

# HOW TO NAVIGATE BY SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES

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Once when I was providing a consultation for a group of rocket scientists who were discussing topics ranging from human factors engineering to operant learning principles, I happened to mention the concept of navigating by spiritual principles. Intrigued, one of them asked, “What does it mean to navigate by spiritual principles?”

Because I had been identified as having the Gift of Bibliography (10-13-2022), I decided to cite some primary sources that would be more enlightening than my own original thought. My first mental image was that of a pilot, which made sense given that these rocket scientists had piloted various crafts in the air and on the sea. I recall a pilot who once explained to me so many differences between a drone and a quadcopter that I had forgotten the question I had asked.

## Man as a Pilot

In their monumental treatise *Systems of Psychotherapy*, psychologists Donald Ford and High Urban (1963) provide a metaphor that is implicit in some systems of psychotherapy. Notwithstanding their gender-specific language, which seems archaic by contemporary standards, Ford and Urban provide the following narrative:

One underlying assumption about the nature of man is the idea of man as a pilot: Sometimes man is viewed as exercising control over his behavior and the situations he encounters. He pilots his craft through the sea of life, choosing his course from among those presented by the characteristics of his ship, the influences of the winds and waves at the time, and the ports toward which he wishes to sail. He can be ‘responsible’ for his behavior. (Ford & Urban, 1963, p. 595)

## Courage to Change

My second thought, which I enumerate as “Thought 1(b)”<sup>1</sup> because the idea is still related to the metaphor of piloting a ship, was from the book *Courage to Change* (Al-Anon, 1992). Again, I quoted the original source, because I had read this page hundreds of times:

I am told that the automatic pilot in an airplane does not work by locking onto a course and sticking to it. Instead, it steers back and forth over the path of an assigned course and makes the necessary corrections when it senses that it has strayed.

In reality, the auto pilot is on course only 5 or 10 percent of the time. The other 90 or 95 percent of the time, it is off course and correcting for its deviation.

I, too, must make continuous adjustments. I am much more willing to do so today because I have stopped expecting myself to be perfectly on course. I am bound to make plenty of mistakes, but with the help of the Al-Anon program, I am learning to accept mistakes as an inevitable part of the adventure of living. (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1992, p. 60)

“This stuff is not rocket science,” I concluded after I had shared the auto-pilot script stored in my mind. “I understand rocket science,” replied my brilliant colleague, “It’s the soft and fuzzy stuff that’s hard.” Fortunately, I had survived enough mathematics courses in college to know a bit about fuzzy clustering. I had also known since childhood that some of us are comfortable with the fuzzy stuff, whereas others are gifted in understanding angles, edges, and spatial rotations. Fortunately, they are the ones who design our pyramids, bridges, and buildings.

### Putting Virtues Into Practice

My second thought, which I enumerate as “Thought 2(a),” involves the idea of practicing the classic spiritual virtues by putting them into action. For those who are unfamiliar with these virtues, they are essentially the polar opposites of the seven deadly sins of pride (arrogance), greed (selfishness), wrath (self-righteous anger), envy (related to jealousy), lust (excessive desire), gluttony (insatiable appetite), and sloth (apathy, indifference, or laziness).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, each of the classic virtues provides an antidote or a counterbalancing effect to the *cardinal* sins (on which all other sins hinge) or *capital* vices (Latin *caput* for “head” because they originate in the head). Psychologists often use the more secular term *character strengths* to refer to virtues. Listed in the order in which they are corrective to each of the vices, they include humility, generosity, patience, gratitude (or, kindness), chastity, moderation, and diligence. Because we do not innately possess these virtues, we can learn to put them into practice by being around others who are practicing them and by acting *as if* they are already part of our character (Doverspike, 2021, p. 13).

