

The Four Absolutes

by Clarence Snyder

Foreword

Spelled out as such, the Four Absolutes are not a formal part of our AA philosophy of life. Since this is true, some may claim the Absolutes should be ignored. This premise is approximately as sound as it would be to suggest that the Bible should be scuttled.

The Absolutes were borrowed from the Oxford Group Movement back in the days when our society was in its humble beginning. In those days our founders and their early colleagues were earnestly seeking for any and all sources of help to define and formulate suggestions that might guide us in the pursuit of a useful, happy, and significant sober life.

Because the Absolutes are not specifically repeated in our Steps or Traditions, some of us are inclined to forget them. Yet in many old time groups where the solid spirit of our fellowship is so strongly exemplified, the Absolutes receive frequent mention. Indeed, you often find a set of old placards, carefully preserved, which are trotted out for prominent display each meeting night.

There could be unanimity on the proposition that living our way of life must include not only an awareness but a constant striving toward greater achievement in the qualities which the Absolutes represent. Many who have lost the precious gift of sobriety would ascribe it to carelessness in seeking these objectives. If you will revisit the Twelve Steps with care, you will find the Four Absolutes form a thread which is discernible in a sober life of quality, every step of the glorious journey.

The Four Absolutes

Honesty.....Unselfishness.....Love.....Purity

We walked into this large group of which we had heard so much, but had never attended. From the vestibule we saw a placard on the corner of the far wall which said "Easy Does IT". We turned left to park our coat. We turned back and there on the other corner of the same wall was a twin placard which said, "First Things First". Then facing to the front of the room, high above the platform we saw in the largest letters of all, "But for the Grace of God". Then as our eyes descended, there directly on the front of the podium was another with four words, "Honesty, Unselfishness, Purity, and Love".

In the next ten minutes as we sat unnoticed in the last row waiting for the meeting to start, many thoughts tumbled through a mind that was really startled by this first face to face meeting with the four Absolutes for a very long time.

We started to grade ourselves fearlessly on our own progress toward these Absolutes through long years of sobriety. The score was a pitiful, lonely little score. We thought of

a fine lead recently heard in which a patient humble brother had told his story, and had mentioned his overwhelming sense of gratitude as an important ingredient of his fifteen years of sobriety.

And in listing things for which he was so grateful, he mentioned how comfortable it was to be completely honest. Certainly he meant nothing prideful. He simply meant that he told his wife and friends the truth as best he could, had no fishy stories to reconcile, was honest with money and material things, etc.

This was a truly grateful, humble fellow. Certainly he did not resemble the man pictured in the cartoon, speaking to a large audience, pounding on the table and with a jutting chin proclaiming in a loud voice that he had more humility than anyone there and could prove it.

But just think of "complete honesty". Is it not the eternal search for the truth which is endless, and in which none achieve perfection?

What do the four Absolutes mean to most of us? Words are like tools. Like any other tools they get rusty and corroded when not used. More importantly, we must familiarize ourselves with the tools, understand them, and ever improve our skill in their use. Else the end product, if any, is pathetically poor.

We thought of a dear friend in the fellowship, prone like other alcoholics to move quickly from one hobby or interest to another, without really doing much with any of them. (Does that sound like someone you know?) Once this friend decided that working with his hands would solve some problems, quiet his nerves, perhaps help him to achieve serenity and balance. So he reviewed an impressive collection of tool catalogues with friends already addicted to the woodworking hobby.

He bought a large expensive collection of tools, and a lot of equipment. He hired a carpenter to build a shop in his basement, install the equipment, and make custom-built racks to house the tools. But in the end not one shaving and not one tiny bit of sawdust graced its floor. The idle tools serve just as well did to keep our friend occupied while he doesn't go to meetings, do Twelfth Step work or engage in other happy activity in AA.

