

# Waiting



*A Nonbeliever's Higher Power*

**Marya Hornbacher**

Best-Selling Author of *Madness* and *Sane*

*Waiting*

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A Nonbeliever's Higher Power

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Hazelden®

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Editor's note

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For Jim A.

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, . . . have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

—Walt Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

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## INTRODUCTION



*Using the cycle of a year's passage, we will explore ten spiritual concepts in the context of the seasons of a life and in the practice of the Twelve Steps, looking at how they can be understood by someone who does not believe in a God. Rather than arguments for any theory or philosophy of spirituality, these are explorations of the experience of waiting itself as a spiritual practice.*

I walked through the door of the convent. It was a silent Catholic order; no one would speak to me during the time I was going to spend there. I paused in the foyer to listen for something—nuns, God, mice—but there was no sound. The nuns, surely, were somewhere in the building; perhaps God was as well. At least, that was my hope.

The rooms were simple. In the kitchen, I found a long, rough-hewn wooden table with wooden chairs. On the table was a bowl of soup and some bread. This meal was meant for me. I sat down and ate it, after glancing around to see if there might be directions as to what one did prior to eating in a convent—presumably one might pray?—but there were no directions. So I simply ate. When I was done, I washed my bowl and spoon and set them in the rack to dry, and then went to explore the rest of the rooms.

I found a small chapel. The fading light of late day came through the stained-glass windows and cast the pews and stone floor with a bright motley of color. Beyond the chapel, I found a library: the walls were lined floor to ceiling with books, except for one long wall of windows that looked out on an orderly garden, vegetables and flowers in neat boxes and rows. Beyond the garden, there was a labyrinth, the long shadows of trees falling across it.

I scanned the books. I pulled one out, I don't remember which one. I sat down in a chair with the book unopened on my lap. I looked out the window as the light faded and dusk fell.

I had lost, more or less, everything.

I say that in a very qualified sense: I had a place to live, food to eat. I had clothes and the usual things one needs to survive. But I had lost what was most familiar, what was safest, what I knew best: I had lost an addiction. That addiction had been the center of my existence since I was a child. It had been my guiding principle, my closest companion, the thing I turned to for comfort, for answers, for assurance that I would be all right. It had been my god.

It had nearly killed me.

I fought like hell to keep it. I kicked and screamed and swore and sobbed. I begged to be allowed to hold it just a little while longer. But in the end, I had to let it go.

And without it, I was quite lost.

I didn't know why I had come to the convent. It was an impulse; someone had told me there was a convent in a nearby city, an order of nuns who had taken a vow of silence and who allowed guests to stay. In that moment, the idea of going somewhere to be entirely silent appealed to some part of me I couldn't explain. Maybe I thought that if things got quiet enough, I would hear God.

Night fell over the convent. I sat there in the dark, watching the moon scatter light over the orderly garden. There was no sound except that of my own breath.

I set the book on a table, picked up my small bag, and found the stairs up to the room where I was to sleep. In this room, there was a narrow bed, a simple desk, and a prayer bench, the velvet kneeling rail well worn. I set my bag on the floor and studied the prayer bench awhile. Then I lay down on my back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

I was at the lowest point in my life. I had lost all I thought I needed. I did not know how to go on.

It was an enormous, sudden peace.

I knew, very quietly, that I would not find God in this place. I knew it

was possible I would not find God at all. And so I could not explain the overwhelming peace I felt. I could not explain how I knew, absolutely, that it would be all right.

I remembered the words of Julian of Norwich: *And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.*

I could not have articulated it at that time, but what I felt that night is what I would now call grace. I felt faith. I heard something. Not the voice of God, not the beating wings of angels. Not the murmur of nuns at prayer, not even the scuttle of mice.

What I heard was the stirring of my own spirit coming to life.



The spirit, it seems to me, grows noisy and goes silent by turns over the course of one's life. There are ways in which we silence it. Many of us have silenced it through addiction, but there are other ways, and many of us have used those as well. And there are ways in which we can draw the spirit out, listen for it with all the strength we've got.

But listening for spirit is something of a complicated process when we do not believe in a God, or do not feel a connection to what may be called a Higher Power. Many of us have been trained to think of "spirituality" as the sole provenance of religion; and if we have come to feel that the religious are not the only ones with access to a spiritual life, we may still be casting about for what, precisely, a spiritual life would be without a God, a religion, or a solid set of spiritual beliefs.

Throughout this book, I use the words *spirit* and *spiritual* often, and that may seem strange when I state my own lack of belief in a Higher Power or God. And some days it seems strange to me as well, that I am so certain of an ineffable force within me and within all of us when I doubt the presence of a metaphysical power without. But really, it isn't contradictory. I am not speaking of metaphysics. I am speaking of the thing in ourselves that stirs.

The origin of the word *spirit* is Greek. It means "breath." That which stirs within, slows or quickens, goes deep or dies out. When I speak of

spirit, I am not speaking of something related to or given by a force outside ourselves. I am speaking of the force that *is* ourselves. The experience of living in this world, bound by a body, space, and time, woven into the fabric of human history, human connection, and human life. This is the force that feels and thinks and gives us consciousness at all; it is our awareness of presence in the world. It is the deepest, most elemental, most integral part of who we are; it *is* who we are.

So when I speak of spirit, I'm speaking of something that frustratingly defies articulation, because we have few words for spiritual beyond those that refer back to a God. But not believing in a God is not opposed to a belief in an aspect of the *self* that can be called spiritual. The latter is experienced, and defined, very personally, and is different for each individual.

I am not speaking of some universal or transcendent "Spirit" that exists outside of us; I am speaking of the human *spirit* that exists in each of us. I'm speaking of something that is urgently important in ourselves, the very thing that's sent us searching, the thing that feels the longing, the thing that comes knocking on the door of our emotionally and intellectually closed lives and asks to be let in.

