

Why the Four Absolutes?

This skeptic learned the hard way that none of the original principles are obsolete, and that the Four Absolutes are now what they always were — the foundation of the Program — the shortest, surest route to freedom, joy, and peace.

I am member of All Addicts Anonymous who found an alcohol recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous some years ago. The recovery Program as it was passed on to me was the Twelve Steps. These were the principles that turned my life off the path of sick drinking, selfishness, and deterioration and onto the path of spirituality, service, and joy.

After I had been around AA for several months, I heard someone at an AA meeting talking about the Four Absolutes: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. According to this speaker, the Absolutes had been big in AA back in the early days.

Well, maybe so, I thought. They did not particularly impress me at that first exposure.

The Steps were specific action directions, things to *do*. But the Absolutes seemed harder to pin down, harder to give application to. The qualities of honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love were surely good and to be striven for, but the how-to behind the vague good intention did not leap to mind, and the qualifier “absolute” was a puzzler. What did it mean? That you were to *try* to be absolutely honest, pure, unselfish, and loving? Or that you were in fact to achieve and lay claim to perfection in all these areas? If it was the latter, I did not feel up to it. If it was the former, I did not see where it added up to more than a pious hope or an impossible dream.

Still, the man had said that the Absolutes were part of AA’s recovery platform through the formative years of its existence. I was not interested enough to consciously try to apply them, but *I was* interested enough to do a little research into their history.

I found out that AA had not invented the Absolutes but had taken them over from the Oxford Group, the evangelical Christian movement out of which AA had its birth in 1935. Heavy stress had been laid on the Absolutes by Frank Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group, and in the mid 1930s many Oxford Groupers were dead serious about the Absolutes as fundamental guidelines for their lives.

Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, before they became the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, were both in the Oxford Group. For the first two years of its life, AA had no formal name and no independent existence. It was a bunch of recovering drunks within the Oxford Group, and the Four Absolutes were central to its recovery plan. In fact the Absolutes at that time *were* the Program. The Steps had not yet been formulated. Bill and Bob sobered up on the Absolutes. So did all the other early members. The Absolutes were what brought the AA fellowship along to the point where the Steps could be written.

In 1937, AA began to separate from the Oxford Group and to make its way in the world alone. In those days it was a tiny, movement with less than 100 members. There were two main groups, one in Akron, Ohio, Dr. Bob's hometown, and one in New York City, where Bill lived.

Actually it was only the New Yorkers who broke with the Oxford Group in 1937. The Midwesterners remained affiliated for two more years. And it was in the New York group at about this time that the Absolutes began to be phased out. They were not even mentioned as part of the AA recovery program in the AA Big Book, the official text of the fellowship, when it was published in 1939. Bill, who was the principal author of the Big Book, later said that he built the Absolutes into the Sixth and Seventh Steps.

But in Akron many AAs continued to regard the Absolute as a fundamental part of the AA recovery program. Dr. Bob himself continued to be a confirmed believer in the Four Absolutes all his life. In his last major AA talk, made in 1948 he said:

The Four Absolutes, as we called them, were the only yardsticks we had in the early days, before the Steps. I think the Absolutes still hold good and can be extremely helpful. I have found at times that a question arises, and I want to do the right thing, but the answer is not obvious. Almost always, if I measure my decision carefully by the yardsticks of absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute purity, and absolute love, and it checks up pretty well with those four, then my answer can't be very far out of the way. ...

Suppose we have trouble taking the First Step. . . . The lack of absolute purity is involved here — purity of ideas, purity of motives. . . . As you well know, absolute love incorporates all else. It's very difficult to have absolute love. I don't think any of us will ever get it, but that doesn't mean we can't try to get it.

Dr. Bob's statement answered my question about the word "absolute." Clearly it was a commitment in principle, not, claim to perfection. What he said also deepened my respect for the Four Absolutes — but still I did not manage to connect with them as I had with the Twelve Steps.

Through this period the one thing that kept me in some relationship with the Absolutes was the concept of rigorous honesty, the toned-down version of absolute honesty which had survived in the Big Book. Rigorous honesty was regularly discussed in the AA meetings I attended, and I sincerely tried to practice it in all my affairs.

Then one day I suddenly found myself in a whole new relationship with the Absolutes. What triggered the change was a conversation — one of those unplanned, priceless sessions that have a way of happening when two or more people in the program get together. Two AA friends and I sat down one afternoon to talk. Somehow we got onto the subject of the Absolutes. One of these men, who had been in AA since the early days, was a strong believer in the Absolutes. He took the lead in the conversation and the other two of us followed. My excitement grew as we dug into the how-to behind these four enormous propositions which up till then had remained beyond my grasp.

As a clarity emerged on each of the Absolutes, we jotted down a brief spell-out on it. What we ended up with is the following statement:

1. **Absolute honesty** — non-lying to oneself or others; unbending faithfulness to the truth in thought, word, and action.
2. **Absolute purity** — purity of mind, purity of body, purity of the emotions, purity of heart, sexual purity.
3. **Absolute unselfishness** — seeking what is right and true in every situation, above what I want.
4. **Absolute love** — loving God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.

