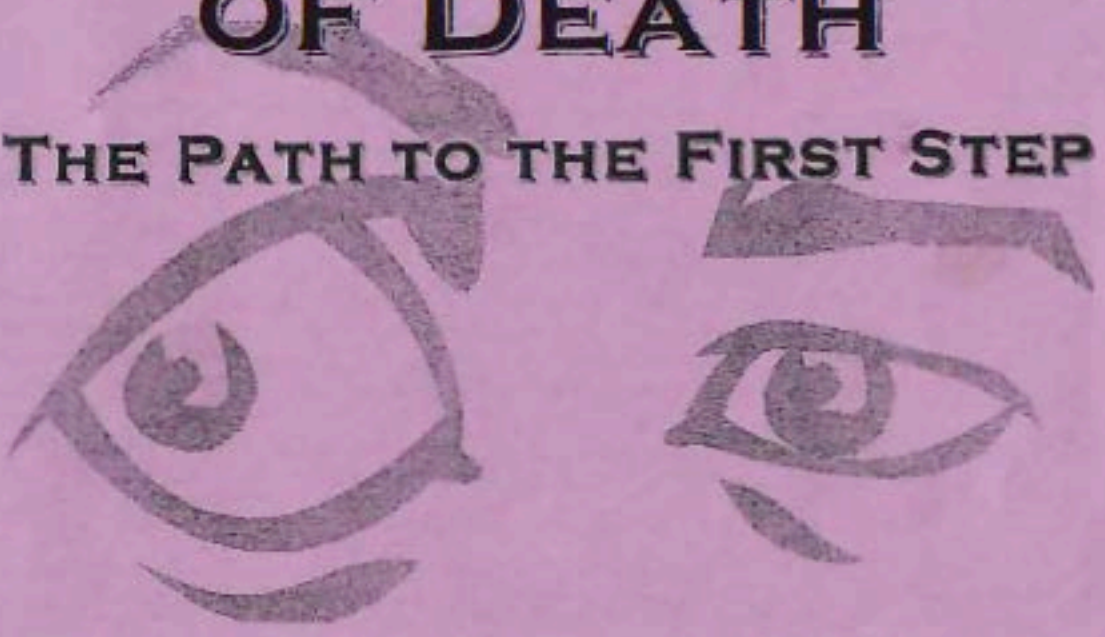
The Sentence of Death

The Path to the First Step



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Haymarket Center is a comprehensive alcohol and other drug treatment center founded in 1975 by Monsignor Ignatius McDermott and Dr. James West. The mission of Haymarket Center is: *To aid people with chemical dependency in their recovery, by providing them with a continuum of optimal professional care that is responsive to the identified needs of the community.*

Haymarket Center is at five locations in the Chicago Metropolitan Area. The main location is at 932 West Washington Boulevard, Chicago, Illinois 60607. If you have any questions about our programs, you may write, call us at 312-226-7984 or fax us at 312-226-8048.

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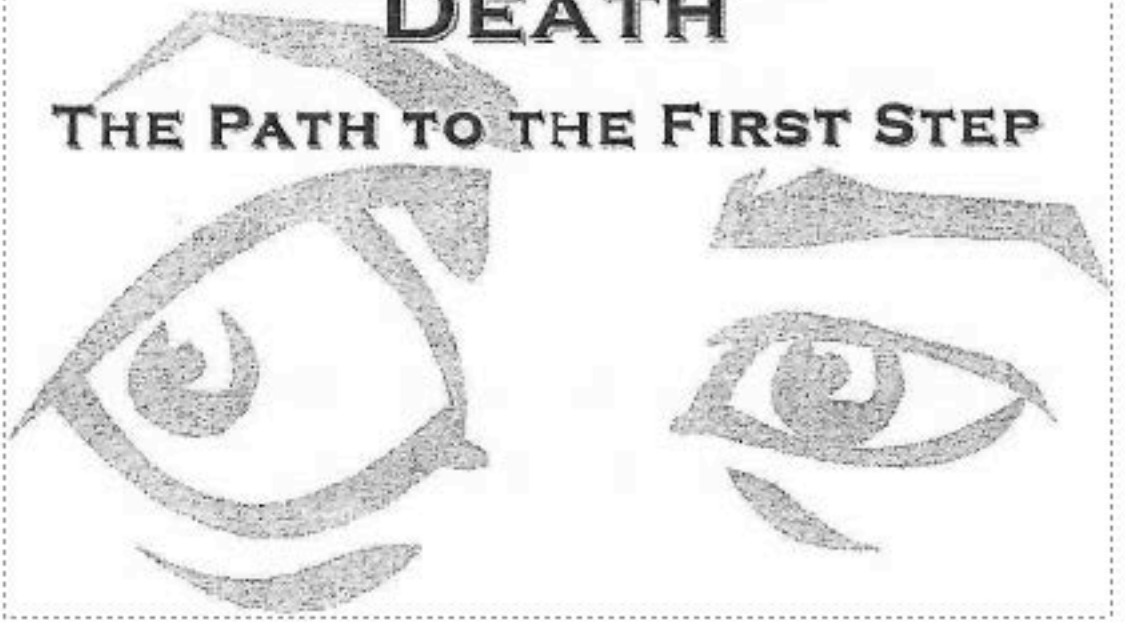

It's difficult, if not impossible,
to have faith in God
if you have *too much* faith in yourself.

Formula for failure:
Try to please everybody.

Wisdom is learned more from failure
than from success.

People don't accidentally stumble into failure.
They feel their way into it.

Introduction

While working on this topic a friend asked, "Just what does the title, 'The Sentence of Death,' mean?" Well, I explained, "There are two ways to think of this: 1. Getting to the place of willingness to see the first step through to the second step initially feels like a sentence of death, 2. To truly work the first step means that we become willing to put to death the illusion of being able to control our life. Either way, it feels like getting a death sentence."

