

STEP TEN: WATCHING OURSELVES

When we begin to watch ourselves in Step Ten, moment by moment as best we can, we begin to discover that we seem in some profound way to be not one person but two.

We become aware that, every waking moment, there is a "critic" inside our heads that is never quiet. This critic passes ceaseless comments upon what is happening outside and inside ourselves. If there is nothing in particular going on outside ourselves, perhaps because things are quiet, then this critic starts to comment on the future or on the past. If you take the time right now to sit down and watch yourself, you will see it is happening this very moment as you read this book.

Here is an example of what it might be saying:

... i didn't agree at all with what that book was saying i've no idea why i let martha talk me into reading it i wonder what my pastor would say about it that reminds me i need to get the brakes done on this car before church on sunday i wonder if i should take it to the same garage as last time i didn't like that mechanic i'm pretty sure he overcharged me perhaps i should get a new car but the loan would be too much if only i were paid more at work perhaps i should look around for another job but the benefits are good and i like my boss i wonder why he was wearing that suit on friday perhaps he'd been to a funeral or maybe he was interviewing if he's leaving i don't know that i want to stay why is that man driving like that doesn't he know this is a 50 mph zone and what a bizarre color for a car oh no the traffic's stopping if this keeps up i'll be late maybe i should call paula and tell her because she can be pretty mean if people are late

This background commentary, this "noise" goes on and on every waking moment. It seems for most of us to have started in childhood and it has never stopped since, except for rare occasions we will talk about in a moment. Some of us have a critic that criticizes mainly ourselves. This critic says *i'm no good i'll never amount to anything people really don't like me i have nothing interesting to say people are always taking advantage of me but i guess that's my fault because i never learned from my parents how to stand up for myself* Some of us have a critic that spends most of its time criticizing other people, and says things like *where on earth did she get that dress she surely can't think she looks nice in it but probably her worthless husband put her up to it he's a real cheapskate i need to tell bill at work to back off on that job he wants me to do the schedule is completely unrealistic and he's only trying to get it done to impress the boss* And for most of us the critic offers a mixture of the two things.

We said a moment ago that this critic never stops. But it *does* stop sometimes, and there is one surefire way to make it stop: Watch it.

If we turn our attention inwards to that critic and watch it, it suddenly stops. Try it right now. As soon as you turn all your attention to the critic, it suddenly stops criticizing. Keep watching it. As long as you watch it, it will be quiet.

That is all very well, but sooner or later something will come along to distract our attention. The car in front of us pulls up, or the telephone rings, or we remember that there is a program on TV that we wanted to watch. And shortly after our attention is distracted, the critic starts up again.

You'll notice that we suggested *watching* this critic rather than *listening* to it. The reason is simple: We actually listen to the critic all the time. We listen to it and we frequently believe it, although as we do so we're not actually aware that the critic is talking (if we *were* aware of it, of course, it would stop), or that we're listening to it. The critic says *i'll never be able to impress people driving around this old car* and we listen without realizing to the critic and find ourselves going to the dealer to buy a new car we don't really need. The critic says *Janie doesn't like me so i'll say something nice about the job she did on the ABC project* and we listen to the critic and end up saying something completely insincere to Janie. The problem with our critic is precisely that we *do* listen it -- listen without hearing, listen without realizing; and not infrequently we do or attempt to do what it is telling us to do. So that is why we suggest *watching* the critic rather than listening to it.

Now, this business of watching the critic raises a question that we hinted at earlier. When we watch the critic, it's as though we have become two people. One of us is generating all this criticism, all this background nonsense, and the other of us is watching it. So here's the question: Who is the critic? And who is the "person" watching the critic?

Let us put the question to one side for a moment, and focus instead on this process of watching the critic. In the times when we are able to remember to watch the critic, the critic falls silent. But we know very well what the critic was saying just *before* it fell silent. It was saying something like this: *this customer service person has made me mad and i'm going to give her a piece of my mind*. Or it was saying *if i don't hold the door open for this person i'll be able to get to the front of the line at the buffet*. And it is in this awareness of what the critic was just saying that we are able to practice Step Ten in one of its purest forms. We are able "to take personal inventory, and when we [are] wrong promptly admit it."

