

“UNITY INSURES RECOVERY THROUGH SERVICE”
MEETING OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

THE FOURTH STEP:
“Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves”

Homework: Writing Inventory on the Fourth Step
By Dennis F.

Inventory is the step that separates those who are dedicated to sobriety and those who are not. By not writing inventory, I do not permit my Higher Power to change me so that I can stay sober.

I think of myself as a high-bottom alcoholic, I was not totally surrendered by alcohol. Three days after I am sober, I want to drink again. I was not a burnt-out case that came from jail, an institution or skid row. I still had some friends, money and health when I got here. I discovered that more than ninety-five percent of the membership of A.A. is just like me.

I heard a great speaker in A.A., Chuck C., say that he was asked the question “Is it possible for a person who is not totally surrendered by alcohol to come to A.A. and stay sober?”

I swear he was looking right at me when he answered, “Yes. And there is only one way that this can be done, and that is by doing the first nine steps of the program.”

I dedicated myself in early sobriety to accomplishing that answer in my life. It took the first three years of my sobriety.

Alcohol did not surrender me. It softened me up so that the program of A.A., the first nine steps, and inventory in particular, could surrender me.

I believe that a “high bottom” like me, must work a more rigorous program than usual in order to stay surrendered and thus stay sober.

I either write inventory or I will create it! I have been “spared the last ten or fifteen years of literal hell’ (12 & 12 p.23) that many alcoholics have to go through. In order to keep this un-drunk energy devoted to service in A.A., I need inventory to give me the spiritual awareness of the areas where I need to surrender.

The third step is a decision step only. The fourth step is the action that surrenders our willingness and our lives to the love of God. It is the surrender step. Many of us first get to know God personally through the writing of inventory.

Through writing inventory we offer to God all our life, including every painful situation. We hold nothing back. Through a fifth step (“Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”), God will transform our guilt for past events into experience: he will transform our lack of power in dealing with today’s situations into

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strength; he will transform our fear of the future (impending doom) into hope. What was once the shameful alcoholic past will become instead our experience, strength and hope to share with another sick and suffering alcoholic. The past will only come to mind when I remember a useful incident to help the newcomer identify with us. We will stop living with 90% of our energies devoted to the past; instead we will be living in the “now.”

My life is the most important gift I can make to my Creator for saving me from my alcoholism. I want to be happy and I want my life to be transformed. Therefore, I approach inventory eagerly and with a desire to be thorough, since the Twelve Steps are the path my Higher Power has given me to follow.

I can express my concept of sobriety in just five words, “I grow or I drink.” Inventory is the tool that enables me to grow.

Through inventory I was permitted to see the spiritual reality of my drinking life for the first time. Gone was the self-deceptive fantasy of the “good time” I had when I drank. There is an additional purpose to writing inventory and that is to make it possible for me to break that cycle that leads to the first drink.

The cycle starts with a frustration. If I do not deal with it through writing inventory, it will turn in to anger. If I don't deal with the anger, it becomes resentment. The resentment turns into self-pity or depression. Then comes the first drink.

In sobriety, after depression and before the first drink, comes a dry drunk. A dry drunk is a period of time when I am sober but have lost conscious contact with my Maker.

The depression I have in a dry drunk stems from my separation with God. I start blaming him for my situation rather than praising him for the growth experience I am going through. The only way out of a depression or a dry drunk is to make an amend to God. The strongest amends are made on my knees looking into a mirror.

The cycle: frustration, anger, resentment, depression and dry drunk can be broken at any point if I use the tools of the program – if I write inventory. Hence the importance of this step.

There are only two attitudes I can have toward God: I praise him or I blame him.

If you had an employee who told you he or she had a better way of running your company, yet you knew that such advice would ruin your company so you told the employee to do it your way and the employee reluctantly did it through gritted teeth, would you give this employee a raise?

No - Of course not. You would wait until this employee changed his or her attitude and trusted you.

I was that employee. I surrendered with gritted teeth to God. When I changed from reluctant surrender to surrender with enthusiasm, my relationship with God improved immensely.

You might say, “Why surrender with enthusiasm over developments in my life that don’t look good?”

This is the time when I must especially surrender with enthusiasm. When God wants my undivided attention, he speaks to me through financial problems, relationship problems, or he puts me flat in a sickbed. The lesson is always the same: to learn dependence on a Higher Power rather than on money, property and prestige or people, places and things!