How many of you will be completely honest and admit that you have put the four Absolutes in the attic, a little rusty from non-use perhaps, but none the worse for wear? Give or take a little, how many of us who still maintain the workshop for the Absolutes, will admit that not too many shavings or much sawdust from our activity have ever graced its floor? Or even assuming that the activity has persisted, how many will admit that the end product did not win a prize for its quality?

Such lack of quality can only mean lack of objectives or lack of all-out effort toward such objectives. We must recognize the Absolutes as guideposts to the finest and highest objectives to mortal man. But recognition is not enough. We must use the tools.

Honesty

Over and over we must ask ourselves, "Is it true or is it false?" For honesty is the eternal search for truth. It is by far the most difficult of the four Absolutes, for anyone, but especially for us in this fellowship. The problem drinker develops genuine artistry in deceit. Too many (and we plead guilty) simply turn over a new leaf and relax. That is wrong. The real virtue in honesty lies in the persistent dedicated striving for it. There is no relaxed twilight zone, it's either full speed ahead constantly or it's not honesty we seek. And the unrelenting pursuit of truth will set you free, even if you don't quite catch up to it. We need not choose or pursue falsity. All we need is to relax our pursuit of truth, and falsity will find us.

The search for truth is the noblest expression of the soul. Let a human throw the engines of his soul into the doing or making of something good, and the instinct of workmanship alone will take care of his honesty. The noblest pleasure we can have is to find a great new truth and discard old prejudice. When not actively sought, truth seldom comes to light, but falsehood does. Truth is life and falsity is spiritual death. It's an everlasting, unrelenting instinct for truth that counts. Honesty is not a policy. It has to be a constant conscious state of mind.

Accuracy is close to being the twin brother of honesty, but inaccuracy and exaggeration are at least "kissing cousins" of dishonesty. We may bring ourselves to believe almost anything by rationalization, (another of our fine arts), and so it's well to begin and end our inquiry with the question, "Is it true?" Any man who loves to search for truth is precious to any fellowship or society. Any intended violation of honesty stabs the health of not only the doer but the whole fellowship. On the other hand if we are honest to the limit of our ability, the basic appetite for truth in others, which may be dormant but not dead, will rise majestically to join us. Like sobriety, it's the power of example that does the job.

It is much simpler to appear honest, than to be honest. We must strive to be in reality what we appear to be. It is easier to be honest with others than with ourselves. Our searching self-inventories help because the man who knows himself is at least on the doorstep of honesty. When we try to enhance our stature in the eyes of others, dishonesty is there in the shadows. When falsehood even creeps in, we are getting back on the merry-go-round because falsehoods not only disagree with truth, they quarrel with each other. Remember?

It is one thing to devoutly wish the truth may be on your side, and it is quite another to wish sincerely to be on the side of truth. Honesty would seem to be the toughest of our four absolutes and at the same time, the most exciting challenge. Our sobriety is a gift, but honesty is a grace that we must earn and constantly fight to protect and enlarge. "Is it true or false?". Let us make that a ceaseless question that we try to answer with all the sober strength and intelligence we have.

Unselfishness

At first blush, unselfishness would seem to be the simplest of all to understand, define and accomplish. But we have a long road to travel because ours was a real mastery of the exact opposite during our drinking days.

A little careful thought will show that unselfishness in its finest sense, the kind for which we must strive in our way of life, is not easy to reach or describe in detail. In the final analysis, it must gain for us the selflessness which is our spiritual cornerstone, the real significance of our anonymity.

Proceeding with the question method of digesting the absolute, we suggest you ask yourself over and over again in judging what you are about to do, say, think or decide, "How will this affect the other fellow?"

Our unselfishness must include not merely that we do for others, but that which we do for ourselves. I once heard an oldtimer say that this was a 100% selfish program in one respect, namely that we had to maintain our own sobriety and its quality before we could possibly help others in a maximum degree. Yet we know that we must give of ourselves to others in order to maintain our own sobriety, in a spirit of complete selflessness with no thought of reward. How do we put these two things together.

