

**A Place Called Self  
Women, Sobriety, and Radical Transformation**

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## **A Place Called Self Women, Sobriety, and Radical Transformation**

### **Chapter One**

#### **What Is Recovery?**

When Anne went to her first Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting, she repeated the familiar statement: “Hi. My name is Anne. I’m an alcoholic and I’m in recovery.”

She had quit drinking the day before, and so she dared to make the claim that she was in recovery. But was it true? Did quitting really mean that she was in recovery? Well yes, but only partially, because quitting is only a tiny piece of it. Recovery is so much more than quitting. Let’s listen in on Anne twenty years later as she tells her story at a treatment center.

Recovery has held so many surprises for me. Some good. Some bad. I didn’t know I could hurt so much. But I also didn’t know I could love so much and be so loved. I had no idea recovery was also learning how to be in intimate relationships, learning how to have close, wonderful friends. Then there’s my marriage. My husband and I have developed a rich life together. And—get this—I really like myself now. Learning about who I am and accepting me, that’s been the hardest part of recovery—and the best. I wouldn’t trade this path for anything in the world.

Recovery is a journey, a process, like the evolution of a wizened old tree, bent and blown and impossibly beautiful. You can see that the tree has suffered the ravages of time, and the ravages themselves have become part of its beauty. This is recovery.

Recovery is a radical change in the self, a transformation. It’s a long and, yes, even painful process of developing a self that has been neglected and distorted over many years. Recovery may even be finding a self that has never been born.

For many women, their real selves are barely known, even to themselves, barely audible, barely visible, and woefully underdeveloped. If you are in recovery, you have a lot of work ahead of you, perhaps a lifetime’s worth of work to catch up on. But wrapped in with the sweaty, grueling work of it is the joy you feel when you hear your own strong voice singing, unencumbered by shame or self-consciousness.

We will explore this long, painful, and joyous process in detail, but first, let’s look at what, exactly, we mean when we say “women in recovery.” Who are we talking about?

### **Who Is the Woman in Recovery?**

In this book I'm talking about the woman who has been actively addicted to a substance, to a repeated compulsive behavior, or to an individual. If you are a woman who has stopped drinking, using other drugs, gambling, overeating, undereating, or behaving in a compulsive, out-of-control manner in a relationship, you are the woman I am talking about. You are a woman who has faced yourself and who has come to a realization that you have lost control and cannot regain it, if indeed you ever had control. You have come to accept the fundamental, deep reality that you are powerless over your own needs and your actions to meet those needs—your active addiction.

This book asks and answers one important question: What happens to the woman who stops her active addiction? This is the woman who has the challenging and perhaps frightening opportunity to start a transformational process of new growth and development called recovery.

### **Redefining Recovery**

The dictionary defines *recovery* as a reclaiming or “return” of something lost. According to this definition, a woman recovering from addiction is reclaiming the health, sanity, and well-being that may have existed before she became addicted. But that's not quite right. Recovery is more like a starting over than a restoration of what was lost. This is because, for many women, the real self was never really developed. As she grows up, a woman in our world frequently becomes role-bound before she knows who she is. Like the “beauty” of a traditional Chinese woman's bound and stunted feet, the “beauty” demanded of a woman's personality requires that her self conforms to a shape that is not hers. So when she strips off the false self presented in her addiction, her real self is only partially there. She frequently finds instead a stunted person.

Recovery is a resumption of the work that was not completed when the woman was a girl. It is a coming into her own. It is an opportunity to resume the normal process of development that was sidetracked, perhaps first by constrained roles, perhaps by trauma, and then multiplied many times by hiding in the addiction. Her development was sidetracked by not accepting her needs as legitimate and not finding healthy ways to meet them, by not even knowing her needs. *And so this is what recovery is: a developmental process of finding and building a new self.* Recovery is a process of radical growth and change. When you are in recovery, you give birth to a new self. Is it any surprise, then, that it's painful and it takes time?

### **Myths of Recovery**

Recovery involves a change in meaning of everything a woman knows. In recovery, you will transform the way you think about yourself as well as the way you think about life itself. Before we explore this further, let's talk about two of the traditional ways of thinking about recovery that are actually misleading: (1) recovery is moving from bad to good; and (2) dependence is bad and recovery means you are no longer dependent.

### *Bad to Good or False to Real?*

Many women initially think that recovery means a move from bad to good. They think that being addicted is evidence of shameful neediness, of deep and lasting failures. The addicted woman is most often working to do her best, trying to be a good person, a good wife, mother, friend, and worker. Yet she feels bad. She believes herself to be a bad person.