It is precisely in this moment of awareness that we are able to say to ourselves, *It's not this woman's fault that my electric kettle is faulty. She's just a service rep doing her job. There's no need for me to take it out on her because I feel angry.* It's precisely now -- and at no other time -- that we can say to ourselves, *So what if I hold the door for this person and they get to the front of the line before me? I'm just being impatient, and as a result "do the next right thing."*

The best expression of this practice of Step Ten comes, not from the AA Big Book, but from the Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text:

We work this step continuously. This is a prevention, and the more we do it, the less we will need the corrective part of this step. This is really a great tool. It gives us a way of avoiding grief before we bring it on ourselves. We monitor our feelings, our emotions, our fantasies, and our actions. By constantly looking at these things we may be able to avoid repeating the actions that make us feel bad.

We've already said that it's impossible to maintain constant awareness of the critic inside us. And because it's impossible, there will continue to be times when we listen to the critic instead of watching it and *do* say something we later regret, or *fail* to take an action that we realize afterwards we should have done. But that is where the provision of the second half of Step Ten -- "when were wrong promptly admitted it" -- comes in. We acknowledge as soon as we can that we were wrong. We apologize, and we make amends where necessary. Because we are beginning to practice self-awareness, we tend to see much earlier than would otherwise be the case where we were in error. And doing what we can to repair the resulting damage -- primarily by freely admitting we were wrong -- is a part of this process which we tend to do more readily.

There remain two questions to consider. The first is this: Isn't it possible, if we try very hard, to be aware constantly of this critic inside us and therefore never to do anything wrong? If we work constantly at Step Ten, don't we eventually reach the point where we never listen to the critic and therefore never take the wrong action?

The answer to this is a very definite *no*, and it is important to understand why. Step Ten is not part of some program of self-help or self-improvement. The successful practice of this Step, as with all other Steps, is based not on our ability to fix ourselves, but on precisely the opposite: our complete and total surrender to the truth that we can never help ourselves, and that we are utterly dependent upon Something other than ourselves in our spiritual

journey. In Christian theology, the idea that we can somehow fix ourselves is known as the Pelagian heresy, and those of an inquiring turn of mind may care to check it out. When we do Step Ten and become aware of the critic, it is not because we are somehow spiritually advanced or super-fit. In fact, it is exactly the reverse: it is because we are allowing that Power greater than ourselves to enter us and to direct our attention to our negative, judgmental thinking. Like all of the three last Steps, Step Ten is not about us *making* something happen. It's about *allowing* something to happen; it's about *consenting* to the working of a Power greater than ourselves within us.

Which begs the second question, one which we briefly considered earlier: What is this new-found part of us that is able, however briefly, to watch the critic in us?

Some people have suggested that it is the working of conscience, and that our practice of Step Ten allows us to access that conscience that most of us tried to suppress in the practice of our addiction. With this suggestion we must respectfully disagree. Conscience, for most of us, is not merely the voice that tells us that what we are doing is wrong. It is also that pernicious power that pushes us into feelings of guilt about what we have done or not done, and that tells us we can never be forgiven.

This has little or nothing to do with our ability to watch our critic in our practice of Step Ten. You may try it for yourself if you wish. You will probably find that when you watch your critic, you do not judge it, condemn it, or feel guilty about it. Instead, you are probably more inclined to feel a little sorry for it, for its pathetic attempts to judge you and everyone else around you, for its pitiful efforts to make you worry about tomorrow or brood over the past. And so Who can it be that watches us with this lack of judgment -- with this Love?

For some of us, what watches the critic is no longer "I" but that very Power we were talking about a moment ago. When we try to practice Step Ten on a moment-by-moment basis, when we attempt to be completely in the here-and-now, *the Watcher that watches the critic in us is not we ourselves but that Power which we are permitting to work in us precisely in this moment.* It follows that every time we practice awareness in Step Ten, we are in the presence of God as we understand God. We are only able to watch ourselves at all because the Watcher is not really us but this Power. *To practice Step Ten in this way is to be in communion with God, to be one with God, right here and right now.*