When thinking about the first step it sure is easy to focus my attention on how I approached the step for the very first time. The range of feelings can be wide and deep. I find it easy to look at the step from this side of recovery and from the distance that I am from that difficult beginning. But lingering there in my thoughts usually causes me to derive a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

I'll dwell on these thoughts and feelings because it makes me feel good to contemplate how far I've come since those days of struggle, pain, heartache, and fear. Then my thoughts wander to the gratitude I sense towards God for all that he has done for me. Following these thoughts come feelings of joy that those days are now behind me. I am so grateful that I have weathered the storm of those days and am now able to bask in the sunlight of a rather fully developed spiritual life. God is good. Life is good—at least much better than it was in those days.

"Wait a minute, Bill!! Get out of your dream world and come back to reality!

"So Bill, you think that the first step is basically for those newcomers who are still floundering around trying to somehow grasp the reality of what's happened? That's a trap that's easy to fall into; the idea that the steps simply get you from one level to another by climbing them once; dream on."

These kinds of fantasies are the result of not getting it into your gut that the steps are a process that we must learn to inculcate (inject, instill, beat, repeat, hammer, and do over and over and over) into the fabric of our life. The steps are not like an instruction sheet for the assembly of a set of dresser drawers—used only once and discarded after assembling the dresser. Instead, they are the description of a process that must become our practiced way of living.

Now, I know that you don't view the steps in that way—at least if directly questioned about it. But in your heart of hearts; when no one is watching; when you are quietly contemplating your life and recovery, *is it possible* that there are times when this pattern of thought begins to knock at the door of your mind? Of course it's possible. You wouldn't be normal if it didn't.

"But I'm sold out to the program," you say. Of course you are, but having a thought is not the problem; it's only a temptation. The problem comes when you begin to entertain the thought; that's when trouble begins. To entertain a thought means that you spend time focused on the thought wondering if it's true; wondering if you have really arrived at that level of capability. This is opening the door to the thought instead of keeping the door closed and saying, "Go away!".

The first step, as with each of the other eleven steps, is part of the ongoing process of changing the way we think, feel and act in all areas of our life. Practically, we will never exhaust the process.

This means that examining the use of the first step is more than simply relating to the behavior problem(s) of an addiction. The behavior involved in an addiction is only one of many manifestations of the heart of an addiction. The heart of an addiction is comprised of two parts: 1. a disorder of our thinking and 2. a closed system of belief. These two work together keeping us enmeshed in our addiction of choice.

To complicate the issue even further, as you progress in recovery, you face different and more serious life issues. Continuing in recovery becomes more and more difficult, not easier. As the sun shines on the earth bringing light and unveiling the darkness, so God's Spirit shines into your soul. There are dark recesses that may be hidden from your consciousness, but they are not hidden from him. The cleansing, purifying work of light must go on. So God is always a work in your life; there is always a deeper level in your life that needs work.

For most of us this process causes us to be scared to death. You are able to effectively deal with the fear because you already have experienced the release and greater freedom that comes as a result of allowing God to continue the work he has already begun in you. And for many, the personal relationship they've gained with God by working the steps gives them confidence in God's love and ability to make appropriate changes in their life.

If you are uncertain about the issues God is working on in your life, ask him. As you seek God's leading, he will convict, cleanse, and set you free.

In this booklet, I will examine some of the issues that keep us from getting to the first step. It doesn't matter whether it's the first time the consequences of our active addiction shove us toward the step or if it's an issue that has arisen much later down the road into recovery. The internal resistance is eerily similar each time we're faced with another destructive aspect of our character.

I will discuss the reasons—as I see them—that addiction treatment universally has such a poor rate of recovery. One of the reasons has to do with not clearly understanding the natural person, their beliefs, thought patterns, and the lies, myths, and deceptions they are prone to.

Additionally, I will examine the two basic choices we have: keep trying to do better or become willing to seek some help outside of ourselves. Finally, I will discuss the strategies that result from each of these two choices. Of course, I hope that you will agree with me and choose the strategy that will lead you in the direction the steps lead you—towards genuine spiritual maturity.

Basic Addiction Issues

What exactly is an addiction?

A simple and direct answer is, "A personal commitment to maintain absolute control of our life so that we can be assured of feeling good."

On the surface this would appear to be leading us to see an addiction as primarily a behavior problem, "...maintain absolute control..." But this doesn't necessarily have to be referring to behavior. In fact, our brain controls all our behavior, and our mind controls our brain. Ultimately, although our behavior demonstrates any addiction in our life, the first problem we run into is the specific thought process involved in addictive living.

Thought Process

So, what we think about and how we think about it seems to sum up any addictive behavior. Compulsive, impulsive, and negative thoughts are the essence of addictive thinking.

Compulsive thoughts are those thoughts that you can't get out of your mind, like a radio ad jingle. These thoughts continuously press you to get the drugs; do the drugs; get more drugs; use the drugs... Around and around it goes without relief. Compulsive thoughts keep you focused on your addiction(s); there is no room for anything else.

Impulsive thoughts are those thoughts that seem to come into our mind out of nowhere. Spiritually, we can see that the Devil working through the Power of Sin that resides in our body makes this suggestion to our mind. It seems to come "out of the blue." This thought arrives and we just act on it without considering the consequences of the action.

An example of this: You are on your way to the grocery store. You have only one item to purchase, a gallon of 2% milk. You enter the store and see the sign on the back wall "Dairy." So you head for the sign, but in order to get there you have to go through the aisles where most of everything else is. As you walk through the aisle with your eyes on the dairy sign, you bump into something in the aisle. You stop. You look down and pick-up one of the items in the bin that's in the aisle. You suddenly get the idea that you could use this item; you take it. A "point-of-purchase display" has trapped you.

This is exactly what impulsive thoughts are all about. They attack us when we least expect it. They strongly demand we do things we hadn't been thinking about doing then.

Negative thoughts occur almost constantly as we are tuned into our addiction. Negative thoughts are present because negative thinking results in negative feelings. We need the negative thinking to be emotionally in a position to *need* our addiction to feel better. Remember, an addiction is a personal commitment to maintaining absolute control of our life so that we can *feel good.* The purpose of every obsessive-compulsive disorder (like an addiction) is to cause the person to feel good.

We can't change our feelings directly. "You shouldn't feel that way" is a foolish statement because the feelings are only the result of the thinking we've been doing. The right admonition would be, "Change that thinking by focusing on something that is true."

