The Wisdom of the Rooms

12 Months of Reflections for People in Recovery

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INTRODUCTION

The rooms of recovery are filled with a wealth of collective spiritual and practical wisdom that is revealed in the hundreds of quotes and sayings heard daily in meetings around the world. Inspiring and insightful, these quotes help deepen the experience of recovery, enrich the spiritual journey, and provide a roadmap for living life one day at a time. The quotes in this volume have been collected from various Twelve Step meetings and programs and are a vital part of the spiritual tool kit each member of the Fellowship carries.

The reflections in this volume are written in the familiar format of “What it was like, what happened, and what it’s like now.” Each daily reflection reveals the experience, strength, and hope members get from working the Twelve Steps and offers insight into what the program is, and how—by working it—the miracle of recovery and spiritual transformation takes place. Familiar topics such as sponsorship, commitments, going to meetings, and of course, the challenges and gifts of working the Twelve Steps are all here. The quotes and meditations also reflect the experience of both newcomers and old-timers alike, and members will invariably find parts of their own journey within these pages.

As with all Twelve Step programs, and with all the sharing that takes place within the meetings, the reflections collected here are
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solely based on the experiences of individual members taking the Steps and working the program. These reflections are not intended to speak for the program itself but rather are presented as personal interpretations and offered in the spirit of giving back.

We hope you find the courage, strength, and purpose you need, just when you need it, in *The Wisdom of the Rooms*. And if you do, then please pass on to others the encouragement and insights you find here. Remember, we don’t do this alone.
Before recovery, I often wondered why little things caused such big reactions in me. I was often filled with rage when somebody drove too slowly, or I hurt for days over someone’s negative comments about me. Other things that didn’t go my way often caused oversized reactions, leaving me confused and resentful. I suffered many painful emotional hangovers from these events, and this only fueled my drinking—which led to a different kind of hangover.

By doing my Step work, I began to untangle the strings of my emotional past. Through journaling and inventories, I learned to look beyond these events and to the real causes of my feelings. What I uncovered were the old wounds and hurts from long ago, the historical causes and conditions of my hysterical reactions. Once I recognized that events were merely buttons triggering old feelings, my real emotional recovery began.

Today, I recognize uncomfortable feelings for what they are: guides into emotional areas that still need healing. I use questions to help me deal with these old wounds. “What is really behind this reaction?” “What can I do, right now, to soothe myself?” Where is the path to recovery here?” These kinds of questions are the tools I use to help me heal, and so avoid the bigger-than-life reactions that used to make my life unmanageable. Today, I uncover, discover, and discard those old hurts.
FEBRUARY 4

“When I get the flu, I forget I was ever healthy.”

I’ve heard that the “ism” in alcoholism can stand for many things, but my favorite is incredibly short memory. In sobriety, this presents a double problem. First, having a disease that is constantly telling me I don’t have it is hard enough, but because of its incredibly short memory, I also forget how bad things were. The trouble, the demoralization and the hopelessness are all quickly forgotten when my memories are painted with the brush of alcoholism.

Second, my incredibly short memory also quickly forgets the good times I’ve had in sobriety, the possibilities, and the hope I felt even a few hours ago. An event like getting a cold or waking up in a bad mood—or other minor things—can trigger my alcoholism, and the vibrant color of my life quickly drains, leaving me in a black and barren place. With no hope for the future, and no memory of the painful past, alcoholism has me right where it wants me.

This is why I continue going to meetings. In meetings, I get the constant outside reminder of what it was like, what happened, and what it’s like now. I get to hear the various parts of my story come out of the mouths of others, and suddenly my memory returns—it was bad, and I belong here. I am also reminded of the hope and possibilities I have as I see and participate in the miracles happening to others. And that’s when the miracle of recovery happens for me, too.
Legend has it that the deepest wisdom was once freely available to man, but he ignored it. The Gods, growing tired of this, decided to hide this wisdom so that only those determined to use it would search for it and find it. They considered hiding it on the tallest mountain, then underneath the deepest sea, and even burying it in the earth, but they decided that man would eventually stumble upon it. Finally, they decided on the perfect place, inside man himself, a place he would never think to look.

This certainly describes me before recovery. I was constantly searching outside of myself for the answers to my life. I was convinced the right job, the right relationship, or more money would fill the hole I had inside me. Eventually I turned to drugs and alcohol, thinking the temporary relief I got would work, but it never did. In the end, I didn’t know where to look anymore, and once alcohol stopped working, I entered recovery.