That clarification made all the difference in the world for me. I began to be able consciously to work with the Absolutes on a daily basis.

The key to them is the term “absolute,” and the critical factor is *commitment*. Without prejudging what *my performance will* be on any given day, I set my *goal* at absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. Then, and only then, do I have a proper set of yard sticks by which to gauge my thoughts, words, and action; and to guide my decisions as I meet the day’s events. In the light of the Absolutes, some big problems of my recent past came into focus.

I had paid a dear price for my earlier cynicism about the Absolutes (a price I have seen other AA people pay too). For me the Twelve Steps alone were not enough. Even though I wanted to, I found that I could not keep practicing the Steps fully and faithfully without the yardsticks of the Absolutes. I did not get drunk. But I did drift back into a style of living that involved levels of self-will and self-deception which knocked me flat in my health and wiped out my peace of mind. Overworking and operating in overdrive on all fronts ended me up with a series of hospitalizations, and not long afterward my marriage came apart over troubles that I had been ignoring, soft-pedaling, and kidding myself about for years.

I was seven years sober, and I was a serious worker of the Twelve Steps, and I found my life in a mess. Emotionally, I had never been under such pressure, not even when I was drinking. During this passage, I had a great deal of conflicting advice from relatives and friends, including AA friends. I found myself unable to lean on people around me. They all seemed to be pointing in opposite directions. Thus I was forced back to first principles — and back to the very first principle of all — God. From experience I knew that regardless of what my emotions said, I had to try to discover God’s will for me and do it as best I could, whatever the cost. Otherwise I could not survive, sobriety-wise and sanity-wise.

I found to my amazement that my decisions and life arrangements, so hopelessly insoluble by ordinary standards, could all be worked out if I submitted them day by day to the criteria of absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love.

I, who had belittled the Absolutes as “pious hopes” and “impossible dreams” wound up in a situation where nothing short of the Absolutes offered a way through. I did not always feel good or look good through these weeks and months, but I did manage, by God’s grace, to weather the toughest passage of my life without doing anything crazy or destructive. And I came out of it a very different person than I went in. The most noticeable difference was a far deeper reliance upon God

and the truth.

Another big difference was a reduction in my tension level. I had long *heard* about “easy does it” but was not able to *practice* it until I could face with absolute honesty my limitations as a human being. When I did, I could see that I had hurt others and been hurt myself by too much false optimism. I had consistently overestimated what I could accomplish by forcing into all of life’s people and events that resisted my plans. When I became able to operate under less of a head of steam, I found my health gradually improving, and along with it my ability to get along with others.

Today I know that for me the Absolutes are absolutely essential. And I believe the same holds true for any modern person who wants to keep his life grounded on spiritual principles.

In AA’s history the Absolutes came before the Twelve Steps. And today they still come first. The Steps, to be fully effective, must be worked in the light of the Absolutes. In chapter five of the AA Big Book, the point is made that you need to become rigorously honest *before you* can have success working with the Steps. The Big Book also says that working with others will help a shaky drunk stay sober when all else fails. The great thing about work with others is that it moves us right away in the direction of absolute unselfishness and absolute love.

I wish more were said in the Big Book about absolute purity. Frank Buchman and the Oxford Groupers made much of it, especially sexual purity. The AAs became nervous about the impropriety of too much open talk about lapses in the sex area. I heartily agree that you have to be careful how and where you discuss your sex life. But at the same time, “decorum” all too easily becomes a cop-out and a cover-up for a policy of phony self-justification and persisting in sex conduct which is condemned by one’s own conscience, Holy Scripture, and the spiritual wisdom of the ages as selfish, harmful, and wrong. Compulsions in this area of life are as powerful as in any other — booze included. Nowhere is it more obvious that we can stay afloat only as long as we are supported by God’s grace.

Over the past twelve years I have talked with hundreds of people — many of them sober AAs — whose spiritual aspirations were being tragically nullified by sex troubles. In my own case the area of sex has required more vigilance and more appeal for God’s help than any other.

When I was ignoring and ducking the Absolutes, I regarded them as

unattainable and therefore oppressive standards. I thought that the more attention I paid to them the more they would rub my nose in my shortcomings, and the more frustrated and negative I would become. But experience has taught me that they work just the opposite way. In the five years that I have sought to live by the Absolutes, I have experienced peace, clarity, and self-acceptance that were never present in my life before.

The most miserable weakling in the world is every bit as free to *aim* at perfection as the greatest saint. No matter what our limitations, God understands them — better than we do. We must not be discouraged by our mistakes, but neither must we give in to them or lower our standards to accommodate them. God will never deny us the help we need in dealing with our weaknesses, if we commit ourselves without reservation to his will, and patiently renew that commitment each day.