In the Christian New Testament we discover that Paul understood this principle well:

> Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies. (Philippians 4: 8 and 9 MSG)

The secret to recovery: We have the ability to focus our mind on anything we choose. In several letters, Paul commands his readers to set, fix, or focus their mind on something. God never commands us to do something we are incapable of doing. So he never directs us to change our feelings. But God does strongly urge us to change our thinking; this we can do.

OUR BELIEF SYSTEM

Additionally, our **belief system** is behind and directs our thought process; the second problem. Our belief system might be described as, "The world according to me." It's the whole set of decisions that we have made so many times that we no longer even bother to evaluate the thing, situation, or person.

An example of how your belief system work could be your response to being offered Brussels Sprouts. Almost everyone who has had any contact with Brussels sprouts has an opinion about

them. They either hate them or they love them. When either person is offered Brussels Sprouts they immediately accept or reject them. They feel like they simply respond; that no real decision has been made. But in fact, each has made a decision to accept or reject the offer of Brussels Sprouts. It doesn't seem like a decision because there is no active evaluation of the offer. We are simply responding as we have come to believe we should respond.

Just like our feelings, making a decision to change our belief system cannot simply change it. Our life experiences form our belief system. This is why we can't directly change our belief system. So when our belief system does change, we are usually not aware of it. Having our belief system challenged in any way causes us to become aware our belief system has changed.

For example: Your belief system has been changed from believing that mood-altering chemicals are helpful to believing that every one of your problems stems from your alcohol and/or drug use. You are unaware of the change that has taken place as you have surrendered more of your life to God; as you have focused your mind on recovery living; as you consistently chose recovery behavior over relapse behavior.

One day you are walking down the street and you meet an old drinking buddy or an old using partner. He or she tells you that they have missed you and that they have a large quantity of your drug of choice. How do you respond to that invitation to relapse?

At first your mind begins to evaluate what your old using partner or drinking buddy has just said. You no longer believe that using is helpful to your life. You believe just the opposite. So you respond to him or her by simply saying, "No thanks." Of course the other person goes ballistic. They get upset and try very hard to get you to use. Why? Your "No" causes him or her to realize their inability to say "No." We suddenly are aware of our changed belief system.

WHY DO MOST TREATMENT APPROACHES FAIL?

With this as a background, we can to see thinking of an addiction as simply a behavior problem means that we will focus our treatment attention on remodeling behavior. (Our treatment plans certainly focus on behavior because we must have a way to measure whether or not the client is somehow progressing towards recovery.) Unfortunately, we end up focusing on treating the symptom and basically ignoring the underlying cause.

So, it becomes fairly easy for those aiming at recovery to do a pretty good job of stopping the primary addictive behavior, but they regularly feel a risk of relapsing. The worst part, they accept this as normal in recovery. Either the pressure to drink and/or use becomes so great that they relapse into their primary addiction or they slide off into another addictive behavior. Unfortunately, if the latter occurs and behavior alone is the focus, everyone including the person seeking recovery can think that he or she is still recovering when they are not. (After all, they're not drinking or using are they?)

Several years ago, the Secretary of State realized that counting the number of times an offender attended recovery meetings meant very little; it couldn't accurately predict recovery. So, the criteria for getting a drivers license back was changed to demonstrating recovery. Attitudes and ways of thinking about life demonstrate genuine recovery.

As a rookie counselor, I had a client who was cooperative and religious. He was a manufactures representative, and traveled extensively throughout the states east of the Mississippi River. Before he left treatment he got a copy of the Alcoholics Anonymous Directory for the Eastern United States. He left treatment with a specific plan regarding what meetings he was going to attend and a very positive attitude toward applying the 12 Steps to his life.

All seemed to be going well. When he was in town, he would faithfully attend the aftercare group to which he was assigned. He sounded like he was living in recovery; that is until about 4½ months after discharge from the inpatient program; he called me sounding terrible. He had relapsed and could not stop drinking for a minimum of 24 hours; I urged him to come in for detox. He agreed.

While he was with us in detox, I talked with him several times. He could not figure out what had happened; neither could I. Looking back, that's not a surprise. At the time I did not really understand the causes or the mechanics of relapse. But as we talked and talked, I came to realize that I had never helped him understand the 12 Steps and how to apply them to his life. And I certainly never helped him understand the purpose of the 12 Step groups or how to use them to grow in recovery.

His failing? He didn't go to the proverbial "90 in 90" meetings; he went to 108 meetings in his first 90 days. He had no idea what to do when he got to the meeting; so he simply went to "get his

ticket punched." I had failed him by falling short in giving him all that he needed to successfully enter recovery.

Since then, I have discovered that this more common than not. After that unfortunate failure, I began deliberately working with chronic relapsers. I wanted to learn all that I could so I would be able to give each addict I worked with the basic required information about entering into a continuing recovery. Developing and coordinating a treatment program for chronic relapsers allowed me to see how so many counselors and programs fail to really help their clients, just as I did.

APPLYING THE STEPS AS INTENDED

The second not so obvious reason revolves around the steps. For several reasons there is a great deal of confusion concerning the meaning and application of the steps. Many do not understand what the founders really intended to communicate through the steps. This is usually not all that obvious. They are written in English, we read, write, and speak English; so what's the problem?

The individuals who wrote these steps were rooted in the traditions and culture of the 19th century. They were attempting to reach people who also were rooted in the traditions and culture of the 19th century. The world was a vastly different place religiously in the 1800s. It could easily be said that the United States was a Christian based culture then and remained basically so until the second decade of the 20th century. Of course, not everyone was truly a Christian, but at least values espoused by the Christian Bible were generally accepted as appropriate. The early members of AA were products of that age. Many of them had been church attendees in their youth. So when the steps of AA mention "a Power greater than ourselves," there was generally little doubt Who was being referred to. Certainly there was some animosity on the part of some members toward God and the church, but that is to be expected as they had thrown over the One True Living God in favor of the lesser gods lurking behind the drug alcohol.

But, at least, we can be certain that the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous generally understood the steps as they were written. They also generally had a spiritual/religious background that allowed them to understand and apply the steps to the basic spiritual problem they were facing. It is also apparent that the early members saw the problem as primarily spiritual in nature.