I remember the first time I heard this quote: “If you don’t go within, you go without.” My sponsor explained that it meant not only were all the answers inside of me, but that if I didn’t go inside for them, then I would keep searching outside of myself and would continue to go without the solutions. It has taken years for me to consistently search within—the Gods did find the perfect hiding place! Each time I go within, however, the wisdom is there waiting for me. Now I know what they mean in the program when they say, “It’s an inside job.”
What a relief it was when I heard this quote for the first time. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what’s best for you, a lot of energy trying to arrange things for you, and a lot of time worrying about what’s going to happen to you. In other words, I was pretty sure that I knew what was best for everyone else, and I felt like it was my job to bring that about.

When I heard this quote, it restored me to my proper role in your (and everyone else’s) life. It relieved me of a lot of responsibility. It reminded me that you have your own path and that my role is to support and love you, not direct and control you. And it relieved me of responsibility by reminding me that you have a force in your life far greater in power and wisdom than me, and that is your Higher Power.

Once I stopped playing God, I stopped trying to direct life and instead learned to let go and let God. Today, when I worry about the challenges those I love and care about are going through, I recognize that I can be of the most service simply by being there for them, by helping them, and by loving them. But their ultimate solace, strength, and hope will always come from their own Higher Power. Today, I let go and let God work in my life and in the lives of others.
I remember sitting in meeting after meeting hearing people describe their concept of God. The one that resonated with me the most wasn’t a God who caused or allowed good or bad things to happen, or who punished or rewarded behavior, but rather the concept of a peaceful river. One woman spoke of her God whose love and peace flowed like a river, and the river was always there. It was always available to her as a constant source of serenity, understanding, and forgiveness.

She shared that whenever she was feeling scared, agitated, or discontented, it was a sure sign that she had wandered away from the river of God. The further she strayed and got caught up in chasing people, property, or prestige, the worse she felt. Sometimes she traveled for days and would find herself lost, seemingly alone, and quite afraid.

During those times, she needed only to stop and listen for the distant sound of the river. Immediately she would make her way back, and as she drew closer, the familiar feelings of peace and comfort would return. Once she was back at the river’s edge, serenity returned, and she was filled with gratitude knowing that God’s grace and love were always available to her. For me, the presence of God is like this river. And I know that if I’m feeling far away from God, then I’m the one who has moved.
How much of my time and energy have I spent worrying about what other people think of me? “Too much,” is the short answer. Before recovery, I had few boundaries and little sense of self. How I felt about myself and my life was largely determined by whether other people approved of me or not. With no internal awareness, other people’s likes and dislikes, moods and opinions were the compass I used to evaluate and direct my emotional life. This exhausted me and contributed to the bottom that drove me into the program.

Thank God for recovery through the Twelve Steps. In particular, while writing my Fourth Step inventory, the “my part” fourth column, I found the freedom and encouragement to discover and validate my own feelings. This process continued as my sponsor helped me take the focus off others and taught me to look within for my own truth. At first this was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable process, but it was the only path to the security, confidence, and peace I had always craved.

Today, I’ve come to honor and welcome my feelings, and I now trust and rely on them as the ultimate validation for my sense of self. I recognize that other people have their own thoughts and opinions, and they are valid for them. But today, there is a boundary between the two, and my opinion and acceptance of myself are no longer linked to other people’s approval. Today, I enjoy the freedom and empowerment that come from respecting, and even loving, myself.
“My recovery changed when I forever gave up the hope of having a different past.”

I have spent a lot of time thinking about my past—alternately feeling sorry for myself or being outraged by the wrongs—real or imagined—that were done to me. A constant theme in my thinking is how much different, better, and happier I would be if only I hadn’t had these parents, or these stepparents, or these siblings, and so on. My angst over my past fed resentments that fueled my alcoholism, and that nearly ruined my future.

But it will never be different. My past will always be my past, and, good or bad, it is uniquely mine. When I got to the program I was taught that in recovery we stop fighting everybody and everything; in other words, we surrender. At first I saw surrender as a sign of weakness, but soon I found it to be the path to freedom. By releasing myself from the pain of my past, I could see it in a new light, and the miracle of my recovery had begun.

By working the program, I am able to make peace with my past, to look at my part, and see the lessons and gifts it has to offer. And what I find is that no matter how painful or unjust my past was, with time I could see how valuable my experiences are, and how I can use them to help another. A therapist once told me, “Our deepest wounds, integrated, become our greatest power.” Once I have healed my past, I begin to see how it can help heal someone else’s.
MAY 10

“Anger and resentment are masks for fear.”