Well, for one thing, it points up that we shall gain in direct proportion to the real help we give others. How many of us make hospital calls simply because we think that we need to do it to stay sober? Those who think only of their own need and who reflect little on the question of doing the fellows at the hospital some genuine good, are missing the boat. We know, for we used to make hospital calls in much the same way that we took vitamin pills.

Then one day in our early sobriety, we were asked to call on a female patient. There weren't enough gals to go around in those days and the men were called in to help. Never will we forget the anxiety on the way to that nursing home. And after nearly two hours of earnest talk we left one of the noblest women we will ever meet, worried about whether we had helped, or hurt, or perhaps had accomplished nothing at all. Some of her questions stayed with us. We thought of better answers later on, and returned to see her several times.

We are helped on our long journey to unselfishness by our great mission of understanding which sometimes seems as precious as the gift of sobriety itself. But the quality cannot be confined alone to that which we do for others. We must be unselfish even in our pursuits of self-preservation. Not the least of our aid to others comes from the examples of our own lives.

Is there any protection against that first drink which equals our thought of what it may do to others, those whose unselfish love guided us in the beginning, and those whom we in turn guided later on? We are again reminded of the last verse of an anonymous poem:

"I must remember as I go
Though sober days, both high and low,
What I must always seem to be
For him who always follows me."

Love

We often learn more by questions, than by answers. Did you ever hear a question that caused you to think for days or even weeks? The questions which have no easy answer are often the key to the truth. However, in this series on the four Absolutes, we are concerned with the questions we should be asking ourselves over and over again in life. The integrity of our answers to these questions will determine the quality of our life, may even determine the continuance of our sobriety.

The old song tells us that love is a many splendored thing. In giving it we receive it. But the joy of receiving can never match the real thrill of giving. Consider that this great mission of love which is ours is seldom experienced by the non-alcoholic, and you have a new reason for gratitude. Few are privileged to save lives. Fewer have the rich experience of being God's helper in the gift of a second life. Love is a poor man's beginning toward God. We reach our twelfth step when we give love to the new man who is poor today, as we were poor yesterday. A man too proud to know he is poor, has turned away from God with or without alcohol. We have been there too. But if he has a drinking problem, we can show him the way through love, understanding and our own experience.

When we live for our own sobriety, we again become beggars in spiritual rags, blind once again with the dust of pride and self. Soon we shall be starving with the hunger of devouring ourselves, perhaps even lose sobriety, Love is "giving of yourself" and unless we do, our progress will be lost. Each one owes the gift of this second life of sobriety to every other human being he meets in the ceaseless presence of God, and especially to other alcoholics who still suffer. Not to give of himself brings the desolation of a new poverty to the sober alcoholic.

When we offer love, we offer our life; are we prepared to give it? When another offers us love, he offers his life; have we the grace to receive it? When love is offered, God is there; have we received Him. The will to love is God's will; have we taken the Third Step? Ask yourself, "Is this ugly or is it beautiful?" If it's truly beautiful then it is the way of love, it is the way of A.A., and it is the will of God as we understand Him.

Purity

Purity is simple to understand. Purity is flawless quality. Gerard Groot in his famous fourteenth century book of meditation, has an essay entitled, "Of Pure Mind and Simple Intention", in which he says, "By two wings a man is lifted up from things earthly, namely by Simplicity and Purity. Simplicity doth tend towards God; Purity doth apprehend and taste Him."

Purity is a quality of both the mind and the heart, or perhaps we should say the soul of a man. As far as the mind is concerned, it is a simple case of answering the question, "Is right, or is it wrong?" That should be easy for us. There is no twilight zone between right and wrong. Even in our drinking days we knew the difference. With most of us, knowing the difference was the cause or part of the cause of our drinking. We did not want to face the reality of doing wrong. It isn't in the realm of the mental aspects of purity that our problem lies. We can all answer the question quoted above to the best of our ability and get the correct answer.

