

*Freedom: 12-Step Spirituality for Everyone Who Struggles*

*Steps 4 and 5: Confessing Our Faults: To Ourselves, to God, to Someone Else*

1 John 1:5-10

I heard someone say once (someone who seemed like they knew what they were talking about) that about 70% of people in the western world have some version of a dream that comes over and over again. The dream where you're going into a final exam on the last day of a class and you panic because you forgot to study. Or maybe you're standing up to speak in front of a large group of people and you realize suddenly that you're naked. Do you know that dream? Do you have some form of it from time to time? It was such a relief to me to hear that almost everybody has it!

It's an anxiety dream, of course. My version, which comes almost always on Saturday nights, is that worship is just about to start, everyone is already seated in the sanctuary, Shine is playing the organ, and I don't have my sermon. I'm running around frantically, trying to find those pieces of paper, because if I can't find them, you might know my fear of getting up to speak and having nothing to say. My dream is only a slightly more subtle version of the one in which you're naked. You don't have to be a dream expert to know that each of these dreams is about being afraid that other people will see us as we really are, with all our flaws exposed.

It's a frightening thought, isn't it? The stuff of nightmares: that the whole world can see in us all the things we know about ourselves. Somewhere deep down, maybe we are *all* afraid that that no one could love us if they really knew who we are. That's what shame is: our fear of the contempt of others. Our fear of being looked down on; seen for our biggest mistake, our deepest flaw. We all carry that fear around with us. And because shame is *such* a scary thing, most of us have also developed an elaborate arsenal of weapons to protect ourselves from being seen fully.

We have explanations about why whatever it is that has gone wrong isn't our fault. Rationales about how someone else's dysfunction made us act like that. Commentary about how terrible it was of God, or the church, or someone else, to *remind* us of our inadequacies. Stories that help us hold on to the illusion that we're OK just the way we are; because *if we're not*—what will happen to us?

Perhaps the most powerful thing about 12-step programs, the thing that makes them work better than any other cure we know for dealing with addictions, is what happens the moment each meeting begins. Every Alcoholics Anonymous meeting begins by going around the room, until every person has said, "My name is John (or Joe, or Nancy) and I am an alcoholic." There is something totally, painfully, liberatingly truthful about admitting out loud, so other people can hear you, your terrible, dark secret: that you are broken. That's especially true for dealing with addiction—a disease in which secrecy and lying are major symptoms. But really, it's true for all of us. What if we began every worship service by telling a similar truth: each of us saying out loud something like, "I'm Kathi, and I'm here today because I need help. My life is a mess."

Don't worry; we're not going to do it. In church, we use more conventional and restrained ways to invite you to name the reality of your life. Rituals and prayers in mystical language (Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy) so that you can speak those words in a crowd and decide silently whether you want them to mean anything. But there's something in the raw honesty of those 12-step programs that I admire and long for. Something that I think is essential to an openness to being transformed.

12-step programs don't stop at naming their common condition, of course. In the steps we are focusing on today, this tradition invites us to take a full inventory of ourselves: to itemize our moral characteristics. To name both the qualities that have served us well *and* the failings that cause us—and the people around us—pain. The idea here is not to judge, but simply to take an inventory, much as you would record the inventory of a store or a stockroom. Not to add everything up at the end and pronounce ourselves either good or beyond hope; simply to see ourselves clearly. Because when we name what we are—not what we should be or want to be, but *who we really are*—when we're ready to take ownership of both our strengths *and* all the dumb and damaging things we've done to our lives, to our marriages, to our children, our parents, our friends—*then* we no longer have to be afraid of being found out. When you've already spoken your weaknesses, when you have nothing to prove, no image to protect, *then* you no longer have to be afraid of a light that might reveal the whole truth—even the truth about you.

By the time we're adults, we've accumulated a lot of tools that can help us deny responsibility for our failings. Supportive friends, therapy, a no-fault culture—they conspire right along with us, help us rearrange the stories of our lives, so that we can believe we are not at fault for the things that plague us. I knew once a young woman who'd had a car accident when she was in her early 20's. The accident did significant damage, and she was charged with felony drunk driving. She had kind friends and family members in her life, helpful people who tried to protect her by not letting her take full responsibility for what happened. "You don't drink that much," they said; or "That isn't who you are." "That court really came down too hard on you; it's not fair." She practically had to fight with the people who loved her when she said to them, and to herself, "No, that *was* me. And I don't want it to be me any more." That young woman's life turned around; she is healthy and strong now. But she only found the freedom to become a whole and healthy person because she had the courage to admit that she was *not* that already. There was power for her in that admission. There is freedom in telling the truth about ourselves.

In the passage from 1 John that we read this morning, the Bible says that it's admitting our sin that moves us from darkness into the light of God. The songwriter Leonard Cohen says it in more contemporary language. "There is a crack in everything. [he says] That's how the light gets in." Japanese culture has turned the practice of admitting your flaws into an art form. *Kintsugi*, it's called. When a cup or bowl is broken, it doesn't get thrown away or put aside; instead it's repaired. And not with invisible glue. With gold. So that the crack is the first thing you see. For a bowl to be broken and repaired is a sign that it has had a good life. It has been used. The break makes it more beautiful than it was before.

What if you could live like you knew that? Wouldn't it be a relief to have a safe space to admit your cracks rather than run around painting over them before they get noticed? To live without turning yourself into contortions so that your scars are always on the back side where they won't

be noticed? Ted Loder asks, “Why do I try so hard to put my best foot forward, when it’s the other foot that needs attention?”

After taking the “fearless moral inventory” of Step 4, Step 5 says, we “admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the nature of our wrongs.” That means making the inventory of our inner lives concrete and real by confessing it—not just silently, to ourselves and to God, but to another person. This is scary. When we tell someone else the truth about who we are, we give that person power they might use to condemn us. But we also give them the power to accept and love us. And it’s only when we’re ready to take *that* risk that we know we are serious about letting our life be changed. That person who hears us will remind us, every time we see them, just by their presence, that we are fully known, seen with our flaws as well as our best features. And loved anyway.

That, I think, might be what lets the light in. When we’re willing to speak our own inadequacy out loud, we make possible the greatest gift of all, which is that the person we’re telling will look back at us, maybe with tears in their eyes, and say the words we long to hear, the only words that can help: “I’m still here.”

That kind of understanding is the real gift we’re able to give each other. But we can only do it when we too have faced the darkness inside ourselves. When I take the risk of admitting that I am not the person I want to be or the image I show the world; when I acknowledge that I am no more worthy or unworthy than anyone else—then, only then, can I understand and be compassionate toward someone else. Compassion: to *feel with* another person. Understand: literally to *stand under* them, to know that I cannot judge because I too am worthy of judgment.

Acknowledging our own imperfection is our ticket to full membership in the human race. It’s the name tag that says “I belong.” It allows connection rather than living isolated and apart, protected, afraid that someone will get close enough to see what we fear: that we’re not enough on our own.

We spend so much of our lives scrambling around trying to fix our souls, working to polish ourselves up. But at the core of our faith is a truth that, if we really could live with it, would take us in such a different direction. Here’s the truth: We don’t come to God, or to a good life, by getting rid of our imperfection. We come to what will save us *through* our brokenness, by being willing to uncover our defenses, layer after layer, until we really get it: that we are fully known, fully loved—just as we are right now. This is the wisdom of the twelve steps. This is the heart of a faith in the God who loves us always.