FAITH, Entry #1 of 7

I know that faith in my Higher Power will not calm the storms of life, but it will calm my heart. I will let my faith shelter me in times of trouble (Just for Today, January 11).

Most of us have heard it said that “none of us gets here by accident.” It wasn’t exceptional skills for handling life on life’s terms that got us here—it was unmanageability. Working Step One helps us to see how addiction creates chaos in our lives, and also to see how we can begin to gain some freedom.

Some of us, while floating on that early recovery pink cloud of hope, might prematurely celebrate the end of all the drama in our lives. We might rush off and make amends to our families—or our exes, or virtual strangers—eager to let them know that our problems are all in the past now.

Then, life gets tough and reality sets in again. We are let down by people and institutions we think we should be able to respect. Rent is too high. We get sacked from our job for no reason. A public health crisis occurs. On top of that, they cancelled our favorite television series. The injustice of it all! And our Step work doesn’t stop any of it from happening.

Our disease creates unmanageability in our lives, sure—and arresting the disease by working Steps can help us put an end to our needless self-inflicted suffering. However, not all of the messes in our life are self-created. No amount of Step work or meditation will prevent us from ever experiencing loss, sadness, rage, frustration, and other unpleasant feelings; no amount of prayer will guarantee freedom from unpleasant encounters with coworkers, family members, or random people in traffic.

We may not know how to react to every new type of weather pattern that comes our way. Still, the freedom from our self-made storms that we gained by working Steps is a source of faith: We can endure all sorts of chaos and nonsense by getting right with ourselves and our Higher Power. Things might not go our way, but we can still go with the flow.

The current crisis—whatever it is—will pass. If the problem is one of my own making, the Steps will help me get through it. If the problem is not one of my own making, the Steps will help me get through it.
When we find ourselves obsessed with a complication in our lives, we will do well to sharply remind ourselves of all that is going right (Just for Today, January 19).

Once we have been in recovery for a while, we discover that unmanageability can be caused by things other than drugs, and that complications can be the result of factors other than our disease. We spent so much time in active addiction being unable to manage our own lives effectively. The Steps help us develop the ability to make and keep plans, to set and achieve goals for ourselves. We were stuck in ruts for so long, and finally we are going somewhere!

And then complications arise. Someone cancels on us at the last minute. The bus is late. Money we were counting on doesn’t come through on time. Complications are a fact of life, and they sometimes make our lives more difficult to manage. As people who caused a lot of unmanageability for ourselves in active addiction, we sometimes have shockingly low tolerance for complications not of our own making.

The real danger for us comes in the obsession. Rather than simply addressing an issue head on, we begin thinking about it. And keep thinking about it—about precisely how much the complication is interfering with our plans. Self-centered obsession is familiar territory for us; what better place for us to go when things aren't going our way?

A member shared, “I can have 99 things going right for me, but all I can think about is the one thing that isn’t.” When our sponsor suggests a gratitude list, it’s not about pretending that the difficulty we are experiencing doesn’t exist—it’s about getting a better perspective. Taking a more objective look at our lives helps us reconnect with faith. Yes, something is going wrong. But in many other areas, our lives are going better than we ever could have managed on our own. We will be okay.

When something goes wrong, I don’t have to pretend that I’m happy about it. I do, however, need to make sure I’m not giving it more attention than it deserves, especially when compared to all that’s going right.
Many of us use spiritual principles as a power greater than ourselves (It Works, Step Two).

We all have differing experiences with religion and belief when we arrive in NA. Some of us were raised in very religious families, attending mosque, temple, or church regularly, while others grew up in secular homes without much exposure to religious matters. One member shared, “My parents were both scientists and atheists. In my family, exploring spirituality made me more of a rebel than using drugs did.” We may show up at our first meeting with an attitude of intolerance toward spiritual principles, thinking that things like “faith” are total rubbish. Maybe we rejected the idea of spiritual principles because we felt that the religion we grew up with didn’t protect us from addiction. Or we came to NA with an open mind, eager to try something new—or desperate to find something that would work for us.

