

I believe that the Twelve Steps are a movement of the Spirit in our time, in many ways rediscovering the real transformative power of the gospel. In their reflections, Trish and Dick hold out the vulnerability, healing, and love that are at the heart of both Jesus' teaching and the Twelve Steps. This book is for any Christian for whom working the program is a lifeline, and for any person interested in the honesty, willingness, and surrender that are at the heart of what founder Bill Wilson called "a vital spiritual experience."

RICHARD ROHR, *author of numerous books including
*The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation**

There is something about a good sermon that brings tears and a chuckle in the same moments. This what I found myself doing as I read *The Twelve Steps Meet the Gospel*. Often those of us in recovery fail to see the wisdom and grace that religious traditions have to offer in our journey. A good biblical story brings profound truth to all people, but especially to those of us who have known a low point in life and need to hear a new hope through recovery. As a person in recovery myself and also as a pastor who has given many hundreds of sermons in the recovery community, my only regret was that I couldn't have been on the other side of the pulpit to hear these insightful sermons each week. Well done, Trish and Dick! Well done!

JO CAMPE, *founding Pastor of the Recovery Methodist Church
in St. Paul, MN*

Recovering addicts didn't need M. Scott Peck to tell them "life is difficult." They know it. They recognized how they were powerless over their train-wrecked lives. They came to believe that a Higher Power could restore them to sanity. They turned their lives and wills over to the care of God as they understood God...every day of their lives. The witness Trish and Dick share as members of the "Order of the Wounded" opens for us a path that accepts human woundedness and despair in the context of steps they have taken to live in joy, peace, and freedom. We in the church need their witness.

ROC O'CONNOR, *theologian, composer, and author*
of *In the Midst of Our Storms*

As an addictions educator, I've spent much of my forty-year career translating the more religious spiritual expressions of twelve-step literature into universal and thus more accessible concepts for myself and the many others I encounter who feel blocked from twelve-step recovery by their religious upbringing, justifiable religious resentments, more scientific/intellectual approaches to life...it's a long list. What a joy it is to realize that Dick Rice and Trish Vanni are providing—especially for "believers" who struggle with addiction—authentic translations of the Christian liturgical year and related Scriptures into more accessible recovery principles. The text Alcoholics Anonymous states on page 87, "Be quick to see where religious people are right. Make use of what they offer." And so you will, through this wonderful collection.

FRED HOLMQUIST, *Director of the Lodge Program at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation's Dan Anderson Renewal Center*
in Center City Minnesota

THE TWELVE STEPS MEET THE GOSPEL

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THE TWELVE
STEPS MEET
THE GOSPEL

REFLECTIONS ON SCRIPTURE
AND STORIES OF HOPE
FOR THOSE IN RECOVERY



DICK RICE
and TRISH VANNI



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PUBLICATIONS**

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TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS

1 Montauk Avenue, Suite 200, New London, CT 06320
(860) 437-3012 » (800) 321-0411 » www.twentythirdpublications.com

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ISBN:978-1-62785-261-6
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2017932939
Printed in the U.S.A.



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INTRODUCTION

*Sought through prayer and meditation to improve
our conscious contact with God as we understood Him,
praying only for knowledge of His will for us
and the power to carry that out.*

■ STEP ELEVEN, *Alcoholics Anonymous*

With its bouncy alliteration, “Conscious Contact” might be the most delicious phrase in the Twelve Steps. It describes the dance with God that we in recovery are about. It also sums up the purpose of this book—to share the light that the Scriptures we hear each week shine on the experience of recovery, and to offer a new lens for all readers to see new depth and richness in God’s constant message of unconditional love.

Back to “conscious contact” for a moment. Both words begin with the prefix *con*, which means “with” in Latin. The rest of the first word means “knowledge” or “knowing,” and the second half of the next word means “touch.” This is much more, however, than simply “knowing touch,” as when someone touches your elbow. The prefix indicates mutuality, a joined touch and a joined knowledge. We are each knowingly reaching out and touching, even as we are touched.

Furthermore, the initiative is God’s. We reach out only in response to the One who has reached out to us. God has spo-

ken to us in every breath, in every moment. Our response is anchored in gratitude and moves to praise and petition and contrition when appropriate.

In *Alcoholics Anonymous*, more commonly called the “Big Book,” people in recovery are reminded that religious practice can be a support in recovery. The Chapter “We Agnostics” notes, “We, who have traveled this dubious path, beg you to lay aside prejudice, even against organized religion.” In the rhythms and practices of the Christian liturgical year, and in the Scriptures that worship offers, we can find support for countless principles of recovery. With that in mind, this collection of homilies/sermons is a reflection on our conscious contact with God throughout the Christian Church year.

In the chapter on the Twelfth Step, the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* asks, “can we bring new purpose and devotion to the religion of our choice?” Doing so has been a great source of hope and strength for our authors in their journey of recovery. In this book, they have attempted to stay in conscious contact with the God of their understanding, with the texts, and with one another, so that you, the reader, might find new ways to be in conscious contact with the Higher Power you embrace, as well.

Advent

“He comes, comes, ever comes....”

■ RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Christians are fond of saying that Advent remembers the coming of Jesus the Christ into history, longs for the coming of Christ in majesty, and celebrates the coming of the Spirit of Christ right here, right now. Both as Christians and as people in recovery, ours is a journey of progress, not perfection. We are always following Christ, always climbing the steps, always waking up without ever arriving until we have completed the journey. And so it is right to say that our Higher Power comes without ever fully arriving in this life and, in response, we journey without fully arriving until we die. As Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

Advent is the season that honors that relentless restlessness and so—we hope—do these reflections. (DR)

ADVENT



Becoming Light Bearers

*“Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither
the day nor the hour.” ■ MATTHEW 25:13*

*Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men
and women who share their experience, strength and hope
with each other that they may solve their common problem
and help others to recover from alcoholism.*

■ THE PREAMBLE

Advent is a season of waiting, hope, and, as the Scriptures remind us, light breaking into the darkness.

In Jesus’ parable about the lamp-bearing virgins who await the bridegroom, we learn a great deal about light: who has it, who doesn’t; how light must be tended to keep it burning; why it’s important to be watchful and prepared; and the risk we run when we don’t have a well-fueled and trimmed source. If we are not watchful, the darkness can engulf us in a moment.

On first read, we might see this parable as the one in which Jesus tells us (among other things) that we shouldn’t share! As a mother, I’ve had ample opportunity to deal with the question of sharing—who’s not sharing, who should be sharing, who’s getting the better end of the sharing. At first glance, it seems that the “wise” bridesmaids are actually the selfish bridesmaids—they won’t take from their own stores to

help the others. Of course, this must be too superficial a reading, because so many of Jesus' stories tell us in detailed and even radical ways to give to one another generously. So "don't share" can't possibly be the point of this Advent parable!

Perhaps what it points to is that there are things we possess that, for a range of reasons, we *can't* give to others—as much as we'd like to. There are some essential but intangible things we cannot give to people even when we see their dire need for them. We can't hand people the surrender that the First Step requires. We can't give them serenity or acceptance. We can't hand someone faith or peace as they struggle to embrace the new way of living that the Twelve Steps offer.

These intangibles that we possess well up like an inner fuel source within us from our deep relationship with the divine. Fortunately, while we can't "give," we can tell people how we got these inner stores—we can lay out our "path" so that others may "thoroughly follow" it. In doing this, we are acting much like the wise bridesmaids who told the foolish bridesmaids where to buy the oil they needed.

I remember a day someone very dear to me called to share her grief over her recent miscarriage. She knew that personal experience gives me a particular compassion and understanding around this issue. I would have liked nothing better in that phone call than to be able to hand over the peace and acceptance I have come to know. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't pull from that personal spiritual well and fill her cup, as much as I wanted to do that. But I could be with her and bear light from my own experience as she journeyed.

In so many moments in life, we can have full-enough lamps to be awake and able to come alongside others in their pain. And we can be awake enough to realize when we need to replenish our stores. I can't be there for others if I've run myself empty. Isn't it interesting that the term we use for that

utter emptiness is “burned out”? The parable of the “wise and foolish” virgins reminds us that there is something in our Christian life, and in our sharing of the program, that constantly needs to be replenished, lest it burn out. Fortunately, we have an unlimited, utterly generous source. This is the gift of meetings, of our literature, of a good sponsor who knows “our case.” In all of these things, God lights our path.

Our journey of recovery is one of moving from darkness to light, with the support of others. We share “our experience, strength and hope with each other;” so that others may discover and claim their own experience of healing. The Al-Anon closing says this so well, when it suggests that we each “let the understanding, love, and peace of the program grow in [us] one day at a time.” (TV)

ADVENT—FIRST SUNDAY



God Breaking into Our Story

“So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal; one will be taken and one will be left. Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.”

■ MATTHEW 24:38, 40–42

He finds himself in possession of a degree of honesty, tolerance, unselfishness, peace of mind, and love of which he had thought himself quite incapable. What he has received is a free gift, and yet usually, at least in some small part, he has made himself ready to receive it.

■ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 107

I’ve been going to meetings for what we euphemistically call “a few 24s.” Some people in my life have scoffed at this, asking with incredulity, “Why are you still going to those meetings?” Well, I go for a lot of reasons. I go to be of service, to give back gifts that were so freely given to me. I go to fill my spiritual well, to remember that there is a God, as I choose to call the Higher Power, and it’s not me. And I go to hear the stories.

The stories serve me not because they are entertaining (which they often are) or insightful (although I always take away what I call a “golden nugget”) but because they wake me up. They sweep me not into another’s reality, but into my

own—what I was like, what happened, what it is like now. I see that God is not done with me. That there are still things to learn and things to do. That I had better “stay awake” one day at a time, and remember to give away what I hope to keep.

The stories of Advent speak of darkness and light—light so great that no darkness can overcome it, stories about paths being made straight, about voices crying out, about vulnerable women taking great leaps of faith, about God coming not like a warrior king on a stallion but as a human child, a vulnerable baby born to an oppressed people.

