache is due to eye strain. Similarly, you don’t take a poll on how people “feel” about abortion if you want to find out the facts.

But in one sense, that’s not really relevant. If, based on the evidence you *have*, you pretend that things aren’t what you know or suspect them to be, you have made an immoral choice, and have set up an impossible goal to be achieved. If you don’t have the evidence, or you’ve made a mistake, you’re home free, because there’s no contradiction *within the choice itself*, and if you’re trying to reach an impossible goal, this is no different from trying to reach a legitimate one and being prevented by circumstances. In this sense, you don’t have to do what is (objectively) right; you have to be moral (do what, *as far as you know* is objectively right).

The reason all of this makes any difference in practice is that, since our consciousness doesn’t go out of existence when we die, then *all* of our choices become present along with all our other consciousness when we

die; and so *any immoral choice* is reawakened, with its consequent self-frustrating striving after a goal that is *known* to be unattainable.

If you *want* to be frustrated, then of course, that's your privilege; you're free. And you may say, "I would rather be frustrated than accept myself with these limitations I can't stand." For instance, there are some people who say, "I would rather be a frustrated transsexual than accept myself as a man; I am more frustrated the way I am." There's nothing to prevent you from taking such an attitude. What it involves is simply having as an *ideal* something that is not possible for your actual self, and refusing to give up the ideal.

You can only *suffer* if your ideal is different from the way things actually are (or can be), and you refuse to give up the ideal. Here is the difference between good and bad and right and wrong. Right and wrong are the simple fact that a given act is consistent or inconsistent with the way you are. Good and bad deal with being *satisfied* or not with the way you are. Finally, moral and immoral amount to *deliberately* setting up a situation in which it is impossible to be satisfied with what you are, since your goal contradicts any possible self you could be. Thus, you have created a "bad" reality for yourself. That is, you are being *immoral* when (a) you conceive an ideal that you know is in principle impossible for you, and (b) you actually make that ideal a goal and try to achieve it. The ideal itself is what "good" means for you; because when

things agree with the ideal, you say that this is “good.” But in immorality, you have deliberately defined “good” in such a way that things can never be good, because the “good” you have defined contradicts itself. For the transsexual, what is “good” for him is to be a woman; but he can’t be a woman no matter what he does; and hence, there will forever and ever be something *wrong* with the way he is. He has made it impossible to be satisfied, that is all. Similarly, for the person who tries to divorce, what is “good” is to be free of that man; but she can’t be free of that man; she is tied to him even if she doesn’t live with him, until death separates them (“What God has joined together, no human being can separate”); and the divorce separates her from what she is not separated from and never will be separated from; it is impossible for her to be satisfied.

In cases where the ideal can’t be realized, *the only way to be happy is to give up the ideal*. You might be less unhappy than you are now if you keep the ideal and try to do what you could about it (such as getting a sex-change operation, where you could act like a woman in some respects, which you consider more important than the other ones); but you can’t be *happy* unless you accept things as they *in fact* are, and don’t live pretending that things are different from what they are.

III

The Eternal Consequences

And if you can forget the frustrating aspects of your immoral choices now, you won't be able to—ever—after death. This is why it is important, no matter what ideals you set up for yourself, to make them in principle possible.

Let me now spell out a little more what happens to our choices after death. I'm not, as I said, going to give the evidence for this, but just the conclusions from that evidence.

First of all, since choices are spiritual acts, once a choice is made it cannot be unmade. If you change your mind, all you've done is made a second choice; you haven't erased the first one. All we can do is *add to* our conscious acts; once they occur, they are part of us forever. We can, in this life, push them out of consciousness by not sending energy into the relevant nerves; but that doesn't remove them. As you can see when I remind you that $2 + 2 = 4$, the conscious act is there, in your mind, recalled as soon as the nerves are stimulated—and when they are, you are conscious of the idea, and that act of consciousness is also conscious that

it's not a new idea, but is part of your proper consciousness. So there is no human way to get rid of any conscious act, including any choice, once it has been made.

Secondly, because of this, our life after death will contain absolutely every conscious act we have ever had, from the first moment in our mother's womb, up until the last moment when we died. It's either this or no existence at all, because in this life which act we are conscious of depends on the activity of definite nerves in the brain; and of course at death the nerves are no longer active at all.

Thirdly, all these acts will then be "dimensions" of one colossal conscious act, which will be the act of consciousness expressible in the sentence, "So this is what it is to be me"—with "this" including every single experience of your life.

Fourthly, every *goal* of every non-self-contradictory choice we have made (every choice that *can* be fulfilled) will be fulfilled in this act, as an additional "dimension" of it. You will be everything you have chosen to be (in addition to everything you have already made yourself); but only what you *choose* to be, not any *ideal* you have set up for yourself that you didn't actually make into a goal (in other words, everything you *decided* to be, not everything you would have liked to be but didn't bother trying actually to be).

In the fifth place, as I said a minute ago, every *self-contradictory* goal will still be there before us as a goal

we intend to achieve, knowing that we can't achieve it. This means, of course, that the frustration in actively trying to be what you know you can't be will be with you forever. Remember, a goal is different from an ideal in that if you make an ideal into a goal, you can't be yourself until you have achieved the goal: the goal makes you unstable until it is achieved. To set up an impossible goal, therefore, is to choose to be forever unstable—which is the definition of frustration.

In the sixth place, this absolutely complete self will from the moment of death never be able to change; we can't add anything more to what we then are, and nothing can take away anything we are. It turns out that, for reasons too involved to go into, only bodies can change; and so a purely spiritual act is active, but in a stable way forever.

Essentially, then, what the life after death means is that your past and your future will collapse into an eternal present, where you will be completely just exactly what you chose to make of the limitations God gave you in your genes to start with—no more, and no less—forever and ever and ever. And this includes the fact that if you knowingly want to be something that is beyond the limits of your possibilities, what you really want is frustration, and you will get that too.

That's as far as reason can go. What it implies, of course, is that every time we have made an immoral choice, we have in some respect eternally frustrated

ourselves, with no way to escape the frustration (because the choice itself is self-frustrating, and that's what's eternal). If we "repent" and wish we hadn't done it, then this is just another choice that has as a goal the (impossible) removal of the first one, and so only compounds the frustration. Presumably, these eternal frustrations will not consume all of our attention after we die; we will be fulfilled in many other respects. The only thing is that we will never be able to get rid of them.

That's the human situation. But the whole of the truth is not that bleak, thank God. In fact, Jesus died so that, if we want and ask him, *he* will miraculously erase these choices *as operative in our eternal life*, and so while the *effects* of them may plague us while we live out our lives (if you cut your arm off, it stays cut off), we will not (by the miracle of his erasing the act for us) be eternally striving after something we can't be.

This is what the Redemption is all about.

What Redemption does is, if in *this* life we want one of these self-contradictory goals erased as a goal (we choose *not* to keep this self-contradictory self as our future), then Jesus' death on the cross demonstrates that God, in his love, will erase that act, provided we love him more than ourselves.

But the erasing process doesn't get rid of what we have *done* to ourselves; it only gets rid of the impossible goal as something we are trying to reach forever and ever. One of the things the Redemption also does for us is that

Jesus' death on the cross allows God to make us *accept ourselves for what we really are* once again, after we have refused to do so. He will do this for us, provided we are willing, in each case, to *give up* the false ideal we have made into a goal for ourselves, and accept our limitations, including the limitations we have brought on ourselves, and to let him do it, knowing that we are absolutely helpless to do it ourselves, and it takes a miracle and is his act, not ours. This is "penance," or the "change of attitude" that is required to be saved.

If you keep your ideal, and only want God to save you from the consequences of your act, you are deluding yourself; because the act itself with its perverse goal *is* the frustration. The mother who aborts her child must ultimately *accept herself* as a person who killed her child, because now she can never be anything else, since *in fact* she killed her child, whether she likes to admit it or not; and God will not "unkill" the child or make her not a mother. He *can* make it possible for her to give up the ideal of being a non-mother, and a non-child-killer, so that she does not *suffer* knowing that she is what she is.

That is the kind of thing that repentance is: return to reality, and accepting it. Happiness means, after all, looking on things as good; and they are not good *only* if our ideal is different from the way things are. It *is* possible to be happy being a mother who has killed her child; but obviously, it takes a complete shift in thinking to be able to be; it takes a miracle. But it is possible, if you want to

let God do it for you.

In that sense, God doesn't care what you are. He accepts you absolutely, and is perfectly satisfied if you are a mother who has murdered her children. This is reality. "And God saw all, and saw that it was very good." If you want to be a *frustrated* mother who doesn't want to be a mother and who has murdered her children, and who refuses to admit that she has murdered her children, and pretends that she is a non-mother, then he is perfectly satisfied with this too—if this is what you want. Because he created you to be a person who chooses for himself what he wants to make of himself; and if what you choose is to be eternally frustrated, then that's what he wants for you. He accepts you absolutely.

They say, "You can't take it with you." They're wrong. What's true is that you can't leave it behind. All that you've made of yourself is you; and you'll have to live with yourself forever. If you can't stand yourself as you are, you are in hell; if you accept yourself and the world as God accepts you and the world—absolutely—you are in heaven. Only people in hell have ideals; people in heaven have given all of them up, and are satisfied with reality as it is.

I suspect that purgatory is for those people who don't have impossible *goals* that they are striving for, but who have had a number of *ideals* for themselves and the world—high standards, if you will—and who have to spend some time, now that things will be as they are

forever, adjusting their standards to the way things are, instead of complaining that things aren't the way they'd like them to be. Actually, it is our *limitations* that make us individuals, the unique examples of human beings that we are. The reason I am different from you is that I am limited in my humanity differently from the way you are; it is what I *can't* do as human that makes me me rather than abstract humanity. So if I don't accept my limitations, I fundamentally don't accept *myself*; I refuse to be myself and want to be some abstraction, not a concrete human being.

True, while we're living this life, we must only accept our limitations in the sense of the *range of possibilities* open to us, like my limitation in being male, yours in being female, the limitation I have in being short, and so on. But "limitations" like not knowing a foreign language are not things that contradict this genetic potential, and so I don't have to accept them. Or I don't have to accept being short *and weak*, because I can make myself strong.

But once we're dead, then there are no more possibilities; we are completely ourselves; and so then we have to accept what we have made ourselves, or we have rejected the only self we are: the only self we ever will be.

There's a lot that's hard to understand here—for anyone, me included.

But be careful. There's a lot that's "hard to understand" because we don't *want* things to be that way. We

want to be “responsible for our actions,” but at the same time, we don’t want to take responsibility for our actions. We want to do wrong and escape the wrongness of the wrong; we want to frustrate ourselves without being frustrated. We don’t want to accept the world for what it is.

And some of the most “realistic” of us are those who least accept things as they really are. They cheat and lie, because “that is the way to get ahead”—and it is, in this life, let’s face facts; but that doesn’t mean that it’s *realistic* to cheat, because to cheat, of course, is to pretend that you know something that you don’t—or in general, to pretend that things aren’t what they are. What they’re saying, then, is that it’s realistic to act unrealistically. That kind of life can’t make sense.

So beware of saying, “I don’t understand this,” when what you mean is “God can’t be like that; I refuse to believe that.” After all, the God I’m talking about is the God that could have prevented the earthquake two days ago that killed forty thousand people and sent people’s houses crashing down on them. Why didn’t he? Because he accepts the world and its laws—and because the people who died there are now exactly what they have chosen to be, for all eternity.

So if you think, “God is too merciful to damn me forever for a little mistake,” you’re trying to redefine reality to be something you know it isn’t. First of all, it wasn’t a *mistake*. If you didn’t know what you were

doing, you didn't set up a goal that you knew was impossible and you didn't deliberately choose frustration. So, for instance, the woman who aborts her child and has no idea that this is a person she is killing has not *chosen* to be a mother-non-mother. Secondly, if you *do* choose to frustrate yourself, God loves you too much (he respects your reality, your freedom, too much) to make you over into someone else in spite of yourself. He's given you the chance to be transformed, and he'll do the transforming, but only if you want it. Beyond that, he's warned you of what you're actually doing to yourself (either through giving you a reality that you can analyze for yourself—as I have been doing—or by his commandments); and if that's what you want, then that's what he, in his love for you, gives you.

Beware of this trap too: Basically, you think, you're a good person; and therefore you conclude that this wrong thing that you did couldn't really be so wrong after all. Many is the woman who has had an abortion and who then refuses to look at any evidence that she has killed her child, because she can't face the fact that this might be what she did. Now, *after the fact*, she wants to redefine the way things are so as to fit her idea of herself as a good person. It is this closing of one's eyes to the facts that's the essence of immorality, not the physical doing of what is objectively wrong: it is the attempt to redefine the facts so that what is inconsistent appears to be consistent.

The trouble is that this won't work. Facts are facts,

and if you know them you know them. Re-evaluating them or redefining them doesn't change what they are. To take another example, if you took the company's supplies and used them for your personal use, you know that you were using as your own what didn't belong to you, and any amount of saying, "Well, it's such a piddling amount," and "After all, everybody does it," doesn't make it right. And this realization of what the facts actually are and what you've tried to pretend they were will be with you forever in all its vivid clarity after death. The trouble with lying to yourself is that you can't do it unless you know what the truth is; and if you know what the truth is, you know what the truth is.

So the beauty of life and the horror of life are the same thing: *You get out of life exactly what you ask: no more and no less.* But you get *concretely* what you ask, not just the abstract part of it that you'd like to have if things weren't the way they really are.

It's pretty obvious that if what I'm saying is the way life really is, the way many, many people live now is a dream world, not the real world at all. We have people screaming at Cardinal O'Connor in New York as a murderer, because he tells them it's wrong to do the kind of things that are giving them AIDS and killing them, and screaming at the doctors for not finding them a cure quick enough. We have women talking about a "woman's right to choose" and trying to prevent others from doing anything about their "choosing" to kill others. We have

people yelling about peace and advocating the very acts most likely to bring us war. We have people trying to keep teen-agers from getting pregnant by giving them advice that is almost guaranteed to put a teen-ager into a situation where she *will* get pregnant.

And all of this is because people think that, because you can subjectively create any *ideal* you want, then you can make *reality* what you want just by declaring it to be what you want it to be. But a woman can't make her fetus pre-human by declaring him pre-human, and a homosexual can't make it nothing but a "different lifestyle" to have sex by putting his arm up someone's rectum. Reality is what it is; pretending that it isn't what it is doesn't make it what you pretend it to be. Not even if everybody else goes along with you. We treat transsexuals as if they had succeeded in changing their sex, when everyone knows they haven't; so everyone knows it's a pretense but "out of compassion" keeps up the pretense that things are not what they are.

And morality says, "Don't pretend that things aren't what they are, or you take the eternal consequences. And if you don't 'believe' there are eternal consequences, this won't make them not happen—as you will discover to your sorrow too late." —Now I am quite willing to say that what I have been just giving you is a theory, and can be mistaken. But it is a theory that has a great deal of evidence to support it, and only the "evidence" of "Well, but how can you know about what

happens after death? You've never been there" against it. But this is like telling the paleontologist, "How do you know that these bones belonged to a big animal? You weren't there to see it." Remember, facts are what they are, and your "being comfortable" with this or that alleged set of facts doesn't make them different. The question is which set of allegations is the one most likely to be describing the real world, not which one suits our convenience best. As I say, if you want the evidence about this, you can read one of the philosophical books I've written. (And if you find evidence against what I've been saying, I want to hear it. I'm no fonder than you are of the restrictions my reality places on me.)

One final note about this, which is connected with what I'm going to say in the next section. If you cringe at this because you can't live up to it, don't worry about it. That's what the Redemption is all about. Our natures are "fallen," and in fact we can't in practice always act (or even choose) consistently with the way things really are; but if we don't fall into the trap of then trying to redefine things to fit what we've done and admit that we've done wrong, we can escape the act with its eternal consequences. The psalmist was right: "Everyone is rotten; not one does any good, not even one." But it doesn't matter, in the eternal scheme of things. How many times can we get away with this? Up to seven times? "No, I tell you. Seventy times seven times." And of course that doesn't mean that you're in trouble the four hundred

ninety-first.

Choices and Drives

Now then, what is the relation of all this to our sensations, particularly our instinct, which also directs our actions?

Theoretically, a human being's instinct should just provide him information as to what is beneficial or harmful to his body; and he would then take this automatic attraction or repulsion to the object and look at it in relation to his goals, to find out if it led where he wanted it to or not; at which point, the emotion in question could be shut off or used (if it was favorable) to enhance the journey toward the goal.

That's what you would expect from a being whose basic direction was to come from understanding himself, understanding his goals, and needing information to find out how to get from where he is to where he has chosen to be. But obviously, things don't work this way—which, by the way, is one piece of evidence that our natures are "fallen"; but that, as I say, is a whole other story.

The choice directs our acts by *concentrating*: controlling attention and the conscious aspect of sensation, and following consciously intended sequences ("logics" or practical plans). But there are already, in the drives and in habits, built-in or previously learned sequences set up that go from the sensations in question toward behavior; and these sequences have an

energy-“dimension” that has more or less energy in it.

It sometimes happens, as I said, that the drive or habit has so much energy in it that the choice can't take it out of its automatic directing of energy; concentration is lost, and attention wanders down the path that the drive or habit takes it.

