



## *A Deeper Wisdom: The 12 Steps from a Woman's Perspective*

### Introduction: A Personal Story

My awakening came late in time. I missed the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. I was immersed in fundamentalist traditions that kept me isolated from the political movements in the wider culture. I was dealing with the aftermath of growing up in a severely dysfunctional home, children's shelter, and orphanage—the kind of situations no one wanted to hear about because they were “so depressing.”

I was managing depression and my disheveled inner landscape with food and relationships. These habits of behavior kept me comatose until I was ready to walk through my personal past. I also finished high school and college successfully, launched a private day school, found great joy in teaching, and courageously entered a marriage. Light and darkness always dance together in our lives.

I was not alone. In circles of women I heard stories of others whose "consciousness raising" was precipitated by real life challenges. The "knight in shining armor" mythology shattered as they divorced and became the sole financial and emotional provider for their children. They sought support at a local women's center and began to listen to women's stories, shedding the competitive attitudes of a lifetime.

Their therapists suggested they read *The Second Sex* or *The Creation of Patriarchy* and they were stunned that women had written such powerful treatises and they knew nothing about them. They stumbled into self-help meetings, as I did, where someone said "goddess" instead of the compulsory "god" in the Twelve Step readings, and we wondered how the reader got the courage to commit such a heretical act.

#### *The Twelve Step Community*

Twelve Step meetings punctuated my life from college graduation onward. I held off marriage as long as possible until I was drawn into the rescue drama of the minister's

wayward son. He had “returned to god” and was recovering from alcoholism in Alcoholic’s Anonymous. He was a perfect candidate for my unexamined care-taker patterns.

I attended Al-Anon to support him. At Twelve Step meetings I found the Christian version of god. The “Our Father,” a Christian prayer, was said at the close of most meetings. And the program’s emphasis on shortcomings, character defects, and ego-deflation felt familiar to me as it was an extension of the sin-based teachings I had been inhaling since childhood. I was fundamentally “diseased” and the remedy was to turn my will and life over to the care of god “as I understood *him*.” I had no trouble turning my life and will over to *him*.

In transition after the divorce, while attending Princeton Seminary, my healing journey in Adult Children of Alcoholics began. The Al-Anon of my married years had not touched the wounds of my childhood as its primary focus was how to cope with an alcoholic spouse or child. During the 1980s, influenced by psychologists steeped in family systems theory, alcoholism began to be understood as a family disease affecting all family members. Al-Anon responded to the new research by establishing ACA – Adult Children of Alcoholics.

In ACA meetings, I took responsibility for my healing journey by exploring the nature and impact of alcoholism on our family system. Over time, I realized that I didn’t cause the craziness in my family of origin — alcoholism had a life of its own within our family. Acknowledging childhood’s influence on my adult life, I chose to walk through my past to heal into the present. And this meant confronting my compulsive eating.

One of the ways I coped with the children’s shelter, orphanage, and later, the gap between my insecurity and the opportunities offered to me as a gifted young person, was to eat compulsively. I bought huge amounts of sugary food and ate like a junkie shoots up her heroin. I literally hid in closets to eat and dropped out of life for days and months at a time as the binges coincided with the cyclical depression I have carried since childhood.

In the pauses between relationships and accomplishments, I was reminded of my

swirling inner life of unexpressed feelings, unacknowledged memories, and untapped potential. To get caught up into the swirl of a project or life of another made perfect sense. The prospect of living my own life from the inside out frightened me. I ate to avoid the awesome responsibility of coming home to myself.

When I finally landed in Overeaters Anonymous, I was exhausted from swirling in the food. I reached out for OA's healing resources and was given the tools of self-care and self-soothing that I had not received in my childhood. Its suggested food plan freed me to handle the feelings that childhood triggered and to show up for my life in the present.

Although I received many gifts of support and insight from the Twelve Step community during my years of attendance, its emphasis on ego-deflation, a concept designed by men based on their experience of themselves, was always a concern to me. Perhaps ego-deflation is an appropriate remedy for men who consider pride to be their besetting sin, but it seemed to me that self-acceptance and self-celebration were more appropriate remedies for women whose besetting "sins" were self-loathing and self-criticism.

