

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 anniversaries and birthdays are reached, we are still living only one day at a time. When facing trials and tribulations that never seem to end, we can still do something for one hour that would appall us if we thought we had to do it for a lifetime. ³

For many reasons, focusing on today—just for today—is one of the best ways to approach life. ⁴ 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 fact, it is never too late to start a new day. 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. In recovery, breadth has traditionally been measured by the number of people we have mentored or sponsored. 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 after the meeting.

Breadth is also measured by how we touch the lives of others each day in our communities, places of work, and houses of worship. We can always leave people, places, things, and events just a little bit better than we found them when they cross our path each day. In doing so, we never underestimate the power of sharing our experience, strength, and hope. We never minimize the impact of a gentle act of kindness, a listening ear, or an uplifting word of encouragement.

Depth

Depth is the dimension of recovery reflected in the steps, traditions, and principles by which we live. For those who are introverts and focus on the interior life, it is the dimension that matters the most. Depth is the underlying foundation on which recovery is built. Foundations are unseen but without them nothing stands. In recovery, “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities” (Al-Anon, Tradition 12). We put the focus on changing ourselves—not others.

Depth is not measured simply by the spiritual principles in which we believe, but by the way we put the principles into practice in our actions each day: honesty, humility, patience, kindness, and gratitude. We practice honesty by saying what we mean, meaning what we say, and not saying it meanly. 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 gratitude 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.

In recovery, we take the impulse that is the opposite of our character defects and turn them into spiritual principles and virtues. We do the work—with a mentor, sponsor, or spiritual director—to change denial into honesty, despair into hope, fear into faith, arrogance into humility, anxiety into serenity, obsession into detachment, selfishness into service, resentment into forgiveness, criticism into acceptance, and isolation into connection.⁵

Opposite Action: An Example

One way to take opposite action is by using the Three A's: Awareness, Acceptance, and Action. Using the model of the seven deadly sins, *envy* could be one of my shortcomings.⁶ To work on this character defect, I must first have *conscious awareness* of it, including self-awareness (i.e., my part in it or how I harm myself with the shortcoming) and other-awareness (how I harm others with it). Then, rather than denying or hiding from it, I must

have *acceptance*, including self-acceptance (i.e., how I accept myself and my defect) and other-acceptance (how I accept others). Regarding my character defect of envy, I can accept that, "Envy is nothing more than a hostile form of self-pity" (*Courage to Change*, Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1992, p. 170). For example, one way I can feel sorry for myself is to envy someone who has the things I don't have. Instead of focusing on what I don't have—or comparing my insides to another person's outsides—I can focus on the opposite of envy. Gratitude is the virtue that counterbalances the thief of envy. I can intentionally choose to take *action* based on the virtue of gratitude, such as expressing appreciation or genuinely thanking someone. As with practice of any skill over a long period of time, the intentionality of action becomes less mechanical and more automatic.

Acceptance: A Key to Serenity

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) is one of my spiritual mentors. Also known as Father M. Louis, he was the Cistercian monk whose first guest master (at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky) I met on my first silent retreat at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers (Georgia) in 1991.⁷ I met "Father Jo," also known as Fr. Mary John "Joachim" Tierney (1912–1999), 50 years after Merton first encountered him at the guest house at Gethsemani in a cold Wednesday night of December 10, 1941 (see Merton, 1951, p. 373). Almost 20 years before my own first silent retreat at the Monastery in Conyers, Georgia) in August 1991, I had encountered Merton's writings in the very small bookstore during my first visit to the monastery in October 1972.

Merton once wrote words that I recite to myself on almost a weekly basis. In *No Man is an Island*, he wrote, "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?" (Merton, 1955/2002, p. 168; 2005, pp. 177-178).

I make and give away bookmarks on which I have a shorter paraphrased version, which I place in double quotation marks because spiritual directors usually state their most important points in more than one way, from Merton's (1955, p. 168) original publication:

"The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them."

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.

Notes

1. Rabbi Harold Kushner (1935–2023) 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 not to imply literal reality but rather it 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. “Just for today I will try to live through this day only, and not tackle all my problems at once. I can do something for 12 hours that would appall me if I felt like I had to keep it up for a lifetime” (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1972; Bookmark [M-12], Side 1).