This sort of thing has two aspects to it: (1) If you can't control your attention, then you can't *have access to all the information* you would otherwise have available to you. Remember, you can only be conscious of what is above the threshold of perception; and if you can't send energy into a given nerve-complex, the consciousness that belongs to that nerve-complex is unavailable to you.

If this sort of thing happens consistently or habitually, the kind of mental unhealth it represents has been called a *psychosis*. The instinct is either blocking out information the person would otherwise have access to, or it is creating *hallucinations* by making imaginary things so vivid they are taken to be perceptions and represent facts; or it is distorting perceptions by overlaying them with images and creating *illusions*. Thus, the paranoid person thinks he has real reasons for saying that everyone hates him. He imagines people having said things they didn't actually say; and he takes the most innocent remark in the most hateful sense. Not deliberately. His paranoia prevents him from getting the other information that would correct his view.

Sometimes, as I said, this sort of thing is due to

past experiences—which were either so extremely vivid and disturbing (so-called “traumatic” experiences—“nightmare” experiences) that any energy put into the “trigger” nerves automatically goes only in one direction. Thus, a person who was attacked by his mother with a knife and cut up and almost killed is apt later to have horrible experiences when confronted with women or knives or anything connected with that experience.

Sometimes, this psychotic inability to access information and distinguish reality (perception) from imagining is due to *repeated* experiences, as for example, if a child is randomly rewarded or punished, with no relation to what he has done. He learns after a while that he can't cope with a completely unpredictable world, and retreats into an imaginary world, where he can control things and be safe. And after a while, he can't even perceive the real world.

Sometimes the psychosis is *physical or chemical*; some damage to the nerves in the brain, or some chemical imbalance, either natural or induced by taking chemicals like LSD or marijuana or peyote (the “psychedelic” ones) which are like chemicals used by the brain in its normal functions. Putting extra amounts of these in your brain can foul up the transmission of information, and make it impossible for you to sort it out.

Very often, of course, psychosis comes from all three of these; and it may be more or less severe. Actually,

either of the first two sources of psychotic experience (horrible experiences or habit) produce chemical changes in the brain. But the point is that the *energy*-“dimension” of the brain’s nerves follows the laws of energy; and the brain, like a computer, can have various things go wrong with the circuitry. There are “bugs” in the program.

And, like bugs in a computer program, it is *very* difficult to find out where they are, because the programs are so very complex. And if it is hard to debug a computer program (which is relatively tiny, with only a matter of thousands of lines of text) when you *have* all of the steps of the program available and can look at each one of them, think how difficult it is to “debug” what is going on in the brain, which is millions of times more complex than any program any person has ever written, and where you can’t look at the program to find out what the sequence of “commands” is, and have to guess at what’s wrong from the relation between the input and the behavior.

This doesn’t give much hope for rescue from a psychotic situation, of course—especially by anything but chemical therapy. It’s sad, but that’s the fact.

In any case, what’s relevant for our purposes here is that a person who is psychotic makes *free* choices but *badly informed ones*. You may make a very rational choice to kill somebody because you see him attacking you with a knife, when in fact all he was doing was handing you a book. I know someone who was suffering from paranoia;

and he with apparent calm reason told me how his neighbors were plotting to force him to move out of the neighborhood, and how he was taking steps to prevent it. He had access to faulty information—reinforced, I might add, by actual facts, since his behavior didn't make his neighbors like him, and their expressions of dislike just proved his point.

But there's a second way the program can be out of control. It's that the person may have all the *information* he needs to make the choice he wants to make, but he may not be able to *carry his choice into action*, because the built-in drive or some habit (or generally some combination of the two) has too much energy in it for him to handle, and takes over, making him behave in some other way. "I know what the Law says and approve of it; but I don't do the acts I choose," says St. Paul; "I hate what I do."

This sort of thing used to be called a *neurosis*, but the term has lost its vogue; and now it is called an "emotional disturbance" or perhaps a "behavioral problem." Once again, the source of not being able to do what you choose to do might be a drive that has got itself too full of energy, or a drive reinforced by a habit, or some kind of chemical or physical damage done to the brain.

(I suppose I should say here that I'm using the terms "psychosis" and "neurosis" in somewhat of a different sense from the way they are used in psychology,

and I'm aware of that. The terms as I use them, however, relate to the usage in psychology, and they're convenient ways of not having to keep using long descriptive phrases.)

Things can go wrong with the brain's program either temporarily or more or less permanently. For instance, it happens to everyone that once in a while, we act inappropriately to the situation, because some drive was blocking out information (and we made an uninformed, though free, choice). "When your heart's on fire," the song says, "smoke gets in your eyes." You simply *don't notice* the bad qualities of your beloved, and you find all sorts of good traits no one else can see. Similarly, if you haven't eaten for four days, you might snatch a piece of steak from someone else's plate without being able to prevent yourself from doing it. We don't call those things psychoses or neuroses; we recognize that occasionally emotions can get out of hand.

Finally, observe that it is generally the case that the two "emotional problems" I've been speaking of go hand in hand. It is the rare neurotic who doesn't have a good deal of information blocked out dealing with what he is doing, so that it seems to him that he is doing what is reasonable; and it is the rare psychotic who can control all his actions and act just as he chooses to act (however misinformed the choice). So the distinction between the two is not useful for practical purposes of treatment; it is just useful to help realize that a person out of control is generally out of control *both* of information *and* his

behavior.

So, while we have complete control of our choices themselves, we don't have complete control either of the information we base them on or the actions we want to have follow from them—and sometimes we have no control at all over these.

This is one of the things that the “fallenness” of our nature is about. It means that we aren't in complete possession of our reality while we are in this life, and it is what allows for the possibility of repentance and redemption. In that sense, it's a “happy fault,” because if it weren't the case, then every choice would be fully conscious and take up the full force of our personality, and there would be no way to erase it without totally destroying us as persons.

Obviously, there is a lot more to what we are than this; but this is enough, I think, to enable us to get a good look into what an alcoholic is like and what his life entails both here and hereafter.

IV

Alcoholics

That, then, is what our minds are like. How does the alcoholic fit into this? I'm going to describe a little what alcohol does first, and then take you inside the mind of an alcoholic, as far as I can. If you're not an alcoholic yourself but have to deal with one, you have to see what's going on in him before you can look at yourself and your relation to him.

Alcohol is poison, and a poison that affects the brain, and also damages the liver and various other organs. Alcohol is, of course, the excretion of bacteria when they feed on various substances. Face it, it's the piss of microbes that a person is drinking. And the feeling of intoxication is how it feels to be poisoned (that's what "intoxication" means, of course).

And your body knows that the stuff is bad news; your automatic reaction to tasting alcohol is that it tastes terrible; because the program that starts operating is the "Avoid this! Spit it out!" program.

But.

But "good" and "bad" are defined by us, remember. Generally speaking, though, we don't do this defining all by ourselves; we soak up our values (our ideals) from noticing what people around us think is good and bad

(just as we learn facts from other people); and we modify these ideals as time goes on by adding our own “personal tastes.” So there is a kind of “pseudo-objectivity” to “good” and “bad” based on the fact that we simply take in the ideals that people around us have. I remember that for a long time I liked spinach and the color purple for (really) the sole reason that my older brother liked them.

And our society says that if you don’t think that beer or gin tastes good, your taste isn’t “sophisticated”; if you “cultivate a taste for it,” you’ll find that it tastes good after all. And our culture thinks that the sensation of dizziness, of not quite knowing what is going on, of being super-relaxed and not being able to control your motions, is “feeling good”; and you say, “So *this* is what it is to have a good time! I must be really enjoying myself now, because I’ve never felt this way before!”

A feeling in itself is just a feeling; it gets a label as “pleasure” or “pain” depending on the way *we* label it. This is why there can be people who *enjoy* getting whipped or cut up—or having someone’s fist in their rectum. They really do enjoy it. You can enjoy anything at all, if (a) you choose to consider it as good, and (b) you practice overcoming your automatic reaction to it.

Notice that *normal* people do this all the time. I enjoy reading, for instance, which most people find a colossal bore. Anyone who goes to college has to cultivate tastes which weren’t in our built-in programs (which, after all, are what adapted us to life we had when our ancestors

descended from the trees). I enjoy wearing clothes and shoes; I enjoy (believe it or not) lifting weights—sometimes. And so on. We find pleasure in things because we *decide* that these acts shall be pleasurable, and we get into the habit of doing them.

An essential thing to face if you are going to be realistic is *that there is nothing objective about “good” and “bad,” even when people agree on what’s good and bad; and there’s even nothing really objective about pleasure and pain. Any sensation can be pleasurable or painful, depending on the circumstances. Values are subjective. Standards are subjective. The values or standards themselves are not facts.*

This is hard to believe. But to confirm it a bit by a reverse example, remember that sex was *actually regarded as painful* by Victorian women, who had been trained to think of it as an unpleasant thing you had to go through if you wanted a baby, and because your husband had a need equivalent to urination. (Notice that we don’t regard urination or defecation as particularly pleasant, though they too are relieving the body of tension.) So it wasn’t that the Victorian women were “brainwashed” into a false view of sex as painful; sex in itself is just a violent sensation; in itself it is neither pleasurable nor painful; it becomes so depending on your attitude toward it.

But to return to the drinker, he is predisposed toward regarding drinking and the effects of drinking as pleasant and good by the attitudes of the people around him. Then he takes into his body a chemical that poisons

him.

One of the things that happens in his brain (if he is an alcoholic) is that this poison fouls up the programs there as they react to it and try to cope with it. The more the person drinks, the more energy the coping mechanism needs, just to keep the person in minimal control and conscious even at a low level.

These coping mechanisms become a habit, and a very strong one; but they are only good for coping with alcohol.

And here comes the next phase. They *need* alcohol to be able to make the person behave normally. If he doesn't have the alcohol, they don't know what to do; the energy-pathways are now built to handle alcohol-induced stupor and make reasonably normal behavior out of it, which means that they *can't* handle the situation when there isn't any alcohol messing up what they are trained to unness.

Hence, the person panics if he doesn't have alcohol. He can't cope with a non-alcohol information system—not for any length of time, anyway. He is now exactly the reverse of a person who isn't a drinker and gets drunk, and whose brain goes into emergency-mode to help him deal with the real world and this poison at the same time. He can handle it, but not for any length of time. The alcoholic's brain is in emergency-mode when he *doesn't* have alcohol, because for him the earlier emergency-mode has become the normal mode. He has

a new operating system.

That is, the alcoholic has gradually learned how to handle what alcohol does to his brain; but in the process, since it's so very difficult to do, he can't handle much *but* it. He can cope with the real world if he has some alcohol in him, and can't if he doesn't, just as some kids can't study if they don't have music in the background. They've trained themselves to concentrate by using the music *as a distraction they block out* by concentrating on the books; and so without it, they get distracted. So with the alcoholic.

One of the other things that alcohol does, of course, is relax you; and letting go is something that many people find difficult to do in our rat-race. Alcohol, then, lets them stop being tense. And since alcohol affects the information system, it lets—makes—they forget many of the things that were worrying them and making them tense, and enables them to say, “What the hell; what difference does it make?” For a certain type of person (one who feels guilty, for instance), this is a tremendous, if temporary, relief.

The same thing applies to drugs like crack and cocaine and heroin. I once, as medicine, had to take laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol) for two weeks. It happened that I was extremely tense (I was studying intermediate mechanics and advanced calculus at the same time one summer), and got nervous diarrhea, and nothing short of laudanum would work for the last two weeks of

the summer school. Fifteen minutes after I had my ten drops, something inside me said, “Just relax. Everything is beautiful. Everything is just fine.” and I felt perfectly normal, except that everything just seemed—nice. Until it wore off, of course. Cocaine, I am told, makes you feel as if you’re in control of things, however out of control you might actually be; and the other drugs make situations that are otherwise intolerable seem wonderful.

There’s no point in denying that these effects happen from these substances; if everything about them went against our whole being, nobody would be able to convince anyone they were pleasant.

In any case, our alcoholic is now dependent on alcohol. But alcohol, like the other dangerous drugs, does more and more damage to your brain as time goes on, and you need it more as the coping mechanism becomes more complicated and more and more of your brain’s energy is used up in it. And you spend more and more time making sure that you have a supply of it available, because life is more and more unthinkable without it. Very often, you don’t even actually have to *drink* it, as long as you are sure that it’s there so that you *can* drink it if you need to.

And of course you do need to.

And since alcohol is messing up the information system in your brain, and since you need it in order even to be a person and have minimal control of yourself, then it’s not going to let you see what you’re doing to yourself.

The slightest hint that you can handle this and you don't really need it (you went without alcohol for a whole day last month) will be blown up into conclusive evidence that there's no problem here—you can leave it alone if you want to. But why should you want to? What's the problem?

And you actually *can't see* any difficulty in what you're doing. Sure, you messed your pants—you might admit, if the fact is inescapable—but everyone does that sometimes. You actually believe this. Or you didn't really fall into the fireplace and burn yourself; that was what your wife told you, but what really happened was something else. And anyway, nothing serious came of it. And so on and so on.

Everyone around the alcoholic sees how stupid his reasoning is; but he simply does not have the information to see this. I know an alcoholic who (now that he doesn't drink) used to think he went to the bar “for the companionship.” After he stopped drinking, he went to the bar a couple of times, and discovered what these “companions” were: how self-centered, maudlin, stupid, and just plain boring.

The *last* thing the alcoholic's alcoholism is going to allow him to see is that he is an alcoholic. This is alcoholic psychosis. Anything that makes it reasonable for him to drink will be vivid in his consciousness; anything that makes it unreasonable will be not known or misunderstood. If his wife tells him that he's making her

and the kids miserable, then this is because she resents not having him around for part of the night, and she begrudges him the little money he's spending, and she's trying to get back at him for not being her slave. If the kids start in on him, then they've been turned against him by their mother, and you can't believe a word *she* says, the bitch.

He honestly believes this is objectively true, just as my paranoid friend believed that the neighbors were trying to drive him out of the neighborhood. And nothing I could have said to him would have convinced him that they weren't doing this, because if I had said anything, then I just would have been part of the conspiracy.

Have I given you the impression that it's a vicious circle? Anything you say to make him realize what the objective situation is will be misinterpreted, because the alcoholism will block it out or twist it into the very opposite of what you are trying to tell him. You have to accept this. *You cannot motivate him to give up drinking. Nothing you say will work;* it will do the very opposite.

And as time goes on, he does more and more things that are destructive of himself and everyone around him; but he thinks—honestly believes—that these things are happening because of his “bad luck,” and he now needs more and more to drink to forget the mess he's in. No one will let him alone; they're all on his back because he takes a drink or two and has been unlucky and dented

the fender a bit (he wrapped the car around a tree) and fouled up the contract for his boss once (a week), and so on. “Why can’t people let me *alone*?” he cries. “What harm am I doing to *them*?” And it’s only when the alcohol is in his system that he can forget these things.

But of course, he can’t even then, really; and life is intolerable to him, and he can’t stand it and needs to forget more and more. And he doesn’t drink much, actually—nowhere near as much as other drinkers; and he finds, in fact, at later stages that very little will do, just a little wine. But it *has* to be there. Life is absolutely unbearable if it isn’t available. But he thinks that life is unbearable because of the circumstances he is in, and only the drinking makes it tolerable—when in fact everyone around him knows that it is the drinking itself that is making life unbearable so that it can continue poisoning him.

Sometimes it happens, however, that the alcoholic “hits bottom.” Something happens where he realizes that he *has* to quit—and it’s then that the alcoholic neurosis comes to the fore (it has always been there, of course). He now tries to quit, and finds that he can’t.

Let’s look at this crisis for a moment. Basically, it’s something that *breaks through* the alcoholic psychosis, and makes him realize that the reasons he thinks are objectively true are not objectively true, and/or makes him see the damage that he’s doing to himself and everyone around him is not trivial—and that *he’s* the one

that's doing it and not "circumstances" or "luck." He has to realize he's out of control, and not only out of control of his actions, but out of control of his *information*. And since he's out of control of his information, *realizing* that he's out of control of it is next to impossible. Up to this crisis, he can't see it. For instance, he gets arrested for drunk driving and his car is taken away. Just getting arrested *might* do it; but if everything blows over, then the psychosis comes back with "Well, it wasn't all that serious after all, and everybody can get unlucky. I only had a little drink. Look at how many people drink and drive and nothing happens. And nothing's ever happened to me; I'm a very careful driver." And he actually *believes* that nothing much happened; because in point of fact, nothing much *did* happen; and so he doesn't have to face the fact that he's out of control. And, of course, his psychosis doesn't let him see (and he was concentrating on the mechanics of driving so much that he couldn't have seen anyway) the hundreds of disasters he barely escaped by other people's defensive alertness.

So the crisis has to be severe enough to make him realize that he's out of control, and also that he isn't seeing "the real truth" behind things. And this is a *very* tall order.

It is at this point that what is called "tough love" can work. Some disaster has to befall the person, so that it's obvious *to him* that none of his reasons are valid. And it can't appear vindictiveness on the part of his relatives

(because there's a lot of paranoia in alcoholism, and so he'll just think that the "real reason" it's happening is hatred, not because of his own acts).

It's very, very difficult to figure out what actually can be done to make this crisis. Getting threatened with being fired if he doesn't give up drinking can sometimes do it. But even trivial things sometimes do it. My mother, who was an alcoholic, saw some roses blooming in December outside the church she went to after she had realized that she could get wine whenever she wanted. It was a turning-point. (They were plastic roses, we found out later, stuck on the bush by the sacristan, but they did the job anyway.)