When we let it in, and only when we do, we begin to be integrated people. We begin to find integrity in who we are. We are not just a body, not just a mind, not just a mass of emotions, not just people dragging around the dusty bag of our pasts. We have depth and wholeness, not shattered bits of self that never seem to hold together properly. And we begin to walk a spiritual path.

This path is not toward a known entity of any kind. Rather, it is the path that leads *through*. And there are many points along the way where we stop, or we fumble, or we get tangled up or turned around.

And those are the places where we wait. We're not waiting for the voice of God, or for the lightning-bolt spiritual experience. We're not waiting to be saved or carried. We're waiting for our own inner voice—for lack of a better word, I'm going to keep calling it spirit—to tell us where to go next.

It will.



I confess: even after putting together a few sober days, I still flinch at the God-centered language of the Twelve Step literature. There's no need to lay out a litany of examples; one need only thumb through the Big Book (*Alcoholics Anonymous*) or *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* or a meditation manual to find what I'm talking about. And I imagine if you've picked up this book, you're probably already aware of what can seem like an inherent assumption held by the Twelve Step program: sooner or later, you will believe in God.

Let's be clear—not every Twelve Step member feels this way. There are plenty of people who are completely comfortable with the idea that some do and some do not believe in or feel a connection to a Higher Power. But there are also a whole lot of members who don't mind telling you that you need a God and better find one quick, or risk losing your sobriety. They believe what they believe. They just don't believe what I believe.

But the literature itself does seem to press the point—sometimes none too gently—that a relationship with God is a basic necessity for contented, long-term sobriety. Maybe the most striking moment when the newcomer realizes this is in reading “How It Works.” It reads: “Remember that we deal with alcohol—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!” (pages 58–59).

That's religious language. Not spiritual language. It leaves no room for interpretation. It implies—rather, it *states*—that without the help of the One God (whose, or which, One God is not made clear), you can't get sober.

So while many of us have spent a lot of time telling non-AAAs “no, no, it's not a religious program!” I have to concede that it certainly looks like one from time to time.

Generally speaking, when a person expresses doubt about God, or flat-out says he or she doesn't believe in one, people get a little frustrated. It's as hard to explain belief as it is to explain unbelief, but people want to share what has helped them, and many of them want you to be able to find the God that works in their lives. So they direct you to read chapter 4 of the Big Book, “We Agnostics.”

We get a few paragraphs in. We think we may actually have found some room for our own beliefs within this program. And then we are instructed, “Cheer up, something like half of us thought we were atheists or agnostics. Our experience shows that you need not be disconcerted” (page 44).

In other words—you are not *really* an atheist or an agnostic. You are deluded. You are simply not as far along in sobriety or spiritual development as those who believe in a Higher Power. Soon enough, you’ll believe in one too.

The chapter ends with a description of a man sent to his knees by a thunderbolt of a thought: “*Who are you to say there is no God?*” By this point, after many pages of reading about the apparent *fact* that there is a God, and the absolute necessity of belief in one if we hope to hold on to sobriety, the nonbeliever may be despairing, furious, alienated, or simply at a loss. In any case, we may feel very strongly that there is no room for us in this kind of spiritual context.

But such a spiritual experience is only one kind. There are as many ways of being spiritual, of feeling one’s spirit stirring, of creating a spiritual practice in one’s life as there are people in the world. The task is to get to know our own spiritual nature, learn what feeds it, and act from a spiritual place in our work in the world.

I was one of those people who came into the Twelve Step program and was more confused by the notion of a Higher Power than opposed to it. I figured there might be one out there, and if all these people were sure there was, they were probably right and could likely tell me how to find it.

Gradually, though, it began to seem that the belief in God—not just a Higher Power, not just a “God of your understanding,” but a God who was assumed to be of *all* our understandings, even those of us who had no understanding of, or belief in, a God at all—was a given. I got the sense that if I did not believe in God now, it was a matter of me still being new to sobriety, and surely I’d come to my senses soon.

So I gave it a shot. Every morning I watched the sun rise and read a highly religious little meditation book and tried having a conversation with God. I waited for that sense of the presence of a Higher Power that I’d

heard of. I chastised myself for not being open to real spiritual experience. It was one of the loneliest things I've ever done.

It sent me, actually, to a pretty bad place. I was terrified I was going to lose my sobriety. I wanted to know what was wrong with me that I couldn't sense or believe in the existence of a God, let alone the personal involvement in my life one might have. I spoke of it in meetings, this failure on my part; I talked to my sponsor, to other people in the program, to anyone I thought might be able to instruct me how to find this God of which everyone spoke in such personal, intimate terms.

Finally, someone pulled me aside after a meeting. He said, "Here's the thing. I don't know what God is, or if there is a God. I only know that there are moments when I feel spiritual. I can be in a church or a mosque or a temple or a grocery store or the woods. And I get that sense of *being spiritual*. Of something alive in me. It's not necessarily a sense that something outside me is present. It's the sense that *I* am present. Completely present. Alive."

And in that moment, as we stood there in the church basement kitchen while people around us rustled and chattered and headed home, I recognized that what I felt—a connection to this person, an ability to hear him clearly, to open my mind, to listen, and to learn—was a spiritual experience. It was an enormous relief. I stopped feeling like I was doing the whole thing wrong. His words undid the terrible tangle I was in, and I could move forward with a new sense of what spirit meant, and what mine felt like, and what I believed.

For all its God language, the Twelve Step program isn't actually an attempt at religious conversion. Really, it just tries to bring us to a place of new spiritual understanding that allows us to live differently *in this world*. The Steps are not intended to get us to heaven or save us from hell. This is not about life in another world, above or below. This is about how we live *here*. And though many would not agree with me on this point, it's my contention that how we live *here* is defined and guided by who we are, who we choose to be, who we try to become. Some believe that a God is the guiding force and principle in this evolution in ourselves. I believe what guides us is already *in* us, is in fact the deepest part of who we are—capable of

turning us into ever-more spiritually grounded, spiritually generous, peaceful people.

