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Preface

It has been more than twelve years since the first edition of *Drop the Rock* was published. During that time, I’ve presented the book in seminars, retreats, and talks ranging in length from one to twelve hours. The positive response to *Drop the Rock* is more than I ever expected; I have especially enjoyed hearing that many sponsors give a copy of the book to their sponsees after listening to their Fifth Step.

Many Twelve Step members hold *Drop the Rock* groups at members’ homes. They meet one night a week over a specified number of weeks, usually eight. As I do in my longer seminars, the group leader preassigns the personal stories in the book to individuals. When that story is reached in the sequence of the book, the assigned member usually reads the story and comments on how he or she identifies with the character’s story.

The new material in this second edition has been added as a result of comments received from individuals who have read the first edition and knowledge I have obtained throughout my recovery journey, which has now moved into its twenty-sixth year. When I first joined AA, I thought the Big Book’s program of action was saying a thousand things. I slowly began to understand that it is saying a few simple things a thousand times.

During the early 1980s I worked in the archives at AA Headquarters in New York and one of the most asked questions was, “What is the difference between character defects and shortcomings?” The answer is that there is no difference. Bill W. and the other authors of the Big Book didn’t want to use the same word in both Steps. The same approach is used in this book—“character defects” is used interchangeably with “shortcomings.”

Nell Wing, Bill W.’s longtime secretary and the first archivist at AA, and I found the original Mary “Drop the Rock” story (which begins the introduction of this book) in an old intergroup newsletter. On occasion, this book gets confused with the famous 1976 AA convention talk by Sandy B. called “Drop the Rock.” Although Sandy’s dropping the rock image is only three minutes of a fifty-minute talk, it has become legendary. Thanks, Sandy, for letting us include your “Drop the Rock” parable in this edition.

Thank you to all those who have contributed to the production of this second edition as we remember that “we will always be students in the Program, we remain teachable and open to new opportunities, and we open our minds to accept and our hearts to understand.”

Bill P.
September 2004
Introduction

Seems there was this group of Twelve Step members taking a boat ride to this island called Serenity, and it was truly a happy bunch of people. As the boat pulled away from the dock, a few on board noticed Mary running down the street trying to catch up with the boat. One member said, “Darn, she’s missed the boat.” Another said, “Maybe not. Come on, Mary! Jump in the water! Swim! Swim! You can make it! You can catch up with us!”

So Mary jumped into the water and started to swim for all she was worth. She swam for quite a while and then started to sink. The members on board, now all aware that Mary was struggling, shouted, “Come on, Mary! Don’t give up! Drop the rock!” With that encouragement, Mary started swimming again, only to start sinking again shortly afterward. She was going under when she heard all those voices shouting to her, “Mary, drop the rock! Let go and drop the rock.”

Mary was vaguely aware of something around her neck, but she couldn’t quite figure out what it was. Once more, she gathered her strength and started swimming. She was doing quite well, even gaining a little on the boat, but then she felt this heaviness pulling her under again. She saw all those people on the boat holding out their hands and hollering for her to keep swimming and shouting, “Don’t be an idiot, Mary! Drop the rock!”

Then she understood when she was going down for the third time: This thing around her neck, this was why she kept sinking when she really wanted to catch the boat. This thing was the “rock” they were all shouting about: resentments, fear, dishonesty, self-pity, intolerance, and anger were just some of the things her “rock” was made of. “God help me get rid of the rock,” she prayed. “Now! Get rid of it!”

Mary managed to stay afloat long enough to untangle a few of the strings holding that rock around her neck, realizing as she did that her load was easing up. Then, with another burst of energy, she let go. She tore the other strings off and dropped the rock.

Once free of the rock, she was amazed how easy it was to swim, and she soon caught up with the boat. Those on board were cheering for her and applauding and telling her how great she was, and how it was so good having her with them again, and how now they could get on with the boat ride and have a nice time.

Mary felt great and was just about to indulge in a little rest and relaxation when she glanced back to shore. There, a ways back, she thought she saw something bobbing in the water so she pointed it out to some others. Sure enough, someone was trying to catch the boat, swimming for dear life but not making much headway. In fact, it looked like the person was going under.

Mary looked around and saw the concern on the faces of the other members. She was the first to lean over the rail and shout, “Hey, friend! Drop the Rock!”
Mike shares his experience with dropping the rock:

Before its discussion of Step Four, the Big Book says, “Our liquor was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions.” A thorough inventory reveals those causes and conditions; the Fifth Step allows us to share them with God and another human being, and so remove the inner pain they have caused in our past lives.

