

HOW TO MEASURE THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF RECOVERY

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When I think of recovery,
I think of three dimensions:
length, breadth, and depth.¹

Length

Length is the measure of recovery that is the most recognized, yet it may be the least important.² Even when our recovery is only one day old, we can already be aware of how important the length—or brevity—of 24 hours can be. Even when milestone birthdays are reached, we are still living only one day at a time. For many reasons, focusing on today—just for today—is one of the best ways to approach life.³ That is, we can make the best of life today as if it is our only day, and as if it is the first day of the rest of our lives. In her book *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard observed, “How we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour and that one is what we are doing” (1989, p. 32). In other words, how we live today is how we are living our life.

Breadth

Breadth is the measure of life that is counted by the number of lives we touch. It is the dimension that matters the most to extraverts and those who are outgoing. It is what we establish and gather around us as we interact with family, friends, and strangers. Historically, breadth of recovery has been measured by the number of people that we have sponsored or mentored. Yet even for those who have never sponsored anyone, breadth can be actualized in other ways, such as being a greeter at the door, a willing member who leads a meeting, or an

old-timer who stays after a meeting to listen to a newcomer. Some of the best wisdom in recovery groups is shared in the parking lot. Breadth is also measured as we touch the lives of others each day in our offices, places of work, and houses of worship. We can leave people, places, and things just a little bit better than we found them when they crossed our path. In doing so, we should never underestimate the power of sharing our experience, strength, and hope. We should never minimize the impact of a gentle act of kindness or an uplifting word of encouragement.

Depth

Depth is the dimension of recovery reflected in the steps and traditions by which we live. For those of us who are introverts and focus on the interior life, it is the dimension that matters the most. Depth is the underlying foundation upon which recovery is built. Foundations are unseen but without them nothing stands. Depth is not measured simply by the spiritual principles in which we believe, but by the principles we practice in our actions each day: honesty, humility, patience, kindness, and gratitude. We practice honesty by saying what we mean and meaning what we say. We practice humility by being humble to those who are at their lowest. We practice patience by being patient when we feel like being in a rush. We practice kindness by being kind to those who seem like they deserve it the least. We practice by being appreciative and thankful for the smallest of things. In other words, practicing the principles is less about talking the talk and more about walking the walk.

Thomas Merton, one of my spiritual mentors and the Cistercian monk whose first guest master at the Abbey of Gethsemani I met on my first silent retreat at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit, once wrote words that I recite to myself on almost a weekly basis. In *No Man is an Island*, Father Merton said, “The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, with the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be love?” (1955, pp. 177-178).

Father Merton’s words highlight the spiritual principle of acceptance as one of the cornerstones of serenity. Without acceptance, we can have no quality relationship with another. With acceptance, we can experience genuine love, which has little to do with our emotions and everything to do with our actions. We can practice acceptance in our beliefs and thoughts, until it becomes part of the fiber of our character. We can practice acceptance by welcoming the stranger, because we were once a stranger.

References

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Notes

1. Rabbi Harold Kushner provides a useful perspective on life: “I will insist to my last day that life should be measured in three dimensions, not only length but breadth—how many other people does it reach out to embrace?—and depth—what values do I stand for, even in my somewhat diminished condition?” (2015, p. 150).
2. As pointed out by book editor and spiritual director Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD, the use of the definite article (i.e., “the”) in the title implies that the article refers to the definitive three dimensions of life (i.e., rather than simply three dimensions of life). Of course, there are many dimensions of life, and the use of the definite article in the title is simply a literary device to add impact and to pull the reader in. Three dimensions that are foundational to recovery meetings are the sharing of one’s experience, strength, and hope.

3. The original paper hard copy of the “Blue Bookmark” (number (17-300M-85-12/1.00) has a copyright listed as Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. 1972. On June 1, 1996, the Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters moved its office from New York City, and opened its office for business in Virginia Beach. Subsequently, the “Just for Today” bookmark contained no publication date. According to Dale Carnegie (1944), “Just for Today” was written by the late Sibyl F. Partridge (whose first name Carnegie spelled incorrectly as “Sibyl” rather than Sybil). With the exception of the Prayer of St. Francis, the Al-Anon bookmark [M-12] was originally written by the same title by Sybil F. Partridge and is printed in *How To Stop Worrying And Start Living* by Dale Carnegie (1985, pp. 126-127). Although “Just for Today” has been attributed to earlier authors (e.g., including 1921 article by Frank Crane in the *Boston Globe*), the words in the 1928 sheet music are identified as “A Prayer by Sybil F. Partridge). See Partridge and Seaver (1928).

Carnegie, D. (1944, 1985, May). *How to stop worrying and start living: Time-tested methods for conquering worrying* [Revised edition]. New York, NY: Pocket Books.

Partridge, S. F., & Seaver, B. E. (January 1, 1928). *Just for to-day: Sacred song* [Sheet music]. Rochester, NY: Sam Fox Pub. Co.

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