If she thinks she was bad because she was an active addict, then somehow she believes that recovery should make her good. And yet she may continue to feel bad after she becomes abstinent because the shame, guilt, and sense of failure over what she did while actively addicted are so great. She may also feel a deep guilt because she has stopped using and now she is a survivor, one who has started down a new road. She worries about what she has done to others by stopping her addiction: Who has she left behind? Who will be upset by her new knowledge, her new path, and, indeed, her new self? She believes that recovery will make her a good person, but she still doesn't feel like she is a good person. This is what happened to Anne, whom we met in the beginning of this chapter.

When Anne's son, Ken, was twelve years old, he started to get in trouble at school. It was springtime. School was almost out for the year when he was suspended for fighting. Anne knew it had something to do with her. When she drank, her anger bubbled to the surface and found its way out in all sorts of ways. The night before Ken was suspended, Anne had gotten drunk and thrown a plate across the room at her husband, Marty. Ken had walked through the kitchen door at just the wrong moment and the plate almost hit him. Anne suddenly turned on Ken. "Why don't you ever watch where you're going? What are you doing here anyway? You're as bad as your dad. Nobody in this lousy house can pick up a thing. What the hell is wrong with you guys?"

The next morning Anne felt miserable about herself. She could hardly pull her head out from under the covers and face daylight. *What a bad mother I am*, she thought. *What a bad wife*. *What a bad person*. She vowed she would never lose her temper again. Yet two weeks later she put a dent in the wall by throwing a can of vegetable soup.

Anne quit using and drinking about the time the snow started falling that year. She still felt miserable, but she thought she wasn't going to have to feel miserable about being bad anymore. Imagine her dismay when Ken came home past his curfew on a Saturday evening and she found herself yelling and swearing at him at the top of her lungs. "You stupid, no-good kid!" she yelled before she could stop herself. She stormed out of the house to keep herself from slapping him and walked for a long time in the cool evening air.

*What's wrong with me?* she despaired. *I still get furious with my son*. *I'm still a bad mother*. She walked until her fingers were like icicles and then headed home, exhausted. Anne had expected that sobriety would mean she would become a good person, but she still felt like a failure.

After Anne had been in recovery for a year, she began therapy to get help with her anger. She began to realize that being sober didn't mean she would never be furious with Ken and Marty. What it did mean was that she could face the fact that she felt furious, and then she could make decisions about how she wanted to act on that feeling.

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*Recovery is not a move from bad to good, but from false to real. This is the transformation. The point of surrender and new abstinence represents a letting go of the old self—a false self dominated by a facade of denial, hiding, and desperate attempts to be good and “hold it together.” By accepting her loss of control, the woman in recovery opens the door to finding her real, authentic self, the woman she is underneath the layers of defense that have protected her—her false self—perhaps for her entire life. That doesn’t mean her real self is “bad” or “good.” These categories no longer apply. It is reality, being real, that now guides her rather than her efforts to be good or bad.*

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### *Dependent to Independent or Dependent to Healthy Dependence?*

Like the myth that recovery means moving from bad to good, many women think recovery is moving from dependence to self-sufficiency. But there is no such thing as total self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is a partial condition. All human beings are ultimately dependent; all human beings need others on whom they can depend. As the old saying goes, “No man [or woman] is an island.” On a physical level, we need others to create new life and to sustain that life. At the most basic level, it takes two to make a baby. It takes even more to form a community that can clothe and feed itself and keep everyone warm and safe. We also need others on an emotional level. We do not outgrow our need for nurture, to be loved and held and understood. Dependence is not a failure, but a normal, healthy part of being human. This is the kind of dependence a woman experiences in recovery.

So let’s go back to talking about how the meaning of everything a woman knows changes in recovery and about how she is transformed.

### **The Truths of Recovery**

First, let me expand on the definition of recovery found on page 5: Recovery is a developmental process of finding and building a new self. You will find that the new self is a complex person. You will gain a whole new way of thinking about yourself and about life, a more intricate way of looking at things. It’s not black or white, it’s not either/or, and it’s not good or bad. Instead, this way of thinking recognizes that life is good *and* bad, joyful *and* painful, sweet *and* sour.

Recovery is a more grown-up way of being in the world, and it is filled with complexity. Like all truths, the truths of recovery are mysterious and complex. They are filled with paradoxes—things that seem like they shouldn’t both be true at the same time. Things that don’t make logical sense. If you look at them logically, they seem absurd. It’s what is called “counterintuitive.” Everything you thought you were and thought you knew gets reinterpreted and turned around. This makes it hard to hold on to paradoxical truths. Because they seem to contradict logic, they must be experienced to be truly understood. That is one of the reasons it takes a long time to learn these lessons, to learn them in such a way that you know them deep in your bones. You have to take the time to live them in order to truly understand them.

