

12 STEPS TO HUMILITY: SEEK PROGRESS NOT PERFECTION
FOR: JANUARY PHOENIX
MARCH, 2008

It's all very simple. You set a goal for yourself; you determine how you'll meet that goal. And then you follow some tried-and-true strategies that will help you reach it.

Will power! That's all you need. Determination. Discipline.

Ah, if the road to recovery were only that easy

Anyone reading this article, anyone recovering from addiction, anyone seeking the *divine* in their daily lives knows recovery and re-finding God is more about surrender than struggle, more about journey than destination, more about making progress than achieving perfection.

Our puny will power is no match for what God *really* wants for us.

For most of us, finding God and surrendering to God's will is about reclaiming the truest parts of ourselves—a humbling journey that often drops us to our knees. And, according to many great teachers, down on our knees is a good place to start a spiritual journey.

One of these teachers is Benedict of Nursia, a monk who lived in the fifth century and who developed "rules" for living a day-to-day spirituality with others. These rules contain 12 Steps of Humility, which parallel Bill W's 12 Steps in AA. (See box story)

Benedict (like Bill W) realized we must understand our dependence on God before being restored to sanity. "We are like a child on its mother's lap," Benedict writes, "cut off from nourishment, helpless, left without the resources we need to grow in the spirit of God."

Stephen Lander—who grew up in the Episcopal Church, drifted away, studied many of the spiritual traditions, became a therapist, returned to his Episcopal roots and was ordained a priest ??? years ago—believes Benedict's 12 Steps in Humility reinforce the 12 Steps of AA and restate the same life-changing principles in new ways.

"Both are steps to freedom," Lander says, "freedom from self-centeredness and freedom from looking outside ourselves for what we *think* we need to be happy. They help us connect with our divinity. They show us how to befriend our true selves and to tap into our own inner resources."

One inner resource, he says, is our sense of humility. "As we progress on a spiritual path, we come to distrust the idea that our will power can make things happen," Lander explains. "Benedict, for example, wants us to see that our will is a reflection of our own selfish nature and gives us false ideas about what makes us happy."

Benedict, he adds, was all about progress and not perfection.

“We live in a goal-oriented culture,” Lander explains. “We assume if we set out in a willful way, we will reach our goals. If we work hard enough we’ll become perfect. For Benedict, however, it wasn’t about reaching goals or being perfect. It was about staying on the path. For him, progress is the path. The path is what we must value.

“Perfection is an illusion,” he adds. “With humility we learn to let go of illusions and surrender our egos to a higher power who will reconnect us to our truest selves. That journey inside is not logical or linear. No words can describe it. It’s all about trusting God and experiencing our own authenticity with a humble heart.”

One of the things that attracted Lander to Benedict is this: “He offers a way of living that leads to peace. In his communities, you work; you pray; you learn. You are engaged. You pay attention. You try to keep a sense of the sacred in the mundane. It’s all about mindfulness,” Lander says, “which is a wonderful way to live. If we are mindful in how we live, we will create the best possible life. If there’s any logic involved, it’s the logic of daily life lived with God and lived well.

“And you don’t have to run off to a monastery to experience it,” he adds. “Being conscious and intentional can enrich life in the 21st century, just as it did fifteen hundred years ago.”

Being in a program of recovery does imply a need for discipline, Lander admits. And addicts often rail against discipline. But Benedict’s ideas are different. “We embrace his ideas about humility because we want to. The results are paradoxical. In the discipline, we find freedom and peace.

“Our intentions change. We learn to be fully engaged in life, but not overly invested in it. For example, I am no longer my job title, or my big house, or my expensive car. I no longer set goals that will bolster my ego or build up my false self. Now I clean the house to show my love, not to earn the love of another person.”

Like the 12 Steps of AA, Benedict’s 12 Steps to Humility are accessible to everyone, Lander says, no matter how we define God. With Benedict, there is no difference in the sacred and secular. It’s about living life with intentionality and letting go of outcomes.

In her book, *The Rule of Benedict*, Joan Chittester sums it up: “Humility lies in knowing who we are and what our lives are meant to garner. The irony of humility is that, if we have it, we know we are made for greatness; we are made for God.”

Stephen Lander offers spiritual direction, pastoral counseling and family therapy at Westminster Counseling Center. He is presenting a workshop on Progress, Not Perfection: The Benedictine Model for Psychological and Spiritual Growth at the Benedictine Center in Maplewood, Thursday, February 28, 7 to 9 pm. 652-777-7251; www.stpaulsmonastery.org.

SIDEBAR

Here are a few excerpts from Benedict of Nursia's "Twelve Steps to Humility" that seem to restate the guidelines found in AA's 12 Steps

1. We keep "the reverence of God always before our eyes" and never forget it.
2. We love not our own will nor take pleasure in satisfying our desires; rather we shall imitate that saying of Christ: I have come not to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me.
3. Our hearts quietly embrace suffering and endure it without weakening or seeking escape.
4. We do not conceal ... any sinful thoughts entering our hearts ... but rather confess them humbly
5. We ... are convinced in our hearts that we are inferior to all and of less value, humbling ourselves ...
6. We always manifest humility in our bearing no less than in our hearts