

CD 702 Working with People
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AA 12-Step Meeting Summary

I attended an LGBTQ+ Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on the Lower East Side on January 24, 2023. I thought I was 10 minutes early, but when I arrived, thirteen people were already seated in a circle. I paused at the doorway, and when everyone looked at me, I asked if the group was “open.” They nodded and pointed to the empty seats, and I quietly sat down. Gideon was talking about Step 8. He articulately and captivatingly told his experience with making the list of people he had harmed and the process of becoming willing to make amends with those people. Everyday that he went to the yoga studio, he stole a towel. I learned later that a common “harm” alcoholics commit is a compulsion to steal, so most amends are made to people they stole from. Gideon had gone back to that yoga studio years later and asked to pay for the towels. When the manager told him to forget about it, he insisted on paying because taking the Step was important for his recovery.

After Gideon gave his “share,” Monica read the rules. Slurs against LGBTQ community are forbidden, each person gets 3 minutes to share, and no one is allowed to interrupt. Alice kept track of time and gave a one-minute countdown.

Each person (except one) proceeded to tell their story. Some told stories of their experience with Step 8 as a testimony from years ago, and others shuffled through their current struggle with making the list. The consistent note for each person was that making the list was scary, and for some it took years. But for each

person who had completed the list (and proceeded through Step 9 to make the amends), there was great victory. Many experienced immediate relief. Often the people of whom they needed to ask forgiveness either didn't remember what had been done, were quickly forgiving, or were just relieved that the person was still alive. A few had stories of people accepting their amends but asking never to see them again. In all the stories, whether they had been received well or not, each one agreed that it was a hard step but worth the breakthrough.

At the end of the meeting, Wanda asked Brian to lead us in a prayer of his choice, so we all stood in a circle and held hands and said the Serenity Prayer. As people were leaving, Mary came to me with three pamphlets and introduced herself. I told her I was amazed at how vulnerable each person is. Gideon explained that for each of them, it was a life-or-death situation; they *have* to be honest to recover. I asked if they talk about a different step each week. Mary explained that this is actually a closed group, a "Step Meeting," so they do discuss a step each week. I apologized profusely for intruding on a closed meeting, but she stopped me; it takes a lot for an alcoholic to darken their doorway, and without knowing my story, there's no way in hell they would turn me away. Even after she knew I'm not an alcoholic, she said I am welcome to come back any time.

What I noticed from Gideon's share, the alcoholics' testimonies, and the conversation with Mary and Gideon after the meeting was that each person had found themselves in a life-or-death situation and needed a systematic change of

lifestyle and life philosophy. They all *required* a life change. The steps in AA provide tangible actions and changes that provide safety, support, and options.

During the sharing time, Morgan cried at the joy he found with his AA group in New York and the dread he felt at returning to LA a few days later. As soon as the meeting was over, Wanda went to talk with him. I felt the kindred community this group has with one another. They are bonded by the life/death situation and a deeply vulnerable shared experience.

For the rest of the evening, I contemplated how the church can create this loving, intimate, safe environment to foster life change. I am neither an alcoholic nor gay, but I have never felt more welcomed to New York by a group of strangers. The keys to their meetings are (1) each person is working through steps, taking proactive measures for life change; (2) each person is committed to honesty and vulnerability; (3) it is a safe space governed by rules and expressly stated expectations; and (4) they share a life-or-death experience.

My pastor in Beijing insisted that our weekly small groups remain “closed” because he wanted to foster a safe space. The rules and closed nature of the groups, like the AA meetings, allowed us to be uniquely vulnerable. Through intentional discussion topics and awareness of our shared life/death experience in Jesus’s blood, those groups created the most life change I have ever experienced in church. I think I understand why now. Vulnerability through safety creates an atmosphere for facilitating life change.