I repeat experiences in life until I learn the lesson. Praising God for negative appearances demonstrates to Him that I trust Him and accept the situation I’m in because I need it for my growth.

When I learn the lesson of the situation I’m in, I will not have to repeat the experience of financial fears, loneliness or sickness. (“When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.” The Big Book; discussion of the Fourth Step, p.64)

The question, “When should I write inventory?” sometimes arises. It could be an excuse to put off writing inventory. This was the case with me.

I was returning home on an airplane in my ninth month of sobriety and the desire to drink overwhelmed me. I had not wanted to drink since my fifth week of sobriety when I got a sponsor, and, not so coincidentally, the obsession to drink was removed from me. I prayed and nothing seemed to happen. I still wanted to drink. Then the thought came over me that doing the steps was the only way I was going to be able to stay sober. So I took out the paper and pencil and began to write inventory from my childhood (which I didn’t think I could remember), and I have not wanted to drink since. If Alcoholics Anonymous means anything, it means that doing the steps produces sobriety.

That is the last uncomfortable moment I’ve had in A.A.. I’ve had some inconvenient situations in my life, but not uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable is when I want to drink but do not drink. There is no worse place to be except actually drinking. My heart goes out to any newcomer who wants to drink but does not drink. Working the steps is the only way I know to escape that situation.

I wanted to know what had happened to me on that plane. I had taken the Third Step a month earlier and my sponsor had told me to start writing inventory, but I hadn’t started. I found the answers in the “Big Book” on page 64. There were two things in my life I had not been doing.

First, the Fourth Step is the only step that the “Big Book” tells us when we are to begin it. It is done as soon as the Third Step decision is taken. I waited a month and paid the price. The desire to drink returned. Secondly, I put off writing inventory until I would become “more sober” and thus more fit to write it. I misused the saying “let go and let God.” “Let go” refers to results not actions.

I thought that it would be easy to write inventory later. The “Big Book” describes what it feels like to write inventory in two words: writing inventory is a “strenuous effort.” The sentence on page 64 of the “Big Book” that contains these two ideas says:

“Though our (Third Step) decision was a vital and crucial step, it could have little permanent effect unless at once followed by a strenuous effort to face, and be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us. Our liquor was but a symptom. So we had to get down to causes and conditions. Therefore, we started upon a personal inventory.”

One of my excuses for not writing inventory was that I didn't know which system to use.

Everyone develops his or her own personal style of writing inventory, since it develops out of a growing relationship with God. Inventory is a lifetime communication tool with God.

I do not feel that duplications are necessary if separate amends are not called for. For example, if I had a number of relationships with women that had the same defect and the same solution, I would not write about each one unless I knew I had to make direct amends to each woman. Consult your sponsor about questionable cases. (I usually found that a “questionable case” meant that I needed to write about it.)

Use this list as a starting place. Go where your inventory leads you.

I have found that inventories usually begin with the physical (what did I steal?), pass through the mental (obsessions with food, money, sex, etc.) and progress to the spiritual (self-centered fear keeps me from a close relationship with my Maker).

When I found out the exact nature of my wrongs (I tried to be God in my own life – I thought I was in charge), I feel that I accomplished the purpose of my inventory. It might take several inventory installments to reach this point, or it can be done in one long steady effort, as mine was.

When the inventory is completed, ask yourself this question: “Did I include those things that I would rather die than let another human being know?” Next, I suggest you review the “12 & 12” on pages 50-54 and write inventory on any question given there that you have not covered. Then you have indeed written a searching and fearless moral inventory.

During the inventory process certain surrenders might take place before we get to steps six and seven and humbly ask God to remove our defects.

When I became painfully aware of certain of my defects, I was called to surrender and work steps six and seven immediately. God heard my prayer and removed me from the bondage of the defects so that I had a choice to do them or not as I now know I have a choice to drink or not. It is good to heed the call for change as soon as we hear God's voice. It shortens our suffering on the way to surrender of our defects.

If you are like me, the enormity of facing the task of writing a searching inventory of every painful situation of my life can be overwhelming. It can be so overwhelming that I can be paralyzed into inaction.

The purpose of the negative part of my alcoholism is to kill me. The only way I can go back to drinking is to stop growing by not continuing on the steps. Therefore, my alcoholism will

try to paralyze me when it comes to working the steps. It will particularly try to keep me from writing inventory.