Regardless of our past experience with spiritual matters, we all have work to do when we get here. We all need to learn to live in a principled manner. On the surface, it might seem like faith in a Higher Power should come easier to those of us who grew up with strong convictions about what that Higher Power is. In reality, the ability to act in faith can have very little to do with our beliefs—secular or religious. Part of acting in faith is giving up the illusion of control. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, every principle discussed in this meditation book is a force beyond our control. We can allow the power of principled action to guide us, or we can struggle to use our own power to control our lives.

Step Two does not say, “We came to believe in a Power greater than ourselves,” it says, “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” It doesn’t matter much whether we understand how or why; we consistently get better results from principled action than we do from self-will. As we experience the results of living by spiritual principles, we come to believe that sanity—peace of mind and connection to ourselves and others—is possible for us.

There are countless forces in life that I may never fully grasp. I will place my faith in spiritual principles because I know they work, even if I don’t always know how or why.
FAITH, Entry #4 of 7

Faith is what keeps us doing the footwork even when we can’t see the reason (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Growing Pains”).

Many of us were fine with living a philosophy of *act now, ask questions later* in our addiction. We did what we had to do—the footwork of using, perhaps—and had a certain degree of faith within the chaos of that lifestyle. But we don’t necessarily bring those bold tactics into early recovery. Why then is it so difficult for many of us to have faith and get on board with NA from day one? Maybe it’s that we don’t know what we want. We thought we’d found what we wanted in drugs, but total abstinence seems unlikely and long-term recovery unfathomable. Yes, we want a better life, but who doesn’t?

It’s suggested we go to meetings. Help set up the room. Read the book. Call a member when we’re feeling squirrelly. Ask someone to be our sponsor so that they can take us through these unfathomable Twelve Steps. We also think, this works for you, but what if it doesn’t for me? And why do you seem so sure it will?

A lot of us would say that the reasons are evident. Here are a bunch of addicts who didn’t use today, who set up and ran a meeting that started and ended on time. They shared their experience, strength, and hope. They griped about their day but stayed clean anyway. They were joyful with each other, celebrating recovery milestones with gratitude. When speaking, most expressed their faith in the program and in each other.

At some point, we made a decision to do the footwork, without a clear picture of our destination. Why? Some of us are so desperate we’ll do anything to stop the pain. For others, it’s a lightning-bolt spiritual awakening, a moment of clarity. Others of us take tiny steps, or have many moments of clarity. Others find a single person to trust and that drives our decision. Still others cling to our rebelliousness and then find ourselves celebrating a year clean, then five years, then a quarter-century. No matter what kicks it off, this decision is, for many of us, our first experience of faith. We hear that more will be revealed, and more is.

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*I see abundant evidence around me that NA works. I just need a bit of faith every day to keep me willing to follow my path of recovery.*
Getting through hard times strengthens our faith (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Growing Pains”).

Getting those first 30 days is a milestone for many reasons, not least of which is that it gives us some resolve to get 31, then 32, and so on. We didn’t think we could, but here we are. And the unpredictable journey continues... As difficult as that period of time may be, we are going to need the faith that got us through it—a day at a time, sometimes an hour, or a minute—as life continues to reveal itself.

We may not view practicing faith as essential to our early recovery as it’s happening. In retrospect, we understand that it took faith to surrender, ask for help, and allow ourselves to be supported. Something else is revealed as well: We are stronger for it. That awareness becomes very useful when we experience life’s inevitable misfortunes. We’ve all doubted, at some point, that we can make it through certain challenges clean—death of a loved one, prison, divorce, severe illness, financial ruin, natural disasters—the list goes on. The longer we stay alive and clean, the more likely it is that we will be exposed to life’s hardships.

We watch others stay clean through the worst. We hear them share about the strength they’ve gained by relying on faith to pull through. Witnessing their resolve strengthens our own—and our faith in NA. If someone else can do it, we can too. And we, who at one time were emotionally unavailable or unreliable in relationships, are now able to help people we love through their suffering.

