

Chapter 4

Step One

We admitted we were powerless over compulsive addictive behaviors—that our lives had become unmanageable.

(Heart t' Heart traditional version, adapted from A.A.)

Admitted that we of ourselves are powerless, nothing without God. (Mosiah 4:5; Alma 26:12)

(Heart t' Heart scriptural version)

How do I interpret Step One for myself? How do I apply it to my own life? The painful tutoring of my own experience has taught me I am powerless over sexual addiction. I cannot quit by myself. I cannot abstain from sexual actions or thoughts without the intervention and grace of Christ. I simply don't have the power to do it. All I can bring to the problem is my willingness to be helped, to be cleansed from the addiction by a Power greater than my own.

PERFECTIONISM, POWERLESSNESS AND ME

From my earliest years I had an intense concern with doing things right. I wanted to make others happy with me and not disappoint them. The specter of failure loomed large, and I feared it immensely. Being called a "failure" was one of the most devastating insults I knew. In short, I was a perfectionist. I used to think it was ludicrous to call myself

that because I consistently fell short in so many areas. I have since learned that perfectionism is not the same thing as *doing* everything correctly, it is the *obsession* with doing everything correctly. It is not the admirable virtue I used to think, but rather a debilitating frame of mind that constantly drained me of motivation.

When I became entangled in sinful sexual behaviors, my inability to free myself presented a near death blow to my self-esteem. Nevertheless, I still hoped that maybe somewhere inside I had the power to succeed—if I could only find it. The idea that I might be powerless over this behavior was too hard for me to accept. Stubbornly, I continued to struggle, sure that my own strength would eventually prove sufficient. The thought that I might *not* have the power to master my weaknesses was repulsive to me. Thoughts like, “Be a man, not a weakling,” and “You can do anything you put your mind to” kept going through my head. I had attended a number of classes on motivation, on being my best self, on overcoming my self-defeating behaviors. I knew if I just found the right approach to this problem, it would yield to “the invincible power of the human spirit” in me. Hadn’t all these men I read about overcome *their* challenges and gone on to become great, self-sufficient, even wealthy? Surely I could at least overcome this one bad habit!

These thoughts of “You can do it!” were so comforting, so encouraging, so enticing, so *seductive* to my ego (my pride) that I kept on trying to overcome not just my sexual problems on my own, but all my other problems as well—procrastination, being habitually late, starting projects and not finishing them, even my perpetually disorganized way of living. I was sure I could conquer all these weaknesses if I just read the right book, took the right class, or found the right inspirational person to follow and to emulate.

MY “UNCONQUERABLE” SOUL

Puffed up on all this learning of men, I had great confidence that all my challenges and limitations would soon yield to the “positive mental attitude” I was always just *about* to acquire. Sentiments like these, expressed in the poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley, inspired me:

Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
 I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
 Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed...

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll,
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul.

(Best Loved Poems of the American People, Hazel Felleman)

Irrationally, I took comfort in thinking of myself as “the master of my fate,” and “the captain of my soul,” even though my helplessness over sexual actions continually proved otherwise. Convinced that my eventual success or failure was entirely in my hands, I increased my efforts to overcome all my problems, including my growing sexual indulgence, through my own insufficient strength. I was determined to win by sheer persistence.

When I was in graduate school, I ran across another quote that affected me strongly. I couldn’t decide, however, whether I was more encouraged or discouraged by it. On the one hand, it was very inspiring, but on the other hand, it was also faintly disturbing:

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.
 Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. (Calvin Coolidge)

What was it about this thought that bothered me? After all, it was touting persistence, the very quality I clung to as my one last hope for freedom from my sin. Still, I couldn’t find any reassurance in President

Coolidge's words. Why? After considerable reflection, I recognized an old familiar threat in this quote: *the threat of failure*. It rang too close to what I had heard all my life: "Philip, you could do so much better if you would just apply yourself and live up to your potential!" So instead of inspiring me to more consistent effort, as I am sure Coolidge intended, his words seemed to condemn me to a fate I already feared: "It doesn't matter if you *do* have talent. You are going to fail anyway, because you can't be persistent enough!"