The battle did not end when I stopped drinking – alcohol is cunning and will wait to strike me at vulnerable turning points. Writing inventory is one of the most vulnerable points in early sobriety. This is why I stay close to a step sponsor during the fourth step inventory process. (“Going it alone in spiritual matters is dangerous, “12 & 12” p.60)

The answer is to pray for willingness. Successes in A.A. do things that failures avoid: attacking the toughest problem first. Pick fifteen minutes of your prime time (such as the morning before work) and promise your Higher Power that you will demonstrate your willingness to work this step by showing up with paper and pencil for fifteen minutes, even if you don’t write one word. You will be amazed at how your inventory flows. We supply the pencil, and God does the writing.

I suggest that a certain time period will be agreed upon to complete the inventory if the writing is coming too slowly. If the inventory is not completed in this time period due to lack of effort, I release those I work with, that they may go to another sponsor. It is my duty to guide a person through the steps. Another might succeed where I fail. It is better for you to lose my sponsorship than your sobriety. Inventory, like sobriety, must be put ahead of concerns like too busy a schedule, job demands, lack of money, and relationships.

I have heard one speaker (Don G.) say, “If you go back out there drinking and you haven’t written a Fourth Step inventory, don’t say to a drinking companion that you tried A.A. and it failed, because you never tried A.A.!”

The penalty in A.A. for not completing the inventory is usually drinking! The reward for writing inventory is freedom from the bondage of the past and the discovery of my greatest talent in life my ability to share from the richness of my alcoholic experience with the alcoholic who is still suffering.

Working a step, tradition or concept to me means that I am willing to surrender something within me. The Fourth Step is the step in the program that gives me the awareness that surrenders me. The Third Step is the decision to be surrendered. The action of writing inventory is the process by which my life becomes surrendered to God’s will. Therefore, in order to surrender it all, I must be searching and inventory it all.

Last week we suggested that we review a list of the thirty-six subjects to see if our Fourth Step is complete. If we are beginning on the Fourth Step, let’s chose one of the thirty-six topics given above that is giving us the most problem and start to write inventory.

If we have completed our inventory, let us chose one of the thirty-six topics that is still our most pressing problem in life and write inventory.

INVENTORY EXAMPLE - (Try to condense to three sentences.)

- a) The Story: I fight surrendering my idea when I think my comfort is threatened.
- b) What Did I Do Wrong (Name the character defect)?: Selfishness
- c) What Would God Expect Me To Do Instead?: Surrender self-centered thoughts and trust a Loving God to take care of me as I tune in to his way.

See the enclosed "Inventory Sheet" for the most frequently asked questions regarding writing inventory. Also included are eight "Quotations to Inspire the Completion of the Written Inventory."

PREPARING FOR NEXT WEEK

We will complete our discussion of the Fourth Step next week and read the conclusion of the Fourth Step in the "12 & 12" on pages 50-54. Review these pages in advance and mark any topics that have not been included in your first inventory.

The three basic systems are:

1. "Big Book" pp. 64-71 (resentments, fears and sex)
2. "12 & 12" pp. 50-54 (Answer the 36 questions there on sex, finances, emotions and relationships)
3. The seven character defects and their opposites (the spiritual shortcomings that lay behind these defects): Pride (lack of humility), Greed (lack of generosity), Lust (lack of purity of intention), Anger (lack of love), Gluttony (lack of discipline), Envy (lack of gratitude), and Sloth (lack of action).

I suggest the following structure, which is based on the above systems.

INVENTORY EXAMPLE - (Try to condense to three sentences)

- a) The Story: I was resentful toward God because of my financial situation.
- b) What Did I Do Wrong (Name the character defect)?: Resentment and anger.
- c) What Would God Expect Me To Do Instead (Name the spiritual shortcoming)?:
I should have surrendered to my financial situation, made amends to God for not accepting life as he gives it, and I should have praised him for the lesson I am to learn from my poverty - the lesson that will overcome it.

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I call an inventory “immoral” when it only includes the first two items. If I stop at my character defects, I become mired in them and obsessed with guilt and my own immorality. I stop with the problem and not the solution. Instead, include the third part of the inventory form, “What Would God Expect Me To Do Instead.” It is the solution I need to follow the next time a similar situation happens in my life. Inventory situations recur in life. I repeat the experience until I learn the lesson.