### Practical Application: Virtues

Just as a body builder works on weak muscle groups first, a spiritual navigator focuses on strengthening virtues by practicing them each day. Putting virtues into practice involves a few simple mental efforts and behavioral actions.<sup>3</sup>

- ✓ Maintain vigilant self-awareness throughout each day.
- ✓ Take an ongoing inventory of ourselves—not others—throughout the day.
- ✓ Notice our vices and use them as early detection signals for practicing the opposite action.
- ✓ Practice the virtues by acting as if we already possess them (e.g., acting as if we are generous, pretending we are patient while we wait).

### Using Vices as Signals for Opposite Action

Vices are not all bad if we use them as early warning signals and reminders to practice the counterbalancing virtue. One of the keys is to detect and identify the vice at a subclinical level and then use that impulse or urge as a cue to engage in opposite action (Doverspike, 2021, p. 12).<sup>4</sup> We may not be able to control our first thought, but we can control our first action.

- ✓ When feeling arrogant, strive to be humble.
- ✓ When feeling greedy, strive to be generous.
- ✓ When feeling angry, strive to be patient.
- ✓ When feeling envious, strive to be grateful.
- ✓ When feeling lustful, strive to be chaste.
- ✓ When feeling insatiable hunger, strive to be moderate.
- ✓ When feeling lazy or careless, strive to be diligent.

### Practical Application: Opposite Action

I learned about opposite action many years ago while working with state police and fire fighters. A fire fighter described what it was like to hit the ground while weighed down with heavy gear and oxygen tanks after parachuting into the dark smoke of a blazing forest fire. “When at first I was afraid and wanted to escape,” he disclosed, “I learned to approach slowly and proceed.”<sup>5</sup> Opposite action was used when a state trooper wanted to yell at the fugitive who required a high speed chase before pulling off to the side of the interstate. As the trooper walked up to the car, she quickly shifted into alternative action—moving slowly and talking calmly while she made the arrest. It’s like the alternative action of the accountant, who thinks he must be perfect and never make a mistake in order to be accepted. Once he learned to admit mistakes and allow others to see his imperfections, he was more loved and respected by others.

### Principles of a Spiritual Program

Once when asked about the principles of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill P.<sup>6</sup> replied by saying, “The principles of Twelve Steps are the opposite of our character defects.” In *Drop the Rock*, first author Bill P. (2005) makes this observation:

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)

### Principles Above Personalities

Practicing the principles is easy to say, but hard to do. Dealing with difficult people is often a matter of attitude, expectations, perspective, and putting principles above personalities.<sup>7</sup> The practice of putting principles above personalities usually means *responding* effectively rather than *reacting* emotionally. Remember the adage: “Respond rather than react.” The difference between reacting and responding is often separated only by a *pause*: Postpone Action Until Serenity Emerges.

### Patience Attains All That it Strives For

When navigating by spiritual principles, direction is more important than speed. Yet any destination can be reached by the Three Ps—patience, persistence, and perseverance. As St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) said, “Patience attains all that it strives for.” Remember the adage: “Progress is better than perfection.”

### Epilogue

Navigating by spiritual principles is not easy, but it is a lot easier than navigating without them. We can be in the storm, but the storm doesn’t have to be in us. Like the observation of one of my friends who had a boat for sale<sup>8</sup> and who could never honestly make the statement from *Jaws* that is the best lines ever from a movie,<sup>9</sup> it may not always be easy to navigate stormy seas with the compass and map, but it is a lot more difficult without them.



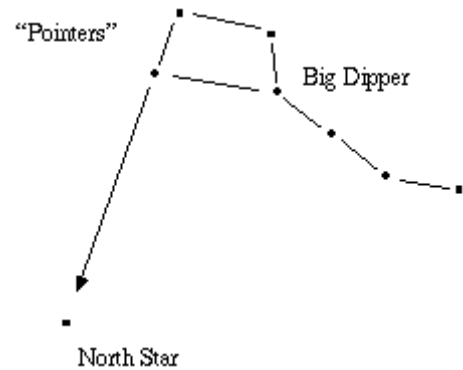
### Ethical Considerations

Navigating by spiritual principles includes ethical considerations related to maintaining confidentiality, respecting sacramental privilege, and protecting the anonymity and privacy of those sharing their stories with secular priests. In the scenarios described in this article, the rocket science colleagues were actually fictitious submarine officers whose deployments often consisted of silent operations under the seas. In this context, navigation under the polar caps in stealth mode was often a mixture of faith and doubt, with no active sonar systems to ping ahead for potentially lethal hazards such as undersea mountains or other submarines.<sup>10</sup>