It's in the realm of the heart and spirit that we face difficulty. We know which is right, but do we have the dedicated will to do it? Just as a real desire to stop drinking must exist to make our way of life effective for us, so we must have a determined desire to do that which we know is right, if we are to achieve any measurable degree of purity. It has been well said that intelligence is discipline. In other words knowledge means little until it goes into action. We knew we should not take the first drink, remember? Until we translate our knowledge into the action of our own lives, the value of it is non-existent. We are not intelligent under such circumstances. So it is with the decency of our lives. We know what is right, but unless we do it, the knowledge is a haunting vacuum.

In discussing unselfishness we mentioned that it includes more than just doing for others. We repeat that it includes all that we do, since much of our help to others comes through our own example. Nowhere is this more true than in the decency and rightness of our life. Were we to contemplate the peace and contentment that a pure conscience would bring to us, and the joy and help that it would bring to others, we would be more determined about our spiritual progress. If our surrender under the Third Step has not been absolute, perhaps we should give the Eleventh Step more attention. If you have turned your will and your life over to God as you understand Him, purity will come to you in due course because God is Good. Let us not just tend toward God, let us taste of him.

In Purity as in Honesty the virtue lies in our striving. And like seeking the truth, giving our all in its constant pursuit, will make us free even though we may never quite catch up to it. Such pursuit is a thrilling and challenging journey. The journey is just as important as the destination, however slow it may seem. As Goethe says: "In living as in knowing be intent upon the purest way."

The Absolutes - A Summary

Our consideration of the absolutes individually leads to a few conclusions. The Twelve Steps represent our philosophy. The Absolutes represent our objectives in self-help, and the means to attain them. Honesty, being the ceaseless search for truth, is our most difficult and yet most challenging objective. It is a long road for anyone, but a longer road for us to find the truth. Purity is easy to determine. We know what is right and wrong. Our problem here is the unrelenting desire to do that which is right. Unselfishness is the stream in which our sober life must flow, the boulevard down which we march triumphantly by the grace of God, ever alert against being sidetracked into a dark obscure alley along the way. Our unselfishness must penetrate our whole life, not just our deeds

for others, for the greatest gift we bestow on others is the example of our own life as a whole. Love is the medium, the blood of the good life, which circulates and keeps alive its worth and beauty. It is not only our circulatory system within ourselves, but it is our medium of communication to others.

The real virtue is in our striving for these Absolutes. It is a never-ending journey, and our joy and happiness must come each step of the way, not at the end because it is endless. Cicero said, "if you pursue good with labor, the labor passes and the good remains, but if you court evil through pleasure, the pleasure passes and the evil remains." Our life is a diary in which we mean to write one story, and usually write quite another. It is when we compare the two that we have our humblest hour. But let's compare through our self-inventory and make today a new day. Men who know themselves, have at least ceased to be fools. Remember if you follow the Golden Rule, it's always your move too. To love what is true and right and not to do it, is in reality not to love it, and we are trying to face reality, remember? The art of living in truth and right is the finest of fine arts, and like any fine art, must be learned slowly and practiced with incessant care.

We must approach this objective of the Absolutes humbly. We pray for these things and sometimes forget that these virtues must be earned. The gates of wisdom and truth are closed to those wise in their conceit, but ever open to the humble and the teachable. To discover what is true and to practice what is good are the two highest aims in life. If we would be humble, we should not stoop, but rather we should stand to our fullest height, close to our Higher Power that shows us what the smallness of our greatness is.

Remember our four questions, "Is it true or false?", "Is it right or wrong?", "How will this affect the other fellow?", and "Is it ugly or beautiful?". Answering these queries every day with absolute integrity, and following the dictates of those answers one day at a time, will surely lead us well on our journey toward absorbing and applying the Absolutes.