I think you have to say that the breaking through of the alcoholic psychosis is miraculous. It's like conversion to Christianity; the actual event that does it is something that seems to be far out of proportion to what happens. And so often—so very, tragically often—it never happens.

But supposing that it does happen, then the alcoholic is by no means home free; in fact, he is still in as deeply as he was. Now he realizes that he's been deceiving himself, and all this time, he's been out of control.

And he can't get himself out of this dependent condition. That's true, by the way; he can't. One thing you have to realize if you're going to cope with an alcoholic is this: *He can't get himself out of his dependent condition.*

All is not lost, of course. “With man it is impossible, but with God everything is possible.” Alcoholics anonymous talks about surrender to a higher power; and it is certainly psychologically helpful to surrender to a higher power. But that’s not the point. The point is that *it’s a fact* that there *is* a “higher power,” who in fact has absolute control over our lives, but who will go along with all of our choices. Whether you believe this or not, it’s still a fact.

But let’s return to where the alcoholic is at this point. He perhaps now can see all that he has done to himself and the people around him; and so now he has the opposite difficulty from what he had.

Now he thinks of himself as rotten, as no good, as hurting the ones he loves, as disgusting, as everything bad he can think of. Can this really be me? Am I really an *alcoholic*? —Or do I just have a “drinking problem”? Maybe a worse one than most, but isn’t that really all that it is? Notice the alcoholic psychosis coming back in again.

It’s fairly common for the alcoholic to experience himself as in a way two different people; and of course, it’s almost inevitable that anyone around him will experience him like this too, because he has two entirely different ways of relating to others: one when he’s sober and one when he’s drunk. But for him the two people are the sober one and the one that gets inside the sober one and drags him to bars and liquor stores. This is an extremely frightening experience, by the way; and of course,

drinking will help him forget that “What I am” has two different definitions for him—one of which is disgusting, the more horrible the more you think about it.

So the primary difficulty the alcoholic has is in *accepting* himself for what he is. That is, not just *admitting* that he *did* and still continues doing all these things, but saying, “It doesn’t matter that I did and do these things; the fact is that’s what I did and do, and that’s what I am; somebody who did do these things, and who does them, but who doesn’t want to do them ever again—but who probably will.”

We like to think of alcoholics as people with “drinking problems,” because it divorces the action from the person: “What he does is one thing; what he is is something else.” The trouble is that what you do defines what you are. A person who steals isn’t “a good boy who just took something,” he’s a thief. A person with a “drinking problem” isn’t a person who *has* anything, he’s an *alcoholic*. Calling him someone (a fine, wonderful person, of course) “with a problem” pretends that drinking is a possession he can throw away, leaving himself just as he was before he started—when in fact, the drinking has permeated and altered his whole personality, and everyone recognizes it. He will never be the same as he was before.

But accepting yourself for what you are is very, very difficult to do. Impossible to do. How can you say that it doesn’t *matter* that you did all this damage? That you’re

the person who did it? And that you *keep* doing it? You can't say that "Well, that's in the past, and it doesn't exist," because it's *your* past and it *does* exist; you *are* the person who did this these things—and you continue doing them, and you'll keep on doing them, you know it, because you're out of control and can't prevent yourself.

And something insidious happens here. *Because* it's impossible and excruciating and intolerable to think that you did and do these things, *you have to keep doing them to prove to yourself that you're out of control*, and that it's not deliberate perversity. Otherwise, if they're deliberate, you're just a hellish monster.

Any time someone tries to motivate you to quit by telling you why you should quit and what you're doing to yourself, this is all the *more* excuse for your alcoholism to keep on with it; because you already know how necessary it is to quit and how hideous what you're doing is—and so it *has to be* that you can't help it; it *has to be!* Otherwise, how can you go on living?

Besides, it's a fact that you can't help it. And that's the second difficulty. If you're out of control, then how could you ever get back into control? And what does "back into control" mean? And who are you? You now are someone whose whole life turns around drinking, and what will you be if you give it up?

A person who quits drinking doesn't give up the *drinking*; he has to give up the *drinker*. (This is why it's exactly false to think of alcoholism as a "drinking

problem.” But we’ll get into that later.) He has to become somebody else, somebody who is totally different from what he now is, because what he now is has alcohol and the availability of alcohol permeating every facet of his life. He will disintegrate into nothing if he gives up drinking; he *can’t* do this. There’s no way a person can vanish and still go on breathing. Far better to kill himself and get it over with. Why go on and just compound the horror? And there’s no way out.

His friends say, “Sure there is. Just stop. Others have.” That’s like saying, “Just grow to be seven feet tall. Others have. If you don’t like being short, do something about it.”

All of this sort of thing faces the person at the crisis, when he finally realizes that he’s out of control. He’s had hints of it before, but not so vividly. He now knows that the energy in this behavior pattern is so strong that it will take superhuman effort to break it; and at the same time, the alcohol has done so much damage that the other resources of the brain are so weak that the person just doesn’t have the ability any more to stop.

And the agony of stopping! The physical pain of stopping! The craving, once you try! The confirmation that life is just worthless, hopeless, agony! Why try? Just one drink will stop the pain! It cannot, cannot go on for the rest of my life! What do I have to live for? Even if I got over this and never drank again (Never! Unthinkable!) I would have to live with these people whose life I ruined,

and how could they stand the sight of me?

What possible motive could a person have for going through the years of this torment—and it takes years, it takes years—just to pick up the pieces of a shattered existence, with nothing—let's face it, it's probably realistic to say that it's nothing—but pieces of a wrecked life to glue together into a shabby patchwork of existence?

That's the situation the alcoholic is in when he's "hit bottom." Actually, this horror is the best thing that can happen to him, because, whether he ever stops drinking or not, he is now face to face with what he really is, and so has a chance (at least in the next life) of redemption.

By my description so far, I've probably given the impression that the psychotic side of alcoholism comes first, and the neurotic side comes second; but actually these go hand in hand all along the way.

The first time something undesirable happens to a person from drinking, he says to himself, "I'll have to cut down." Immediately, the psychotic aspect of the poison starts its work telling him that it was an accident, that it wasn't serious, and so on; but at the same time, he realizes in a vague sort of way how hard it would be to cut down, and it doesn't seem worth the trouble.

As more and worse things happen to him because of his "bad luck," he realizes more and more that he really ought to stop—or at least cut down (there's the psychotic

aspect working)—and he might try, finding it harder than he thought it was.

He gets nervous, and knows that he can stop being nervous if he has just one drink. That's a *fact*, by the way. He can *only*, in fact, stop being nervous if he has a drink, for a long, long time. And one drink will do it. It will. The difficulty, of course, is that it won't in fact be just one; he can't stop with just one.

But the nerves are really difficult to handle; it's all right for a few hours, but to have them nagging at you day after day, for how long? After a year, maybe, you won't be bothered much, and after two years, maybe, you'll be safe. Two years! When only one drink will stop the problem. I don't *have* to take more than one. (That's the psychosis again. Only in theory is he able not to take more than one.)

And always, it's cut down, not stop. All the time, there's the insuperable difficulty of not being able to touch it ever again—the way they say “real alcoholics” are—which means that the alcoholic absolutely *has* to say he has a “drinking problem,” not that he's an alcoholic. And it isn't all *that* bad, after all. There's the psychosis again.

Even after he admits he's an alcoholic, he doesn't really *believe* it; for him, it's a device he uses to make it a little easier to cut out drinking until he can get back into a stage where he can control it and have a little every now and then once again.

It never lets up. After he's been off it five years, every so often the idea emerges from the back of his mind, "See; I wasn't really an alcoholic; I can handle it. I haven't had a drink for five years. I bet if I had one now, I could have just one, and that would be that. Of course, maybe I was an alcoholic. I wonder. The only way to find out would be to have a drink." You see how it works? Even the success in stopping is a reason for starting again.

That's why there's no such thing as an ex-alcoholic.

V**Coping with Being Alcoholic****I: What Not to Do**

Now what do you do with someone like this? What can you do *for* someone like this?

The first thing you do is not ask those questions. He isn't a thing you can do something with; and he's not necessarily someone you can do something for. He is a person; and a person is someone who sets goals for himself, not someone who has goals set for him. You might be able to help him toward goals he's set for himself, but if you want him to move toward goals you've set for him, then you've denied what he essentially is. You have to face this. You do *not* know what's good for him. What's good for him doesn't exist objectively; it's *defined* by him. The only meaning "what's good for him" has is the meaning *he* freely gives it. That's what it is to be a person.

Let me now break this up into two sections: First, how an alcoholic can cope with being an alcoholic, and then how a person connected with an alcoholic can cope with being connected to him. If you're not the alcoholic yourself, stick with this, and live his dilemma for a while.

If you are the alcoholic, then the very first thing

that has to be done is this, if you're going to cope and have a chance at making sense out of your life:

You have to give up your ideals, your standards, your values.

You don't give up *morality* (acting consistently with what you are), and you don't give up goals. You give up *standards* and stop thinking in terms of "good" and "bad." If you don't, you won't be able to face facts and still live with yourself.

By any normal standards, you are rotten. But you don't have to face the fact that you are rotten, *because it isn't a fact* that you are, or even have been rotten, no matter what you do. Standards—even "normal" standards, the ones practically everyone has—aren't objective; they're subjectively created *expectations* for people to live up to, and they weren't *discovered* anywhere.

Hence, you have to acknowledge what you've done, but not *admit* it; you have to *accept* it, because it's your past, and it's what you've made yourself up to this point. And when I say "accept," I don't mean "grudgingly accept," I mean accept it the way you accept the fact that grass is green or that dogs bark. You have to get yourself into a condition where it's just a fact about yourself that you wrecked your car because you were drunk, that you messed your pants, that you beat your wife and so on and so on. If you want, you have to accept

it the way a blind person accepts the fact that he bumped into things yesterday, and that he's apt to bump into things today. It's just a fact.

One way to get to be able to do this is to say what you've done, the way people say it in Alcoholics Anonymous. The reason Alcoholics Anonymous can help is, first of all that you can be anonymous if you want to be—which is certainly helpful at the beginning, and may be necessary all the way through, because many other people are certainly not going to accept what you've done as “just a fact” about you. *They* have standards, after all. Second, people in these support groups have also done the same sorts of things, and they can accept what they've done as a fact about themselves, and so can accept what you've done as a fact about yourself.

This is perfectly consistent with Christianity, by the way. St. Paul says, “I don't even evaluate myself.” Evaluation is the curse of human existence. It was what was brought upon us by Adam, who sinned because he wanted “to know good and evil,” and thought it would make him like God, and all it did was make him like the devil.

Ideals and standards are totally useless; the only useful function of ideals is to convert them into goals, not to have these imaginary states as criteria for complaining about the way things are. Ideals and standards look to the *past and present* and try to assign blame; goals look to the *future* and tell us where we can go from here. “What future have *I* got?” You say. Patience. We'll get to that.

So the point is not “Where should I be now?” or “How did I get here?” The point is “Where *am* I so that I can know where I can go from here, and how I can get there?”

You have nothing to be afraid of. Other people will despise you; they despise you now—because other people have standards, and you don’t measure up. That’s hard to take. But you have to realize that their standards are *not objective*; they’re not *correct* in their opinion of you, because *no one* is correct in his evaluation of anyone, either anyone else, or himself, because the standard isn’t a fact. After all, think of how many people despise Ronald Reagan, or George Bush, or Martin Luther King, or Jesus, or anyone else you want to name.

In a way, you’re lucky, because you have your purgatory here. In fact, Jesus said as much. “It’s a good thing to be poor,” he said, “because you have heaven as the kingdom you belong to. It’s a good thing to suffer; it’s a good thing to let people sneer at you; it’s a good thing to be oppressed.” Why? Because people in this condition have a chance at realizing that standards don’t objectively matter. Jesus also constantly inveighed against evaluating people; that’s what “Judge not lest ye be judged” means. Who are you to criticize anyone, even yourself?

And also, knowing you are what you are, and accepting yourself as in fact what you are, and not evaluating this self according to some standard, you’ll be

more in a position of being able to accept others, no matter what they are. And this is *love*.

Love is not feeling affectionate; it is an imitation of God's love for us: *absolute acceptance*. It simply doesn't matter to you if your friend is a murderer. "Oh wait a minute, be real!" you say. "I don't know any murderers!" No? With all the women who have abortions nowadays, we're all going to have lots of friends who are murderers—and murderers who have pulled their own children apart, limb from limb. If you think it's hard to live with yourself based on what you've done, think of what it must be like to have to accept *that* as a fact—because it's what the fact is.

I think that one of the reasons so many righteous people want sinners punished is that they envy them. They see the sinners doing things they'd like to do—and apparently getting away with it—and they want to make sure that God lowers the boom on them, because otherwise how does it pay to be virtuous? The whole first part of Paul's letter to the Romans is about the fact that the desire to see sinners punished makes you one of them, because it means, among other things, that you really would like to be doing the sin yourself, only you're afraid to.

But you're in a position where you can realize that the thing these people want sinners punished *for* is a million times worse than any punishment that can be meted out. You know what it's like to live being an

alcoholic; punishment for the “indulgence” of continuing in this horror is ludicrous. And so you can deal with other people society looks on with loathing, knowing that the last thing they need for what they’re doing is punishment. The sin is its own vengeance.

Notice that I’m not saying that you’re to be “comfortable” with yourself as an alcoholic, in a kind of stupid reading of that “I’m OK, you’re OK” psychology. I think these therapists are driving at what I’m driving at here; but the view is very often interpreted as a kind of *positive evaluation* of yourself and everybody else—even by psychologists who use this therapy.

Let me say for a moment that, in the proper context, standards and evaluation are not out of place. It is perfectly rational to set standards for children in school and evaluate them based on the fact that in their future lives, they’re going to need to know this, that, and the other in order to function without difficulty. But the standards will always be subjective, and so will the evaluation.

You obviously don’t want to *stay* where you are, and so you’re *not* OK. But the point is to be “not OK” in the sense that a freshman entering college is “not OK” until he gets his degree; he’s not where he wants to be later; but he’s not *evaluating* himself and complaining about his ignorance. He has a *goal*, not a standard. Goals are fine; it’s standards that are pernicious.

Be careful, by the way, even as you pursue your

goal not to have standards—like Mayor Koch: “How’m I doin’?” Too many people evaluate their progress against some standard of how fast they *ought* to be progressing. Now it’s fine to know *that* you’re getting to your goal; but why bother with whether you’re getting there fast or slow as long as you’re getting there? You have an eternity guaranteed of being there; and the important thing in this life is to *have* the goal, not to succeed immediately in attaining it, or even to succeed at all in this life. Working toward the goal only convinces you that it’s a goal and not an airy ideal; but it’s having it as a goal that guarantees success. So again, progress—or regress—has to be accepted as a fact, and not as a value or disvalue. After all, Jesus couldn’t carry his own cross; Simon of Cyrene had to carry it for him; and even then he fell down three times on his way. By any standards of crucified people, he was a lousy cross-carrier. Why should you have to be better than the Lord of the Universe? Wasn’t he showing you in this that it doesn’t matter whether you “do a good job” in pursuing your goal?

Not having standards has two other implications:

Forget about self-esteem. In fact, forget about yourself.

A lot of psychotherapy today is based on self-esteem; and little lies are created so that people can “feel good about themselves.” Actually, anyone who has

any self-esteem is deceived. If you have *ever* done anything the least bit wrong, then you have violated your own reality, and you have insulted the infinite Being who created you. Who are you to claim that God can't tell you what to do? Can the clay talk back to the potter?

"Well," you say, "but it's not so *bad* to tell a little lie that did no damage." What you're doing is setting up a *standard* so that you can "take the good with the bad" and feel good about yourself. But if you can say that, why can't you say, "Well, he was going to die anyway; all I did was make it a little sooner; what's so bad about that?" Napoleon thought of himself as a great man; but he was responsible for the deaths of many many people for his great causes, and for him, it was *worth* it—values again. The Ayatollah Khomeini undoubtedly thought that what he did was *good*, and what God was pleased with.

This desire to "feel good about yourself" as a kind of goal is only one of the many perversions of our modern age. And what it results in in the long run is setting standards so low that it's possible to give yourself a glowing evaluation no matter what you've done. Look at what's happened in the education of American children: They're the worst performers in mathematics among the developed nations—and at the same time their opinion of how good they are at math is the highest of any of the developed nations. Obviously, they've more than met their standards only because the standards are set so low. They've got lots of self-esteem about their math ability;

they just can't do math.

But there are no objective standards. You don't *have* to feel good—or bad—about yourself. You are what you are. And in fact, God Almighty, your owner and Master, has no standards at all. That's why he can "forgive" you, because from his point of view, there's nothing to forgive. You just are. He doesn't evaluate you; he simply accepts you. St. Paul makes it quite clear that, once the Old Law went away, God abandoned even any pretense at evaluation. In the fifth chapter of *Second Corinthians*, he says, "God was the one who transformed the world to himself [the word is usually translated "reconciled," but it means "transformed"] and no longer keeps records against people of the rotten things they do."