That evolution itself is a spiritual process. And the Steps can be guideposts on the way. Each of them asks deep and hard spiritual questions; while some of us may need to find our way past the God-centered language to reach the core of those questions, we can find that core, and having done so, can open our minds to what the Steps might teach us about how to live. The Steps are intended—it sounds simple, and it is—to make us better people, more aware, more alive, and more spiritually whole.

The Steps, at their heart, are a pathway to spiritual experiences. Not to a singular spiritual experience. They are, as you'll often hear in meetings, "a program for living." I would add that they are a program for living *spiritually*. Each Step is based on spiritual principles; taken as a whole, they form a map toward understanding ourselves better as spiritual people. And they are a spiritual *practice*, requiring not only thought and feeling but action as well.

We come to the program "spiritually bankrupt." We come spiritually bereft. Addiction starves and eventually kills the spirit; we come in need of spiritual nourishment. That nourishment comes in different forms for different people. For some it comes as God, for some it's felt as a more amorphous Higher Power. Some people are comfortable taking the suggestion often given to nonbelievers, that they make their Twelve Step group their Higher Power. Some people, for reasons I don't claim to understand, find comfort in the idea that literally anything can be their Higher Power—a doorknob, a rock.

Whatever works. But it is human nature to want some source of spiritual comfort or guidance—the things a God gives to those who believe. Addicts have, over the years of their use, ultimately made their addiction their Higher Power. And when addicts come to sobriety, the sense of disorientation—the sense of being unmoored from anything solid—the sense that they are absolutely lost is overwhelming.

So we reach for something. We reach blindly outward—toward a God in whom we may or may not believe, toward a Higher Power we may not understand, toward a group of people, toward a simple inanimate thing. And for some of us, this works. We find that spiritual source we crave.

Some of us, though, do not.

It is my belief that though we need to reach outward in our search for spiritual nourishment, we need to reach deeper within. For those of us who do not know God, who may not believe there is a God to know, this search within is the search for our own spiritual nature. We seek not what is out there in some abstract heaven. We seek, instead, what is here, in ourselves, on this earth.

And the search can be undertaken using the Steps. Though the language of the old program literature is religious, its message is spiritual, and it seeks to bring about a spiritual experience. And if we allow it to, it does. We do not need to know a God for that to happen.

The practice of the Steps does not require houses of worship or prostrations or adherence to a creed. It requires a careful and intensive look inward, a deepening knowledge of ourselves, our actions, and our beliefs, so that we can be more intimately, spiritually connected to the world in which we live. The Steps ask us to take that look inward, and ultimately bring us to a spiritual wholeness where we have the capacity to love and serve the world outside our limited selves.

When we come to the program, we are in dire need of a spiritual source. The Steps lead us to it, whatever we call it, whatever it may look like, whatever form it may take. This source feeds us; and, in turn, we are able to feed others in spiritual need.

This is a spiritual experience. This is a spiritual experience anyone may have, anyone who knows a God, and anyone who does not. This is a way of living a spiritual life; this is a spiritual practice of being alive.



Before we go any further, I assure you that this book will ask more questions than it answers. It will not offer an “alternative” set of beliefs that are hard and fast in any way. It will not posit an alternative God or gods. It will not build a ladder to a clearly knowable Higher Power. Part of me wishes I could find these things for myself.

But another part of me has come to know this: it is precisely in my lack

of certainty—about whether there is a God, about what the spirit actually is—that I find my spirituality. I have come to believe that, for me, peace can only be found in the acceptance of all I do not know.

I do not know if there is a God, if there is a Higher Power. In the interest of full disclosure, I do not, myself, believe that there is a personified God, a deity to whom I pray and by whom I am guided and who intervenes in my daily life. I do not find a source of comfort in a singular religious or spiritual figure, nor do I have a God to question when things go wrong in my life or in the world.

That I myself do not have or know such a God does not mean one does not exist. It only means I do not believe it exists. I am only one, incredibly flawed, absolutely limited human mind—one spirit—among millions more. But it is precisely this limitation—the fact that I can know only so much of the nature of things, of spirit, of universal truth—that is, paradoxically, the source of my spirituality.

Because, lacking a sense of a God above, but aware of the spiritual nature of myself—the spiritual nature of, I believe, all human beings—I find myself in need of a spiritual life here on the ground. A spiritual life that is not theoretical, but practical. A way of living spiritually—here, in this life, bounded by space and time, both in connection with others and in solitude, here in this living world.

This book, then, is not an attempt to find or name a God. It is not a search for a spiritual source outside ourselves. It is, instead, a search within—for what we mean when we refer to *spirit*, for what our own spirit feels like, for how we can live according to that spirit's wisdom.

In this book, I want to move beyond “There is no God” (or “Is there a God?”) to “What do I believe?” What do we believe about the human, the spirit? And beyond that, I hope we can move from asking ourselves what we believe, to a place where we can ask, “How do I live?”

To me, that's the central question. How do I live in a spiritual way?

How can the Steps be worked in a spiritual way, if we do not believe in a God? That's an oddly easy question to answer: the Steps can't *not* be worked in a spiritual way. They are spiritual steps, leading to spiritual experiences. The only requirement is that we open ourselves to them. If we

let them, the Steps will work themselves into us, and we will work them as spiritual people, increasingly aware as we go of our spiritual nature, our spiritual strength.

This book takes the form of a year on a spiritual journey. I am not trying to reach God by December; I am not trying to develop a fixed set of beliefs in twelve months. I am merely going through the Steps, trying to draw out the spiritual principles that shape them, that build on the previous Step and lead to the next.