I imagine that there has never been a time when our Advent stories were not important. Humankind has often wandered into the darkness. But our situation today feels particularly heavy. As I listened to the morning news, I heard reports of increased deadly violence in a stressed city neighborhood, fractious name-calling by politicians, heretofore marginalized indigenous people fighting to protect the environment, and a call to address racism in its many insidious faces. I’m in need of Advent. I’m in need of the reminder that this God who loves stories has a few amazing ones still to tell.

Do you remember *Left Behind*, Tim LaHaye’s bestselling series about the rapture? One minute the protagonist, Cameron “Buck” Williams, is on a plane; the next minute, half of the passengers are gone, leaving only their clothing. They have been “raptured.” I think about that when I think of this passage from Matthew—what’s this “one is taken, one will be left” thing? Where’s Elizabeth? John? Mary? Simeon? Anna? I’d take any of them, but instead you give us *Left Behind*?

It’s important to remember that this interpretation of this Gospel was first developed by Cotton Mather, the Puritan, and popularized by the Plymouth Brethren at the end of the nineteenth century. Before then, the interpretation was precisely the opposite. The words Jesus used—left and taken

away—are the same words used when Babylon, Assyria, and Rome invaded Israel, taking away the residents while leaving behind a lucky remnant. For Jesus’ listeners, being “taken” would have been incredibly undesirable. Those that are left behind, are in fact, those brought forward into the kingdom. They are working, but they are alert, and their focus is not on the skies but on the earth, on the job that is here and now.

My friend Paul is a real example of this. Years ago, Paul got involved with an organization called “Results” that was working to address global hunger. In a training, Paul learned about something called “oral rehydration therapy,” an incredibly simple solution to dysentery, which at the time was killing millions of children around the globe. It entails mixing a small amount of salt and a handful of sugar into some distilled water and feeding the mixture to the suffering.

Paul was really taken by how accessible and simple the solution was. He called his congressman and asked for an appointment. He and five friends showed up with a video that explained the solution. The congressman returned to Washington and worked to pass legislation to fund a worldwide outreach using “oral rehydration therapy.” The year following implementation, the numbers of children dying from dysentery dropped literally by the millions.

I don’t think for a minute that when he picked up the phone, Paul thought that he could singlehandedly save millions of children. But having seen Paul in action over the years, I notice that he’s someone who’s awake while he’s grinding in the kitchen. The one phone call, that one turn of the grinding wheel, set the rest in motion.

What kind of Advent might we all have if our focus was on the tasks before us, if our focus was on the ways in which God is breaking in to our story, hoping to write some new words through us?

Advent reminds us to remember the story and remember that God made us for it—the story of God breaking in, the story of God engaged with each of us, holding on to us, never letting us go. God comes at an unexpected hour, in unexpected places, in unexpected voices. How well we in the program know this!

And if we remember that, if we remember we were made for the story, we are part of the story, and we have the courage to tell the story, God will be able to use us in ways we can barely imagine. (TV)

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ADVENT—FOURTH SUNDAY



Saying “Yes” to God’s Will

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.

May it be done to me according to your word.” ■ LUKE 1:38

*God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me
and to do with me as Thou wilt... ■ THE THIRD STEP PRAYER,*

Alcoholics Anonymous, PAGE 63

I have had the opportunity as a pilgrim to visit the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth. The main floor is filled with different countries’ tributes to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. But the real action is in the basement, and even below the basement in a sub-level. There sits the first church, today just a small altar with the words across the front of it (in Latin):
HERE THE WORD OF GOD BECAME FLESH.

I was absolutely blown away by the realization that here, or at a place close by, God chose to inhabit the body of a woman. It is almost as though, if you and I had arrived five minutes earlier, we might have witnessed Mary and the angel, as God chose to enter human history in the womb of this woman. God chose to come to us as human that we might again come home to God as his children. This is the mystery of the Annunciation, and this is the mystery of Christmas.

The way the author of Luke’s gospel is inspired to tell the story, Mary is the least and last that we would expect to be the hostess for God’s homecoming. We have been led through

centuries of expectation and Scriptures to believe that if God were to visit us humans, it would be to a man who would be in the temple at Jerusalem, offering sacrifice. That was how the birth of John the Baptist was announced to Zechariah just previously in Luke's gospel. But when it came to Jesus, the Son of God, it was to an unimportant woman in a seemingly God-forsaken town of a seemingly God-forsaken people, Nazareth in Galilee. Mary is the *last* one we would expect to be the recipient of God-becoming-human, and yet she is God's choice, not because of anything she is or has done but because God is God and this is how God chooses to come to us.

And because Mary said YES, and because God now is among us as Jesus in human form and in his Spirit in risen form, we now have God among us every time we say YES to God's will and not simply to our own willfulness. Christmas happens every time we take the Third Step and turn our will and our lives over to God—in that choice God is born again into our time and our space. We are not simply preparing to celebrate the Christmas of 2000 years ago or the Christmas that will come forever at the end, but the Christmas that comes every time we make room in our hearts, in our wills, for the Christ to be born. We are the manger, we are the crib right here, right now. Merry Christmas. (DR)