Here are some of the paradoxes of recovery:

1. We are powerless, out of control, and yet, we must take responsibility for being powerless and out of control.
2. All of us need others on whom we can depend; we die without others, and yet we are alone. We can't really connect with others until we've developed a separate self; yet we develop separate selves by connecting with others.

How does it work? How does a woman know that she is powerless and at the same time acknowledge that she had choices in the development of her addiction? How does any woman build a new self on a foundation of powerlessness? How can her strength be anchored in powerlessness? How does a woman come to know that she has a separate self, is independent of others, and, yet, connected to others?

*You Are Powerless and You Are Responsible for Your Powerlessness*

This is one of the most difficult paradoxes to grasp. You come to see yourself straight on, often for the first time, when you acknowledge that you are powerless. As you acknowledge what really happened, what you did, and how and why you did it, you acknowledge and accept yourself as an agent (someone who can act). You understand that you are a person who made choices that resulted in your utter helplessness. In other words, you have been out of control and you are responsible. With this acceptance of defeat, you come into being.

Many women can accept the first part—being out of control—but not the second part. Many believe that they became out of control because they couldn't help it, because they were the victim of someone else's dominance, aggression, or example. They feel they had no choice because they didn't feel they really existed as a separate person. They only existed through others and to please others. So they feel like addiction happened to them. But as they begin to realize that they do have a separate self, although perhaps muted and stunted, they begin to see that they made choices that led them to become increasingly powerless.

When Anne first went into treatment, she was very clear that she did not have control of either her alcohol and other drug use or of her temper. So all the talk of her being responsible for her addiction was very annoying. After listening to a lecture one evening, she asked the counselor in frustration, "How can you say I'm powerless and that I'm responsible at the same time? It makes no sense."

"Think back, Anne, over the years," her counselor answered. "Think how you came to be in this position. Did someone open your mouth and pour in the gin? When you got mad at Marty, who decided it was easier to pop a pill than to tell him how angry you were? Did Marty make that decision?"

That conversation was repeated in many forms over the next few days, and slowly Anne came to understand how she was responsible for making choices that brought her to this place in her life.

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*The acceptance of powerlessness and the acceptance of responsibility for being powerless is the great paradox of recovery. As a woman acknowledges herself as an agent, the one responsible for her behavior, she comes into her real self.*

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### *You Are Dependent, and You Are Separate and Alone*

While all human beings need others, they are also separate and alone. Even while a woman in recovery recognizes that she, like all people everywhere, needs to depend on others, she also recognizes that she needs to develop a self that is separate from others. This is the only way she can know her true self. Recovery is a process of learning who you really are and accepting this person. It's a process of gaining intimate knowledge of your own self. It is the shocking discovery that you are more than your roles and more than your relationships, a discovery that is both liberating and unsettling.

At the same time that you discover you have a separate self, you discover that you are intimately connected to others. In fact, it's only when you have developed a separate self that you can be truly connected with another person. It's a never-ending circle, a mystery. You come to know your real, separate self through connections with other people, and you connect with other people by having a separate self. It's like the proverbial question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

And ultimately, of course, there is the profound existential reality that we are alone. It is in the quiet, deepest part of ourselves where we think our thoughts and feel our feelings. We can say our thoughts and feelings out loud to others and share them in that way, but others cannot literally think our thoughts and feel our feelings with us.

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*We are left with the powerful paradox that we need others to survive, and yet we are alone. This is the spirituality of recovery, the knowledge that we have a basic, fundamental need for an "other."*

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This paradox will become clearer throughout the book as you meet Carole and Blanca, Candace and Sharifa, Mai Lee and Patti, and many other women who struggle to come to terms with their powerlessness and their responsibility, their loneliness, their peaceful aloneness, their strength, and their great capacity to love and be loved.

### **Recovery as a Developmental Process**

Becoming addicted is a developmental process. Many people believe that it happens quickly or that they were always addicted, even born addicted, and were just waiting to live it out. However, no matter how fast or how slowly a woman hooks herself, she still "makes a turn" toward the object of her addiction.

Recovery, too, is a developmental process that takes a long time. Luckily, you don't undertake this new development alone, and luckily, you can take all the time you need for this radical change. Recovery generally follows certain stages. In part 2 we will look at the developmental stages of addiction and recovery.