If I am searching, I am searching for a deeper understanding of spirit, of spirituality, of a way in which one can live a spiritual life. I hope to find, on my way, greater insight into what makes people spiritual beings—in their brokenness, in their wisdom, in their joy, in their despair. And I hope to find a way to articulate what I mean when I speak of the spiritual practice that can be put into action by working the Twelve Steps.

The Steps have shed light on a spiritual self I did not know I possessed. I have heard that same thing from more people than I can count—believers, nonbelievers, atheists, agnostics, none of the above. The Steps are not a religion, not by any means. But they pave the way, for those who need them, to a spiritual source. Taking us from brokenness and isolation, to awakening and connection, to, finally, spiritual awakening and action, we find as we go that the spiritual source can be found within and without, in ourselves, in others, right here in this world.



## CHAPTER ONE



# *Despair*

January

*Reaching the end of a given road in our lives—or the end of the road of our lives in addiction—we find ourselves at a point of despair, recognizing our powerlessness, not knowing where to go next or if we can even begin again. Sometimes it’s a matter of waiting through this painful moment, allowing the heart to experience what comes, to feel its way through darkness, and to emerge with whatever it finds. We have come to Step One.*

Lake Superior sprawls endlessly to the east of Highway 61, a steely silver-gray, surging against the rocks that line the shore. Sharp outcroppings of rock rise high above the road. At certain crevices, icy waterfalls tumble downward, frozen solid, as if time had stopped and held the ropes of water tangled in midair.

This is the heart of winter in the deep north. For reasons I can’t quite explain, I’m driving yet farther north, toward the Canadian border, toward tundra, a place where maybe the landscape will match the emptiness I feel spreading through my chest.

There are times when the heart burrows deeper, goes tunneling into itself for reasons only the heart itself seems to know. They are times of isolation, of hibernation, sometimes of desolation. There is a barrenness that spreads out over the interior landscape of the self, a barrenness like tundra, with no sign of life in any direction, no sign of anything beneath the frozen crust of ground, no sign that spring ever intends to come again.

I have known these times. I believe everyone has. And for the better part

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of my life, I have tried to dull the sharp awareness of them with addictive substances and behaviors. I have tried to blot them out, blunt their edges, make them disappear. At those times in my life when I have reached a moment of doubt or despair, I have turned in desperation to my addictions, clinging to the absolute faith that my addictions would fill the emptiness. I have trusted the voice of addiction to guide me; I have made it the absolute in my life, the one thing I trusted and knew to be true. I have tried, again and again, to turn my addictions into a spiritual source.

Addiction failed me, as it fails us all. Its clear voice turned out to be nothing more than the voice of my own fear. The source of guidance and comfort it seemed to be were false at best, deadly at worst. And eventually I realized that my life in active addiction had to end. The devastation it had created in my life, in the lives of those around me, in what I wanted to be myself, was too great.

But at that moment—the moment of realization that life as I'd been living it would have to end—I felt devastation unlike any I'd ever known. The barrenness was indescribable. The emptiness that opened up in me seemed to stretch on forever; I could see no end to it, could find no source of comfort in it, could not imagine any way out.

That state of devastation, of despair—a state we fear and run from, most of us, all our lives—is a spiritual state. It does not feel like it at the time. It feels powerfully, absolutely alone. We have reached an ending; we know that the path we've been on goes no further or leads only deeper into a private hell. It is what they call the dark night of the soul.

But it *is* a spiritual state: because in that darkness, we become aware of a spiritual hunger that we know must be fed. And that awareness of ourselves as spiritual beings is in fact a gift. It is a turning point. We reach an ending, yes, but it is at that ending where we hear our spirits, which we'd thought were long buried or dead, choke back to life.

Although I spent years drowning the sound of my spirit in alcohol, hoping it would serve as some kind of spiritual nourishment, there came a time when I had to stop. And though it was the most terrifying thing I had ever done, I turned inward. I turned to face what seemed to be a spiritual wasteland, walked into it without compass or map, in the hope that I could find my way to something I might need.

At the lip of a cliff, I look out over Lake Superior, through the bare branches of birches and the snow-covered branches of aspens and pines. A hard wind blows snow up out of a cavern and over my face. I know this place, I know its seasons—I have hiked these mountains in the summer and walked these winding pathways in the explosion of color that is a northern fall. And now, as the temperature drops well below zero and the deadly cold lake rages below, I feel the stirrings of faith that here, in this place, in my heart, spring will come again.

But first the winter must be waited out. And that waiting has worth.

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Most of us, when we arrive at the realization that we have reached a spiritual dead end, come to that knowledge broken, barely holding our pieces together. We come craving wholeness. We come craving comfort. Those of us facing the end of addiction are painfully, terrifyingly aware of our own powerlessness, our tininess in the face of something vast. It has nearly destroyed all we have and are.

And yet we miss it. We feel that we need it. Addiction was the thing that brought us a kind of comfort. We answered to it, and so it seemed to give us guidance. It was what we knew. Without it, we feel hopelessly lost. Lost, grieving, desperate, emptied of the things we knew.

The Big Book calls us spiritually bankrupt. This spiritual bankruptcy is characteristic of both those who have a sense of a Higher Power and those who do not. People who know and feel connected to a God feel just as lost when they decide to stop their addictive behavior. Their grief in loss is no less; they speak of the same disorientation and sense of absence that those of us without God speak of, and their devastation is the same.

All of us, at one time or another in our lives, reach a point where we are absolutely leveled by some loss or by another spiritual crisis. Yet I believe we need to reach it, or we will not fully hear the echo of a spiritual emptiness within; and until we hear that echo, we will not respond.

But now that we have reached that point, what do we do? What should we feel? Where do we turn?