Things are surely different today! Those members born in the 19th century have vanished as we enter the 21st century. Along with them has generally vanished a clear understanding of spirituality and religion as they grasped and practiced it. Therefore, the problem that 12 step groups, who continue to base the idea of recovery on the traditional 12 Step program as outlined by the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, find is a membership that struggles to truly grasp the meaning of the steps. This is especially critical since most of those who struggle don't know it. What was abundantly clear to the membership of Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930's, 40's, and even 50's is today clouded by confusion and misunderstanding.

Currently, we live in a Western culture that has systematically eliminated the conception of an all-powerful external God from all general discussion and life. Those who hold to the existence of a personal, individual God are seen as anachronistic and perhaps a little naïve. This, too, adds to the confusion and misunderstanding by so many. This confusion even extends to such groups that claim to have had various experiences with God. Therefore, it should not surprise us that there is a pervasive mind-set of doubt, confusion, and uncertainty regarding spirituality and the idea of the existence of life in any other realm than the material realm.

None of this should surprise us. Life changes. Language changes. If you don't believe that, just pick up any book written 150 years ago. As you attempt to read it, you will be struck by how difficult it is to grasp what the author is saying. Not only are the words used in different ways, but also even the construction of the sentences is vastly different. So, in the more than 65 years since the founding of the 12 Step program approach to recovery from an addiction the world has changed and so has our language.

It is important to understand that just because the world has changed and language has changed doesn't mean that the basic principles of change have necessarily been altered. As was said at the beginning, the basic issue of personal control so that we can achieve comfortable feelings hasn't changed. Therefore, the spiritual approach to life-change hasn't become outmoded.

Language conveys meaning. Words arranged in an agreed upon and predictable order makes up many languages. So, the order of the words in an English sentence helps convey the meaning, not only of the whole sentence, but also the individual words. And,

perhaps even more important, the words themselves also provide us with the ability to grasp what the author has meant to communicate.

In the foreword to the first edition of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* the pioneers clearly stated their purpose for committing to writing the principles of their recovery and their stories of how they applied those principles to find personal freedom.

> "We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics *precisely how we have recovered* is the main purpose of this book. For them, we hope these pages will prove so convincing that no further authentication will be necessary. We think this account of our experiences will help everyone to better understand that the alcoholic is a very sick person. And besides, we are sure that our way of living has its advantages for all." (Alcoholics Anonymous 1976, xiii)

If the basic meaning of the steps, as the founders intended, is a little clouded, the spiritual power of the steps has been pretty much removed by our culture, reducing God to a being or thing that many think they can control. Quite a few people have even come to the conclusion that, in some way, they are their own god.

The world around us wants to limit dialogue on religion or spirituality to an intellectual discussion. So, many of the current members of 12 Step Groups approach the steps with the same attitude. The idea that the steps are directions to be applied to the life of the seeker of recovery is simply not understood. Therefore, discussions of the steps can take on a character of an academic investigation. It also becomes possible that the steps are seen as suggestions that may or may not be "worked". This leads to approaching the steps like a cafeteria line; a little of this step; oh, I don't like that step, so no thanks; etc.

We also find that many people around us become very uncomfortable when a discussion of spirituality or religion begins. The angry, hostile response indicates this, but it also indicates fear. Why is this so? What are they afraid of?

Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it. When, therefore, we were approached by those in whom the problem had been solved, there was nothing left for us but to pick up the simple kit of spiritual tools laid at out feet...

The great fact is just this, and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God's universe. The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never do by ourselves.

Alcoholics Anonymous p. 25

THE SITUATION

THE FIRST HURDLE: OUR PRIMARY ADDICTION

It's natural for us to think that the steps and the first step in particular relates to beginning the journey into recovery. Many people make several forays into the first step only to retreat when the going gets tough. Why do so many start and stop so many times?

The first step is a very painful step. (*That's an understatement!*) Forced to examine the concrete results of my best attempts at maintaining control of my life is awful; it proves my inability and failure. When I see the unmanageability of my life all stacked up in one heap, it is too painful. I really don't want to look at it. Then when the negative thoughts are swirling around in my mind, my feelings become involved. It hurts and scares me. The pain and the sense of powerlessness can become overwhelming.

So, when I feel badly I naturally react in the way that I have trained myself, I look for what has always taken the pain away in the past: My primary addictive behavior. If, for some reason, I am unable to go to my primary addiction for help, I will then turn to a secondary addiction to ease the pain. After all, my addiction is the way that I have coped with pain in the past.

Another barrier to the first step is the psychological need I have for my addiction. I have been coping with the problems of life for a long time by counting on my addiction. So, when you talk to me about giving up my addiction, fear fills my mind. It may not appear that way, but you are scaring me to death.

I may reluctantly start the process, but then I find a way to get out of completing the step. Only when I am beaten—having no other choice—will I follow through in the first step.

Even when I am willing to discuss some of the unmanageability in my life, if I am unwilling or unable to feel the powerlessness, my feelings will rule me; often those feelings will be hidden from me. At best I'm going to be disappointed, and at worst, demoralized. Most usually end up in depression or despair. Regardless, if I am in any one of these feeling states, I am hurting. At this stage of the game I can't stand feeling this way much longer. What's my solution? Of course, return to what I've learned will make me feel good, my addiction, or another addictive behavior.

In a nutshell, this is why those who we attempt to help enter the process of recovery keep failing. The slide of one's hidden negative

feelings from disappointment, to discouragement, to depression to despair, and finally into demoralization has been clearly documented. This is what happens to the person who cannot or will not completely face the first step. And all of us are in that boat at sometime or another.

It's a basic principle of life, when dealing with any problem, the earlier you face the problem, the easier it is to solve; the longer you wait, the harder it gets with each passing moment.

Those who fail in the first step often fall short in facing and admitting the reality of the unmanageability and/or the reality of the feelings of powerlessness. Generally, they are operating on the lie that they will not be able to survive the bad feelings that come when they honestly face the reality of what their life has become.

Naturally, when we've been through the agonizing process of the first step and, by the grace of God, have moved on into the second step and beyond we can have empathy for those who struggle. The strugglers desperately need God's encouragement and strength to make it through. If we're willing, God will often use us to bring his encouragement and strength to the struggler. God also uses our being the vehicle of his working in another's life to encourage and strengthen us. Pretty neat, huh?