God doesn't love you because you're lovable. None of us are lovable, when it comes to that, because we've all disobeyed, and in effect sneered at the one who created us. But love isn't love if it needs the beloved to be lovable in order to love him—because that kind of "love" is *finding one's own satisfaction* in someone else, which is a way of *using* the "good" qualities of the other person for one's own gratification, not accepting the other person as what he is: a *person*, a creator of himself to his *own* goals. God loves you because you are; which means he accepts you absolutely as you are, simply because you are. Not because you are this or that, but because you *are*.

So the fact that God loves you doesn't make you important or worth anything; it just means that he loves

you.

You don't matter. In the eternal scheme of things, you don't matter; you are a superfluity. Nobody matters, because God accepts, he doesn't "want." God doesn't need you, and doesn't want you in the sense that he'd be disappointed if you didn't exist, or if you messed up his "plan" for you. He has *no* plan for you that you can mess up; because his plan for you is *that you do with yourself whatever you want*. That's what it is for you to exist, and so that's why he created you; because that's what it means to be free to set goals for yourself.

Of course, you can make a difference. Sure. You can affect other people's lives, and be useful or detrimental to their pursuing their own goals. But it doesn't *matter*, objectively; because when something matters, you're evaluating it according to some (subjective) standard. In the eternal scheme of things (in God's eyes, where everything is objective) nothing matters. It *is*. We think of God as the great idealist with the infinite standards that no one can live up to, because we want to feel good on those few occasions when we've lived up to what we think his standards must be—and so we create God unto our own image and likeness, making sure that we give him standards that we've lived up to, so that our report card will be a ticket to heaven.

But that's not the God that exists. How do I know? Because that God contradicts all the evidence there is for saying that there's any God at all. There *is* a God,

and he is what he is, and your believing or not believing in him won't alter the fact one iota. The point I'm trying to make here is that you're not being "unfaithful" to the real God if you give up your lofty standards and simply accept the facts about yourself as the facts.

And the flip side of not having values and standards is that you can forget about yourself and your "self esteem." You don't have to hate yourself if you have no standards, and you don't have to like yourself.

In fact, only if you have no self-esteem can you *love* yourself; because loving yourself means accepting yourself absolutely. Self esteem (or self-respect) is what they used to call "self-love" rather than love of self, and is the sin of *pride*: of thinking that you're something. And as St. Paul tells the Galatians, "Remember, if a person thinks he's something when in fact he's nothing, he's fooling himself."

And you, as an alcoholic, have a far greater chance of achieving this Christian virtue of true love of yourself (which as a virtue is called "humility," by the way) than other people, who haven't done things except what most other people have done, and so who can compare themselves with other people and *evaluate* themselves as "pretty good," all things considered. Notice what this does; when you compare yourself with others and so achieve some "self esteem," you are doing it by thinking of many of them as *worse* than yourself—by your standard. "And who are you," says St. Paul, "to set standards for

someone else's slave?"

I'm not trying to give you self-esteem as an alcoholic. That's stupid. You're not "worth something in spite of the fact that you're an alcoholic, because you have all these good qualities that offset it." You're not *worth anything*, objectively; nobody is. And whether the "good qualities" offset the alcoholism depends on what standards the person who says this has. If you *want* to set up standards like that, of course, you can. But by the same token, anyone else can set up standards such that, no matter how many "good qualities" you have, they won't offset the "bad quality" of alcoholism. An alcoholic has no reason for self-esteem at all.

But this still doesn't mean that you have to look on alcoholism as a disaster. If you give up evaluation, then it's just a fact, and there's nothing good or bad about it. Giving up evaluation doesn't change what the *facts* are one iota. But it's devilish hard to do. Evaluation sneaks its ugly head in all over the place. Jesus talked about the Pharisee who congratulated himself in the Temple about all that he had done, and said to God, "I thank you that I'm not like this tax-collector." Jesus didn't mention that there are a lot of tax-collectors who stand in the back of the Temple and say, "Well at least, sinner that I am, thank God I'm not like that hypocrite Pharisee standing up there."

What does it matter how good you are or how bad you are? Whose standards are you going to use? The *fact*

is that you did this and that and the other. That's the only facts there are.

So you don't have to forget your past, and say, "That's gone; it doesn't exist." That's false. It *isn't* gone; and it will exist *forever*. It just doesn't *matter*. You are what you are. Accept it as a fact, and don't bother with self-esteem. You have goals to reach, and it doesn't matter who you are now; it's what you will be that is the focus of your attention—what you will do with the rest of your life.

But you've got a few other things to think through before you start setting goals for yourself.

Do not consider that your drinking or your alcoholism is a *problem*.

I've mentioned this a couple of times already; but let's spell it out in some detail. First of all, get used to the idea that *you are an alcoholic*; you don't *have* something called a "drinking problem"; you *are* an alcoholic, and you always will be.

There are five reasons why it's pernicious to consider that you "have a drinking problem." First of all, as I just said, a "problem" is something that you "have," and it isn't something that you are. It doesn't touch your very reality; you can take it off like a set of clothes. But you can't take alcoholism off. You may be an alcoholic who doesn't *drink*; but you'll never be not an alcoholic. A

non-alcoholic can drink and make nothing of it; that is forever impossible for you. You *need* drink, because you have been poisoned, and it has permanently damaged your brain. You can't undo the pathways you have burned into your brain that have coped with the poison all this time, any more than you could grow back an arm you have cut off.

This is a physical fact. Nerve cells aren't like skin cells. When a skin cell dies, another one grows to take its place; when a nerve cell dies, that's it. Fortunately, we have billions of nerve cells in our brains, and that's why you've been able to act fairly normally in spite of the damage that you've done to your brain; other nerves have taken over. But you'll never get back to where you were before you poisoned your brain.

Not that it matters. Keep remembering that. It's not what you could have been if you didn't poison yourself, but where you are now and what you can do with what you've got. And that's an enormous amount.

But the point is that your drinking has touched and poisoned, not only your mental being, but your physical being. You don't "have a problem"; you *are* an alcoholic.

Secondly, if you say you "have a problem," you can say you have a *little* problem or a *big* problem; but it's not a matter of "size" here. You *are* an alcoholic, which means that you're a different *sort of human being* from non-alcoholics. Whether alcoholism is something genetic, whether there's a genetic predisposition to alcoholism,

whether it's a habit, or what, is completely irrelevant. You *are* an alcoholic, and that's a fact.

No matter what "stage" of alcoholism you are in, you are an alcoholic. *As soon as you have the slightest problem with drinking, you are an alcoholic.* As soon as you say, "I really should cut down," you are an alcoholic. A non-alcoholic is a person who has no reason for saying this.

The psychotic aspect of your alcoholism is always going to make you do anything but admit that you are an alcoholic, because you know as well as everyone else that an alcoholic is a person who must not drink. Your alcoholism will go to any lengths to prevent you from recognizing that, which is why you will find, at *every* stage, that you will be saying to yourself, "But I'm not really an *alcoholic*; I just have a drinking problem." Or "I just had one a while back."

As I said, even once you admit it, you still won't believe it, "deep down," because the alcoholism itself is "deep down" and it'll be fighting for its survival for the rest of your life. So believe it, and don't listen to what's "deep down"; it's a liar.

The third reason why it's pernicious to think that you have a "drinking problem" is that problems are something wrong that can be corrected; they are *solvable*. Your alcoholism isn't "solvable"; you've given it to yourself (indeliberately, of course, if you want to feel good about that—but what does it matter?), and it's with you

forever. You have to *accept* it, not *solve* it.

True, you have to stop drinking, and *that's* a problem. But it's a "problem" in the sense of something that you have to figure out to get where you want to be. But the *drinking* isn't a problem; it's a fact; and the alcoholism isn't a problem; it's a fact. *How* you're going to stop drinking is a problem; and *whether* you're ever going to stop drinking is a question.

Problems can be solved by putting your mind to it; but, if you go over what this poison has done to you, in its psychotic and neurotic dimensions, then no matter what "stage" you're at, *you are helpless*. It's bigger than you are; it's taken you over. It will be a miracle if you stop drinking. There is no sense in which alcoholism can be "solved."

Miracles happen, of course. I myself have seen two in my own immediate family: alcoholics who stopped drinking—and they stopped for apparently the most trivial reasons. But let's not worry about this now. You're busy seeing the implications in accepting what you are; and what you *aren't* is someone with a problem.

Fourth, if you think of yourself as "having a problem," then you and the people around you are thinking of yourself negatively; there's something *wrong* with you, and you're back to evaluating under a different disguise. If you've got a problem, why aren't you busy solving it? Why aren't you at least doing *something* to get rid of it? Actually "problem" in this sense is just a

euphemism for “something bad about” you that needs to be got rid of.

But you’ll never get rid of your alcoholism, even if you stop drinking; and you may never stop drinking until you die. That’s something you have to face. That’s what it means to be out of control.

Let me remark here that by far the greatest damage is done in this world by people trying to correct what they see as “bad.” Communism had its inspiration in Marx’s seeing how the English workers were oppressed by factory owners, and in seeing capitalism as an evil that had to be got rid of. And perhaps the “eradication of evil” that he launched brought more misery and suffering on the world than anything else in history.

Why is this? Because “getting rid of evil” means looking on *what exists* as “not really real,” and looking on the self-created ideal as the “true” reality. Now it’s fine to make goals of our ideals (which is what “looking on the ideal as the true reality” means); but *not if you look on reality as “unreal” and something that has to be got rid of and replaced with the ideal.*

Setting goals leads to progress, because you look at *what you are* and take the steps toward the goal that you can in fact take. “Correcting wrongs” is *regressive* because it *destroys* what is there in the name of the ideal. The loftier the ideal, the worse the damage that is done when the “evil” that confronts it is to be wiped away in its name. Think of how much, for instance, that is against

God's commandments is done in God's name: in the name of ridding evil from God's earth (while all the time, from God's point of view, there's no evil there).

So you must not consider that there's something wrong with you. Not that you should "stop thinking negatively and have a positive attitude about yourself." That's just the "I'm OK" evaluation again. Negative and positive attitudes are *evaluative* stances; and what we're after is accepting facts as facts. And if you look at your drinking as a "problem," then you fall into this trap that's so easy to fall into. Your addiction to drink is a *fact*, not a problem.

And, you see, calling alcoholism "having a drinking problem" makes it easy both to blame you for it, and to avoid the whole issue. If it's a problem, then you *should* be doing something about it (values and standards again), and you can always postpone doing something about it ("I'll solve it tomorrow. I need to rest today, because it's Sunday; and I'll celebrate the Lord's day with a little drink.")

Here's another thing to get out of your mind:

Never mind how you got here, still less how much to blame you are for getting into the state you're in.

That again is looking back to the past and the present and evaluating it according to some standard, and trying to assign blame. Who cares how you got here?

You're here.

We love to “assign responsibility.” If there's anything human beings like to do, it's find out who's to blame—as if that changed the fact. You of course didn't set out to make yourself an alcoholic; but those who want to assign blame are going to say, “Yes, but couldn't he have foreseen that it might happen, and isn't he responsible if he could have foreseen it?” That might be true; but who cares, now after the fact?

Blaming yourself is just another dodge by which you can indulge in the pleasure of hating yourself. Because if you hate yourself, and if you blame yourself, you can simultaneously congratulate yourself on the fact that you haven't lost your high standards. Big deal! All having high standards means is that you still have an active imagination, and you're not what your imagination tells you you are.

The *fact* is that you are where you are. The *fact* is that you did things that got you where you are. How *free* and therefore how responsible you were for doing those things is also a fact, but you'll never know it (because you're partly psychotic and out of touch with your own past access to information), and if you can't know it, neither will anyone else except God—and he doesn't care.

After all, if God doesn't care, why should you?

In this connection, remember what the father of the Prodigal Son in Jesus' story did when his son came home after spending all his inheritance on prostitutes. He

welcomed him home and killed the fatted calf. He didn't say, "You're welcome back, but you have to do this and that to make up for ruining your life and to show you're sincere." The father couldn't even be bothered hearing him admit what he'd done; "My son was dead and is alive! He was lost and is found!" The father didn't care what the son had done. The kid didn't even need to do penance to make up for his crimes.

So if God doesn't care how much to blame you were, why should you? Facts are facts; you are what you are. Accept that as God accepts it, and you can go on from here. Accept "responsibility" for your past, and you'll be spending the rest of your life in penance, wasting your time trying to "correct the wrong," which is impossible.

So your alcoholism may or may not have been due to a moral lapse. The point I'm making here is that morality is something to take into account *before* you choose to do something; after the fact, what's done is done, and whether you were guilty or not has no bearing on your life now. It might have a bearing on your eternal life, but you can't "make up for" it by "reparations." Choices, as I said, can't be undone or "fixed"; all you need to do on this score is beg God to redeem you from whatever sin there might have been in it—and do you doubt that he'll do it if he got himself crucified to demonstrate how willing he was? So forget it, and don't worry about it.

Alcoholism in itself, of course, is not a sin or a

moral failure. Immorality, I mentioned earlier, is a *deliberate choice* to do something that you know or suspect is wrong (self-defeating because self-contradictory, a violation of your reality); and there is nothing wrong with taking a drink—and that’s what you did. It would be immoral, of course, deliberately to poison yourself, but one drink, or even a drink a day, won’t poison you enough so that you could say that you intend (even as a side-effect) to do damage to yourself. We do harm to our muscles when we exercise, after all.

If you had any real reason to believe that you were making an alcoholic of yourself before you actually became one (if you weren’t one from birth), then there might have been immorality involved. But by the time you realized that this might be happening to you, you already were an alcoholic, and you were out of control with all the psychotic and neurotic aspects starting their insidious work.

By the way, some people say, “Well yes, but look at the ingenious plans he made to save up his money and hide the bottle. Granted, he might not be able to help himself if someone offers him a drink, but there has to be *some* freedom and responsibility to *plan* how to get a drink next week, for God’s sake.”

They don’t know what it’s like, do they? The *behavior pattern* has so much energy in it that you can’t *not* think of how to get the next drink—because you’ve *got* to have it or you’ll disintegrate; and it’s as ingenious

as the cleverest fox in figuring out how to satisfy itself. All this, even though you know what's going on, without your being able to prevent it, for two reasons: (a) because you can't get energy out of this pattern, and (b) you don't see any sensible reason to, because the alcoholism is blocking out any counter-evidence.

Of course, it's not all that simple, and you aren't *completely* blind; and after the fact, when you've finally had the drink and the urge has quieted down and you're back in control, you don't know how much you knew as you were planning.

I'm not trying to excuse you; what I'm saying doesn't exculpate you so that you can feel good about yourself. What I'm saying here is that those who consider that you really *must* have been free and to blame aren't stating facts either. We're trying to lay out what the *facts* are here, not to put a value-judgment on them.

You know perfectly well that those who are in control of themselves misinterpret people like you, who are out of control of themselves. Everyone tries to "get inside" someone else when trying to figure out why he did something; and what this means is that they put themselves in your place and see what *they* would have done if they were in your shoes and "confronted with a temptation" to go down to the liquor store and buy a supply, knowing that they "had a problem." But they have no idea what your experience is.

And of course, what they're trying to do is

understand you, and no one can understand anyone else. Just as your job is not to understand yourself, but to accept yourself, their job is to accept you, not understand you. And your job, by the way, is to accept *them* as trying to understand you and as not accepting you. Why should you complain at their being what they are? You'd be evaluating them, then. See how hard it is to avoid evaluating?

So forget it. Thinking in moral terms is just blaming yourself. Who cares whether you were immoral or not, and how free you were? God doesn't, so why should you? The fact is, you did it. Don't worry about it.

Stick to the facts. It doesn't matter how you got the way you are. The fact is that you're an alcoholic. Let other people feel good by thinking you've got a "problem," (and they can "help you solve it" in their wisdom), or that you've got a "disease," (and they can sympathize with your misfortune), or that you've had a "moral lapse," (and they can sneer at you, because *they* didn't fall from grace). That's *their* problem. You stick to the facts.

Well, but if isn't a problem or a moral lapse, why not think of it as a disease?

Don't fall into the trap of thinking of your alcoholism as a "disease" or "sickness."

Now it's true, of course, that you're mentally unhealthy as an alcoholic, but all "being unhealthy"

means is that you can't act up to your genetic potential, because something inside you is hindering you. But a *disease* or a *sickness* is something you "catch," which of course absolves you from responsibility. You don't catch alcoholism.

Besides, I'm not trying to absolve you from responsibility by what I was saying above. By no means. You may be very responsible for where you've got. What I'm saying is that it simply doesn't matter now that you're here. You *are* here; and you *were or were not* responsible for it. That's the fact; but whether you were responsible for most of it, some of it, or none of it doesn't alter the fact at all, and what you need to do is accept the fact as a fact. Accept any responsibility you may have. "Okay, I did it to myself. I don't know how much I deliberately did it to myself; but if I did it deliberately, then I did it deliberately. I am what I am, and that's a fact." The point is not to add any value judgment to it.

But calling alcoholism a "disease," like calling it a "problem," is a euphemism which has the laudable purpose of getting people to stop thinking of it as a "moral lapse" or a "vice." But it *isn't* a disease, and it *isn't* a problem, and everybody knows this. Alcoholism is as much a disease as homosexual sex is a "different life style." This is just another one of those attempts by our culture to make something what they want it to be by having everybody agree to define it that way.