That last may be the most pressing question for those of us who do

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not believe in God. Here at the nadir of emotional and spiritual experience, we want lifting up out of this dark place. We long for comfort. We desperately need guidance. And who or what, many of us are asking, will give us those things? What lifts us, when we have fallen so far? To what source do we turn?

This state of spiritual brokenness is more than painful. It is terrifying. And the absence of a belief in a Higher Power makes us feel as though there is an enormous silence that comes when we ask these questions. That silence is lonely, and frightening, and it makes the sense of longing, need, and emptiness within us even greater.

But we are not ultimately empty, and there is more to hear than silence. We are not yet listening to our own spiritual voice. We are unaccustomed to doing so. We are also not looking to the people around us for spiritual wisdom. And we have not yet learned to look to the Twelve Step program itself as what it is: A program for living. A program for living *spiritually*. And a path to spiritual experience.

But now we are only embarking on the journey. Our craving for spiritual wholeness is enormous. Our education in who we are as spiritual people is only beginning. It is a lifelong process and will move through many phases. We will come to this point again—this point of darkness, of despair, of loss and loneliness and grief. And so we must pay attention while we are here. We must experience this spiritual stage fully and with consciousness. And we must wait.

When we are faced with the choice between our own certain destruction and the uncertainty of going on, we are told that there is a spiritual solution to our problem, a way of living that will save us from the spiritual death we were already in. But for many of us, “spirit” and “spiritual” are suspect concepts. And we’re asking: What is spirit? Can it exist separate from the notion of a God? *Is* there anything within us that can be called spiritual?

So much of our sense of the spiritual has been killed off. Our ability to recognize and experience joy, beauty, or wonder has been destroyed. Our ability to connect with other people in a real and intimate way has been damaged beyond recognition, to the point where many of us do not know what a healthy or fulfilling relationship with another person would be.

Both of those things—the internal sense of awe at the beauty and difficulty of life, and the ability to truly connect with other people—are spiritual experiences, and we have cut ourselves off from them through our addiction.

So when we ask ourselves whether there is anything within us that is spiritual, whether we have, in fact, a *spirit*, we can look back to the time prior to our addiction. For many of us, that was childhood. It is easy to write off childlike faith in the universe and childlike wonder at the world as simply a lack of knowledge about “how life really is.” Well, how is life, really? Do we know—we who have been denying life, life’s beauty and its true challenges, for such a long time? Or did we know better as children, when the whole world seemed to be filled with meaning and possibility, both good and bad?

We do each have spirit within us. But we have to recognize that it is deeply buried under layer after layer of addictive sickness. That spiritual voice we long to hear has been silenced by our own years of use and abuse. In this first stage of our journey, we begin the long archaeological dig that will lead us to our own spiritual truth.

The spiritual journey moves forward and back, goes around in spirals, descends and ascends again. It is not a straight shot from the depths of despair we feel now to the grace we hope to feel soon. We will feel despair again, and feel grace many times, and feel wonder and doubt, and feel myriad things that we have not felt in a very long time. We will feel these things in our core, at a spiritual level, the level of ourselves that has been ignored for so long. We have been barely living, living only at the surface of what is possible in human experience. Now that we have set out on a path toward a greater sense of a spiritual life, we will feel more, feel deeply, feel both joy and pain. And we will feel our spirits bloom. We will hear that spiritual voice, first softly, then with increasing clarity, until it becomes as natural a part of us as breathing.

This is the spiritual experience we seek: to find our spiritual selves, so that we may connect with the world in a spiritual way.

To make this beginning requires bravery—even the bravery of desperation—and it also requires faith. Faith does not imply a God; the faith we need is a faith that spiritual growth and wholeness are possible for

## 6 WAITING

us. It may seem unlikely. But we have journeyed here, from the certainty that nothing could help us to the tentative hope that something can. That took faith. It was a spiritual leap to come even this far. It required us to reach deep within ourselves and come up with whatever tiny sliver of hope we might have left. And we did that. So we hold on to that hope, that tentative faith, as we begin.

There is a place in spiritual life for descent. It is unavoidable in life that there will be loss, there will be grief, there will be moments—or months, or years—when we doubt that there is meaning or purpose to our lives or to human life at all. And at these moments, we descend.

The end of our addictive use is such a moment. We are thrown into doubt, and it may feel as if we are tumbling end over end into a dark and deeply unfamiliar place, a place where we have no guide. Without God, what guides us through and out of this place?

Wait. It isn't always necessary or even desirable to leave this place so soon. There may be things we need to learn from how we feel—the emptiness, the grief, the fear. We need to learn the nature of these things, because the end of our addiction is not the only time in our lives we will feel them. The descent into this dark place can be a moment for spiritual development if we allow it, if we acquaint ourselves with the nature of that darkness, and if we begin to trust ourselves—our spirits—to find the way back to light.

If we think about it, we realize that we know despair well. The end of our addictive use brought us to levels of sickening despair that we could not answer with any hope. And that's the difference: now that we have begun working toward spiritual wholeness, we *can* see that hope is possible for us. We may doubt. We may still be profoundly grieving our loss. But we are no longer trapped in the torturous cycle of turning *to* addiction in an attempt to comfort the despair *of* addiction.

At times, it may seem worse—harder, at least—to live through the despair of this loss without the temporary comfort of our addictive behavior. We cannot drown our sorrows. We must face the fact that we don't know, really, where we are, how we got here, how long the pain will last, or how to move past it. That uncertainty may be the most painful part of not

knowing a God: no one is there to reassure us that a God will take the pain and confusion away. We simply don't know. And we have no way to numb ourselves or forget the condition we're in.

But until we do this work—until we plumb the depths of our emotional and spiritual nature—we will never truly know who we are. We have been hiding from ourselves for the duration of our addiction. And until we explore the darker moments of the human experience, we will never be spiritually whole.