An inventory need not be long to be searching. Mine was long but could have been shorter (I bless my sponsor’s patience). Three sentences is all it takes. Frequently, the story part of the inventory is too long and is filled with other people’s inventory. If I avoid this, I make quicker progress: I now feel that if it takes me more than one sentence to describe “The Story,” I am expressing my ego.

Inventory writing is not a diary or a letter to God or reflective writing. It is an example of what I did wrong and what I should do next time. I do not regard writings as inventory if they don’t contain these elements no matter how worthwhile the writing might otherwise be.

I propose that at least thirty-six subjects be covered in writing inventory.

Inventory Subjects

(Canceled checks, old check books, credit card stubs and old calendars can be a help in reconstructing the past.)

1. Drinking and Using Episodes (include reasons for drinking and include the last drink)
2. Childhood, teen and family relationships
3. Spouse(s), lovers, children
4. Work talents (also relationships with employers)
5. Other talents (artistic, sports, etc.)
6. Non-A.A. world (friends, doctors, attorneys, etc.)
7. A.A. wreckage of sobriety
8. Resentments
9. Fears (include financial fears, cowardice, fear of discovery)
10. Relationships
11. Pride (lack of humility)
12. Greed (lack of generosity)
13. Lust (lack of purity of intention)
14. Anger (lack of love)
15. Gluttony (lack of discipline)
16. Envy (lack of gratitude)
17. Laziness/Sloth (lack of action)
18. Rigorous honesty
19. Loneliness
20. Guilt and shame (reasons for self-hatred)
21. Self worth (reasons for being disappointed in myself)
22. Obsession with remorse (“if only . . .”)
23. Depression or self-pity (being a “victim” or “martyr”)
24. Withdrawal (being a loner)
25. Perfectionism (“All or nothing at all”)
26. Competition (“The need to be first”)
27. Creating crises (being a “rescuer”)
28. Blaming organized religion
29. Need for approval
30. Being judgmental of myself and others
31. Treating the present like the past (a wife is treated like a mother or a boss like a father, etc.)
32. Willingness to pay the price
33. Anybody I have not completely forgiven
34. Am I fulfilling my primary purpose?
35. The past and present state of my relationship with God (Is God first in my life? Do I have any false Gods I still rely on? Do I trust him without having to understand his decisions concerning me? Do I surrender with enthusiasm or reluctance?)
36. The exact nature of my wrongs (Who’s in charge: God or me? Am I still trying to be God in my life and the life of others?)

QUOTATIONS TO INSPIRE THE COMPLETION OF THE WRITTEN INVENTORY

1. Are you in poor physical or mental condition? Are you in pain? Do you sleep well?
“When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.”
(Big Book: Discussion of the Fourth Step, p.64)
2. Are you hurting financially? Do you think you could write good inventory after your financial problems are solved? Is your daily life a mess?
“Without a searching and fearless moral inventory, most of us have found that faith which really works in daily living is still out of reach.” (12 & 12: Discussion of the Fourth Step, p.43)
3. Are you looking for a soul-mate relationship in your life?
“The primary fact that we fail to recognize is our total inability to form a true partnership with another human being.” (12 & 12: Discussion of the Fourth Step, p.53)
4. Are you willing to go to any lengths to stay sober?
“We went back through our lives. Nothing counted but thoroughness and honesty.” (Big Book: Discussion of the Fourth Step, p.65)
“But they had not learned enough of humility, fearlessness and honesty until they told someone all their life story.” (Big Book: p.73)
5. Are you aware that inventory should be written?
“If we have been thorough about our personal inventory, we have written down a lot. We have listed and analyzed our resentments.” (Big Book: Discussion of the Fourth Step, p.70) “We have a written inventory and we are prepared for a long talk.” (Big Book: p.75) “Therefore, thoroughness ought to be the watchword when taking inventory. In this connection, it is wise to write out our questions and answers. It will be an aid to clear thinking and honest appraisal. It will be the first tangible evidence of our complete willingness to move forward.” (12 & 12: Discussion of the Fourth Step, p.54)
6. Do you believe that it is possible to stay sober without writing inventory?
“Unless each A.A. member follows to the best of his ability our suggested Twelve Steps to recovery, he almost certainly signs his own death warrant. His drunkenness and dissolution are not penalties inflicted by people in authority; they result from his personal disobedience to spiritual principles.” (12 & 12, p.174)
7. Would you like these promises to come true in your life? (They will happen to you before you are half way through the ninth (amends) step.
“We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word ‘serenity’ and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook on life will change. Fear of people and of

economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us - sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.” (Big Book, pp. 83-84