But it won't work. Everybody knows they're lying

when they call alcoholism a “disease,” and so they don’t really believe it. But most especially, it won’t work for *you*, because your primary job is to face *facts*, and comfortable euphemisms that save your self-esteem are the worst things in the world for you, because you *know* they’re lies. You aren’t sick; you’re an alcoholic, a person who has poisoned himself.

VI

Coping with Being Alcoholic

II: What to Do

Okay, I've told you all the ways not to consider yourself. Then how *do* you look on yourself realistically, and what do you do about this self that you are?

First, what are you?

The way to consider yourself as an alcoholic is that you are handicapped.

The upshot of this whole book, as I said at the beginning, is that you should consider that what your alcoholism is is a *handicap*, not a problem. You aren't the same as other people in respect to drinking; you're more limited than they are. Other people can drink and not have it affect their lives. You can't. If you ever could, you can't any more. Other people don't need to drink. You do. That's what your alcoholism is; and that's all it is, in the last analysis. This isn't a euphemism; it's just a statement of what you are: you're handicapped when it comes to drinking.

Just as some people can walk without trouble and others can't even stand, some people can drink, and you

can't. Just as some people were born crippled and others did something foolish and crippled themselves, and others got a disease and got crippled, and others got crippled in an accident, so it might be that alcoholics are born alcoholics, or maybe some are and some aren't, or they did stupid things and became alcoholics, or they happen to be very susceptible and got into it by doing less than any normal person would do. What does it matter?

Just as the handicapped person spends a while saying "Why me?" you'll undoubtedly spend a while saying, "Why me? I didn't *want* this to happen to me!" That's beside the point. The handicapped person can spend his whole life saying this, and complaining that he can't do what most people can do—and spend the rest of his eternity this way—if he wants to. He's free. And he *is* more limited than most people, perhaps in many ways (I know a man who's blind, deaf, and with almost no sense of touch). That's what the evaluative mode of thinking gets you: "Why me?" Well, why not you? What objective reason can you give for saying that you should be singled out to have everything go the way you'd like it to?

And eventually, the handicapped person realizes this and says, "Well, there's nothing I can do about it, so here I am. Now what can I do with this self I've got?"

The secret of being handicapped is not to look at what you *can't* do, but what range of acts are open to you with the handicap. And the more you look, the wider the range becomes, even to sometimes being able to do, after

a fashion, what non-handicapped people can do.

As an alcoholic, you're lucky. The only thing you can't do that most people can do is drink any alcohol.

At this point, there's something else that you have to get through your skull:

You have to *stop* drinking. You *cannot* cut down. You have to stop drinking *now*.

And the reason, of course, is that you need to drink, but the drinking is destroying you and making you need to drink more and more. *There's* where your problem is: How you can overcome the need to drink and actually not drink any more. Maybe you can't. But whether or not you can do it, you've got to stop, not cut down.

The psychotic aspect of your alcoholism is going to tell you, "But there are alcoholics who have turned into normal drinkers, and who have cut down to a reasonable amount. Why can't I?" Yes, and there are people with withered legs that got up at Lourdes and walked on two perfectly sound legs. Why can't you? For the same reason you didn't win the lottery last week.

As far as you know, you *might* be one of the one in a hundred thousand who looks like an alcoholic and quacks like an alcoholic but isn't an alcoholic and can cut down without stopping cold.

But tell me this: Would you play Russian roulette? One bullet in a six-shooter, spin the chamber, put the

barrel up to your head, and pull the trigger. Would you do it? You have five chances out of six of surviving—and one chance in six of proving whether I’m right or not about what life is like after death.

But if you wouldn’t do this, I’m telling you what your alcoholism doesn’t want you to hear: (a) the consequences of not stopping are *just as bad* as losing the game of Russian roulette; in fact, they’re the same: you die. Only with alcoholism, you die by slow torture. Face it, what you’re taking to relieve the torment creates agony, not relief; it’s only *telling* you that it’s relief, but you know it’s a lie. And (b) the chances of winning at Russian roulette are millions of times better than the chances of being able to cut down.

Face it, you *have* to quit. You can’t cut down. You *have* to quit, and you have to quit *now*.

But *can* you?

No.

Don’t ask yourself whether you can quit or not. You can’t. If you think of it in terms of whether you can or not, you can’t.

Never mind quitting. You know you have to quit. But don’t think about it. When you’re going to have the next drink, say to yourself, “Well, but I just won’t have this one.” Never mind any other one. Just don’t have this one. I know an alcoholic who used his inherent laziness to

postpone the time when he'd go get a drink because "it's just too much trouble right now." It worked for him. Will it work for you? If you wonder, it won't, of course.

But how do you not think about whether you can or not? Can you forget about whether you can quit or not? No.

There is a higher power, however; remember that. "With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Maybe what He's got in store for you is quitting at the moment of death; but maybe he hasn't. Practice with this one drink now, and forget about the rest.

You absolutely have to distract yourself from the contemplation of never taking a drink again, or of whether you can quit or not. You need to find somebody to talk to who will listen to you talk yourself beyond the crisis.

Here's another case where Alcoholics Anonymous comes in handy. There are people there who have been through this and who know that particularly for the first month, you've got to have somebody available at every minute of the day, and somebody who knows what you're going through and just accepts it as a fact, and doesn't make a big deal about it.

Sure, you'll be bothering people. But people are "bothered" only when they have something else that's

more important to do (values again) and there's nothing objectively important. And there are lots of people—you'd be surprised at how many—who think there's nothing more important than saving someone's life, which is what they're doing for you. So you're not bothering them at all.

Forget it. You need them and they're willing to be used. You'll pay back the world some day by being willing to be used by someone else—or you won't. But that's not the point. The people you'll be asking for help, if they give it to you, won't be looking to get paid back.

Actually, that's what love is. Being willing to be used by someone else. And it's amazing how much love how many people have for people you'd think not even a mother could love. Use it when you need it; that's what they *want* you to do.

Ask for help. Don't worry about it, ask. You need it.

One of the strongest fights the psychotic aspect of your alcoholism is going to make is to try to convince you (a) that you can get out of this on your own, (b) that ultimately you *have* to do it yourself, (c) that other people can't really help you anyway, and (d) that you can't ask, because you don't have the strength to ask for help. All of these are true; and all of them are false. You can get out of this on your own, because ultimately, it's the choice to do

it that will succeed—at least after you die—and nothing else will. You have to do it yourself, because no one else can get into your skull and choose for you; and no one can really help you because no one can make you choose or enable you to carry out your choice. And you don't in fact have the strength to ask for help, because your alcoholism in its neurotic aspect is going to keep you from doing it, because it's deadly afraid that if you *do* ask for help, you might actually give up drinking and that's absolutely intolerable. Far better to try and fail, because then you'll keep on drinking.

And of course all of these are false. You can't get out of alcoholism on your own. You are totally helpless; your alcoholism is not only making it impossible to act, it's making it impossible for you to know what the facts are; you have neither the information nor the control necessary to get out of your dilemma yourself. Secondly, while you have to make the choice yourself, you *can't* carry it out yourself; that's what being out of control means. And you have to stop drinking. And of course other people *can* help you by being there when you need to talk yourself past the crisis, by giving you encouragement, and so on.

But can you actually ask for help? That I don't know. Let's continue being realistic about this. What you should do and what you're able to do are two different things. So if you know you should ask for help but can't bring yourself to, don't worry about it. Don't worry about

anything; you'll see that you don't have to.

Another thing you should realize is this:

It takes no energy whatever to choose.

Choice is a spiritual act. You can agonize over making a choice by going over the pros and cons, but when it comes to actually making it, then all you do is choose.

So when you get to the point of drinking, you say, "I just won't."

"Oh, sure," you say. "I've *said* that. Every day of my life for the past five years, I've said that. I've said 'I have to quit now. Now I'll stop,' and I refused the drink—and then five minutes later found one in my hand, half empty in celebration that I'd refused it five minutes ago. And you say to say 'I just won't.' It doesn't work."

I know it doesn't work. You fell down carrying your cross. But it's *still* a fact that you have to quit now, and that means that there's nothing you can do about it; you can't give up. It's *always* now; and if it didn't work in the past, it's still true that you have to quit now.

As Mother Teresa said when someone asked her why she bothered with her little clinic, since there were so many sick people that she'd never be able to reach, "God didn't ask me to succeed; he asked me to try."

And after all, it has worked for some people, even after years and years of trying. It might work for you—and

it might not. But that doesn't alter the fact that you have to quit, and you have to quit now, not tomorrow; and it's always now.

Of course, that's horrible to contemplate. But it's the fact. So don't contemplate it; just quit. Now.

Think of this, in this connection:

Failure shows that you have a goal.

The important thing in this life is not to *reach* your goals, but to *formulate* them; you have an eternity of fulfillment ahead of you if—and only if—you set a goal for yourself. If you don't set the goal and try to achieve it, then all you've got to look forward to forever is what you've made of yourself so far.

What does that mean? Obviously, the greater the fulfillment after you die, the higher your goals have to be here. But the higher your goals are here, the more you will fail (here) in trying to achieve them. The people who have accomplished really great things have been failures their whole lives long.

Think about that. I saw one of Michelangelo's late *Pietà's* in Florence. Mary had the body of the dead Jesus, and the whole thing was just shouting her anguish—but the lower leg of Jesus wasn't attached to his body, and the faces of several of the minor figures in the sculpture were not finished. Michelangelo was going to break it up when an apprentice begged him to give it to him, because it was

such a masterpiece. But to Michelangelo it was a failure. Leonardo finished nine or ten paintings; he just couldn't bring himself to do them.

Or look at Jesus. His life was spent trying to get people to understand what this "Kingdom of God" he was talking about was like—and not one person had the faintest idea what he was driving at, not even one. He died a total failure.

Do you have the courage to fail?

Courage? What else can you do? Again, you're lucky, because you *can't* give up trying to stop drinking. You know you have to keep trying, in spite of all the times you've failed; and if it never works before you die, it doesn't, that's all, and you say, "Okay, then today I quit." And *that* lasts ten minutes, and then you say, "Okay, now I quit," because what else can you do? Even if you give up, what does that mean? You still have to try to stop drinking, and you know you do.

It doesn't really matter whether you actually quit or not (in the eternal scheme of things nothing matters); but for your life the fact that you have this goal matters, because eternally it will be fulfilled, whether you succeed in stopping before the poison kills you or not.

Finally, **get interested in something that you can lose yourself in.**

And here's the secret nobody tells you about. What

you've already made of yourself will be with you forever. But what you can add to that is that *you can be whatever you choose to be, as long as it doesn't contradict the reality you are. It's just a question of deciding to be that, and starting out after it.*

And I mean *anything*. If you want to be a nuclear physicist or a basketball star, and you're in your fifties, you can choose to be either of them, and start on the long road toward it. You won't get there before you die, of course; and if it's being the basketball star, then you can forget being the first seventy-year-old NBA center. But if you *want* the skill at that level of perfection *you will have it after you die.*

Our life, as I've been stressing, depends on *making* choices, not in fulfilling them in this life; otherwise, life is the cruelest cheat imaginable—for anyone, not just for you, you mental cripple.

Look at me. My ambition is to change the way the world thinks for the next two thousand years, minimum (if the world has that long to go). And what am I doing? Teaching in a little college in Kentucky; teaching maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty people a year. I want to influence *millions!* Why not? I've got some very good ideas, and (though I haven't presented it here) some damn good evidence to back them up. But nobody's interested. But my students look up at me and say, "Well that's *your* opinion, and I don't happen to agree." Not that they have any evidence why I'm wrong and

they're right. They just "feel comfortable" believing something else—and what they believe is a "fact for" them, and they're happy with that. Never mind what the facts *really* are.

If life doesn't go on after death, my life is agony and torture. It doesn't make sense. It is the opposite of reasonable to be able to set goals for yourself and have *luck* what determines your life. The goals then become gratuitous cruelty. If the goals are really high, the way mine are, it means that everything you do is a failure; you don't even always "fail forward," as they say; you just fail.

But if there's a life after death that's anything like what the evidence seems to tell me, then the mere fact that you've conceived these lofty goals guarantees your success.

In any case, you don't know by direct experience one way or the other; so, as Pascal says, you have to bet. And if you bet I'm right, then your life, even with this handicap, can make sense and be glorious—simply because you chose something and are starting after it from where you are now. You'll be eternally the alcoholic who found out the secrets of the galaxies. Why not? And if I'm wrong, you'll have tried; is that worse than the way you are now? What have you got to lose?

But why bother doing anything, if nothing matters in the eternal scheme of things?

And the answer to this is: Why not?

But suppose you go the other way. Suppose you

bet I'm wrong. Then you won't set any goals for yourself, certainly not the goal of quitting, because it's a waste of time. But with what you know now, you know that "being satisfied with yourself as you are," which is what *deliberately* intending not to quit entails, means *setting up as a goal* the eternal continuation of your present life. And what does that mean? If I'm right, it means eternally trying to escape this hateful existence by doing the thing that you know makes it hateful. If I'm wrong, it just means doing this until death finally creates oblivion. So in the best possible case, if you bet I'm wrong, the what you get is more of the same thing that you're trying to escape from.

But let me caution you here. You're not betting I'm wrong if you say, "I'm sorry; I just don't have the strength to try to quit; I just can't, that's all. So I guess I want to just go on this way until I die; and I have to bet that you're wrong." That's not *deliberately choosing* to go on as you are; that's the voice of despair saying that you don't think that in fact you can *do* anything else.

Remember, it takes no energy to choose, and it doesn't matter whether you can carry out your choice or not. Bitter experience tells you you can't carry out your choice, and I'm not saying that you'll be able to. All the voice of despair is doing is making a prediction about your actions; but that doesn't affect your choice. Your choice is totally free.

"But how do I know whether I'm making a choice

or not, if the outcome is the same?” That’s the difficulty in being out of control; the outcome is the same no matter what the choice is—the *temporary* outcome, that is. But the true outcome, the eternal outcome, is vastly different, and in the last analysis, that’s all that matters.

But how do you know? Ask yourself this: If medical science discovered a pill which would remove all traces of your alcoholism and put you back to where you were before you started down this road, would you take it? If you say, “No, I wouldn’t,” then you’d rather be where you are, all things considered. If you say, “Of course I would,” then your will is in the right direction. You’ve *accepted* yourself for what you are without being *satisfied* with what you are, and that’s all you need.

That is, your situation, when you say, “But realistically speaking, I’m betting that you’re wrong,” is the knowledge that your attempts to extricate yourself from your need to drink are doomed to failure, *not* the deliberate choice to keep drinking. You would gladly stop if you could; and for you, that’s the choice to stop. So you’ve got nothing to worry about.

That is, I said you have to quit drinking. That’s not true. You have to *choose* to quit; you have to choose each time you fail. But when you do, then also choose the life you want and can’t achieve because the handicap of your drinking is keeping you from it, in practice here and now. And then, if I’m right, you’ll eternally be the self that you chose to be, and so what if it means making futile choices

over and over again from here right up until the blessed moment when the struggle is over. You have nothing to worry about. And if I'm wrong, you'll still be working toward making something of yourself.

But, of course, you don't have to choose this course. You can forget about trying to quit and keep drinking and it'll kill you; and then you'll be whatever it is you chose to be, which probably wouldn't be what you would have chosen to be if you chose to quit, because alcohol, let's face it, is taking up all your mental time now. In that sense, you don't *have* to quit. But then where are you? Either where you are now, or worse—and it will be worse; you have no idea of the bottoms there are to hit below the bottom you've actually hit—until you die, after which there's either nothing or the prolongation of this agony for all eternity. Can you afford it?

And, of course, if you *do* choose to quit, then maybe one of these days the miracle will happen and you actually *will* quit. Think of that. Then you won't just have an eternity of fulfillment facing you, you'll have the rest of your life to start along the road that leads toward the goals that you can't really believe are achievable now. Who knows? With some success, then you might conceive higher and higher goals, and be someone the world will admire for the next ten centuries. Why not? It doesn't depend on talent; it depends on ambition.

So if you *do* choose to quit—and I keep stressing, that's all you have to do, choose—the world—or rather,

eternity—is still your oyster. You’ve lost twenty years, maybe, of your eternity. Big deal. After twenty million times twenty million, where will those twenty lost years be?

And isn’t the point, really, that you don’t have *not* to quit? You *can* at least choose to quit, because your choice is completely free and takes no effort whatever, and not even your alcoholism can make you choose. And if you *do* choose to quit, even if you can’t carry out your choice in this life, your eternity is secure; because your eternity depends on your choices, not on your ability to carry them out—and it’s definitely not a self-contradictory choice to choose to quit poisoning yourself. What have you got to lose? Especially you. You’ve got nothing left as you are now.

What is it that you wanted to make of yourself when you were young, and gave up because you got “practical”? What is it that you liked to do? Why not do it?

In a way, you’re lucky, because you’ve made such a mess of your life that you can see that life goes on, even when there’s nothing to it but filth and concern about whether there’s still something in the bottle to help you forget.

Suppose, then, that you start out on the Quixotic quest to do what you wanted to do when you were a kid. Your pursuit of this dream can’t make you any worse off than you are now—even if I’m wrong and there isn’t a life

after death, where the pursuit guarantees the capture.

So you see, if you face the *facts*, there's hope, and life can be beautiful if you choose to make it beautiful. *This* life up to death may not be beautiful; it may be agony, because you may not be able to fulfill any of your goals until after you die. But that won't be long, and so don't be like the kid who says, "But I want to go to Disneyland *now*, not next week!" and rants and raves and throws a tantrum.