And so it's necessary to learn to trust our spirits to keep us safe on this journey. This is an act of faith: we must trust that we will emerge.

We are often told that it is God who will lift us out of the spiritual abyss we're in. It may be true. Even so, it isn't necessarily something all of us can believe. But there are three things in which we can place our faith: our own spiritual integrity and strength, the spiritual nature of those with whom we form connections, and the cycles of spiritual life.

And we can also place our faith in the process of working this particular spiritual program of the Twelve Steps. So, as we begin to work the Steps, we attempt to work each one in a spiritual way. For now, all that requires of us is that we open our minds and hearts to the possibility that the Steps can be what they claim: a path to spiritual experience. We do not need to believe in a God; we do not need to believe that we *will* believe in a God; we only need to begin to conceive of ourselves as spiritual beings who are capable of making a spiritual connection with the world.

So we begin our work by opening our hearts and minds, paying attention, and giving ourselves over to the possibility that we will be spiritually changed.

The notion that we are powerless is powerful, and for many of us painful. We have suffered under the delusion that we were in control of our addiction for a long time, and the realization that we are under *its* control is very hard to accept.

But the word has ramifications beyond our addiction. Spiritually speaking, we are asked here to recognize our smallness in the face of certain forces—in the first case, the force of addiction itself. But we also must recognize our smallness in the face of a universe we do not fully know

or understand, which operates on principles of its own, which moves us, rather than us moving it.

Many people believe the source of that universal movement is God; in the Christian tradition, there is the faith that God “moves in mysterious ways,” and that faith may bring comfort when one doubts the meaning or purpose of events. For those of us who do not believe in God, though, it may be simply terrifying to recognize that the universe—not a person, not a logical mind—operates according to laws we cannot, and will not, understand.

But those laws, when looked at without fear, are awesome and miraculous in their own way. That we are a part of that awesome greater whole is astonishing as well. To me, an acceptance of my humanness—my unknowing, the fact that I am irrevocably tethered to the ground, that I am not much more than a fleck of matter in an infinite cosmos, but an *integral* fleck—is a spiritual practice. Accepting my humanness, I am put in my place; I am able, in this place, to feel the overwhelming spiritual wonder at the mysteries of this world.

So when we find ourselves wondering about the powerful nature of our addiction and our helplessness before it, we often also wonder about the nature of massive, infinite, universal forces, and our tininess in the face of all that exists beyond ourselves. But this is exactly what we need to face. We *are* tiny; we are powerless. We are, by our very human nature, limited in what we can know or do or control or change.

And this is a moment of grace, this recognition. We are recognizing that there *are* things—forces, powers—that are “greater than ourselves.” These forces do not need to wear a face or have a name or creed. They exist according to their own laws and logic, and we do not need to understand them; we need only acknowledge that they are there, and while we are a part of them, we are not the powerful forces they are. This is simply a recognition, and an *acceptance*, of the fact that we are human and there is much beyond us; there is much that is more powerful than we are; there are powers greater than ourselves that we do not need to understand as a God.

And here we discover that in a state of despair, facing that excruciating truth, recognizing our powerlessness—we are beginning to have a spiritual experience.

When we face the moment of spiritual crisis that is addiction's depth, we have to recognize that our lives have become unmanageable. We may struggle with denial about this, as we may struggle with denial that we are powerless, but ultimately we must realize the truth of it. The degree of our unmanageability is irrelevant; what we are looking at from a spiritual point of view is the fact that our *spiritual* lives are most definitely unmanageable. They may be buried, they may be in chaos, but they are not in any state of development, and we are not at peace.

The principle of unmanageability reminds us that a life wherein we are divorced from our own spiritual selves and from the spiritual sources around us—a life where we have replaced true spiritual sources with addiction—is a life without center and will spin out of control. There is nothing to ground that life. There is nothing to ground us ourselves, to give us a sense of wholeness or integrity.

And in this kind of spiritual crisis, we feel nothing if not a lack of integrity. We feel literally *disintegrated*. Our lives are split into parts; we run from the past, we fear the future, we cannot live in the present we have created for ourselves. And we ourselves are split into parts. Many of us feed our intellect at the expense of our emotions; others reverse the imbalance; but most of us allow our spirits to wither on the vine. And that is how we, the selves we once were or at least wanted to be, became as spiritually dry and shattered as a winter leaf.

So we need to feel the extent to which our unmanageability stems from the lack of a spiritual center. The development of our spiritual center will take time. But one place we can look for inspiration is to other people. All around us, we see people whose spiritual lives feed them—and not all of them believe in God or even in a Higher Power. Ask questions of them. Listen to their stories of how they went from a place all too familiar to us, a place of fear and despair, to a place of serenity and an active spiritual life. Learn from anyone—not just people like yourself, who believe what you believe, but people who seem to have found a spiritual life that works for them. You do not need to believe what they believe in order to see their evidence of sobriety, serenity, and spiritual development. You may disagree in the particulars, but you can see the evidence of the centrality of a spiritual life to their state of peace.

Without faith in a personified God, we may question the idea that our addiction will be taken from us. Whether or not there is a force beyond us that could or would act upon us in this way, we need to do the hard work of opening our hands and letting go of the addictive life to which we cling. That addictive life is the very thing that is killing off our bodies, minds, and souls; it is the thing that drains our spiritual lives and denies us access to our spiritual source. And so it's time to let it go.

This is a step into the unknown. We do not know what follows life after addiction. We do not know who we will be when we begin to develop as spiritual people. It is still very dark in the place where we are; we still question what comforts, what guides us as we go. But we have taken a leap of faith that a spiritual life is possible for us by opening our minds and hearts, and trusting that what is spiritual within us will guide us through the darkness and into a place where we see light. This act of faith in itself strengthens the spirit.

And if we practice this step with absolute honesty and a willingness to go where it takes us—no matter how deep a place in the soul that may be—we will find the answer in there.