CONTINUING TO WORK THE STEPS REVEALS MORE PROBLEMS.

When faced with the seeming mountain of character defects and relationship wrecks in our life, we surely need all the encouragement and strength we can get. Here the result of working with others in an appropriately encouraging, strengthening, and loving way pays off in our life. We need the strugglers as much as they need us, and not just as those who screw-up in our place.

The individual character defects and relationship wrecks we slowly become aware of can often be almost as difficult to deal with as when we were able to finally move through the first step. We eerily experience some of the same feelings that we felt while dealing with our primary addiction. Don't be surprised. Every issue in our life passes through, at least, the first 3 steps. Now we can see the reason that the steps must become a way of life for us. And not only us, but every maturing human being on earth.

The maturing process requires that I face the pain of unmanageability and powerless again and again and again. The more I ma-

ture, the more quickly and fearlessly I can accept the reality of what God has revealed to me. This helps me deal with each difficulty more effectively. I am not condemned to repeat my previous behavior when I first tried to enter the process—thank God! The solution is the same, whether it's the first or any following time—work the steps. Working the steps encourages spiritual growth in my life. This spiritual growth reveals more previous dysfunction needing a reality check and acceptance. So, the process becomes clearer. Enter the process of growth and recovery; find more problems, dysfunction, or failings; accept the reality of them; surrender each to God; grow spiritually; find more problems, dysfunction, or failings...and on and on it goes resulting in greater growth in spirituality and maturity.

...we agnostics and atheists chose to believe that our human intelligence was the last word, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and end of all. Rather vain of us, wasn't it?

We, who have traveled this dubious path, beg you to lay aside prejudice, even against organized religion. We have learned that whatever the human frailties of various faiths may be, those faiths have given purpose and direction to millions. People of faith have a logical idea of what life is all about. Actually, we used to have no reasonable conception whatever. We used to amuse ourselves by cynically dissecting spiritual beliefs and practices when we might have observed that many spiritually-minded persons of all races, colors, and creeds were demonstrating a degree of stability, happiness and usefulness which we should have sought ourselves.

...We never gave the spiritual side of life a fair hearing.

Alcoholics Anonymous pgs. 49-50

BUT WHY DO I HAVE SUCH A DIFFICULT TIME GETTING TO THE FIRST STEP?

Our difficulty comes is the result of our addictive thinking process and belief system. The intense focus placed upon our symptomatic behavior only serves to compound the difficulty. So, we have ended up treating the cough rather than the bronchitis. Following is a series of roadblocks to genuine recovery. Some of these roadblocks will resonate with your previous beliefs, thinking, and behavior; some of them won't. Forget about those that don't fit your life. Focus your attention on those making sense for you.

WE TRIED TO CHANGE OUR BEHAVIOR INSTEAD OF THE UNDERLYING BELIEF AND THOUGHTS THAT DETERMINED OUR BEHAVIOR.

The focus on behavior rather than the cause of the behavior I think is probably the key to understanding the failure to recover. Unfortunately, this approach is so ingrained in many 12 Step groups and in most of the established treatment community that the struggler's hope of significant change any time in the future is slim.

Fortunately, we can function in a different way. We can choose to approach recovery by dealing with one's belief system and thought processes. We can recognize that there is a similar thought process and belief system underlying most addictions. Understanding this allows us to help ourselves and others to choose to surrender all thoughts and feelings to God. God will take them and in return give us the peace of mind that can only come from him.

This also helps us understand why a chemically addicted person, when forced to stop his or her chemical addiction behavior, can fairly easily switch addictions. Most of us know individuals who stopped using drugs or stopped drinking, but suddenly began to spend a great deal of time at the gambling boats.

WE FOCUSED ON OURSELVES AND WHAT WE SHOULD DO INSTEAD OF FOCUSING ON GOD AND WHAT HE HAS ALREADY DONE

This is a general failing of mankind. It is one of the deciding factors for most dysfunctional behavior. The reality of this thinking and belief pattern is seen in the many ads in print and on TV. "It's

all about you!" (meaning, of course, ME) is the usual line in the ads.

Looking at ourselves and life with God's big picture in mind, we become aware of the reality that we're not God and that it really *isn't* about us. God is in charge of the universe. Our little world is a part of his gigantic universe. The only thing that makes us more than nothing is the fact that God has created each of us individually, with a specific set of gifts and abilities, and a specific purpose for us that can only be fulfilled in partnership with him.

When we understand this, we are on the edge of discovering the reality that in ourselves we are incompetent, incapable, and ignorant of how to live in freedom. This is not the bad news it seems to be.

Let's say that I believe that I am an excellent golfer with a four handicap. But truthfully I am a 25 handicap hacker. I am going to play in a best ball match and my partner is a scratch golfer—as good as a pro golfer. My partner is capable of recovering from any of my bad shots and has a chance of winning if I can hit most of my turns okay. And even if I fail, I'm partnered with someone who knows how to deal effectively with difficult situations.

In some ways, this is how I match up with God. I may be deluded into thinking that I am a very capable, knowledgeable person when it comes to living life. I'm not, even if I think I am. But it's possible that I could be partnered with Someone Who created me, understands me perfectly, knows my good points as well as my bad, is capable of living his life through mine, if I will only choose to allow him to do so. All that I have and am is due to God's involvement in my life. And he has done this graciously, simply providing what's best for me in every situation, whether I've known it or not.

Part of what makes it so difficult to get this kind of mind set is the attempts of the people in our life and the media—the world around us—to get us to think and feel that it is a foolish and stupid idea to believe that God actually exists. They belittle us if we express a belief that God is actually involved in the life of human beings, or if we let be known that we are convinced that God loves us and wants desperately to have a personal relationship with each of us, or if we convey the belief that God has already taken care of the results of our stupid and rebellious behaviors.

The Christian Bible is very clear on this issue. It is the conception that most clearly differentiates Christianity from other religious/ spiritual systems. The Bible makes it very clear that none

of us is capable of making life work—really work—even if we try with all our effort and skill. Our experience with addictive living also provides us with the practical knowledge to back-up this biblical idea.