The American Psychological Association (2017) Standard 4.07 (Use of Confidential Information for Didactic or Other Purposes) has relevance:

Psychologists do not disclose in their writings, lectures, or other public media, confidential, personally identifiable information concerning their clients/patients, students, research participants, organizational clients, or other recipients of their services that they obtained during the course of their work, unless (1) they take reasonable steps to disguise the person or organization, (2) the person or organization has consented in writing, or (3) there is legal authorization for doing so. (APA, 2017, p. 8)

The stories in this article are actually fictitious, designed to illustrate some principles that are easier to understand when there is some skin on them. Composite scenarios are anonymized and fictionalized stories that are based in part on compilations (or compositions) of trends observed or reported by actual people in the real world. Throughout these composite scenarios, background information, demographic data, and other variables have been changed to ensure and protect anonymity. Any resemblance to real people is a pure coincidence—which is God’s way of remaining anonymous.



### Notes

1. As one astute reviewer observed, there actually is no Thought 1(a), although the image of the pilot would be the implied Thought 1(a).

2. The classic seven deadly sins (or vices) and heavenly virtues (strengths) are as follows:

<u>Vices</u>	<u>Virtues</u>
Pride	Humility
Greed	Generosity
Wrath	Patience
Envy	Gratitude / Kindness
Lust	Chastity
Gluttony	Moderation
Sloth	Diligence

3. “God seldom delivers virtues all wrapped in a package and ready for use. Rather, He puts us in situations where by His help we can develop those virtues.” ~ C. R. Findley

4. With respect to opposite action, there is a notable quote from an episode of the television series *Seinfeld*: “If every instinct you have is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right” (Jerry Seinfeld to George Castanza in *The Opposite*).

5. The operative principle here can also be described as *festina lente* (Latin), which is a classical adage and oxymoron meaning “make haste slowly” (usually rendered in English as “more haste, less speed”). This principle was adopted as a motto numerous times, particularly by the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus (63 BCE–14 CE, also known as Octavian and the founder of the Roman Empire, as well as the Roman Emperor Titus Caesar Vespasianus (39–81 CE), the Medicis, and the Onslows.

Of greater interest to me was a municipal fire fighter’s description of walking into the third

floor of a building in which cinders from the burning ceiling were falling around him and the floor was close to the flash point of incineration. I asked, “Do you mean to tell me that when you are in the middle of putting out a fire in a burning building with ceilings and floors collapsing all around, you are not scared?”

“No, doc, I love it,” he replied, “What really scares me is when my wife says, ‘We need to talk.’”

Wow, what can I say other than to ask, “Approach slowly and proceed?”

6. Bill P., one of the three authors of the 2005 book *Drop the Rock*, is not to be confused with Bill W., who was a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous and author of the 1953 book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

7. When the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous were first printed in the November 1949 issue of the *AA Grapevine*, the Twelfth Tradition ended with “above personalities.” Coincidentally, the November 1949 issue, which was entirely devoted to the Traditions in preparation for the First International Convention in Cleveland (July 28–30, 1950), included the request that Thanksgiving week be set aside as “Traditions Week” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1974, p. 213). The initial wording of the short form of this AA Tradition was a bit different from that which members hear in meetings today. Here is an excerpt of the Tradition Twelve taken from a transcription of pages 15-16 of the November 1949 issue: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.”

The second edition (1973, January 1) of the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* contained a new appendix with the short and long form of the Traditions. However, it mistakenly listed the

short form version published in the November 1949 *AA Grapevine* instead of the version of the Traditions published in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953. The error was not fully corrected until the sixth printing in 1963.