I desired a non-shaming, non-hierarchical framework within which to wrestle with my habits of behavior. I rewrote the 12 Steps from an inner perspective, recognizing that my journey was an inward one. Instead of looking to another god or higher power outside of my life for salvation, I longed to return home to myself, to grow in knowledge and love of myself, to accept and trust myself. I wasn't interested in ascending to enlightened states of being that involved the denial of the self. I was compelled to descend—to look deep within to reclaim forgotten aspects of myself.

Releasing the shame of a lifetime, I reached beneath the obsession with flaws, beneath the accomplishments that masked my sense of unworthiness, beneath the years of alienation from myself, toward the goodness at my center. I discovered that the good was embedded within me. As I embraced my original goodness, my inner spaces were cleared out and reclaimed as my own. I found rest within my own life and accepted all of myself as worthy.

From a self-possessed center, I refused to embrace any set of principles based on the

belief in my fundamental sinfulness and defectiveness or on the necessity of ego-deflation, humiliation, or the surrender of my natural impulses. Instead, I reframed the 12 Steps based on my belief in original goodness and the necessity of self-love and self-trust. Each step now answers the question, “what’s good and right about me” and affirms my natural impulse toward healing and wholeness.

As I was writing *A Deeper Wisdom*, I invited a community of recovering women to join me in the process. Studying pre-patriarchal history together, we discovered a courageous community of women whose experience and stories, ideas and images, creativity and outrage become healing resources for us. No longer asking the question “what's wrong with me,” we stepped outside of patriarchal thought and immersed ourselves in women’s history, philosophy, theology, creativity, and recovery. We received Gerda Lerner's strong challenge:

To step outside of patriarchal thought means being skeptical toward every known system of thought and toward our own thought, which was trained in the patriarchal tradition. It means developing intellectual courage, the courage to stand alone.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to thinking women is the challenge to move from the desire for safety and approval to the most "unfeminine" quality of all—intellectual arrogance, the supreme hubris which asserts to itself the right to reorder the world. The hubris of the god-makers, the hubris of the male system-builders.

We have been warned against exhibiting hubris all of our lives. Gerda Lerner supports us to be full of ourselves for the salvation of our beloved planet, which is out of balance and in danger of annihilating itself. Inspired by her powerful words, I asserted my right to reorder the world by rewriting the 12 Steps. *A Deeper Wisdom* was written for all women wrestling with habits of behaviors that inhibit the full expression of their heart, mind, and spirit.

#### *A Life-Practice for all Women*

Whether or not you have ever set foot in a recovery meeting is irrelevant—*A Deeper Wisdom* is for all women. We have all lost our way at times in our lives. We have all wrestled with habits of thought and behavior that troubled and challenged us. We have all written self-improvement lists and committed to diet regimens recognizing that some of our habits did not support the life we wanted.

*A Deeper Wisdom* is a powerful woman-affirming life-practice for all of us. It is based on the belief in our original goodness and in the healing capacity of self-love and self-trust. Each step affirms our natural impulse toward wholeness, transforming self-criticism into self-compassion and the suffering that fuels habit-energy into joy.

The 12 Steps introduced in this book were written from an inner perspective, recognizing that life is lived from the inside out and that the most essential aspect of our human journey is an inward one. Instead of looking to another god or higher power outside of our lives for salvation, we return home to ourselves and accept the responsibility for becoming awake and aware of our thoughts, feelings, behaviors, lives, and relationships.

*A Deeper Wisdom's* version of the 12 Steps invites us to descend—to look deep within to reclaim forgotten aspects of ourselves. As we descend, we notice an unmistakable design flowing from the depths of us. We notice that this flow of deep wisdom was faithful even in the midst of difficulties and apparent detours from what was healthy and good.

The journey home to ourselves begins with a deep breath and the courageous vulnerability of acknowledging that we have lost our way and need guidance to find our way home. On the journey home, we are restored to peace, sanity, and a loving relationship with ourselves.

Softly and tenderly. Wisdom is calling. Calling for you and for me.  
Come home. Come home. All who are weary come home.  
Softly and tenderly. Wisdom is calling. Calling, O woman, come home.

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