In my desperation to believe in myself, I turned a blind eye to certain scriptures that suggested more humility was in order. Verses like these troubled me:

O how great is the *nothingness* of the children of men; yea, even they are *less than the dust of the earth*. (Helaman 12:7, emphasis added)

I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, *and your own nothingness*, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, *unworthy creatures*, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility. (Mosiah 4:11, emphasis added)

Yea, I know that *I am nothing*; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself. (Alma 26:12, emphasis added)

Even though I thought I believed the Book of Mormon to be true, I found these verses impossible to comprehend or accept. For one thing, they didn't square with what I desperately wanted and *needed* to believe about myself so that I could continue in my illusion of self-sufficiency. After all, wasn't I a child of God, made in the image of the Creator of the Universe? Wasn't I a "god in embryo?" That must mean I had *something* going for me. I might have a few problems, but I wasn't "nothing" (regardless of what these prophets had said).

Year after year passed, and in my own way I kept trying, and trying, and trying. I prayed (but not too hard, nor too consistently) and I read

the scriptures (but not too often, nor too deeply). I fasted and asked the Lord to give me the strength to overcome (but not too wholeheartedly). I confessed to my bishops and to my stake presidents. I repented, over and over again. It seemed that my every prayer began, “Heavenly Father, please forgive me for my sins...” but invariably, as soon as the stresses in my life built up again, I would seek comfort or relief by returning to my behaviors. How well I came to identify with the disgusting and pitiful image in **3 Nephi 7:8**, of returning **“like the dog to his vomit, or like the sow to her wallowing in the mire.”**

SLIDING INTO THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR

As the years passed and none of my intentions to change had any lasting effect on my slavery to lust, my indomitable spirit began to crumble, like the façade it was. I was starting to accept the adversary’s continually whispered lie that I was already beaten. The “dream” of one day overcoming these habits started to fade, and I found myself coming to the conclusion that I would *never* be free of these behaviors, that I would die still enslaved to the power of this degrading life of sin and sensuality. I found myself sliding deeper and deeper into despair. Hadn’t I tried as hard as I could to quit? Hadn’t I wept bitter tears over my endlessly repeated failures? Bludgeoned with discouragement, I eventually came to the point where I had practically lost all hope. I began to reason that if I had not been able to free myself with the effort I had put forth year after year, then the amount of willpower required to ever *really* succeed was beyond me.

As my hope faded, I began to be tormented with an awful specter. I had so far escaped what I had always considered to be the ultimate disaster, adultery, but the way I was going, I wasn’t sure how long I would hold out. I frequently wondered what it would feel like to stand in front of the Stake High Council, in front of brethren I had known and respected for years, and be confronted with sins serious enough to strip me of my priesthood and my Church membership! I started to picture the scene, not realizing that Satan was subtly, carefully preparing my mind to accept the inevitability of just such an outcome. I didn’t recog-

nize that this true principle was operating—that all things are created spiritually before they are created physically, *even our destruction*.

I eventually came across some literature on sexual addiction and even though I was startled to see myself in those pages over and over, that awakening still didn't give me the power to change. I considered the possibility that I might actually be an "addict." I knew an addict was someone who could not shake off his habit, no matter how hard he tried, and whether I liked it or not, that description fit me perfectly!

Terrified by the nightmarish future that each indulgence in my addiction made more likely, I found myself asking a question every addict must eventually face: Had I had enough? Had I given away enough of my soul; had I lost enough integrity? Had I finally fallen far enough? In short, was I humbled enough yet to be willing to offer the Lord whatever might be required to put myself within the saving influence of His mercy and grace?