All it depends on is your choice, not your skill, your brilliance, your talent, anything. You're handicapped; so what? It doesn't make any eternal difference. You can be a glorious cripple. And after all, your Master—your owner—has hands and feet cut open, and a big gash in his side, which he apparently shows to some privileged few, as decorations of honor. How do you like that?

And the *fact* is—remember this, I'm not telling you stories, I'm giving reasoned conclusions from good evidence—the *fact* is that there *is* a life after death, and we *will* be what we've chosen to be. The tragedy of this life isn't things like alcoholism; it's that people *don't choose*, because it's too much trouble actually to try to be what you want to be, or they're afraid that they'll lose what they have in the pursuit. But you know that you've got nothing to lose, so make your choice, and it can be anything you please. You can still be the alcoholic who does what you always wanted to do and haven't given up because it's "too late."

At the moment of death, it's too late, because you can't change any more. But any time before then, you can set a goal for yourself and work—and you don't necessarily have to work hard—for it. All that matters is that it's a real goal, and not just something that would be nice if the world weren't the way it is.

One more thing I'm convinced is a fact, and that I think you should know. This is a conclusion I've arrived at from some of the implications in Christianity:

If you choose to let yourself be redeemed, this entails the fact that all the damage you have done to others will turn out to have been the very thing they needed to achieve their goals.

That is, what you *did* to them will remain the same; but it will turn out that what *seemed* to both you and them to be a disaster was actually, as things worked out, what was a necessary means for them to get where they wanted to go.

“Oh, come now,” you say. “How can that be?” Well, look at your alcoholism. If you hadn't been an alcoholic and been forced to face the facts about yourself, would you have looked into your life and realized that it can and will be just what you make of it, and all you have to do is choose? And (if I'm right, of course), won't you be able to look back at this phase of your life after you die and say, “Thank God that happened to me! If I hadn't

become a drunk I'd just have kept on at the same old job, and the cure for AIDS wouldn't have been discovered for another fifty years!"

What do I base this on? Among other things, two statements from St. Paul: From *Romans*, 8: "And we know that for those who love God, everything works together for good—that is, for those called as he intends them to be." And from *Second Corinthians*, where he is talking about a letter he wrote reading the riot act to the community: "If I did hurt you by my letter, I don't regret doing it; and if I did feel sorry about it—since I see that the letter did hurt you, if only for a while—I am happy now, not because you were hurt, but because your pain made you change heart. You were hurt in God's way, where no damage was done by what we did. Being hurt in God's way brings about a salutary change of heart that can't be regretted; being hurt in the world's way brings about death."

Now Paul was talking about well-intentioned acts that hurt others "in God's way." But everything is in God's hands; and what we actually *do* is used by him to fit into others' plans for their lives. The truly evil person, then, who wants to do real damage to others, is doubly frustrated; he's choosing what is inconsistent with himself, and in the eternal lives of those he hates and wants destroyed, he fails, because what he does turns out to have been the very thing that brought about the victim's fulfillment, not ruin. Unless the victim *wants* his ruin.

Which is one reason why Satan tries to keep us ignorant of what the facts really are by biasing our minds so that we don't see what *all* the facts are, and what conclusions they lead to. Then we “realistically” make the self-defeating choices in the name of self-fulfillment; and God will not rescue us if we don't want to be rescued.

What I'm getting at here is that if you *do* want to be rescued, then the damage you have done already—even the deliberate and malicious damage you have done—will be redeemed also. This *must* be the case. When I think of all the things that I've done to those I love, people I would gladly die for, how could there be any meaning to “fulfillment” for me with this knowledge, unless I were to know that the damage was not damage at all, but in fact a help toward their own fulfillment?

And I'm not just talking about impossibilities. My father was blind and couldn't give much of the support a father gives his children; my mother was an alcoholic, and deprived me of hundreds of things that mothers give their children. But if they had not been what they were, would I know what I know now? Would I be able to write this, and perhaps lead thousands of people away from despair to a life of eternal fulfillment? Would I give up the ability to do this for the sake of having a happy childhood? Not on your life—especially when I look back and see that my childhood wasn't all that unhappy. Not that I'd want to go through it again. But having endured it, I treasure it because of where it brought me.

And I'm convinced that all my misguided efforts to help my wife and kids, and all the harm I've done because of my own handicaps and being out of control, will ultimately turn out that way for them too. And I'm convinced that the damage I've done as a teacher will turn out to have been help, even when it now seems to me that some former student of mine "turned out bad" because of a perverse interpretation of what I taught him in class.

The world is a lot better than you think it is. That's a fact.

What I'm telling you may sound too good to be true. In fact, you're probably drinking because you finally "got realistic" and "faced the fact" that it was too good to be true, and was all a myth.

Well, I'm telling you that there's solid evidence that says that it's *not* a myth, and that it's true.

And in the last analysis, isn't it too good *not* to be true?

—If you're the alcoholic, don't stop reading here. It'd be useful for you to see what the people around you are like. They have their own handicaps, and they're a lot like you, in fact.

VII

Coping with an Alcoholic

I. What Not to Do

Now then, Pam, I finally get to you. It's one thing to be an alcoholic, and it's another to be married to one or the child of one. But I think you'll be surprised at how similar your situation is.

The first thing for you, just as for the alcoholic, is this:

You have to give up your standards, values, and ideals.

Life was so nice before he started to drink. Why did he have to go and do it? Would you ask this question of a blind man? He was showing the kids about fireworks, maybe, and one blew up and blinded him. Why did he have to go and do that? Would you ever *dare* throwing this in his face, or even reproaching him in your own mind for blinding himself in this way, and making life so difficult for himself and you?

No, if he'd blinded himself, you'd weep over his misfortune, but eventually, you'd say, "Well, what's the

use of crying over it? He's blind now, and we'll have to learn to live with it." Notice, you wouldn't say, "*He'll* have to learn," but "*We'll* have to learn." You would no more think of saying, "Well, his blindness is his problem, because he got himself into it; and it's his problem, and he'll have to learn to cope." Furthermore, you'd say, "We'll have to learn to live with *it*," not "*I'll* have to learn to live with *him*."

So if it were a physical handicap he'd given himself, you'd stay on the team, and cope with his awkwardness, his spilling things, his frustrated rages, and all the rest of it—no matter how hard it was. And it can be hard. My father was blind, and I know something about this kind of thing. We never gave a second thought to the extra things we had to do because he was blind; it was just our life, that was all. But he certainly did. He hated being dependent on others, and putting others to extra trouble. He wanted so desperately to be "independent," not realizing how very dependent everyone, handicapped or not, is on other people. But we always took pains to assure him that what we were doing wasn't extra trouble—because it wasn't. It would have been trouble if we had been thinking what else we could have been doing rather than helping him; but we just took things as a matter of course; this was our life.

But when the handicap is alcoholism, as it was with my mother, it's a completely different story. We all, my father included, kept thinking, "Why is she doing this to

herself—and to us?” There’s always that last phrase. It seemed to us that she knew what she was doing and could really help herself if she put her mind to it.¹ It would never have occurred to us that my father could have put on two black socks instead of one black and one brown one “if he put his mind to it,” and so we saw to it that he’d have his socks matched without being able to see them. But why didn’t she stop drinking? She could see the chaos that it was making out of everyone’s life.

But of course, she couldn’t. That’s part of the psychotic aspect of alcoholism. And something analogous happens to the people who have to live with an alcoholic: *they* need so very desperately not to see that they’re dealing with a cripple, and to believe that they’ve got a situation that the alcoholic can see and get them out of. Just as he has to believe that he can cut down and doesn’t have to quit, they have to believe that he could quit if he really wanted to. So many have, after all. The people who live with an alcoholic can’t face the *fact* of what he is, any more than the alcoholic can face the fact of what he is; because in their case, it means adapting their life to this reality, instead of living in “hope” of getting out of it.

¹I just corrected a significant typo I made here. Instead of writing “it” at the end of the last sentence, I wrote “us.” That’s what was *really* at the back of our minds. If she’d considered *us* more, she could stop. But we never said it.

“Now wait a minute!” I can hear you saying. I can certainly hear the temptation. “You’re implying that this thing is *my* problem! *I* didn’t bring this on myself!” You married him, didn’t you? “What’s that got to do with it? I didn’t marry a drunk!” Yes you did. “...for richer or poorer, for better or worse, in sickness and in health...” You *did* something that brought this on you. “Well, but it’s not my *fault!* I didn’t foresee he was going to be like this.” And neither did he, when he started down the long road. The *fact* is that you did something that wound up having you in this situation, just as he did something that brought you and himself into this situation. The fact is that the acts happened. Who’s to *blame* for the facts is an evaluation. We’ll get to that later. What’s important at the moment is that if you’re reacting the way I just described, you’re not accepting the facts as facts *which is the main thing the alcoholic doesn’t do, and it’s one of the things you’re blaming him for.*

Does this mean that you’re to blame, and as much to blame as he is? No. The whole point of what I’m saying is that “blame” supposes a bad situation, and the first thing you have to deal with, just like the alcoholic, is that nothing is objectively bad.

That is, what I’m writing is a book about facing the facts. And, having got that first automatic reaction out of the way, look at the facts: What *is* this chaos that someone else’s alcoholism is making out of your life? Fundamentally, it’s that you’re doing things that you

wouldn't have to be doing if he weren't drinking. It's chaos because you're comparing the life you live now with that *imaginary* life you'd be leading if he weren't drinking; and the imaginary life is the "real" life and the one you're living is unbearable in comparison. And if you say, "But I care more about the mess he's making of his own life," again you're comparing his life now with *your idea* of the life he would be living if he weren't drinking, and saying that *your* idea of *his* life is his "true" life, and he's messing up your idea of what he ought to be. Remember, I'm not blaming you for this. I'm just telling it like it is. Forget about whether I'm implicitly reproaching you, because your situation has its psychotic aspects too, which want to keep you from seeing the facts as just facts. I'm not defending anyone or blaming anyone; I'm just stating facts.

But what are the facts? The fact is that your life (and his life, too, God knows) is more limited now than it used to be. You can't do things you used to be able to do, and you have to do things you didn't have to do before. So does he. You have had happen to you something like what happens to a person who gets polio. The first thing you say is "Why me? Everything used to be so nice." You have to get beyond this so that you can say, like the polio victim, "Okay, but that's not going to get me anywhere. The fact is, I can't walk any more, and I'll have to learn to use this wheel chair."

But here, there's the nagging thought that *he's* the

one responsible for this; it's not just an act of God. That's about like blaming the one you caught the polio from. His behavior that restricts your acts is *your* polio. His tempers, his irrationality, his sloppiness, his—you know the litany better than I; I've been away from it for years.

When I was describing the alcoholic himself and saying that he was partly psychotic and partly neurotic and that he had to accept the fact that he was an alcoholic, you probably didn't realize that this is just as true for you. You have to accept the fact that he's an *alcoholic*, and simply get out of your mind the question of his responsibility for being one, or you'll never get yourself into a situation where you can accept the facts about yourself and your relation to him.

He doesn't see what he's doing in the same way you see it; he can't. When he's doing things, they seem to him to be perfectly reasonable, however insane they may be. But realize that the way *you* see his behavior—the foolish things he does, the destructive things—isn't just the facts. If a blind man bumps into things, we see that as just a fact, even though we know that he walked into them under his own power. When a drunk bumps into things, we don't see this as the same; but it *is* the same. The fact is the fact is the fact.

I'll tell you something about myself. I'm a depressive person, and I decided to test an experimental anti-depressant drug for Bristol Meyers, which makes it perfectly clear to me that I'm like a mental diabetic.

There's some kind of chemical imbalance in my brain that, when I'm not taking the drug, makes me see everything in the most hopeless light possible. For forty years and more, I have seen everything I've done as just a failure, and I've wanted desperately to kill myself and get it over with. Since I knew before I started on this program what was going on, I simply—Simply!—did what I was supposed to do even if it felt hopeless to me, and I counted on success after my death. My mind kept telling me, "I can't go on! I can't stand it!" But what could I do? Try to kill myself and guarantee an eternity of a frustrated attempt to go out of existence? I *had* to go on, that was all. But now, with two pills a day, *the exact same situation* doesn't bother me. I sit here at the computer and type, and don't concern myself with what use it all is, because I feel good; it *feels* worth it; it *feels* as if things will work out.

What I'm trying to say is that a hopeful attitude and taking things in a good light seems *reasonable* when I'm on the medicine; but when I'm off it, I say to myself, "Well, now I can see things again the way they *really* are," and feel that the medicine has created pleasant little illusions. And you can make out a case for both positions.

The point is that neither of these two attitudes is the *correct* one. The facts are just the facts. They're neither hopeful nor hopeless; and we have to realize that *that's* the objective fact, and our interpretation of it is not—because our interpretation is our evaluation of the facts. Don't get

me wrong. When this testing period ends, I'm going to my doctor and get a drug that's as close as possible to the glorious stuff I have to give up after the test, because it's a hell of a lot more fun to feel good about yourself and your world than to feel like killing yourself. All I'm saying is that feelings are just feelings, and they're not facts, even though they seem to be "the correct way to look at things" when you're under their influence. That, if you can recall back so far as what I said about emotions, is the way instinct works.

The source of suffering is always evaluation: looking at the way things are in relation to this ideal that doesn't exist. It's why the damned suffer in hell. They're not jumping around in fire; the fire is the ideals they refused to give up, because they refuse to accept the situation they're actually in.

Sorry, but if you're going to live life and have a chance to be happy—eternally happy, too—you have to give up your standards about what a married life should be. That's the fact. Sorry.

Why do we have so many divorces? Because people have standards for their marriage; and they'll "give up" the marriage (they can't, of course, as I mentioned) rather than give up the standards and adjust themselves to the reality. This is a hard saying, I realize. But it's the truth. You have to *accept* the facts. Not grudgingly accept; accept in a neutral way. "I am married to an alcoholic. I am married to a mental cripple."

I'm tempted to say that there's no disgrace in this; but of course there is, because other people have standards, and if you tell them, they'll say, "Oh, you poor thing! How can you bear it?" And of course, you can't, any more than the alcoholic can bear being an alcoholic, if he has any standards. But standards aren't facts; they're relations of facts to an ideal that doesn't exist.

Another temptation you're probably having now is that I'm trying to shift the burden onto you: to start telling you what you have to do to cope, and looking down on you if you don't do it. That's another way your situation is keeping you from accepting the facts as facts; because it looks as if accepting them is going to mean locking yourself into this agony forever and ever.

You want your husband to accept the fact that he's got to quit and has to live without drinking forever and ever; and at the same time, you're saying to yourself "I can't go on with this. I can't live with this forever and ever." You're in just his situation. Accepting the facts implies a burden of facing the rest of a life that's simply unbearable.

True, it's unbearable, because you're thinking of what life could be if it weren't the way it is. But that doesn't make it different from what it is. What I'm saying is that not accepting the facts doesn't change what they are.

"But *can* I accept the facts just as facts? I don't think I'm strong enough." Maybe you can't. And maybe

your husband can't quit drinking. Does it make sense for me to tell you, "If you just put your mind to it, you can accept the facts as just facts." I myself couldn't. As soon as I had the chance, I left home, because I couldn't stand living with my mother. I hated her. That's a fact. I don't hate her now, as it happens; but I hated her when I was a teen-ager. Okay, it's a fact about my life.

But, just as I was telling the alcoholic, whether you accept them or not, the facts are still the facts. Again, if you think of the wife of a polio victim, you either don't accept the facts or you accept the facts, and you make what you can of life within the facts, or you suffer because you "can't" accept the facts and you have to, or you do something like get divorced and pretend that the facts aren't the facts—that you're not the wife of this man when you are the wife of this man.

The alcoholic has to accept as just a fact that he's out of control. And *you* have to accept as a fact that you are tied to someone who's out of control. If you can accept it (and maybe you can't), you have a chance of seeing what you can do with the situation as it actually exists. If you can't face it, then of course, you can't be happy.

Don't think about the bleak future, stretching onward and ever onward. Accept the fact about today.

You won't be able to adapt for the rest of your life.

You can only adapt to the facts today. You're facing a prospect that's just as daunting as the prospect the alcoholic faces: going on and on in a hopeless situation, until you die.

But, just as you realize that for him, not drinking isn't the end of all hope of human happiness, but really the beginning; so for you, adapting yourself to living with this mental cripple isn't the end of all hope of human happiness, but a chance at having some. Happiness, after all, is having the facts match your ideals; if you make your ideals match the facts, you're happy.

The question with you, just as with the alcoholic, is not what you could be doing if you weren't married to him, but what you can do with the situation you're in fact in. Some of the things that you now find just unbearable—the waiting, the soft replies to the beastly things he says—aren't in themselves hard to do; they're only hard to do because you have to do them because of what he's forcing you into.

Think of this. What in fact are you doing that's so hard? And why is it hard? Because of the physical effort? Or because you shouldn't have to be doing things like this? It's the evaluation that makes it hard, not the physical act you're performing.

One of the things that accepting the facts will free you from is this:

You don't have to cover up for him.

For you, if you accept the facts, what he is is no disgrace, any more than a person who's lost an arm and a leg is a disgrace. Of course, it's going to be a disgrace for other people. But if your husband had lost an arm and people started saying, "But why does he go *swimming* without an arm and a leg, taking off that fake leg of his and leaving it at the edge of the pool for everybody to see!" Would you cover up for him? Or would you say to them, "If you can't approve of what he's doing, that's *your* problem, not ours!"