After finishing my Fifth Step, I discarded the inventory but kept a single page that listed my major character defects. That list would come in handy later.

The first time I read Step Six, I thought it meant I had to arrive at some angelic state of mind in which I would become—and forever remain—“entirely ready” to have God remove all my defects. (I had forgotten that AA promises “spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”)

Twelve and Twelve set me right. It calls Step Six “AA’s way of stating the best possible attitude one can take in order to make a beginning on this lifetime job.” To me, that means Step Six is not a onetime matter; it stretches over a lifetime of recovery. Even that “best possible attitude” is always just a beginning.

One morning, while I was at Hazelden’s Fellowship Club in St. Paul, Minnesota, I awoke very early and knew it was time to make that beginning. I took out the list of defects, read it over, and asked myself two questions: Why are you holding on to these things? and What did these things ever do for you? (I may choose to hold on to them for fear of letting go, but holding on to them for years and years led me into alcoholism.) So I got on my knees and recited the Big Book’s Step Seven prayer, which asks God’s help in replacing our willfulness with His will for us. The Twelve and Twelve calls that replacement a “basic ingredient of all humility.”

I went to Hazelden for treatment because I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. I believe we get active with Step Six when we get sick and tired of being sick—sick and tired of the character defects of which alcoholism is a symptom, sick and tired of their effect, not on our past, but on our present lives.

In this ongoing process, the Program is asking us to go where none of us has ever been before—into lives of lessened fear, diminished anger, fewer resentments, and genuine self-esteem instead of self-pity. There is a price, however: the willingness to challenge and change patterns of thought, speech, and behavior that may have gone unchallenged for ten, twenty, thirty years or more.

These stories from Mary and Mike are good illustrations for a better understanding of working the Sixth and Seventh Steps. The first five Steps have supplied the foundation for recovery. The next two Steps begin the active, day-to-day solution, removing what blocks us from our usefulness to other people and to our Higher Power, and especially (and ultimately) what blocks us from ourselves.
There are four basic reasons we won’t be “entirely ready” to work the Sixth and Seventh Steps. The first is a conscious decision that we will never give up a specific character defect. Next, we blame our defects on others: people, situations, or institutions. Third, we rationalize. Our capacity to rationalize is unlimited. Before recovery we spent years on this one—throwing up barriers against unpleasant realities. Finally, it’s denial: we are totally unaware of our own contribution to our problems.

The order of the Twelve Steps occurs for a reason. There’s not much use in doing our amends in Steps Eight and Nine if there is no sign of our willingness to change by doing Steps Six and Seven. How many times in active addiction did we say we were sorry without the slightest intent of changing our behavior so we wouldn’t have to say we were sorry again? Working Steps Eight and Nine is hollow unless we’ve begun working the Sixth Step with humility as our guide. “The Promises” in the Big Book (pages 83 and 84) come after the discussion of Steps Eight and Nine.

Let’s look at the words of Sam Shoemaker to gain some clarity on what the Sixth and Seventh Steps are asking of us. Sam was the Episcopal clergyman who ran Calvary Church and Mission where first Ebby T. and then Bill W. (AA’s cofounder and primary author of the Big Book) began their recovery. Bill W. credited Shoemaker with passing on to him and the early AAs the “spiritual keys” that make up the Program and the Twelve Steps.

Shoemaker wrote about the necessity of making daily surrenders. Yes, the Sixth Step is also about surrendering, just like the Third. But Shoemaker made one point very clear: We surrender as much of ourselves to as much of God as we understand. In other words, our spiritual progress is based in direct proportion to our dropping the rock. We are very fortunate that all of our defects aren’t revealed to us all at once. Recovery works by giving us daily insight into what we can do to remove what blocks us. We need a daily awareness that our character defects are the opposite of the principles of our Program.

Shoemaker also passed on to the early AAs the idea that God reveals as much truth as you can live up to. That statement puts us directly on page 164 of the Big Book where it says, “The answers will come, if your own house is in order.” The Sixth Step helps us do that. Some have called the Sixth and Seventh Steps the “forgotten Steps” because they aren’t talked about that much. Others have called these Steps the most important. Perhaps the whole program is about Six and Seven.

By working the Sixth and Seventh Steps, we are less likely in recovery to stay stuck in old, unproductive, negative behavior patterns. We gain more understanding on how all the Steps, although ordered for a reason, need to be worked together. This prevents us from falling into the trap of understanding only just enough of the Program to make us miserable and not enough to make us happy. For example, some of us might fall into the trap of thinking the support system of the fellowship (meetings) is the entire Program of action.

