Purpose, Entry 1 of 7

*Faith in the process means believing that we are moving in the right direction, even if it’s not where we thought we would be going.*

—Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Desperation to Passion”

On the day of our first NA meeting, we may have predictions about what our lives will look like without drugs, but what if our dreams don’t come true? Desperation has forced us to strive for something new, but what will it be? We now have choices about how we live that we didn’t have before, but how do we know which is the “right” path and if we’re following our life’s “true” purpose? If we don’t have a whole lot of faith in the future, how can we get more?

Whatever questions we have about finding our true purpose, the same crystal ball that didn’t work when we were high doesn’t when we’re clean either. Thankfully, more is revealed as we stay clean. Through the steps, we discover our values and convictions. For many of us, that means our purpose radically shifts, or we find one at last. Recovery gives us a chance to revisit goals that addiction interfered with, or we start from scratch. Hope helps us to believe we’re headed down the right path, and faith keeps our feet moving in that direction.

We find purpose (or many purposes, as time elapses) in NA, in a career, in relationships, in our communities, on a mountaintop, in a foreign land, or in sitting still. We learn to serve others more than our egos. We practice self-acceptance and model it for newer members who think that being okay with themselves is unattainable. Many of us also have—or regain and revitalize—our faith in a God who has a plan for us that we can’t predict, ardently believing that this plan is better than one we could create on our own. Others find purpose in a life guided by spiritual principles or believe the universe conspires in our favor, cheering us on. Having faith in finding and living our purpose takes practice. Recovery in NA provides us with tools to manage our discomfort with trial and error, impossible without plenty of open-mindedness and willingness along the journey.

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*I can’t predict the future, but I believe I have one. I will move in a direction and see where the path leads. It’s worth staying alive to find out.*
Purpose, Entry 2 of 7

What a joy it is to be part of something that not only saves people’s lives, but makes them worth living.

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Fellowship”

We’re brought together by desperation, so being alive and clean may seem like enough reason to be joyful at first. But wait, there’s more! Even in our earliest days clean, we may have some inkling that we are part of something special. We may wonder, am I being indoctrinated into a cult, but with no discernable leader and no dogma to adhere to, we can rule that out. We decide to keep coming back and just play along as we see what these dope fiends are up to.

So, we’re clean! Now what? We come across this passage in the Basic Text: “When the drugs go, and the addict works the program, wonderful things happen.” I like the sound of that! We start to piece together what it means to “work the program” and find some practical advice in “What Can I Do?” — chapter five of the addicts’ owners manual. We go to lots of meetings without using between them—even on holidays! We get a home group, a sponsor, and a service commitment, and we find ourselves surrounded by people who take great joy in our progress. They want nothing from us, just good things for us. They offer us words of encouragement, lessons from their own lives, and epic tales of shenanigans with other members. They point out our growth and say they’re happy, grateful, and even honored to be a part of our miracle. We smile and nod and our eyes start leaking. All we can think is, this NA thing . . . is a trip.

Our lives are transformed as we become both the helpers and the helped. Now we’re those people with stories and kindness for the newer folks and find great joy in being a part of their miracle. Our mentors continue to evolve, too, and they allow us to help them. We’ve found a purpose and a framework for living. We are free from active addiction, and although that’s NA’s only promise, that freedom opens up in unimaginably beautiful ways.

I will soak up the vitality around me and be grateful to have found a life with purpose.
Purpose, Entry 3 of 7

*Helping others is perhaps the highest aspiration of the human heart and something we have been entrusted with as a result of a higher power working in our lives.*

—*It Works*, Step Twelve

Many of us wanted to help others before getting clean, but once we started using, doing so became difficult. One member described it this way: “My heart aspired to help people, but my brain never got the memo!” At some point in early recovery, many of us have the experience of sharing and then seeing another member relate. Maybe they nod in agreement, or they shake their head in shared amusement or disgust at the insidiousness and insanity of our disease. Maybe they vocalize—“that’s right!”—or shed a tear. However they do it, they let us know that they know that we know—we share in the knowledge of the disease, and we share our experience with recovery, too.

This is how we get clean and stay clean—the therapeutic value of one addict helping another. We share experience, strength, and hope; we share tea and coffee; we share the joy of staying clean and the pain of losing fellow addicts. We do it together. At many points along the way, we are reminded of our purpose for being here and being together. Maybe it’s when a nonmember asks, “Why do you still go to those meetings?” We might even wonder, *yeah, why do I?* Then we remember—we are uniquely qualified to help other addicts, and helping addicts gives us purpose and keeps us clean.

When we go through something clean—the loss of a loved one, an unintended pregnancy, parents with dementia, learning to skateboard—we are rarely the first ones to do so. We share what we’re going through so others can help us. Then we share what we went through so we can help others. Yes, we’re each other’s eyes and ears; sometimes we are also each other’s trailblazers, coaches, older siblings. We have a reason for being here. And that reason is one another.

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*A sense of purpose can fill that void I tried to fill with drugs. I will find purpose by sharing with and helping another addict.*
We begin to feel connected to the world around us and our lives have purpose.
—Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Creative Action of the Spirit”

Disconnection is one of the hallmark features of addiction. Whether being disconnected leads to drug use, or the use of drugs causes us to lose connection, most of us ended up feeling pretty isolated and alienated by the time we first came to NA. Some of us feel connected right away when we get clean. Others keep coming back for months or years to get there—but when we stop using and start living the program, that sense of connection begins to grow.

“The members who immediately directed me to service helped me feel like I had purpose,” one member wrote. “They carried a message to me, and then right away they involved me in carrying a message to others. I became part of something bigger. I felt connected in a way I hadn’t felt before.”