We must begin our work by acknowledging our brokenness, our spiritual bankruptcy. Only by recognizing that we have come to the end of the road we were walking can we make the choice to set out on a new road. Whereas the hell of addiction was at least familiar terrain, here we do not know the way at all. Ultimately, these are Steps into a new life, and that life will require spiritual care and feeding if it is to survive.

We make a descent more than once in our lives. We reach a point where we have become spiritually drained, where we have blocked out our spiritual voice or become cut off from our spiritual source. At these moments, again, we descend.

These are the moments of winter in our lives. And in these winters, during which it seems that all is dark or even dead, we have the opportunity to go within; to study our own capacity for a faith that can endure pain or emptiness or doubt; to reach deeper for our spiritual center, listen harder for our spiritual voice, than we ever had before.

We have flickers of doubt, and we have flashes of uncertainty, and at

times we fall headfirst into despair. Crisis, loss, death, tragedy, whether in our personal lives or in the larger world, cast long shadows across the sunlit path we'd like to walk.

We may doubt, during these periods, that there is meaning in human existence or that there is purpose in our individual lives. We begin to wonder whether there is anything spiritual within us or in the larger world. This sense that we may be spinning aimlessly on a rock through an indifferent universe defined by impersonal laws is lonely and frightening, and at these times it is easy to get lost in a forest of our own fear.

Many religious people would say that their faith is being tested by God at these times. And it is possible that these periods of descent, these times when our faith in meaning and purpose is called into question, are periods when our own internal selves are calling on us to strengthen our spiritual lives. Perhaps our spirits are well aware of when they need to be strengthened and tested by fire.

During these times, we have the chance to develop trust in ourselves, in our internal spiritual compass. We have the chance to learn to rely on the people we love and to more deeply experience the necessity of love and connection in our lives; we can give up the isolating notion that we are going through this life alone.

These dark moments are another chance to work Step One: to recognize areas where we are powerless and ways in which our lives have become unmanageable. Working this Step again and again will, as it did the first time we worked it, renew our acquaintance with the sound of our spiritual voice coming through the layers of our doubt, our fear, our ennui.

Whether working this Step for the first time or returning to it later in our sobriety, we are at a point of development where we are beginning or renewing a search for what has spiritual meaning for us—what we believe in, what lights our hearts on fire, what gives us strength, where we connect with other people and the world. We are looking for what is spiritually significant to us, both within and without. This is what fills our lives with meaning, what gives us purpose—our spirits, and what feeds them, and what they love.

These periods of descent allow us to again face our own smallness, our

own fears, our own sense of emptiness, our own despair. These feelings are part of the human condition. And they are spiritual hungers crying out to be fed. In order to know what our spirits need, what *we* need as whole, spiritual people, we must listen. These are times when we are able to learn from the emptiness itself. We are able, when we listen and discover what we truly need, to find and make meaning for ourselves; we are able to find what may be a new direction in our lives.

Practicing Step One as we walk away from our addiction is that movement in a new direction, and it requires listening to the spiritual self. This may be the first time that we have done this in many years; some of us may never have had the opportunity or felt the need to develop our spiritual lives at all. But now it is a clear necessity if we are to move away from addiction, if we are to practice the Twelve Step program, and if we are to continue to grow.

That growth depends upon recognizing that spiritually we move outward from the center of ourselves. We find our connection with others by being aware of our spiritual core, and we are able to build meaningful relationships with them based on spiritual integrity. These inward times are a natural and necessary period in the life cycle of the soul: we are building the people we want to become, the people we want to be in the world. During these periods of darkness, we are actually developing from spiritual isolation to connection with others. Our process of finding meaning and direction for ourselves is a process of finding out how we want to contribute and what we want to give.

And so we find that by stepping into this place of darkness and by navigating its unfamiliar terrain, we come unexpectedly to a place of hope. Having recognized the insanity and spiritual brokenness of our addiction, having taken the journey to face that sense of emptiness and loss, and having come face-to-face with our own limited human nature, we come out on the other side of Step One with a deeper knowledge of ourselves as spiritual beings.

Step One is, paradoxically, both a crushing end and a beginning. The fact that we have come to recognize our powerlessness and spiritual emptiness means that we have reached a moment of spiritual awareness as well.

We would not be able to face this moment or take this Step if we did not contain a source of spiritual strength. We may not know the nature of that strength or of that spiritual self at all. But we can sense that it is there.

Having worked Step One spiritually, we arrive at Step Two with the knowledge—however tentative, however new—that we are not, in fact, spiritually empty after all. We begin to sense that there are spiritual sources that can feed us, and that there may be hope for our restoration to sanity. We can begin to believe that we will be relieved of our addiction.

Just as we know that winter will become spring, though we see no evidence of this around us, we can know that our spiritual self will emerge. We only have to wait. We wait with consciousness, attention, and awareness of what is changing within us as we still our minds and hearts long enough to listen.

We may not hear a God. But we will hear a spiritual self, an inner voice. That spiritual self is what has led us to Step One. That voice is what told us we had reached an end and needed to begin again. Even as we sit in the dark, even in this heart of winter, we find that we have already planted the seeds of faith.



## CHAPTER TWO



# *Doubt*

February

*Eventually we must face our own fears and doubts, listen to our own resistance to trust, and learn from that resistance, opening ourselves to the possibility of moving beyond it. This brings us to the question of faith, of what we can trust when we are lost—a central question that runs through the seasons of a spiritual life. The critical moments in life when we drop into deep doubt are necessary moments that allow us to fully face our own fear and to learn from it what we really want and what we need. We have come to Step Two.*

I stepped out of the church and flinched in the blinding white light of a cold February day in 1998. White sky, white ground, the ambient light sharp and hard. I started to walk.