I have since come to realize that this whole process of admitting powerlessness is the same "tutoring" experienced by the Prodigal Son (**Luke 15:11–32**). In other words it is a process of becoming humble—truly humble. I had never before identified with this poor, lost prodigal. After all, I had never left the Church. I believed in its teachings. I was faithful in so many ways. It was only in what I thought of as "just this one area" that I was stalled out. In my perverse pride, I ignored my desperate need for humility, insisting that life teach me the hard way. On the one hand, I prayed for help from God, while on the other, I clung insanely to the very poison that was destroying me spiritually, and which I *knew* would eventually wreck my whole life. Just as I had turned a deaf ear to the prophets' insistence that I was "nothing," and that in my own strength I was weak, I also ignored Alma's invitation to become humble without having to be compelled:

Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, in other words, blessed is he that believeth in the word of God...without stubbornness of heart, yea, without

being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe. (Alma 32:16)

In my stubbornness of heart, insisting on finding the way out of my dilemma without coming down into the depths of humility, I was setting myself up to be compelled, or as Alma puts it, “blessed.”

And now, because ye are compelled to be humble blessed are ye; for a man sometimes, if he is compelled to be humble, seeketh repentance; and now surely, whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end the same shall be saved. (Alma 32:13)

HITTING BOTTOM—THE DEPTHS OF HUMILITY

And save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility, he will not open unto them. (2 Nephi 9:42)

“Hitting bottom” is an expression that’s been used in recovery work ever since the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous. It refers to the devastating emotional bankruptcy most of us have to reach before we are finally ready to seek divine help in a state of total surrender. When we fall, we *keep* falling until we hit something that stops us—the bottom. Hitting bottom is the inevitable end to a fall.

Most of us hit a few jarring bumps before we hit that final “bottom.” Said another way, we get several wake up calls, inviting us to see ourselves as the fools we are before we finally *do* wake up. Looking back at my own life, I am now amazed to see the depths of foolishness and degradation I fell into but could not (or would not) see.

One “wake-up call” happened after I moved to the east coast to attend graduate school. I had just graduated from BYU in Provo, Utah, and the culture shock of my new environment was enormous. The year was 1974. The “women’s movement” was in full swing, and the university I was attending was in the forefront of the “bra-burning” crusade.

As a result, a number of the young women on campus dressed very immodestly. In this temptation-laden environment, my addiction kicked into high gear. I graduated from noticing things I couldn't avoid to actively seeking out opportunities to lust. One day I was in an elevator with a fellow graduate student. A girl got on the elevator and stood opposite, facing us. After a moment she nervously crossed her arms. When she got off the elevator, my companion spoke up: "Did you notice how we both looked at that girl just now, you know, to see what we could see?"

I was mortified! I knew *I* had noticed her, and I wasn't surprised that he had too, but I had no idea he had noticed *me* noticing her! I felt like such a fool! My friend wasn't a member of the Church, *but he knew I was*. What kind of example was I setting for others about the morals of Latter-day Saints? I made some lame excuse about how sad it was that some girls dressed in such a provocative way that we guys had become conditioned to looking at *all* women that way. But my excuses didn't make it any better. They never have.

Did this wake-up call turn me around and motivate me sufficiently to change my behavior? Sadly, it didn't. I went on like this for another twenty-five years, and all along the way I had experiences that could have become turning points, but I never let them.

Another wake-up call came when I turned forty and the stake president interviewed me about being ordained a high priest. I confessed to him some things I had not previously cleared up. He listened intently, counseled me about my mistakes, and then set a date for my ordination. I went home, relieved the confession had gone so well, and called my father to invite him to ordain me. He gladly agreed and I told him the day and time. He said he and my mother would be happy to make the trip and were looking forward to the experience. Moments after I hung up, the phone rang. It was the stake president calling to say he was sorry, but after thinking it over, he had come to the conclusion that we needed to wait awhile for my ordination. I protested that I had already told my parents, and explained how embarrassing it would be for me to call them back and postpone it. He kindly, but firmly, reminded me he was a "judge in Israel," and he had the responsibility to see that things were

done properly. He also apologized for not realizing earlier what needed to be done. With no other recourse, I called my parents back and told them the ordination had been postponed, but even then I was still light years away from being able to explain why. Did this incident wake me up? Again, sadly, no. I was able to “white knuckle” it (abstain through sheer willpower) long enough to be ordained, but no “heart-deep” change had happened, and, for the umpteenth time, my repentance didn’t last.