When I came into the program, I was pretty angry. With the alcohol gone, I very quickly got in touch with my feelings, and for me that meant my anger quickly turned into rage. Oh, and resentments—I had a lot of those as well. Without having developed the spiritual tools to deal with my feelings yet, I soon became defiant. You could say I wasn’t very fun to be around.

As I began working my way through the program, I learned in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions book that we are driven by a hundred forms of self-centered fear. After doing a thorough Fourth Step that included a fear inventory, I found I was driven by way more than just a hundred! It took years, though, for me to realize the connection between my fears and the anger and resentment I felt.

Today, I not only see the connection, but I feel it all the time. In fact, today I know that whenever I’m feeling uncomfortable, impatient, quick to snap at people, or just generally irritable, I’m usually in fear of something. The good news is that now I have a solution. Today, when I’m feeling angry or resentful, I stop and ask myself what I’m afraid of. Doing this allows me to take the mask off my fears and allows my Higher Power to present a solution.
AUGUST 12

“The way to make a mountain out of a mole hill is to add dirt.”

It used to be that anything that went wrong—or didn’t go my way—easily became an impending disaster. Toothache? Must be a root canal. Boss not smiling? Probably going to get fired. Left to myself, my incessant negative thinking was quick to add dirt to any mole hill until the mountain of imaginary evidence overwhelmed me.

When I entered recovery, my sponsor was quick to point out a few tools I might find useful for my distorted thinking. The first was, “One day at a time.” He asked me, “You’re not having a root canal, and you aren’t being fired today, are you?” “No,” I grudgingly replied. “Then take it easy,” he suggested. Next, he taught me, “Take the next indicated action.” Calling my dentist was a manageable action, whereas worrying endlessly about an imagined root canal wasn’t. Using these and other tools of recovery helped restore me to sanity.

Today, I’m quick to recognize a mole hill when one comes up, and I have the tools to keep it from becoming a mountain. My three favorites are to remember that (1) there is a solution, (2) whatever is happening is temporary, and (3) God is in charge. By focusing on God, and not the problem, I get to experience serenity while the situation sorts itself out—as it always does. And by not adding dirt to the mole hill, I avoid the imaginary mountain that used to make my life unmanageable.
I remember how bad things were before recovery, and how easy it was for me to make them worse. If my job wasn’t going well, I’d cop an attitude, show up late, or start slacking off (more than I already was). If my relationship wasn’t going the way I thought it should, I’d shut down and withhold—all with the justified thought, I’ll show her. No matter what was going wrong, I always found a way to make it worse.

When I entered recovery, my sponsor taught me that what happened in my life was my responsibility. He showed me how I had a part in everything that happened to me and how my solutions often became worse than the original problem. It took many years for me to accept this and many more to learn how to make better choices. Thank God I had the Twelve Steps to teach me how.

I have often heard people say that the program was the life manual they wish they would have had when growing up. I completely relate to this, because now I, too, know how to handle situations that used to baffle me. Best of all, though, by staying focused on my part, I know how to make things better. Today, I have a choice between making the situations in my life better or worse, and most of the time I make the right choice.
When I was in school we would spend weeks, and sometimes even whole semesters, preparing to take tests. I remember studying lesson plans and course outlines, reading and highlighting books and taking chapter quizzes, and attending lectures and taking copious notes. I studied this material all in preparation for midterms and finals. How I did on these tests depended on how well I studied the lessons beforehand.

In life, it’s quite a different story. We get the test first, and then it’s up to us to learn the lesson. And while this may be tough, what’s worse is that if we don’t learn the lesson, we get another test, then another, and another, until we learn the lesson. This is something I never understood while I was in the fog of my drinking, and because of it I seemed to end up in the same bad situations over and over again.

One of the things I love about recovery is that I’ve been taught to look for and learn the lesson. Today, when I get a test I immediately look for my part, examine my motives, and look for how I can either make amends or act better the next time. This is called a daily Tenth Step inventory, and it ensures that I learn the lesson quickly. Life may still be tough sometimes, and the test may still come first, but now I know how to learn the lesson to avoid having to take the test again.
“What Step are you on?”

Before recovery, I had very few tools to handle the problems, challenges, and situations in my life. And the tools I did have weren’t very helpful. My go-to solution was drinking. Whether things were going well (rarely) or poorly (more often the case), I escaped into a bottle of alcohol. It didn’t take long for this solution to become part of, and then the main, problem in my life. Out of options, I surrendered and entered the program.