I walked and I walked. I was wearing a red dress. He had told me to wear a red dress to his funeral. I called him a bastard and laughed. It was painful laughter, sharp as the light. He was my best friend. He was twenty-four and dying. We were planning the service. He said no roses. He said no sappy hymns. He said, if we could possibly manage it, no God. We agreed his mother might want a little God. So he said, “Okay, a little God.” And he closed his eyes and leaned back on the pillows and struggled to breathe, but he smiled.

He died on a bitterly cold morning a few days later, before the light came up. Through the window of his dark hospital room, the city lights looked soft and strangely warm. We stood around his bed, sobbing and telling him

we loved him. His dying was painful. He screamed and screamed. Then he went silent and still and was dead.

I pitched face-first into my husband and slid down him to the floor. Then I realized I was on the floor. So I collected myself and stood up and went to Brian, dead on the bed. I leaned down and whispered *Thank you* in his ear.

And then there was nothing else to say, so I left. I stepped out of the hospital into that white winter light northerners know well. It's the light of the hardest season. I walked and I walked, freezing cold, my face burning with wind.

I let myself into my house. Glanced at the clock: 8 a.m. I took the bottle off the shelf. I didn't bother with a glass.

Days passed, I'm not sure how. It seemed unlikely that time should continue passing, with Brian dead. It seemed frankly absurd. It seemed equally absurd that I was tasked, now, with writing the eulogy. I sat at my desk with the bottle at my left hand and my head in my right, staring at a piece of paper and wondering how in the hell I was supposed to sum up the life of a man who hadn't had a chance to live a full life, but who lived better than anyone I'd ever known—lived wiser and kinder and with a more furious love of this world and the people in it and the fact that he got to spend any time here at all. I sat wondering if he had heard me crying *I love you* as he died. And I wondered if he'd heard me say, once he was gone, *Thank you*.

I thought it was very unlikely that he had.

But I wrote the eulogy. I wore the red dress. I stood in the pulpit in the church—a curious place to celebrate the life of a man who thought the idea of God was hogwash, but whatever—and I said my piece.

What I said was this: I doubt. I doubt the existence of a God who would be so witless as to take my dearest friend. I doubt the presence of a benevolent force. I doubt that there is anything out there that really gives a damn. Brian, of all people, should have had the chance to stick around. And so I doubt.

What I did not say was this: I am lost.

With Brian gone, it was as if the thing that had tethered me to the ground

## EPILOGUE



As this year of a spiritual search draws to a close, I can offer no neat summing up. I have as many questions as I did when I set out; that is the unfolding nature of spiritual growth. I know very little, and wonder much. I do not know where the greater journey of the world began, nor do I know where it goes. I have no universal compass, no cosmic map. I have only the sound of my own spiritual voice and the loud, unruly, beautiful song of the world I need to serve.

And so I listen. And so I sing.

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS



1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. 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.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Twelve Steps of AA are reprinted from *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th edition, published by AA World Services, Inc., 2001, New York, NY, 59–60.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marya Hornbacher is an award-winning journalist and the Pulitzer Prize-nominated author of four books. Her best-selling memoirs *Madness: A Bipolar Life* and *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* have become classics in their fields, her recovery handbook *Sane: Mental Illness, Addiction, and the 12 Steps* is an honest and enlightening look at the Twelve Steps for people who have co-occurring addiction and mental health disorders, and her critically acclaimed novel *The Center of Winter* is taught in universities all over the world. Hornbacher's work has been published in sixteen languages. She lectures regularly on writing, addiction, recovery, and mental health.

**Hazelden**, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction. Built on decades of knowledge and experience, Hazelden offers a comprehensive approach to addiction that addresses the full range of patient, family, and professional needs, including treatment and continuing care for youth and adults, research, higher learning, public education and advocacy, and publishing.

A life of recovery is lived “one day at a time.” Hazelden publications, both educational and inspirational, support and strengthen lifelong recovery. In 1954, Hazelden published *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, the first daily meditation book for recovering alcoholics, and Hazelden continues to publish works to inspire and guide individuals in treatment and recovery, and their loved ones. Professionals who work to prevent and treat addiction also turn to Hazelden for evidence-based curricula, informational materials, and videos for use in schools, treatment programs, and correctional programs.

Through published works, Hazelden extends the reach of hope, encouragement, help, and support to individuals, families, and communities affected by addiction and related issues.

For questions about Hazelden publications, please call **800-328-9000**  
or visit us online at [hazelden.org/bookstore](http://hazelden.org/bookstore).

**For those who don't believe in God**, feel disconnected from the ideas of God presented in organized religion, or are simply struggling to determine their own spiritual path, best-selling author Marya Hornbacher offers a down-to-earth exploration of the concept of faith.

In *Waiting: A Nonbeliever's Higher Power*, Hornbacher uses the story of her own journey, beginning with her recovery from alcoholism, to offer a fresh approach to cultivating a spiritual life. Relinquishing the concept of a universal "Spirit" that exists outside of us, Hornbacher gives us the framework to explore the *human spirit* in each of us—the very thing that sends us searching and that connects us with one another, the thing that "comes knocking on the door of our emotionally and intellectually closed lives and asks to be let in."

When we let this spirit in, and only when we do, we begin to be integrated people and can walk a spiritual path. There will be many points along the way where we will stop, fumble, or get tangled up or turned around. Those are the places where we wait.

Waiting, you'll discover, can become a kind of spiritual practice in itself, requiring patience, acceptance, and stillness. Sometimes we do it because we know we need to, though we may not know why. In short, we do it on faith.

**Marya Hornbacher** is the author of two best-selling nonfiction titles, *Madness: A Bipolar Life* and *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*. She has also authored a recovery handbook, *Sane: Mental Illness, Addiction, and the 12 Steps*, and a critically acclaimed novel, *The Center of Winter*.



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