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1972). *Just for today* [Bookmark, M-12]. New York, NY: Author.

4. The original paper hard copy of the “Blue Bookmark” has a stock number (17-300M-85-12/1.00) at the bottom of the bookmark and the copyright is listed as Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. 1972. At that time, the

headquarters was listed as P. O. Box 182, Madison Square Station, New York, NY 10159-0182. According to Dale Carnegie (1944), “Just for Today” was written by the late Sybil F. Partridge (whose first name Carnegie spelled incorrectly as “Sibyl” rather than Sybil). Carnegie’s attribution may also be inaccurate, referring to a Christian hymn rather than the adages of wisdom.

With the exception of the Prayer of St. Francis, the Al-Anon bookmark [M-12] titled “Just for Today” 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 more reliably attributed to an earlier author (i.e., Frank Crane’s 1921 article in the *Boston Globe*), the words in the 1928 sheet music are identified as “A Prayer by Sybil F. Partridge.” The sheet music is for a hymn.

The earliest appearance of this text actually appears to have been a 1921 piece titled “Just for Today” published in a *Boston Globe* newspaper column titled “Dr. Crane Says” written by Frank Crane. Crane’s 10 suggestions were titled “Just for Today” and were prefaced by this introduction: “Here are ten resolutions to make when you awake in the morning. They are Just for One Day. Think of them not as a life task but as a day’s work. These things will give you pleasure. Yet they require will power. You don’t need resolutions to do what is easy.” Forty years earlier, an 1880 periodical called “The Messenger of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” printed a piece titled “To-Day” that included the recurring phrase: “Just for to-day.” This

1880 piece was written by an English governess, Sister Mary Xavier, S.N.D. (Sisters of Notre Dame), who was posthumously identified as Sybil F. Partridge (1856–1917). Sr. Xavier’s work differed substantially from the “Just for Today” essay published by Frank Crane in 1921. The 1880 piece ended with the identifier “S.M.X.” The 1880 piece, which basically became a Protestant hymn written by a Catholic nun known as Sister Mary Xavier, was attributed to Sybil F. Partridge. It was sometimes called “Just for Today,” which may have led to a misunderstanding by Dale Carnegie, who incorrectly ascribed the piece to Sybil Partridge. See Carnegie (1985) and see also 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.

5. In the Introduction section of *Drop the Rock*, Bill P. (not to be confused with AA Co-founder, Bill W.) shares his thoughts on the relationship between character defects and spiritual principles:

“I once spoke at an AA group’s anniversary meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, and left the members with a riddle: ‘If the principles of Twelve Step recovery are not the Twelve Steps, then what are the principles?’ I returned to the same meeting about a year later to present a sponsee with a sobriety medallion and a few people approached me with the following comment: ‘I’ve been looking all year, since your talk, in the literature for the principles and can’t find

them!’ My answer to these group members was the same one I give my sponsees: ‘The principles of Twelve Step recovery are the opposite of our character defects. In recovery, we try to take the opposite of our character defects and shortcomings and turn them into principles. For example, we work to change fear into faith, hate into love, egoism into humility, anxiety and worry into serenity, complacency into action, denial into acceptance, jealousy into trust, fantasy into reality, selfishness into service, resentment into forgiveness, judgmentalism into tolerance, despair into hope, self-hate into self-respect, and loneliness into fellowship. Through this work, we learn to understand the principles of our program.’”

(Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S., 2005, Introduction, p. xvii)

Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005). *Drop the rock: Removing character defects* (2nd ed.). Center City, MN: Hazelden.

With respect to opposite action, there is also a notable quote from an episode of the television show *Seinfeld*: “If every instinct I have is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right” (Jerry Seinfeld to George Costanza in *The Opposite*). “The Opposite” was the 22nd and final episode of the 5th season of *Seinfeld* and it was the 86th episode overall. It premiered on May 19, 1994. It was written by Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, and Andy Cowan, and was directed by Tom Cherones.

David, L. (Writer), Seinfeld, J. (Writer), Cowan, A. (Writer), & Cherones, T. (Director). (1994, May 19). *Seinfeld: The opposite* [TV series episode]. New York, NY: National Broadcasting Corporation.