But the Christian Bible doesn't stop there with the analysis of the problem. It goes on to tell us that our condition is not a surprise to God. God created us expecting that we would look to him for the direction and ability to succeed in life. God has never intended us to meet any of the needs he built into us in our wisdom, understanding, strength, or ability. God built these needs into us so that we would discover living in a close partnership with the Living God of the Universe would provide us with the *best* possible life.

"Okay, but I've heard that God won't or can't relate to those who are involved in any kind of wrong-doing."

Well, God has already taken care of this problem. Remember, God is not surprised at the mess we've gotten ourselves into. So, from before the beginning of time he knew human beings would screw-up living how he wants them to live. God gives us guidelines for living to show us what a life can be. He has never intended that we would merit a relationship with him if we could, somehow, follow the "directions". God has never planned to fix-up the "old" us; his stated intent was always to let the old us stay spiritually dead. Instead, he has made it possible for anyone who wants, to be a "new" person if they simply believe that God will give it to them if they will only ask.

Why would God do this? How can God do this? These are both appropriate questions.

Why would God do this? Quite simply, he created each of us with the expressed desire to have a close, intimate relationship with us. He finds joy in relating to us. He wants us to get to that same place.

How can God do this? Implied in this question is, "What did God have to do to make this relationship possible?" Again, remember the mess each of us has made of our life as we have worked to control it is not a surprise to God. At best we have lived in independence of God indicating that we didn't need his help in running our life. At worst we have lived in rebellion of God.

Those of us who have been characterized by simply living independently of God, have generally lived under the delusion that we were doing a great job of living our life and didn't need any help...thank you very much. On the other hand, those of us living

in rebellion of God have known what God can do and what he wants to do in our life, but we have rejected his offer because we were deluded into believing that living with God in control of our life would result in a dull and miserable life. Regardless of which of these general lies we have fallen for—maybe even both—we need God to intervene in our life to give us a "mulligan" or a "do-over" in our life.

God's own rules for life require that the old independent, rebellious person must die before they can be made new in their thinking processes and be given a new belief system. But to kill the old us would eliminate us; God wants to have a relationship with us; eliminating us would prevent that relationship from happening. Instead, God wants us to know how important a relationship with us is to him. So, he decided to help us grasp what he is actually like. Part of what he's like is willing to suffer this loss of his life for us so that we would still be in existence and available for a relationship with him.

The first Adam was not able to maintain a loyal relationship with God. This resulted in all of us being born dead spiritually. The last Adam is the one who was able to live with God in control of his life regardless of the temptation thrown at him to be disloyal to God. The first Adam could have done that if only he did not take things into his own hands, but instead have chosen to allow God to continue to control his life.

Jesus lived a life in consistent and complete dependence on the Father and was also willing to sacrifice himself so that a new us could come to life replacing the old us. Of course, the old us and the new us we are talking about is who we are in our soul—our mind, emotions, and will. Another way to think of this is it's the immaterial part of us; the part of us that goes on living when the body finally dies.

WE RELIED ON OUR OWN EFFORTS INSTEAD OF TRUSTING GOD AND LIVING BY HIS POWER.

How many people truly believe the lie, "God helps those who help themselves"? Many frequently believe that this is a statement from the Christian Bible. This is actually a quote from Benjamin Franklin.

Beginning at a very early age most of us were strongly and frequently encouraged to take control of our life. We received the message, "If you don't take care of yourself, who's going to?" So, we listened; we believed; we acted. Most of those people who told us those things were good intentioned. They had attempted to life their life by such a philosophy. Despite the poor outcome of their efforts, they were convinced that the direction was correct.

When God created each of us, he never intended for us to slog it out in life alone; he never intended for us to meet our needs alone and unaided. God created us so that he would have beings to relate to, to care for, and to lavish his love on. As I have said, he has always wanted to do life together with us.

This is where being addicted can become the greatest blessing of our life. Unlike most people, we have discovered first hand what happens when we live independent of God—innocently or rebelliously. We got to the bottom by relying on our own efforts instead of trusting God and living by his power. Yep, that's exactly how we did it—can't be any clearer.

WE ACCEPTED A FAILURE IDENTITY INSTEAD OF ACCEPTING THE IDENTITY THAT GOD GIVES US, AS WE TRUST HIM.

Human beings will always act consistent with how they perceive themselves. Oh yes, they *can* act inconsistently of their self- perception, but only for short periods of time.

What identity have you accepted and, therefore, lived out? In general terms, you and I have accepted the identity of failure, screw-up, no-good, incapable of doing right, family or home wrecker, disappointment, unsalvageable, unchangeable—I will always be what I have come to be. If that's how I now perceive myself, that's how I will live.

"What's the problem with this?" you may ask.

Well, if you have come to believe that God is willing and able to make changes in your life; and, based on that belief have surrendered your will and your life to God; because you believe that God

accepts your will and life because there can be a new us; and that this new us exists because of what God, through Jesus' sacrifice for us, has accomplished; you have been given a new identity.

This new identity includes: having every spiritual blessing; being a totally new person; being holy; being God's child; being Christ's friend; being complete in Christ; buried, raised, and made spiritually alive in Christ; free forever from condemnation; assured that all things in your life work together for good, despite how it might look now; having liberty in Jesus; having been given a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind; having been placed in Christ by God's doing; Christ is now your wisdom from God, your righteousness, your sanctification, and your redemption; you are God's co-worker; you may approach God with freedom and confidence; you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you; and you are born of God. This list is only a small part of what God has done for those who wake up to the reality of what has happened in their life, and choose to surrender their life to God.

Probably the most significant identifier is the last one, "born of God." You see, **birth determines identity**. Note that carefully, birth determines identity.

You know the truth of this, of course you do! Why is it you have common DNA of you mother and father? Why are the members of your birth family recognizable as somehow related? Why do you have the name you have? (This is not as universally true in our times as it was in former times.)

These few questions tell us that, in general, physical birth does determine identity. If this is true, why do we have problems grasping the idea that spiritual birth determines spiritual identity?