He's a cripple, not depraved. If other people think he's depraved, that's *their* problem. You might try to set them straight, of course, just as you'd stand up for the crippled swimmer. But *standing up for* someone is a far cry from *covering up for* someone. You don't have to keep from others that your husband is an alcoholic, as if it were some dark secret that could only be disclosed in the most intimate circumstances. Of course, you don't go proclaiming it from the rooftops either; because large numbers of people look on it as depravity and a disgrace, and there's no sense giving them ammunition.

Here again, a group like Al-Anon can be a useful tool for getting to accept the facts and talking about them just as facts, because these people are in the same situation you're in. You're going to have to practice saying, "Yes, he's an alcoholic" in a neutral tone, as if you'd say, "Yes, he's got gray hair." I remember a play I once attended in New York, in which Charles Boyer, as an art dealer, was

coaching his assistant. “Say, ‘Three million.’ Just say it; don’t make anything of it, or you’ll frighten them. Now, let me hear you say it when I ask you: ‘How much is this one?’”

And, of course, you have to *believe* it; and that’s not easy. The more you practice saying it, though, the more possible it’ll look. You have as much difficulty as your husband, as you can see; things look as impossible for you at the moment as they look for your husband, provided he’s reached the stage where he realizes he has to quit.

Let me say something here about what’s called “co-dependency.” The idea is that the co-dependent person is a person living with a person who’s dependent on alcohol, or drugs, or sex, or whatever that gets him out of control; and the other person becomes dependent on the dependent one’s dependency. She covers up for him, does things he doesn’t do for himself, makes life “as easy as possible for him,” and in general reinforces his dependency because it makes life bearable for him and even easy for him to be dependent, and so prevents him from facing the facts.

The idea here is that to fulfill *your own* psychological needs, you actually need your husband to be an alcoholic, so that you can have someone to blame for your troubles and so that you can keep up your self-esteem by showing what a noble martyr you are. So you’re as sick as he is; and you don’t realize it, but you’re

keeping him sick so that you won't have to face the facts about yourself.

The trouble with theories like this is that they're so plausible, and they might in fact be true.

But worrying about this ("Am I actually keeping him in his alcoholism? My God! Am *I* responsible for his being this way?") is as futile as his worrying about whether his alcoholism is genetic or if it's something that he brought on himself.

The point is, who cares if you've been doing this and helping him to do the very kind of thing that you can't help blaming him for doing? Facts are facts. He is where he is, and you are where you are. How you got that way is relevant only insofar as it affects how you can cope with the facts, and where you can go from here.

One of the things I don't like about the analysis of co-dependency is that it says that the co-dependent attitude is "unhealthy," and it's an attempt to *correct that wrong*. "Unhealthy," actually, is the current code-word for "sin"; it's supposed not to have moral overtones, but it implies that there's something wrong with you that has to be corrected. How many times have you heard "That's *sick!*" in reference to particularly heinous crimes—and the tone of voice is by no means one of pity. The speaker means, "That's really evil and cries out for vengeance," but you can't say that nowadays, because that would be to bring religion into it—and that's "unhealthy." "Unhealthy" is a milder way of saying "immoral." The

implication is that you're supposed to be healthy, and if you're unhealthy, you have to do something about it.

Put it another way: You've got a problem; you're co-dependent. You have to get free of your co-dependency.

Does that sound familiar? He's got a problem; he's an alcoholic; he has to get free of his alcoholism. Alcoholism is unhealthy.

What you *have* to do, just as what he has to do, is accept the fact, not get "free" of it. He can't get free of alcoholism; he'll be an alcoholic for the rest of his life—more, forever and ever. And you'll be married to an alcoholic until one of you dies; and in your afterlife, you'll be with him (though not "married") forever and ever. He's a part of you, whether you like it or not, forever and ever. That's the fact. You simply cannot get "free" of him.

Of *course* you're co-dependent. He's dependent, and you're tied to him. But of course (and this is what the "treatment" is all about) this doesn't mean doing things that help keep him locked into his alcoholism.

But essentially, what the co-dependency people call "unhealthy" is things like covering up for him as if what he was doing was a disgrace, and making life easy for him so that he can keep drinking if he wants to. The "problem" is supposed to be that by doing this you dominate him, and have control not only over your life but his. Is there some of that in the depths of the unconscious workings of your brain? There may be. So

what? Do you think any of us can actually get our brains to function in such a way that the only motivations behind our acts will be the motives behind our choices? Not a chance. The idea of the “treatment” is that if you have a “healthy attitude” toward him and yourself, you’ll realize that his problem is *his* problem and *he* has to deal with it; and you can’t live his life for him.

But they’re very subtly, I think, mistaken. First of all, he hasn’t got a problem, and neither do you. But I’ll talk about that shortly (I hope).

Before I do, there’s something that you have to realize.

You have no right to set goals for another person.

A person is a being who *sets goals for himself*. This is what it *means* to be a person. He creates his own ideals and changes them into goals and sets out to achieve them. That’s human self-creativity, and it’s what makes us into the image and likeness of God, our creator. We are sub-creators of ourselves, within the limits that God gave us.

But if you have goals for another person, then you’re saying that *your* idea of his “true self” is to take precedence of *his* idea of his “true self.” You’re saying that you know what’s “really good” for him and he doesn’t know it as well as you do—because he’s sick. But the

point of human freedom is that *there is no meaning to what's "really good" for anyone. Goodness is subjective, not objective.*

Only the person himself can "know" what's really good for himself, because he doesn't *discover* it, he *chooses* it. If you set goals for him, you're trying to make him your slave, your animal, not a human being at all. *Your* will for him is to prevail, and he is to conform his mind and his will to yours, and not to create himself into what *he* chooses to be.

This is the truth behind the "treatment" for co-dependency, by the way. It isn't that you're to get free of being dependent on his being dependent on you; it's that you have to recognize *the fact that* his goals are set by him and by no one else, just as your goals are set by you and no one else.

But suppose he chooses what's perverse and self-defeating. That's his privilege. That's what it means to be free. There's nothing against *informing* him of what he's doing, in case he doesn't know what the facts are (that's what I'm doing to you right now); but if he chooses not to accept them or says, "I don't care, I know what I'm doing and I'm going to do it anyway. Back off," then that's his privilege.

Isn't that what God does? God respects us absolutely. He informs us of what choices are the self-defeating ones, in the ten commandments. The ten commandments are a summary of the kinds of things you

have to do if you're to live your life realistically. And he lets us know that violating these laws is not only frustrating yourself here, but frustrating yourself eternally. But if a person refuses to obey the commandments, then that's fine with God; he's not going to stop him. That's God's love for us.

So what I'm saying is that "you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

And when you *do* let a person set his goals for himself, and simply become available to help him reach his goals, then you love as God loves. And the interesting thing about this is that now his (independent) goals for himself become the goals of *your* action, and so his reality as independent of you is part of your reality. That is, you can't be your full self unless he is his full self (because the goal of your helping act—and so of your choice to act—is precisely that he will find his self-defined fulfillment).

And of course, that choice, like all choices, carries over to eternity. You are then forever with him, knowing that he has reached the fulfillment that both you and he strove for, and rejoicing that he is forever secure in being the independent person which he is. For instance, I care about you (and everyone else who reads this book); and so I will forever be aware of you (and them, even though I don't know who they are now) as fulfilled, and will spend my eternity knowing that I contributed to some extent to your eternal satisfaction.

You see, it sounds as if you have to give up your

own fulfillment; and you do; you have to accept the limitations on your reality that are brought on you by another person's limitations on *his* reality, not by intrinsic limitations of your own. But if you do it, then you are not alone forever; and, given that we can't change anyone else after he dies, then we can't use other people after we die—and so the only way to be with anyone else after you die is to subordinate your reality in some respect to that other person's reality—to make his goals as his the goal of at least some of your own actions.

But how can you do that? That's impossible. Exactly. Just as it's impossible for the alcoholic to quit. How could you possibly just accept him as a mental cripple? You can't. He can't.

“With men it is impossible; but with God everything is possible.” The *fact* is, you're married to a mental cripple, and you have no right to have as a goal for him that he stop drinking. You have no right to demand this of him. You have no right to determine what his life is to be. That's a fact. You have no more right to demand that he stop drinking than he has a right to demand that you get off his back. His life is his life; your life is your life.

But that doesn't mean that his alcoholism is his problem and not yours. *It's not the problem of either of you.* And this is the next point.

You must not look at him or his drinking as a *problem*. It's not “his problem,” and neither he nor his

drinking is your problem. His drinking is a fact, and it's a fact that he's your husband. Neither of these is a problem.

I hope I don't have to go back over all the reasons why it's pernicious to consider this as a problem; what I said to the alcoholic applies to the person married to the alcoholic. If you think of him as a "problem," then he's something that you "have" that can be "dealt" with; he's not a person who's part of your life. Thinking of him as a "problem" means that you can "detach" yourself from him; and you can't. Even if he's apart *from you*, he's *a part of you*. Nothing can ever change this. Part of you is an alcoholic, and will be forever. Part of you is handicapped—is a mental cripple—and always will be, even if he gets the mental prosthesis of quitting drinking. He'll never never be the same as he was. So he's not something that can be "solved"; he's something that has to be accepted; and it's part of *yourself* that he is that has to be accepted. You *are* dependent on him, because his life is inside your life. That's what it means to be married.

Thirdly, a person cannot be looked at as something wrong that can be corrected; he is an absolute (an "end," as Immanuel Kant would say) that must be accepted for what he is. Another *person* is not to be a means toward your goals—your happiness. As I was saying just above, the truth is rather the other way round. Of course, you can use his *acts* as means toward your happiness; but *you*

must adapt yourself to his reality—his reality—not adapt him to yours. And if you think of him as a “problem,” you’re evaluating him, thinking that he’s bad—unreal, not his “real self”—and needs to be different to be real.

So he’s not a problem. But what about his alcoholism? It makes no more sense to look on his alcoholism as either his problem or your problem or your joint problem. If it’s looked on as a problem, as I tried to point out in talking about the alcoholic himself, it’s insoluble. It’s not a problem, it’s a fact.

And it’s so very easy, if you think of his alcoholism as his problem, to say, “It’s his problem; let him deal with it.” But he’s part of you. He is. Face it. He’s part of you, and will be forever. And of course, if you look on his alcoholism as his problem, you can blame him for it, and absolve yourself of any connection with it. But it *isn’t* something that he *has*; it’s something that he *is*; and he’s part of you.

“But how can I bear it!” you say. You can’t. The only way to bear it is not to be in a frame of mind where that question comes up. “But how do you get that way?” I don’t know. How does he quit? You’ve got to see that you’re asking of him something exactly analogous to what you claim you can’t do: the impossible. Pray.

But be careful that your prayer isn’t just, “Dear God, make him quit,” because then it’s all his problem, and why aren’t you praying, “Dear God, make me happy living with him as he is”?

I could just as easily say that your unhappiness at living with him as he is is your problem, and you have to deal with it, and can make yourself happy (“healthy”) “by just putting your mind to it” as you can say that his drinking is his problem and he could quit if he “just put his mind to it.”

After all, to be happy living with him as he is, all you have to do is make this kind of life the life you want to live, and give up all your other ideas of what a good life is. All! Well, but ideals are subjective, after all. A blind man can be happy in his blindness simply by not having ideals that include seeing. Jack Fogarty’s son has fun without his arm and his leg, because he doesn’t think about it, but looks on what he’s doing.

But your unhappiness is not your *problem*; it’s a fact; and his drinking is not his problem; it’s a fact. If you *can* realize this, you can be happy, and *that’s* a fact. They say that if a woman in labor weren’t afraid at all of being in pain, she’d actually feel no pain; but her fear makes the wrong muscles tense at the wrong times, and the pain comes from fighting herself.

Fine. Tell that to the woman who’s just entered labor.

Now it’s not as bleak as I’m painting it; but the point of hope is to have a realistic hope, not the hope that “someday he’ll quit and everything will be all right.”

If he *does* quit, by the way, it doesn’t necessarily follow that everything will be all right. My mother quit,

and spent the rest of her life resenting my father for the way he treated her when she was drinking—at least, that’s the way it looked to me, who could see her face when she replied to him (he couldn’t, of course, being blind). Interestingly, when he died, she missed him terribly, even though he died of Alzheimer’s (and probably alcoholism, by the way, because once she quit, he started taking a “just a drink or two” for his asthma, and toward the end, it was a fifth a day, my brother told me), and she had a year or two of waiting on him hand and foot and cleaning up the bed twenty-four hours a day, and dealing with his not knowing that he was home and blaming her for kidnapping him, and so on. You’d think she’d have felt immense relief, but she missed him terribly. That’s the way we are.

But if you succeed in not thinking of him or his alcoholism as the “problem,” then you’ve also got this to consider:

Do not think of him as having the “disease” of alcoholism.

He’s not sick. Much as you might hear to the contrary, he’s not sick. There’s no cure for alcoholism; the alcoholic is a cripple, not sick. The hardware in his brain has been broken, and so the software has bugs in it. No one can ever get it back to the state where the old programs he used before he became an alcoholic will

work. The best that can happen is that his brain can be reprogrammed so that he can bypass the damaged circuitry without doing any more drinking and destroying any more chips and transistors.

If he stops drinking, then, he's not a "recovering alcoholic." There's no recovery; he's an alcoholic that (for the moment at least) isn't drinking—and all it will ever take is one drink, and then he's right back into the old program, in the same state he was in when he hit bottom and actually by that miracle stopped drinking. If he's not drinking, he's forever in danger, because he hasn't got well, because he wasn't sick in the first place.

Face the fact: You will never have a husband who isn't an alcoholic, and who will be safe from tomorrow being just the same as he was when you found you least could stand him. You will never change *him* to be anything else, even if he stops drinking. The only one you can change is *you*, to be able to accept him for what he is, no matter what he is—to accept him as a fact, without any evaluation of it, and accept his alcoholism as a fact, with no evaluation of it.

But if you think of him as having a disease, you're again thinking of him as having something wrong with him, except that now what's wrong with him just absolves him from blame. You're thinking of what's wrong with him as if it were some kind of virus that got into him, some foreign object that's attacking him. But his alcoholism is his very self, not some disease he has; it's his

reality (in part, but his reality nonetheless). You want to feel good about him, and to have him feel good about himself, and so you like to tell yourself and him that basically, he's all right, but he's got this disease that's not his fault, really.

But there's nothing objectively wrong with him; and your task is to realize this. Say it.

There's nothing objectively wrong with him.

There's nothing objectively wrong with him.

Then why do you see something wrong with him?

Don't sympathize with him. He doesn't need your sympathy, because there's nothing wrong with him, objectively.

If you sympathize with him, you're implicitly blaming him, because you're saying that there's something wrong with him—which means that he doesn't conform to your ideal of what he "ought" to be. You haven't accepted him. And if you think of him as having a "disease," you can indulge your pity for him. "Poor thing, afflicted with this disease. What can I do to help you?"

And if there's anything an alcoholic—or any handicapped person—hates, it's sympathy; because it comes from those who are on a higher plane than they are and who look down from their lofty heights and make themselves feel good by saying, "I know just how you

feel.” If there’s ever anything anyone else doesn’t know, it’s how someone else feels.

So we don’t sympathize with people any more, we “empathize.” Sympathy means “pity.” Empathy is actually that automatic feeling you get that mimics someone else’s feeling—the sadness you feel when you watch an actor expressing suffering. As an actor, I know that, though the actor *does* in a certain sense feel what emotion he’s expressing, the ability to make the audience feel a certain way is actually certain tricks of facial expression, gesture, and vocal tone (especially this) that *produce* certain emotions in others, whether you yourself feel them or not. You don’t actually transmit your emotions by these means; and so when you empathize with the actor, you have no idea whether the emotions you’re feeling are the ones the actor is actually feeling, however “sincere” he may appear to be (there are other tricks to appearing sincere).

The point I’m making is that “empathy” is even worse than pity or sympathy, because of the arrogant presumption that you can actually feel what the other person is feeling—and he knows perfectly well that you can’t. It’s not for nothing that the Greek word for “actor” is *hypocrita*. You become the Pharisee in the synagogue, who, after he thanks God that he’s not like the tax-collector, turns and takes the man’s hand in his, and says soulfully, “You unfortunate, I know just how you feel. What a shame you’re not like me.”

The fact is that he's handicapped, and this is a fact. The fact is that he's part of you, and that's a fact. And all this means, in the last analysis, is that he's more limited than most people; he does things that most people don't do. Okay. So be it.

People have the same sort of attitude toward retarded people. They sympathize. I have a friend who's probably thirty now and has the mentality of about a twelve-year-old. But if you relate to him as a twelve-year-old, what's the problem? People sympathize with his misfortune because they think of what he is in relation to what he *could* be if he weren't what he is. But he is what he is; and *he* doesn't have any problem with being what he is. Why does he need sympathy from anyone? There is no objective sense in which he *ought* to behave like a thirty-year-old. Most thirty-year-olds can do a great deal more than he can, mentally (physically, he's strong as an elephant); but how does that fact imply that he *ought* to be able to do more than he can?