6. In the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), what is the difference between “defects of character” in Step 6 and “shortcomings” in Step 7?” According to the AA General Service Organization’s archives, Bill W. commented about his use of “Defects of Character” and “Shortcomings” interchangeably in the Steps in a personal letter he wrote dated March 7, 1963.

“Thanks for your inquiry, requesting to know the difference between ‘defects of character’ and ‘shortcomings’ –as those words appear in the Steps. Actually I don’t remember any particular significance in these phrases. In my mind, the meaning is identical; I guess I just used two ways of expression, rather than to repeat myself. It’s just as simple as that.”

In another letter, dated November 16, 1965, Bill replied to a similar inquiry. He wrote, in part:

“When these Steps were being done, I didn’t want to repeat the phrase ‘character defects’ twice in succession. Therefore in Step Seven, I substituted ‘shortcomings’, thereby equating ‘shortcomings’ with ‘defects.’ When reading most people do equate that way and there seems to be no difficulty. I used them as though they both meant exactly the same thing – which they appear to many people.”

7. The Monastery of the Holy Spirit, officially the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, is a Trappist monastery located near Conyers, Georgia. Officially known as the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCS), the Trappists are a Catholic religious order of cloistered monastics that branched off from the Cistercians. The primary work of the monks is prayer.

8. Father Mary John Joachim Tierney (1912 to May 20, 1999) is mentioned in *The Seven Story Mountain* (Merton, 1951, p. 373). After reading a transcript of my invited address at a graduation (Doverspike, 2011), Abbot Bernard Johnson (1925–2017), in his retirement at the Abbey of our Lady of New Clairvaux in California, wrote me a letter on November 11, 2011. Dom Bernard wrote, “I had a very strange thought in reading the footnotes: Fr. Joachim would love to be a footnote. He used to talk a lot about Saint Bernard’s [1090-1153 the founding Abbot of Clairvaux Abbey in Burgandy] phrase—*ama nesciri*—love to be unknown. Whereas I suspect Thomas Merton would hate to be a footnote to anything. Figure that one out” (B. Johnson, personal communication, November 11, 2011). According to Dom Bernard, Father Joachim’s motto was *ama nesciri* (English: “Love the obscurity” in the sense of “Love to be unknown” or “Do not seek fame”).

Doverspike, W. F. (2011, May 07). *The Real Presence: Integrating the sacred and the secular*. Invited address to the graduating Class of 2011. Richmond Graduate University, Atlanta, Georgia. Footnote 1. Available at the link below: http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/christian_counselors_-_2011.pdf

Merton, T. (1951). *The seven story mountain*. Garden City: NY: Garden City Books.

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- Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005). *Drop the rock: Removing character defects* (2nd ed.). Center City, MN: Hazelden.
Based on the principles behind Steps Six and Seven, *Drop the Rock* combines personal stories, practical advice, and powerful insights to help readers move forward in recovery. The original book was published in 1993 by Glen Abbey Books in Seattle, Washington.
- David, L. (Writer), Seinfeld, J. (Writer), Cowan, A. (Writer), & Cheronos, T. (Director). (1994, May 19). *Seinfeld: The opposite* [TV series episode]. New York, NY: National Broadcasting Corporation.
"The Opposite" was the 22nd and final episode of the 5th season of *Seinfeld* and it was the 86th episode overall. It premiered on May 19, 1994.
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https://youtu.be/1Y_6fZGSOQI
This 02:16 video clip is based on *The Opposite* episode, which premiered on May 19, 1994. This video clip was uploaded by TBS on July 2, 2014.
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- Merton, T. (1955). *No man is an island*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Merton, T. (2003). *No man is an island*. Barnes & Noble, Inc., by arrangement with Harcourt, Inc.
Merton's original book was originally published 1955. Copyright 1955 by The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani [sic]. Copyright renewed 1983 by The Trustees of Merton Legacy Trust. In this 2003 version of the book, the quoted material is from the bottom of page 168 in Chapter 9 (p. 164-187), which is titled "The Measure of Charity."

Merton, T. (2005). *No man is an island*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Library.

Merton's original book was originally published 1955. Copyright 1955 by The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani [sic]. Copyright renewed 1983 by The Trustees of Merton Legacy Trust. In this 2003 version of the book, the quoted material is from pages 176-178 in Chapter 9 (pp. 173-197), which is titled "The Measure of Charity."

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