The action of the Sixth and Seventh Steps culminates in dropping the rock—all the stubborn, grasping, stupid holding on to old patterns of behavior, thinking, and feeling that are harmful to our progress in recovery.
For another insight, let’s return to Shoemaker, who believed progress in the spiritual life is based on our looking inward and upward, not outward and downward.

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Reading *Drop the Rock* is a way of getting into the principles behind the Sixth and Seventh Steps, not only for understanding, but for action. We’ll be looking at a number of ideas and examples of how men and women have made positive changes in their lives by working these Steps and by showing up at meetings to tell others of their experiences.

After doing our Fifth Step, many of us were directed to go home and to read the two paragraphs in the Big Book on the Sixth and Seventh Steps and then to do the Steps. Who wouldn’t want to be rid of those defects of character, especially after talking about them in the inventory process? We uncovered a list of pain and agony and then shared it with another person and God. Of course we wanted to be rid of those character flaws and habits. So we prayed to let our defects go and humbly asked God for help. We thought we had done the Sixth and Seventh Steps, and that was that.

Then, down the road, we started having the same difficulties and issues arising from the same defects that had plagued us before. We may not have practiced them or noticed them quite so much after doing a Fifth Step, but they returned with a force that scared and surprised us. We went back to our sponsor and said that perhaps we needed to do another Fourth and Fifth Step. We were feeling and acting very similar to ways we used to feel and act. What should we do? Or, perhaps after years in the Program, things seemed to just have gone flat. There doesn’t seem to be the same old spark, and the meetings just aren’t as interesting as they once were. We’ve drifted into a numb place where there seems to be little growth and little reason to change.

Can we explain why we aren’t entirely ready? Why can’t we humbly ask? What’s in our way?

If our sponsor is a good one, perhaps he or she responds that maybe it isn’t the Fourth or Fifth Step that needs repeating, but that it is time to take a real look at the Sixth and Seventh. Rather than blaming the Program and the people in it for the flatness in our life, maybe it’s time to rejuvenate the growth process through a jump start of the Sixth and Seventh Steps, remembering that the Program helps those who help themselves. The Program works for those who understand it.

**Bill’s thoughts on principles versus character defects:**

I once spoke at an AA group’s anniversary meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, and left the members with a riddle: “If the principles of Twelve Step recovery are not the Twelve Steps, then what are the principles?”

I returned to the same meeting about a year later to present a sponsee with a sobriety medallion and a few people approached me with the following comment: “I’ve been looking all year, since your talk, in the literature for the principles and can’t find them!” My answer to these group members was the same one I give my sponsees: “The principles of Twelve Step recovery are the opposite of our character defects.”
In recovery, we try to take the opposite of our character defects and shortcomings and turn them into principles. For example, we work to change fear into faith, hate into love, egoism into humility, anxiety and worry into serenity, complacency into action, denial into acceptance, jealousy into trust, fantasy into reality, selfishness into service, resentment into forgiveness, judgmentalism into tolerance, despair into hope, self-hate into self-respect, and loneliness into fellowship. Through this work, we learn to understand the principles of our program.

Such work may look like an overwhelming goal to an outsider, but those of us in recovery know that our true goal is “progress not perfection.” As the Big Book tells us, we are not destined for sainthood, and we should not be discouraged when we cannot “maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. The point is that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles are guides to progress.” Also, the *Twelve and Twelve* states: “AA’s Twelve Steps are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happy and usefully whole.”

What, exactly, are these principles, and where did they come from? Over the years, a list of principles that correspond to each of the Twelve Steps has been printed in AA newsletters and on pocket cards. The origin of this list is unknown, although it is used by many Twelve Step members:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step One</th>
<th>Honesty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Step Two</td>
<td>Hope</td>
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<td>Step Three</td>
<td>Faith</td>
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<td>Step Four</td>
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<td>Step Eight</td>
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<td>Step Eleven</td>
<td>Spiritual Awareness</td>
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<td>Step Twelve</td>
<td>Service</td>
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In this book, we and all those who have assisted us will attempt to take a real look at the Sixth and Seventh Steps. We must learn to take the intellectual knowledge and turn it into emotional and spiritual reality—into living—so we can continue to change and grow and be useful. To become the person we can become, we must drop the rock—all the grasping and holding on to old patterns of behaving, thinking, and feeling that are harmful to ourselves and to others. The focus must become “moving toward completion” rather than “away from unpleasant and uncomfortable habits and actions.”

Please join in this adventure of learning to put the Sixth and Seventh Steps into action. Through these actions, we will be able to transform our life and relationships.