No, just like any handicapped person, what he needs is for you to accept him for what he is, matter-of-factly, not to try to "help him with his problem."

VIII

Coping with an Alcoholic

II. What to Do

This doesn't mean that you can't be there when he wants to use you. Loving does not mean "helping" others, in the sense most people mean it in this context. This is all too often nothing more than an attempt to make others over into your own ideal of what they "ought" to be, and is rightly seen by them as interference in their very essence as persons.

Loving is willingness to be used by another person.

When you "help" someone in that meddling sense, *you're* the one in control; you know what's good for him, and you're going to see to it that he takes the steps to what you know is good for him. That, Pam, is *not* loving; it's the opposite of loving. You're using the other to achieve *your* goals; you're making him over into your image of what he "really is," not just being there so that *he* can decide what he wants to be, how he wants to achieve it, and how he's going to use or not use you. Love

leaves him in control, and is there as a tool—as a slave, deferring to his will.

“If that’s what love is,” I hear you say, “I want no part of it. Where’s my autonomy?” Gone. It was gone when you married him. You are *not* a “law unto yourself” any more, because he and his (independently set) goals are a real part of you. That’s what the marriage vow you took meant, and why the priest or preacher talked (I hope) about “sacrifice,” and said “the two of you are one.” It isn’t that he disappears into you, but that some of you has disappeared into him, in the sense that there’s some of you now that’s out of your control and is under his control. There are some aspects of yourself now that you don’t have any right to, because he has the right to control them: the aspects by which he needs you in order to be himself.

It works both ways, of course—or it’s supposed to. But even if he doesn’t live up to his side of the bargain, he’s still part of you, because it isn’t a bargain, it’s what the Theologians call a “covenant.” It’s made a change in your reality, that your reality is now partly under his control.

Of course, it’s immoral for you to disappear in him; marriage is not a “total giving” in the sense that he is in total control over every facet of your life. Your goals for yourself are still your goals for yourself, and he has no more right to set goals for you than you for him. It’s just that *one* of your goals for yourself is that he achieve his

goal for himself; and you're there when he needs you as a means for achieving this goal.

I am saddened by the fact that the women's movement has had its consciousness raised, and has realized that men are using them; and are clamoring to get free. True, men have been using women for millennia; and women have been using men. Look at all the literature written by men; almost to a man, they don't treat marriage as the great state men yearn to get into; they treat it as the trap they've got snared in by their women, and they long for their old freedom, when they could have someone come in and clean house and cook, and go down the street for their sex when they wanted it. But marriage is the price they had to pay for having sex legitimately.

That's not really the point. The point is that marriage *is* the exploitation of *each* side by the other. Not a quid-pro-quo give-and-take, where I'll do the yard if you do the dishes, and so on. That's not a marriage; it's an economic arrangement. Marriage is love, and love is willingness to be used by the other person.

The fact that so many people marry for their own fulfillment nowadays (rather than accepting it as what nature expects) is one of the main reasons for divorce; because it isn't fulfilling *if you are looking for your fulfillment*.

And so the next point is the one that I gave the alcoholic in terms of self-esteem.

Forget about your yourself and your fulfillment as something that “matters”. Accept yourself and him.

Objectively, you (and your happiness) are of no importance at all. That’s a *fact*, because *objectively*, nothing is of any importance. So it’s possible to forget yourself, and to just be there to be used.

Not that you have to “hate yourself,” or “mortify” yourself, or deliberately seek your own *unhappiness*. No. You can do things you like, you can set goals. Why not? But it’s just not objectively *important*. And even if you’re unhappy, then this doesn’t matter, objectively, in the eternal scheme of things.

It’s possible to have this attitude. I told you that before I started taking these pills, I felt terrible; but it wasn’t important to me that I felt terrible. That didn’t make me feel any better, of course; but what does my happiness and my feeling good matter? I wasn’t put here to feel good; I was put here to *be*. Of course, in my case, there’s no heroism in this; I have no alternative. The only thing I could do would be to kill myself, and I would have done it, if I believed that it would end the way I felt. But I’m convinced that it would just guarantee a continuation of the hopeless situation forever. I couldn’t risk it. I don’t dare. But anyway, if I’m right, I know who I am and where I’m going; and feeling good or bad about myself while I’m on the way there is simply beside the point.

And now let me tell you a secret:

If you can accept your husband and his alcoholism as just a fact, he can talk to you.

This is one of the greatest blessings any handicapped person can have: to be able to talk about his handicap to someone who doesn't "understand" it but simply accepts it as a fact. It's one of the reasons why Alcoholics Anonymous has the success it has. It isn't that the members "understand" each other; it's that it doesn't *matter* to them whether someone else is an alcoholic; it's just a fact for them. No matter what you say to them, they say, "Is that so?" without evaluating it, and so you can talk about the facts about your alcoholism as part of yourself; and you can talk about the problem of how to stop drinking as a question of means to reach a goal, without there being this exhortation in the background, "You've got to *do* something about this! How can I *help* you?"

As soon as your alcoholic husband sees that it doesn't really matter to you whether he quits or not, then he's freed from the vicious cycle of having to drink to prove to himself that he's out of control; and this is one of the major obstacles to his quitting. And he can talk to you, *not* because you'll understand, but because he realizes that what he does doesn't matter to you; that you don't have to "forgive" him for what he does and for all the times he decided to quit and then didn't quit, because it doesn't matter. He is what he is, and you accept him absolutely.

Never mind “understanding” him or “putting yourself in his shoes.” Accept him.

You’ll never be like him—would you want to be?—and so there’s no point in pretending that you are. You can understand the *facts* about what he is and how he got there, but this isn’t the same as understanding *him*. And he doesn’t need understanding; after all, he can’t even understand himself. He needs to be accepted for the reality which he is, mysterious though it is to him and to everyone else.

So many people nowadays are going into therapy in a vain attempt to understand themselves, as if they could lay out the nerve pathways in their brains and follow the logic of the programs that use them. It can’t be done. The therapist can look at you and what you’ve done and compare you to the typical person who exhibits this behavior; but with our programs billions of times more complex than the programs that track the space probes to Jupiter, how does he know whether your behavior is the result of the same sort of bug that has resulted in others’ similar behavior? Any therapist who knows what “these people” do (whoever “these people” are) shouldn’t be treating individuals.

And actually, what does the most good in these sessions is not that people come to understand themselves (insofar as they do, they’ve accepted interesting *possible* theories about themselves which are as apt to be lies as the

truth), but that therapists are trained to be “nonjudgmental,” meaning that they’ll listen to you without evaluating your behavior. *This* is what people pay hundreds of dollars an hour for, really, for years on end; this is what they so desperately need. It isn’t the understanding that does the good, it’s the acceptance. There’s nothing so infuriating to a mental patient as having the therapist say to him something like, “Yes, well I realize that you want to be unhappy, but don’t worry about it.” Why? Because the therapist *understands* him; and the patient, if he has any sense, knows that the therapist doesn’t have Clue One about him, really. (I had a therapist say that to me once, and I know what I’m talking about when I mention the reaction.)

So forget about trying to understand your husband. You can’t, he doesn’t need it, and if he thinks you do think you understand what he can’t understand about himself, you’ll only enrage him.

But you’ve *done* that. You aren’t pushing him, and you’re there available to him, and he can’t be bothered using you.

Accept the fact that you might not be able to be the one he needs.

He might need someone to talk to, but not you. After all, he cares about you—it doesn’t show, but part of the perversity is that he’s doing this *because* he cares about

you; and so he can't believe it doesn't matter to you, because it matters so much to *him* what he's doing to you.

“What! He's doing this to himself and me because I *matter* to him?” Of course. That's part of it. What's happening goes this way. He can't stand what he's doing to your life, and to your kids—and so he has to forget. He can't stand what he's doing to you and the kids, and so he has to drink to prove that he's out of control; because otherwise, he's deliberately doing all of this, and he can't live with himself as doing so much harm to you. He probably cares a lot less about the harm he's doing to himself than the harm he's doing to you; if it were just himself, then he could live with himself—and so maybe pull himself out of the mess he's made. But it harms you, and he can't bear to live with doing this, and so he has to escape; and alcohol is the escape. That's one of the things his psychosis is doing to him.

Naturally, then, the impossible task you and the kids have is to attempt to show him that he's not really doing you any damage. And in the eternal scheme of things, of course, he's not, because you'll all still achieve every single legitimate ambition you have, no matter what he does to you—and even because of what he does to you.

But in his psychotic condition, anything you do to reveal to him that what he does to you doesn't really matter is almost bound to appear as either condescending pity (which he can't stand) or manipulation to get him to

stop drinking (which he'll fight tooth and nail) or "martyrdom," which is perhaps the worst of the three, because it makes you out to be the saint whose sanctification is based on the actions of this vicious sinner.

That assessment is true, of course. The attempt to deal with him realistically is a kind of martyrdom and is a shortcut to sanctity, which is lack of self-interest or self-importance. Its perversion looks very much like it; it is the *awareness* of how unselfish one is and the *interest* in being so, and the *satisfaction* in how wonderful one is as unselfish. And that, of course, is the very opposite of lack of self-interest; it is self-absorption in the external manifestations of what lack of self-interest is. This kind of person, who is doing all that a true lover does, is anything but a true lover, because the person cares about the fact that he is doing it, rather than the other person.

But then how can you achieve this concerned availability to him, and not have it spill over into this hateful hypocrisy? First of all, you can't. How can you practice a lack of self-awareness? The mere attempt to practice it presupposes self-awareness. But of course, with God everything is possible. That's why love is a Theological virtue; you can't acquire it, because the very attempt to acquire it is its own opposite; it has to be given to you. It has to be given precisely because in true love, there's nothing in it for you (as far as your motivation is concerned), and why would you do anything if there wasn't something in it for you?

The answer to the question, by the way, is Because you can. Or to put it another way, Why not?

But of course, in this case, there's plenty in it for you. This kind of acceptance of him as he is is one of his main chances to stop drinking; and that's going to make your life a lot better than it now is. And there's no way you can be unaware of this; and if you're aware of it, how is it possible for this to make no difference in your motivation?

It's possible because you're free, and you can *reject* this selfish interest as the reason you're doing what you're doing. Would you do it even if it didn't work? If you would (and it probably won't work), then you're not secretly using your unselfish acts to achieve selfish goals.

The Lord, remember, is running the universe; and it's not your job, nor is it in your power, to make your actions perfect. You are going to make a mess of your relations with your husband; you are going to do exactly the wrong thing, with the very best of intentions—and sometimes you'll do the wrong thing and you'll have anything but the very best of intentions. Okay, so you failed. So you just made matters worse. So you give up, right?

How can you give up? You're in the same situation he's in. You can't give up; you're stuck. You just have to try again.

In any case, your availability to him, for all these reasons, may not be able to be used. So be it. If he can use

someone else, don't be jealous; he's getting what he needs, and you're limited to being someone he can't use because he cares too much about you. If you accept him for what he is, you can accept that too. And you can work around what he is, because you can now see the possibilities for yourself and him as the cripple that he is. And you can do the little things that make his crippled life easier, without at the same time adding to him the reproach that he should be doing something about it.

And then he'll become important in your eyes, for what he is. Just as the person who's married to a blind man loves him with his blindness, and he's dear to her with his blindness, so the person who loves an alcoholic can love him in his mentally crippled state, and he's dear to her in his mentally crippled state.

And she can be happy, knowing that he will eventually, whether here when he quits drinking or hereafter when he quits drinking, be just exactly what he has chosen to be, not the thing she sees him to be now. He will be glorious, and you will be glorious with him and in him, and he in you and both of you in God, who loves you absolutely, and will wipe every tear from your eyes.

Think of that. Either life is the worst cheat ever devised by an unthinking universe, or the life you are living now is nothing; forever you will be with this man who will have succeeded in being just what he wanted to be, wearing his alcoholism proudly as Jesus wears his wounds, with his happiness shining through his

limitations. What more could you, as a wife, ask?

I am reminded of a little part of C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, which is about a bus ride from hell to heaven, and whose thesis is that those who are in hell would rather be in hell than give up whatever it was that put them there, even if heaven is the alternative. This particular man was the one in the story who made it. He had a monkey, as I remember, on his shoulder which would whisper obscenities in his ear. When the angel told him that he could go over the mountains into heaven, he demurred, saying that he didn't think it'd be appropriate to bring the monkey. The angel told him that no, the monkey would have to be killed, but that doing this wouldn't kill the man. After some discussion, the man in desperation says, "All right then, kill it and get it over with!" and the angel strangles the monkey, the man shrieks in agony, and the two of them fall to the ground unconscious. The man then gets up—and the monkey turns into a beautiful white horse, which the man mounts and they gallop off toward the dawn coming over the mountain.

So when your husband gets to heaven he won't be free of his alcoholism; and so if you pray to have him free of his alcoholism, you're wasting your time. But what will happen is that this monkey of his will become the beautiful white horse, and you will see him, and see how his alcoholism has been transformed and how it has transformed him into just what is perfectly fitting for this

unique person you cared so much about—and your joy will be complete, and no one will be able to take your happiness away from you.

But how do you do this?

I don't know. All I was trying to do was to lay out the facts. Eventually all things will be well, and all manner of thing will be well. I know this for a fact. And if it takes a long time before this happens, then all I can say is, as I said to the alcoholic, try not to be like the little kid who says, "But I don't want to go to Disneyland next week! I want to go *now!*"

Finally, remember this:

Any goal you set for *yourself* will be fulfilled.

You have no right to set goals for *him*; and if your only goal for yourself is his quitting, then you've tied yourself to him in such a way that you'll be eternally unfulfilled, because you have no right to set goals for another person. And, as I just got through saying, essentially what you're doing is setting up a goal that he not be an alcoholic, and he's an alcoholic forever. You guarantee your frustration this way.

(This doesn't mean you can't *hope* that he'll quit drinking, of course; but it mustn't be a goal in your life. Only that abstraction called "his happiness" can be a goal in your life that involves him, where the definition of the term is up to *him*, and he can include in it anything he

wants. If that's your goal, then you'll be eternally happy with whatever happiness he picks for himself.)

True, he's part of you; and his happiness is your happiness. But he's not the *whole* of you; you're a person in your own right, with a life that's tied to his but isn't inside his and isn't subordinate to his.

And so you can set goals for yourself and work to fulfill them; and they'll be part of your eternal life. And if you can't achieve them because he's an albatross around your neck, then after you die, he won't be a hindrance any more. The important thing is *having* the goals; working toward them proves to yourself that they're goals and not daydreams: ideals that are just used for escape from reality or complaining about it. Goals *will* be reality; every non-self-contradictory goal you set for yourself will be forever and ever achieved. And this makes even the agony of this life, where we have so many setbacks, make sense, even if it isn't enjoyable. The joy will be there. It will. That's a fact. God will wipe every tear from your eyes.

So not only will you be with this husband whose alcoholism will be transformed into his own unique glory, you yourself will be just exactly the self you have chosen to be; and you will discover to your delight that the hindrance he was, the albatross about your neck, has become the diadem of gems around your forehead; the very hindrances toward achieving your goals, will turn out to have been the rocks in the stream that allowed you to ford it. You'll find that you couldn't have achieved your

fulfillment of your own personal aims without what you thought were the very things that kept you from pursuing them: the obstacles will turn out, in the eternal scheme of things, to have been the best possible means toward the end you were looking for.

You have an eternity of happiness beyond your wildest imaginings ahead of you; it's just a question of time. And the journey there won't be as horrible as it seems to you now; and perhaps some of the things I've said can make it a little less arduous. You never know; some of us have a very rocky road, and some have a smooth one; and some have a road that's bumpy and then smooths out.

Then there's the fact about redemption I finished up my remarks to the alcoholic with:

The damage you have done to him and others will be transformed, after death, into just what was needed for their eternal fulfillment.

You can't make a mistake, in the eternal scheme of things. You can make plenty here, with the best of intentions; but all of the mistakes, for those who love God, will turn out to have been just what they would have done if they had seen the whole situation fully in the light of the other person's total life (including the hereafter).

The Lord, as I said, is running the universe. And he put us here on earth for us to make of ourselves what

we see fit; but he gave us minds that don't have all the facts, and bodies we have only the most meager control over, and which eventually escape from us in death. It is inconsistent with him to penalize us by giving us what we asked for but would have rejected if we knew the facts, and for him to allow us to direct our lives unintentionally into being the very opposite of what we chose to be.

If we *want* to be a self-contradiction, that's another story. But that's no mistake. Ultimately, either life is horror, or there's no such thing as mistakes or luck. You have, in that sense, total control over your eternity; and this applies not only to you, but to everyone else. So the damage you have done is not damage, in the last analysis; you can't do any harm to anyone except what that other person deliberately wants done to him—and in that case, the harm is totally in his control, not yours.

So you have nothing whatever to worry about. Nothing whatever. Which is not to say that I envy you the situation you're in. But remember how Jesus finished his remarks to his students as he was walking across the valley to the Garden of Gethsemane: "I've told you all of this for you to have peace in me. You will have agony in the world; but be brave: I have won the battle with the world."

—I think, amazingly enough, I've finally run out of things to say. I hope some of it has been of some use. Use what you can, if anything, and discard the rest.

Good luck. You have my prayers.

With sincere love,
George

P.S. In case you haven't realized it, what I've been doing in this letter is spelling out from the point of view of my philosophical research the implications of the Alcoholics Anonymous prayer, "Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."