Once in recovery, I was given a whole treasure chest of new solutions. These were spiritually based tools that fit into what my sponsor called my “spiritual tool kit.” They included things like working the Twelve Steps, taking commitments, reaching my hand out to others, praying and meditating, and so on. These new tools were incredibly helpful in changing my life for the better, but I soon learned something very important: They only worked when I worked them.

Throughout my recovery, I have found that it is easy to slide back into old behaviors, and that whenever I do, I start to experience my old feelings again. This isn’t a good thing. Whenever I find myself on my pity pot, wondering, “Where’s mine?” my sponsor brings me back to the solution. He simply asks, “What Step are you on?” When I then ask myself which Step applies to the current situation I’m obsessing over, I see the way out. The tools of a gratitude list, calling another, working the Eleventh Step, and so forth never fail to restore me to sanity. Whenever people are struggling in recovery, I know to ask them what Step they are on.
As I was leaving a meeting at a church near my home the other night, I saw one of our members bring his cigarette onto the church parking lot (smoking is not allowed on church property) and then throw it on the ground as he got into his car and drove away. This made me angry as I thought about how this would reflect on the rest of us, and I wondered how he could be so self-centered and insensitive.

About a week later, I found myself at my bank dealing with an online banking error. I was resentful I had to take the time out of my day, indignant they hadn’t been able to fix it over the phone, and I was generally a pain in the ass to the guy who was trying to help me. After he resolved the issue and I calmed down, I thought about the kind of example I was setting and quickly made amends to him for my behavior.

On the way home, I thought about Step Twelve and the importance of practicing these principles in all our affairs. I realized how easy it is for me to still be self-centered and insensitive, and how the Tenth Step helps me guard against these character defects. I also realized that I have a responsibility to the program because I am an example of us all. Today, I work all the Steps to the best of my ability because I know that I may be the only Big Book anyone ever reads.
For years, I hoarded all the good that was inside me. The capacity I had to be of service, to care for others, and to truly make a difference in other people’s lives I diverted to serve and advance my own selfish needs and wants. When you needed help, my first thought was, What’s in it for me? If I couldn’t find a compelling answer to that question, I wouldn’t bother to extend myself. This attitude left me barren of feeling, alone, and self-destructive.

In early recovery, I was still pretty shut down and unwilling to participate. When others offered help, I was suspicious of their motives. What’s in it for them? was my reaction, and I remained distrustful. It took contrary action for me to follow my sponsor’s direction to be of service at meetings and to take commitments like greeting people, cleaning up afterward, or going out to fellowship. Although I was convinced I’d get nothing out of it, over time I found I was wrong.

There is a saying in the rooms that recovery is simply a matter of one alcoholic helping another. The miracle of the program is that this simple act of giving, without the expectation of getting anything back, is how it all works. The innate capacity in us to love, give, and be of service reflects the same qualities of the God within us all. The healing comes from letting this energy of God out, rather than damming it in to benefit ourselves. As the poet Robert Browning said, the ultimate goal of us all is to “set the imprisoned splendor free.” And that’s why today, it’s not so much about letting God in, but letting God out.
Each pearl of wisdom in this book of daily recovery inspiration provides just what readers need to hear, when they need to hear it.

This is more than just a daily meditation book—this is a book of Twelve Step quotes and daily reflections that come right from the meeting rooms of recovery. Here are the “aha” moments shared by people in the program—the ones we hear in meetings that offer us instant relief and revelation—the ones we wish we had written down and saved. Now you have them all at your fingertips.

Quotes like, “Humility is not thinking less about yourself, but rather thinking about yourself less,” and “There are no victims, only volunteers—you always have a choice,” and “I can’t do God’s will, my way,” plus hundreds of others those of us in the Fellowship use to develop our practice of daily meditation and deepen our experience in the program.

Each timeless piece of recovery wisdom is followed by a thought-provoking reflection on the challenges, blessings, and growth that occurs in recovery, and the God shots we rely on to live a life that is happy, joyous, and free.

These quotes—by newcomers as well as old timers—offer people in recovery the experience, strength, and hope they need, just when they need it: one day at a time.

“A warm and meaningful book, delightful and enlightening; it will help anyone who is looking to strengthen their connection to God, to themselves, and to others. Highly recommended.”

—Charles L. Whitfield, M.D., author of Healing the Child Within

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