Spiritual birth gives us our spiritual characteristics, such as how we think, the ability to face difficulties with peace and confidence rather than anxiety, fear and confusion, and able to see life from a totally different perspective.

How do you think of yourself? Have you trusted God with your life? What keeps you from accepting the identity God wants to give you?

THERE ARE AT LEAST FOUR BASIC "STRONGHOLDS"–VERY SPECIFIC GROUPS OF LIES–THAT KEEP US IN BONDAGE TO OUR ADDICTION, WHATEVER IT IS.

1ST—HOPELESSNESS which is:

- Loss of self-esteem
- Having a sense of purposelessness and lack of direction
- Having a strong conviction that I or my situation will never change
- Feel inadequate to face whatever comes into my life.

THE LIES BEHIND THESE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ARE:

- I am a victim and am helpless
- I will never change—any hope of that is foolish, stupid and just wishful thinking
- I am different from everyone else and so is my problem, so what you are trying to get me to think and do won't work for me

2ND—GUILT which is:

- Being depressed and bitter
- Being discontented and grieved
- Having a sense of worthlessness
- Living in denial and dishonesty

THE LIES BEHIND THESE THOUGHT AND FEELINGS ARE:

- I deserve to be punished and condemned
- I cannot face the awful truth about myself
- What I have been, I will always be

3RD SELF-SUFFICIENCY which is:

- Being focused on my behavior—I am what I do
- Being judgmental of myself and others
- Being continually weary and tired

- Always trying to earn acceptance through performance—always doing and saying the right thing in the right way at the right time

THE LIES BEHIND THESE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ARE:

- If it's going to be, it's up to me
- God helps those who help themselves
- Simply changing my behavior, will make big changes in me

4TH—INSECURITY which is:

- Being worried and anxious most of the time
- Feeling abandoned, without support, alone and isolated
- Having no meaningful relationships
- Being unable to receive love, acceptance, and genuine compliments
- Avoiding intimacy—convinced that if anyone actually got to know me, they would be immediately repulsed and would certainly reject me; or telling others what I think and/or feel will cause them to reject me

THE LIES BEHIND THESE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ARE:

- I don't deserve to be loved and accepted
- I need someone to validate me as a person
- I need someone or something to make me feel secure

HOW CAN WE POSSIBLY OVERCOME THESE THOUGHTS AND LIES THAT HAVE PLAGUED US FOREVER?

THE ESSENTIAL ANSWER IS LOVE!

- This is truly is the hidden secret of the helpfulness of 12 Step groups!
- Human love goes a long way in helping someone begin to overcome the lies behind these strongholds.
- But unfortunately it doesn't change many of the entrenched lies.

SOMETHING MORE IS NEEDED!

These four basic strongholds give us the truth about our condition a human beings on earth attempting to deal with our problems in our own way. *But they only show us the problem, not the solution! Trying harder will only result in the same results.* **We need a new strategy!**

WHEN WE ARE UNABLE TO GET TO THE FIRST STEP, ALL, MANY, OR SOME OF THESE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ARE TRUE OF US.

We are:

- Always living with the fear of losing our self esteem—just about anything has the potential for shaking how we feel about ourselves
- Convinced that regardless of what we do, many of us live with a sense of purposelessness and lack of direction. We may constantly live with the question, "Why am I here?" We may question the long-term worth of what we do.
- Sure that we and our situation will never change; we are on the treadmill of life and we will only get off when we die.
- Sure that we are inadequate to face whatever comes into our life.
- Depressed and bitter
- Discontented and filled with sorrow and frustration
- Filled with a sense of worthlessness
- Living in denial and dishonesty
- Always focused on our performance; if we fail in performance, we are always looking for someone to blame.
- Always judgmental of ourselves and others; "if only they were like me"
- Continually weary and tired
- Always trying to earn acceptance through performance—always doing and saying the right thing in the right way at the right time; you are what you do.

- Worried and anxious most of the time
- Feeling abandoned, without support, alone and isolated much of the time
- Have no meaningful relationships
- Unable to receive love, acceptance, and genuine compliments
- Avoiding intimacy—convinced that if anyone actually got to know me, they would be immediately repulsed and would certainly reject me. Therefore, no one really knows me; they only know what I want them to know.

Not all of these things are true of all of us all of the time, but some—many—of them are true most of the time when we are struggling with getting to the point of dealing with the truth revealed to us; it doesn't matter how long we've been working a 12 Step program; but the longer we have been in recovery, we will have fewer of these characteristics.

These are all symptoms of denial. This means, if I, my sponsor, or any of my close friends become aware of any of these symptoms in me, I need to ask, "What am I not willing to deal with?" Then, I need the courage that comes from confidence in God's love for me to do the hard work of self-examination that the first step requires.

So, How Do I Get to the First Step?

Do I keep trying to do better? Do I somehow get somebody to help me be different? If so, who? These are good questions. Obviously, if you've read this far without dropping this booklet in the trash, you are aware that God will undoubtedly play a part in the process.

My Current Strategy is to remodel or reform who I am. So, I formulate a plan to help me change my behavior. Behavior is what everyone sees; everyone who is affected by my behavior tells me that my behavior is the problem; I become convinced that if I could only change my behavior, then everything would be okay.

As we have seen, this tactic will not really solve our problem because we are only dealing with the symptom of the problem and not the actual problem. What's the actual problem again? Our real problem is **the unhelpful ways we have learned to cope with life; the beliefs and thought patterns those who raised us had**. We developed the vast majority of these ways of dealing with the difficulties of life when we were children. We observed how those around us dealt with problems and we used our limited grasp of life to decide what to do.

Failure comes because I am not dealing with *the cause of the behavior—my thought process and my belief system.* Very early on, by trial and error, I found ways to get by in sticky relationship situations. I continue as an adult to use some form of my childhood coping mechanisms. If these beliefs and methods of thinking are not radically changed, genuine recovery will elude me, and that's for sure.

A New, More Helpful, Strategy is to give up on who I have been—I have found that trying to remodel the old me just won't work. I have tried and tried to do that with very little permanent or continuing progressive results. As I become willing to give up on trying to be different, I am on the pathway into the first step. The first step involves coming to the realization that I have been trying so hard to do what I was never going to be able to do—be different.