I have heard stories from other men about things they have gone through before they finally hit bottom. More than one brother has been fired from his job for viewing Internet pornography on his computer at work. One said: “I knew it wouldn’t happen to me,” and he took the chance—and got caught. Others have been disfellowshipped or excommunicated for serious sins. Some have lost their families. The devastation can take on terrible proportions if that is what is required to wake us up. When I hear these stories, I think, “There, but for the grace of God, go I,” and I thank God my addiction didn’t take me any further down than it did.

THE SUPREME PRINCIPLE OF AGENCY

It seems it is the Lord’s will to let us learn from our own experience to distinguish good from evil, to learn what works and what doesn’t work. The Lord loves us and wants us to repent so we don’t have to suffer, but agency is a sacred principle, and He will never violate our agency by forcing us to do what is right:

I ought not to harrow up in my desires, the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; yea, I know that he allotteth unto men, yea, decreeth unto them decrees which are unalterable, according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction. (Alma 29:4, emphasis added)

God allows us to experience the natural consequences of our actions until we finally learn that **“wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10)**. Elder Neal A. Maxwell described this painful teaching process:

If we have grown soft, hard times may be necessary. If we are too contented, a dose of divine discontent may come. A relevant insight may be contained in reproof... *One may be scorched by humiliation, so pride can be melted away. Whatever we lack will get attention, one way or another.* (Ensign, Nov. 1995, 25; emphasis added)

Those of us who have been compelled by addiction to be humble face a great opportunity. We can respond to the humbling events we have already experienced and thus not require still more serious and painful humbling. In some educational programs, you can take a test part way through the course, and if your test results show you understand the current topic, you can move on to the next principle. I think the Lord teaches us that way. If we haven't learned the lesson yet, it keeps coming back until we “get it,” but if we can show Him we have learned the lesson already, we can “graduate” and we won't have to go through the sting of further “learning experiences.” When the course is as painful as addiction, graduating as quickly as possible makes a lot of sense. If I could have one wish, it would be that the testimony of my own experiences might help others to turn around where they are, rather than have to experience the full pain of devastation that continuing in addiction will surely bring. AA refers to this as “bringing the bottom up,” or in other words, “getting” the message without having to experience the worst consequences addiction can bring.

POWERLESSNESS TURNS TO HOPE

I have gained so much through attending Twelve Step meetings in the Heart t' Heart program. In Heart t' Heart, each of the original Twelve Steps of AA is paraphrased in a “scriptural version.” The scriptural version of Step One reads: “(We) admitted that we of ourselves are powerless, nothing without God.” Here was that principle of “nothingness” that I had so long resisted. Now, somehow, life had taught me the

truth of it in an irrefutable manner. I could not deny that when I weighed the years of effort I had put into trying to quit against the results my efforts got me, “nothing” was a perfect description. The facts of my life bore witness to me of my powerlessness so plainly that I could not deny the truth in Step One when I heard it. As Alma had promised, by being compelled to be humble, I had finally been brought to a **“preparation [willingness] to hear the word” (Alma 32:6).**

Paradoxically, admitting my powerlessness did not make me feel hopeless. I started studying the Twelve Steps in earnest when I began attending Heart t’ Heart meetings. There I met people who were being freed from a variety of destructive behaviors. Hope was everywhere. I began to think: “If they can quit, maybe *I* can, too.” I have heard it said that the first thing a person experiences when they start attending Twelve Step meetings is a rebirth of hope. That began happening for me as soon as I got out of isolation and started going to meetings.

Hope continued to dawn on me as I started to turn to the Lord **“with full purpose of heart” (Mosiah 7:33)**, willing to see myself as a fool and admit my **“nothingness,” (Mosiah 4:5, 11** or in other words my total need for Him. With this new perspective, the scriptures started to take on deeper and *more hopeful* meanings. Truly, just as was promised in **2 Nephi 9:42**, the Lord was opening the scriptures unto me!