HOMework

WRITING INVENTORY ON THE FOURTH STEP (CONCLUDED)

THE FOURTH STEP: “MADE A SEARCHING AND FEARLESS MORAL INVENTORY OF OURSELVES”

The following list of thirty-six inventory questions is taken from the “12 & 12,” pages 50-54 (I have rewritten numbers 23 and 31-36 in question form). They are numbered and arranged in a list rather than paragraph style in order to make it easier to answer them.

Let us review this list and write inventory on any question we have not faced, or, if we have completed the Fourth Step inventory, let us write about the one question from the list that still bothers us the most in sobriety.

On page 52 of the “12 & 12,” Bill Wilson states that, “Questions like these, more of which will come to mind easily in each individual case, will help turn up the root causes.” It is on these “root causes” that we will write inventory.

A. SEXUAL INVENTORY

1. When, and how, and in just what instances did my selfish pursuit of the sex relation damage other people and me?
2. What people were hurt, and how badly?
3. Did I spoil my marriage and injure my children?
4. Did I jeopardize my standing in the community?
5. Just how did I react to these situations at the time?
6. Did I burn with a guilt that nothing could extinguish?
7. Or did I insist that I was the pursued and not the pursuer, and thus absolve myself?
8. How have I reacted to frustration in sexual matters?
9. When denied, did I become vengeful or depressed?
10. Did I take it out on other people?
11. If there was rejection or coldness at home, did I use this as a reason for promiscuity?

B. FINANCIAL INSECURITY INVENTORY

12. In addition to my drinking problem, what character defects contributed to my financial insecurity?
13. Did fear and inferiority about my fitness for my job destroy my confidence and fill me with conflict?
14. Did I try to cover up those feelings of inadequacy by bluffing, cheating, lying, or evading responsibility?
15. Or by griping that others failed to recognize my exceptional abilities?
16. Did I overvalue myself and play the big shot?
17. Did I have such unprincipled ambition that I double-crossed and undercut my associates?
18. Was I extravagant?
19. Did I recklessly borrow money, caring little whether it was repaid or not?
20. Was I a pinchpenny, refusing to support my family properly?
21. Did I cut corners financially?
22. What about the "quick money" deals, the stock market and the races?
23. Did the alcoholic housewife juggle charge accounts, manipulate the food budget, spend her afternoons gambling, and run her husband into debt by irresponsibility, waste and extravagance?

C. EMOTIONAL INSECURITY INVENTORY

24. Looking at both past and present, what sex situations have caused me anxiety, bitterness, frustration or depression?
25. Appraising each situation fairly, can I see where I have been at fault?
26. Did these perplexities beset me because of selfishness or unreasonable demands?
27. Or, if my disturbance was seemingly caused by the behavior of others, why do I lack the ability to accept the conditions I cannot change?
28. Suppose that financial insecurity constantly arouses the same feelings. I can ask myself, 'to what extent have my own mistakes fed my gnawing anxieties?'
29. And if the actions of others are part of the cause, what can I do about that?
30. If I am unable to change the present state of affairs, am I willing to take the measures necessary to shape my life to conditions as they are?

D. RELATIONSHIP INVENTORY

31. Do we insist upon dominating the people we know, or do we depend upon them far too much?
32. Do we habitually try to manipulate others to our own willful desires?
33. When they revolt, and resist us heavily, do we develop hurt feelings, a sense of persecution, and a desire to retaliate?
34. Have we sought to be one in a family, to be a friend among friends, to be a worker among workers, to be a useful member of society?

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35. Have we always tried to struggle to the top of the heap, or to hide underneath it?
36. Have we always tried to form a partnership relation with any one of those about us based on true brotherhood?

INVENTORY EXAMPLE - (Try to condense to three sentences.)

- a) The Story: I have always tried to struggle to the top of the heap from business to tennis.
- b) What Did I Do Wrong? I viewed life as a competition and sought approval by trying to be first.
- c) What Would God Expect Me To Do Instead?: God's vision of me is that I am unique so I don't need to compete, and I have his approval, since I'm sober, so I can relax and enjoy my business and tennis talents and express them with surrendered love