It’s true that many of us have discovered that experiencing adversity can be one pathway toward gratitude, peace, and serenity. We grow through the pain. But let’s also be realistic about how this may manifest. Many of us will smile and have some relief to share. Others will undergo unbelievably crushing experiences that we will have to manage daily—at times, by the hour or minute—for the rest of our lives. Most days we will be able to get out of bed, go to work, care for our families, and help others. Some days, just continuing to stay on this earth will be the best we can offer. Recovery in NA doesn’t eliminate pain and suffering from our lives, but our faith gives us a way to endure it.

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No matter what I’m going through, I have enough resolve to stay clean one more day. Today I have faith in NA and in myself.
We plan for the future just for today and let go of the outcome, even when we really want it (*Living Clean*, Chapter 1, “Why We Stay”).

Early in recovery, many of us are told, “Hey, don’t future-trip!” when we express certainty that disaster lies ahead, no matter what we might do to prevent it, including staying clean and working a program. In NA, we frequently and actively encourage each other to be in the present moment, to focus on today and what is directly in front of us, instead of fearing what may come to pass.

But let’s not be confused about what this means. We can and should plan for the future. We can allow ourselves to want a better life, full of good stuff—even really, really want it. We can’t let fear of the unknown prevent our progress. Enacting the future we desire depends upon our willingness to plot steps in the direction of our vision and our desires…and having faith that we are going to be okay, no matter the outcome.

What we need to be cautious about, however, are expectations. Because we’ve let ourselves really want something, dare to hope for it, even (gasp!) fantasize about getting it, a loss can really shake us. But we can’t let disappointment, or feelings of entitlement, rob us of the faith in ourselves that can feel so fragile at such times. We also can’t succumb to the temptation to let a single failure, despite all of our good intentions and hard work, define us and stop us from trying again. One of faith’s toughest and most rewarding lessons is when we do everything in our power to succeed, turn over the rest, lose out, learn from it, and be okay to let it go. That’s a moment of freedom to savor, because it strengthens our faith to try again.

And there may even be times when the outcome we’ve experienced initially as utter failure turns out to be the best possible result that could have happened. Faith, perspective, and time often work together in ways that create insights we could never have imagined.

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*I won’t let fear and uncertainty stop me from wanting more out of life. Faith will help me get my plan in action, find some acceptance, and help me stay out of—and deal with—the results, whatever they may be.*
In the Third Step, faith gives us the capacity to actually make a decision and carry that decision into action (NA Step Working Guides, Step Three, “Spiritual Principles”).

When we look back at early recovery—regardless of how recent or distant that may be—we can see how faith inspired some of our decisions and helped us to act on them. Many of us credit some sort of blind faith for getting us through the doors of our first meeting. We decided to get some help and found our way to Narcotics Anonymous.

As our heads cleared, we saw that our every effort to clean up on our own had failed. Consciously or not, we surrendered and made that crucial admission in Step One. We took another leap of faith by entertaining the possibility that we could stay clean and be restored to sanity. Faith that the recovery that we’d seen work for others could also work for us brought us to Step Three.

Deciding to turn our will and life over to the care of the God of our understanding was huge. It might have seemed too big, really. Other members reassured us, “You’re just making a decision. You’ll have a lifetime to figure out what that looks like, plenty of time to practice.” So, okay, we decide...now what?

Some of us get stuck here or find ourselves cycling through the first three Steps, sure that we’ve dropped a stitch. We get lucky—as we do so often in NA—when we’re sitting in a meeting, only half listening, and we hear just what we need to propel us into action: “The footwork of Step Three is Step Four.” And so on.

The faith we practice as NA members gives us the courage to make other momentous decisions: to change careers, to exercise more, to marry, to end a marriage. When we’re secure in our recovery, faith enables us to ask ourselves some really tough questions, like “What do I want?” and “What’s holding me back?” Faith steadies us as we make decisions, supports us as we clear the way forward, and keeps us humble as we find out what we’re capable of.

Faith will show in my actions today, as I make the time to do the things I ought to do and say the things I need to say.