For example, when I went back and looked at those verses I mentioned earlier that had bothered me, I found I had not been hearing the whole message. I had only heard that part of the message I thought condemned me. What I was missing was the realization that in each of these passages there was also the promise of help, of success, of joy! These inspired writers weren’t condemning me for *not* using my own power—they were testifying to me of *God’s* power and inviting me to take advantage of it. Listen to what Ammon said:

My brothers and my brethren, behold I say unto you, how great reason have we to rejoice; for could we have supposed when we started from the land of Zarahemla that God would have granted unto us such great blessings?

And this is the blessing which hath been bestowed upon us, that we have been made instruments in the hands of God to bring about this great work...

Blessed be the name of our God; let us sing to his praise, yea, let us give thanks to his holy name, for he doth work righteousness forever. (Alma 26:1, 3, 8)

Does this sound like someone who is beaten down and discouraged over being “nothing?” Quite the opposite. Ammon is bubbling over with enthusiasm in his rejoicing. His exuberance even evokes a reprimand from his brother.

And it came to pass that when Ammon had said these words, his brother Aaron rebuked him, saying: Ammon, I fear that thy joy doth carry thee away unto boasting. (Alma 26:10)

But Ammon could not be deterred from his rejoicing *in the Lord*.

Behold, my joy is full, yea, my heart is brim with joy, and I will rejoice in my God. Yea, *I know that I am nothing*; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things. (Alma 26:11–12, emphasis added.)

Ammon confesses his own nothingness and his own weakness, and in the same breath gives glory to God for being the One who has brought about these mighty miracles. His admission of powerlessness is far from discouraging; it is exalting! It’s all right that I am nothing, because Christ is *everything*! I do not have to be able to do all things, to move mountains and change the course of rivers, because I have a Friend who can, and who *does* do these things. He has moved the mountain in my life that I could not move! He has wrought an amazing change in me, one I thought would never happen!

Step One is an exercise in letting go of the notion that recovery is going to happen through our own strength. We will need to take action,

to take certain steps, but the power to do so comes from God. The amazing result is marvelous peace and joy!

MAKING THE MOST OF THIS CHAPTER

Please take time to answer the following questions in your recovery journal.

1. Let's revisit the truth we read in **2 Nephi 9:42**—**“Save they shall cast these things away [pride in their learning, wisdom and riches], and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility, he will not open unto them.”** I'd like to invite you to walk head-on into the miraculous process of entering the depths of humility by honestly reviewing your own history of sex-related behaviors. I recommend that you write your history down—even if it's for your own eyes only. Start with your earliest awareness of sexuality and each experience since. At what point did you begin to feel these thoughts or activities were “getting out of control”? What have you tried in your efforts to stop? Do you feel truly powerless over this behavior yet? Do you accept that it is actually an addiction?
2. When we are trapped in addiction, we are not only doing things we wish we weren't, we're also letting a lot of good things that we wish we were doing slip out of our lives. We are even as the apostle Paul wrote: **“For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Romans 7:19)**. Write about how this applies in your life. Make a list of the things you once enjoyed, or hoped to enjoy, that have either slipped out of your life or haven't materialized because of your addiction.
3. In **Mosiah 27:29**, Alma the Younger, uses words like **“gall of bitterness,” “bonds of iniquity,” “darkest abyss,”** and **“racked with eternal torment”** to describe his depths of despair and humiliation. Write about whether you can relate to any of these expressions.

Write about the hardest moments you've experienced so far—or have seen someone else experience, and know in your heart that you're headed for yourself.

4. In **Alma 38:11 and 14**, Alma reminds his son, Shiblon, to not be lifted up in pride, but to **“acknowledge your unworthiness before God at all times.”** Write a list of people, places, and circumstances you have used as excuses to turn to sexual addiction. How has using them for excuses been a way of avoiding admitting your own **“unworthiness,”** or bondage to addiction?

5. Read the “Psalm of Nephi” (**2 Nephi 4:16–35**) in its entirety. Note the “I am...” statements Nephi makes about himself: **“I am encompassed about, ...wretched.”** Nephi doesn't seem to be afraid to tell the straight truth about his human frailties. Write about how you feel about being “encompassed about” by addiction. Write about how you feel when you finally say, “I am *addicted*,” or even “I am an *addict*.” How can facing this truth set you free?