What we connect to and what our purpose is may not be the same for every addict, or for every phase of recovery. Feeling reconnected to humanity by virtue of being an NA member is a big part of early recovery for many of us—and we find an abundance of meaning and purpose in sharing our recovery with other addicts. Usually, as long as we’re still clean and still coming to meetings, this sense of purpose stays with us. But more is available, too.

Many of us develop a sense of connection and purpose in other areas of our lives, as well. We may get involved in a particular religious practice, begin volunteering in our community, or find meaning and beauty in art, fashion, fitness, or a career. The opportunities to find purpose in our lives are as varied as our membership, and they need not diminish the sense of purpose we gain by sharing with others in NA. In fact, they often enhance what we have to offer.

Where addiction is isolation and alienation, recovery is connection and purpose. I will seek out greater connection to the world around me to deepen my sense of purpose in it.
Being able to focus on a primary purpose and work creatively toward it is so much part of our way of life that we may not realize how valued that is in the world at large.

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Bridging Two Worlds: Relationships Outside NA”

The idea that what we learn in recovery applies outside NA is not revolutionary or even surprising. There is plenty to be said about how we do things in NA—our tools, our principles, our primary orientation toward helping others—transfers easily to other contexts and is often appreciated. We have Steps that guide us, in essence, to clear the way so we can be of service to others. The principles within the Traditions challenge us to work with integrity, goodwill, and discernment in groups and within structures. Convening around a primary purpose helps us to stay oriented and in alignment with each other. The concept of “principles before personalities” guides us through conflict when it inevitably arises.

Each of us learns these transferable skills, embodying qualities that can support many different types of structures: a family, a business, a community or faith organization, even a one-on-one relationship, romantic or otherwise. Our value as members of NA extends to our value outside. Being oriented toward generosity, kindness, responsibility, perseverance, and of course gratitude in all our affairs enriches our lives and touches others’ lives. Some people outside of NA may know that we’re recovering from addiction, but others do not. Either way, what they often see is a person who is able to act with love rather than fear, can handle adversity, and is willing to help others when tragedy strikes.

As great as the above description sounds—and as true as it often is—none of this is possible without actually practicing the principles of NA and using the tools of our program. As we often declare in meetings, “it works if you work it.” But it doesn’t when we don’t. Working the Steps and Traditions helps to prepare us to serve beyond NA. And we know that when we make mistakes, in NA and outside of it, we always have each other’s experience, strength, and hope to rely on to help us get back on course.

How am I applying what I’ve been learning in NA to other parts of my life and what can I do today to further that purpose?
Purpose, Entry 6 of 7

As we seek our Higher Power’s will for us, we come to an understanding of our purpose. Spiritual awakening is a process. Maybe it is what the whole process is about.

—Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Creative Action of the Spirit”

Life before recovery was in steadfast pursuit of our addiction. We had purpose, that’s for sure! Now that we’re clean, we are still searching, still striving, but what we’re looking for and how we are pursuing it are quite different.

It may be worthwhile to ask ourselves right now, what is my purpose in life? and take a moment to listen for a response. Maybe we’ll write about it, share about it in our group, meditate on it, or ask our Higher Power directly. For some of us, the answer may come easily, as it’s something we’ve thought much about. We may have a specific practice of seeking the will of a power greater than us, or maybe we’re comfortable improvising in the moment. Many others will struggle with the question and with hearing, understanding, and articulating the answer. Still others of us may be seriously pondering this question for the first time clean.

Because we’re NA members, we may be of the mind that our purpose is already established: carrying the message of recovery to the addict who still suffers—and anything else is extraneous navel-gazing. Many of us believe that NA’s primary purpose aligns with ours but that seeking a life of fulfillment and living by spiritual principles extends further. But, to what exactly?

In NA, we talk (and read) a lot about “spiritual awakenings”—whether we call them that or not. Most of us would agree that living spiritually is both about what we do and about how we do it. Perhaps the “how” is even more consequential because our lives look so different from one another. Striving for integrity springs to mind here: being true to ourselves while acting by spiritual principles. Maybe we don’t have a specific answer, and maybe it will change and change again. Maybe the question is enough, and we’ll keep asking it.

I’m open to pursuing something different today. I want to be more awake and help others to wake up too. Beyond that, who knows?
Groups have come together to form service bodies that help them achieve their primary purpose. Service bodies have formed workgroups, boards, and committees to accomplish the tasks that support the groups.

—Guiding Principles, Tradition Nine, Opening Meditation

In our service bodies, we embrace Tradition Nine when we regularly consider our responsibilities to those we serve. By carrying out public relations service, maintaining H&I panels, hosting recovery events, and furthering NA’s reach in other ways through public relations efforts, we make it possible for groups to focus on providing an atmosphere of recovery for members. The purpose of our service bodies is an extension of our groups’ primary purpose.

In our personal recovery, considering the relationship between purpose and responsibility can be helpful, too. When we are in a meeting, for example, we might have several reasons for attending. We show up for our own recovery, to carry a message, for coffee or tea, or to see whether that cute person who was there last time came back. Whatever our reasons, thinking about purpose can help us practice responsibility. The meeting exists to create an atmosphere of recovery, so our responsibility in that space is to contribute to that atmosphere. Even if the cute person does show up!

The same is true for other areas of our lives. Family, work, school—each has a purpose that may or may not align completely with our own. However, there is usually a fair amount of overlap, and so we can practice responsibility by attending to that portion of our purpose that aligns with where we are at. We practice responsibility by looking for the overlap in purpose and focus our energy there. The more we practice, the better we get.

Fulfilling my purpose involves being responsible. I will consider my responsibilities in each area of my life and try to act accordingly.