Here I use what I am learning about myself by examining what my life was like while stuck in my addiction. I am learning a lot of accurate information, such as, trying to somehow keep the

same addictive thinking patterns while attempting to live a "recovery" life just won't work for the long haul. I've learned that just trying hard doesn't really change who I am or how I cope in difficult situations. I've learned that going somewhere else doesn't make me different because the problem was not the location but me. I've learned that promising to change, and really meaning it, doesn't guarantee that I will actually be able to make myself different. I have made super-human efforts to genuinely change but have, in the end, failed to accomplish much.

If I learn from my experience, I will recognize that however much I wish, will, promise, or plead, I can't make myself become what I want to be. I am discovering the truth!

Therefore, this second tactic causes me to recognize the need for a totally new me. I finally get worn down to the place of just giving up on my efforts. At this point I become willing to try something new—anything—if I can be different. Now the second tactic begins to work. I give up on self-effort.

I am ready to let God work. I just want things to go well without having to work so hard for so little permanent results. I have stopped *trying harder.* Instead, I am *trying smarter.*

Triumph over the bondage I've been in starts to come as I grasp the purpose for which God has created me. He never intended for me to struggle on alone and unaided in this life. His purpose is getting me to understand that without him I will never get truly free. He allows me to become so frustrated with self-effort that I will give it up. Then, and only then, will I be really ready to let God control.

God wants me to be appropriately active in my own life—he won't do for me those things I can do. He is interested in working in partnership with me; focused on doing what I am capable of doing. God wants to develop my confidence in him; he wants me to learn how to act under his authority; he wants me to learn how to give-up on self-effort forever. Indeed, he has created me for a relationship with him.

I guess that it's the same for you as it is for me, it's difficult to grasp that the One True Living God of the universe simply wants to relate to me...to you. He has created you and me individually with specific, unique abilities, gifts, characteristics, and with a specific purpose in mind. God created no one as one of many, exactly the same. You and I are one-of-a-kind, truly individual in every sense of the word. No one was created by being stamped-out with some cosmic cookie-cutter by God.

He wants to have a personal intimate relationship with you. He really wants you. You are special to him. Therefore, he did not create you with the ability to do life independent of him. **This is the reason all your self-effort has failed.** You can never really succeed in what counts in life without him.

The only way you can live the way he intended you to live is for you to voluntarily work with him in the project called "My Life." To do this, you choose to give up what you could never do, for the opportunity of God living his life out through yours, doing what *you* could never do. This is what living dependent on God really means. And *this is the essence of the first three steps.*

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

How are you doing in this change thing? Do you find yourself working as hard as you possibly can with the Old Strategy but still struggling with real behavior change? That's not a surprise. What's keeping you from trying God's answer?

You might say that you are following the program as outlined by the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. But are you really applying the program as the founders suggested?

The founders were 19th century people writing for other 19th century people. When talking about a power greater than ourselves, I suggest that they were thinking of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Remember, the phrase *God, as we understood him,* was an addition to the original "God".

So, what's your story? What has caused you to simply settle for the Old Strategy and not move on to apply a New, More Helpful Strategy to your life?

To see these two strategies compared, point-by-point, turn to the next page.

THE STRATEGIES COMPARED

It may help if we look at two different approaches to the solution; the Old and the New Strategies: Man's Answer vs. God's Answer:

Man's Answer	God's Answer
A Plan—designed to change the behavior of the person (Galatians 4:9)	*A Death*—to put to death the person who does the behavior (Romans 6:4)
Result—self-improvement (Galatians 6:3)	*Result*—new person with a new identity who behaves differently (Galatians 2:20)
Need—to constantly work on doing the right behavior (Galatians 3:1-5)	*Need*—to understand who we are so our behavior will match up with our identity (2Corinthians 5:17)
Force behind behavior—our commitment and performance (Colossians 2:20-23)	*Force behind behavior*—the life of Christ; God's solution to our "strongholds"
Summary	**Summary**
Commitments—subject myself to a plan consisting of:	*Death*—I agree with God's verdict on self and give up on myself and my resources by:
Law—following rules, concepts, and principles through:	*Grace*—apply to my life what God has done by:
Works—disciplined self effort to:	*Faith*—apply to my life my death and resurrection with Christ and by:
Dead Works—behavior change	*Life*—good works, the right things done in the right way, at the right time, by the power of the Spirit of God working through me.

This chart shows you the two *radically* different ways of approaching your need to be different. The word *radical* means *from the root*. Therefore, each of these ways starts from a totally different mindset or worldview and approaches your problem in a totally unrelated way. So, you have two opposite strategies of producing "recovery". Which one will you choose to follow?

The founders of the 12 Step approach to change understood how important it is to grasp the distinction. They wrote the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" to clearly help you and me to have a chance at understanding this radical approach. This is why they said:

> ...With all the earnestness at our command, we beg you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely.
>
> Remember that we deal with alcohol [or whatever your addiction]—cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find Him now! (Alcoholics Anonymous, 58-59)

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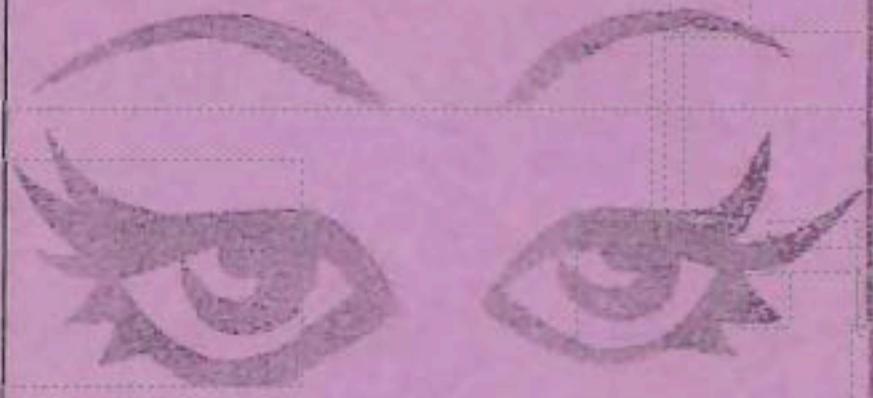

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