In 1949, AA's Tradition 6 ended with "primary spiritual aim" rather than "primary purpose." Tradition 12 ended with "principles above personalities" instead of "principles before personalities." When Al-Anon created its version of the Traditions, it had to have used the 1949 version from the *AA Grapevine*, which clearly used "primary spiritual aim" and "before." Therefore, we have an explanation for the idiosyncratic difference between the two fellowships. Some old timers have witnessed sparks flying when a double winner casually reading the Traditions in Al-Anon used "before" rather than "above." Historically, both terms originated in AA (G. Neidhardt, personal communication, March 26, 2022).

8. 1988 Hatteras 80 Cockpit Motor Yacht with two Detroit Diesel (Model 12V71) engines.

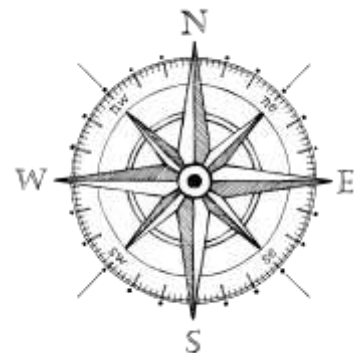
9. "We need a bigger boat."

10. Consider the dilemma of the submarine communications officer when he returned from a long deployment:

"I don't know what my wife expects when I leave the base each day. She knows I often come home at different times."

"Have you considering pinging your wife so that she knows your location and ETA?"

"Doc, that's a great idea!"



## References

- Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1992). *Courage to change: One day at a time in Al-Anon II* [B-16]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.
- Alcoholics Anonymous. (1949, November). *AA Grapevine*, 6(6), 15–16.
- Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Author.  
 On April 10, 1939, 4,730 copies of the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* were published by Works Publishing Company at \$3.50 per copy. The printer, Edward Blackwell of the Cornwall Press, was told to use the thickest paper in his shop. The large, bulky volume became known as the “Big Book” and the name has stuck ever since. On page 170 of *AA Comes of Age* Bill W. wrote that the idea behind the thick, large paper was to convince the alcoholic he was getting his money’s worth. The second edition was published in 1955, the third edition in 1976, and the fourth edition in 2001.
- Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1953/2010). *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*. New York, NY: Author.  
 Copyrighted in 1952 by The *AA Grapevine*, Inc. and Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing (now known as Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.), the first printing of the book was in April 1953. This book was written by AA co-founder Bill W., who had introduced the Traditions to the Fellowship in an April 1946 *Grapevine* article titled “Twelve Suggested Points for AA Tradition.” Bill W. published more than 150 articles in the *Grapevine* between 1945 and 1970. These articles were collected in the anthology known as *The Language of the Heart* (1988).
- Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1975). *Alcoholics Anonymous comes of age: A brief history of AA*. New York, NY: Author.
- American Psychological Association. (2017). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (2002, Amended June 1, 2010 and January 1, 2017). <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.asp>  
<https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/ethics-code-2017.pdf>  
 The downloadable and paginated version cited in this article is available as a document file (PDF, 272 KB) at the link below:
- 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). *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. It was written by Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, and Andy Cowan, and was directed by Tom Cheronos.

Doverspike, W. F. (2021, September 05). *How to understand the seven deadly sins*. [http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how\\_to\\_understand\\_the\\_seven\\_deadly\\_sins.pdf](http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_the_seven_deadly_sins.pdf)

Ford, D. H., & Urban, H. B. (1963). *Systems of psychotherapy: A comparative study*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

Spielberg, S. (Director). (1975, June 20). *Jaws* [Film]. Zanuck/Brown Company and Universal Pictures.

## Resource

“How’s My Driving Test” is a 10-item non-standardized and non-validated quiz designed for discussion purposes only. It is not intended to be used to get a discount on automobile insurance, although it may increase one’s self-awareness and even help to reduce road rage.

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