

The Hungering Heart

By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder

Life is a conglomeration of problems, surprises, a few extraordinary events, and boredom. That we ever manage getting through it in a reasonable fashion has always surprised me, given the truths one comes to know with the passage of time and the acquisition of a certain chronological age.

That life can be so exhilarating at times and then, turn into the most boring, lonely, and painful existence is, in itself, one of life's mysteries. And if we search for reasons why we tried to escape, I suppose all of the above would somewhat explain our behavior. Perhaps not, since we seem to experience the very same feelings when we are not drinking.

All of this suggests that we must search for an answer, a way in which we can live and overcome the debilitation of painful events. In this day and age of the computer, what better solution than to think of a "program". Of course, trying to reduce life to a method of living that comes from a program sounds rather artificial and certainly simplistic, yet it is possible to educate ourselves in "methods" that help us with living and overcoming and, finally, in triumphing. Many of us begin our days with inspirational reading, with meditation, with a way in which to mold our first daily thoughts in order to have a frame of reference for that day's tribulations.

And so I should like to recommend thinking about using the 13 Program Statements in a method of stair climbing as a recipe for a dynamic life, one that provides that strength and self-knowledge necessary to happiness.

The WFS "New Life" Program came into existence officially in 1976. Actually, I was probably gathering those statements for a few years before the official copyrighting, for it was the way I had learned to live, the way in which I changed the way I lived. Then, sometime in 1987-88, there came a gradual way in which I began to view the 13 Statements. Prior to the late 1980's, I often said that the statements could be used in any order one chose to use them, to learn them, to take them into one's life.

And that is still quite true. However, there is a stepwise progression of accepting the statements that provides a more organized way of looking for a solution to life. This method of using the statements is being referred to as the program "levels". Perhaps you have seen the literature that now shows the statements in the levels, because we are starting to distribute the program statements in both ways.

Looking at the levels approach, we see a stepwise pattern for growth.

Level 1 (Statement #1) – Acceptance of our alcoholism (or other addictions). Having the knowledge that we have a physical disorder that we must acknowledge, and accept, as having.

Level 2 (Statements #2, 4, 9) – Now we are ready to move on to the acknowledgement that much of our approach to life has not been the best approach and that we can change our approach to life and its problems by changing our attitude. This is when we spend large chunks of time with a pencil and a notebook and we begin to write down our attitudes about everything. It is a time for total honesty and recognition of our negative thinking, whatever it may encompass.

At this level, we not only are to recognize our negativities but we also must recognize that we are willing to do something about them.

This level may be the most difficult and take the longest period of time than any other stage of recovery with our program.

Level 3 (Statements #5, 12) – Since we have accepted, acknowledged and removed our negative attitudes, we now move up one more notch and fill that vacuum, this time with positive thoughts about ourselves and our lives and our attitudes. This phase of our moving onward and upward begins to be a very happy time, for we begin to see rather clearly how we made ourselves miserable with all of our former negative thinking. Now we begin to learn the value of a positive environment in our thoughts. Good thoughts, pleasant thoughts, positive thoughts now form the skeleton of our day's events. We begin our day's thinking process by acknowledging the value of ourselves as a contributing person to life's process. We begin to see that the good that comes to us we made possible by our thinking about it first. We know now, once and for all, that we create the world we live in by our thoughts.

Level 4 (Statements #3, 6, 11) – This level can almost be called the icing on the cake, for this level is the putting of additional positive attitudes into our lives. We add enthusiasm; we add happiness, having learned that it is an attitude we little understood before, that happiness is relative and that it is at hand wherever and whenever we choose to acknowledge it. This level teaches us to recognize that what we feel is dependent upon us to create. Happiness, enthusiasm, and appreciation of life itself are entirely in our hands to do with as we choose. We can create and live these attitudes or we can turn our back on life and slip back into Level 2 and those nasty old negative thoughts.

Level 5 (Statements #7, 10) – In our progression upward into becoming a whole and renewed person, we are now at the place that is probably the most difficult for us all: that is to be a loving person, one who loves and who accepts love. Both of these are extremely difficult, for most of us fear being hurt and rejected and turned away. This has often been our history and we have become insulted beyond giving and accepting. Some of us have become bitter, angry, unyielding, and even vitriolic at times. Perhaps I was wrong in saying that Level 2 was the most difficult. Perhaps this level is, for we must reveal ourselves, we must put our feelings on the line.

Getting to this level in our climb to happiness and stability may be a stumbling block, for it requires us to be real, to be giving and receiving, it asks us to express our feelings and it asks us to be vulnerable to possible hurt. But we also open ourselves to the possibility of the greatest happiness anyone can know... love.

Level 6 (Statements #8, 13) – Our final stage of development is one more esoteric than the other stages, for it is our spiritual development, which is a very personal matter for each of us. But this stage can surely be the most fruitful and personal. It is also the stage that requires the most careful nurturance.

This final stage sees us at the level of self-responsibility enhanced with emotional and spiritual growth.

The WFS "New Life" Program provides us with a way of life. It is a program for personal growth. It goes far beyond our seeing ourselves as persons with a drinking problem. That is merely the beginning. We have a long way to go and the "New Life" Program offers a way. Over the years of its history, thousands of women have found a way to happiness and peace and a liberation to do and be all that each of us can be. ☞ [March 1989]

(This article is from *The Collection of Sobering Thoughts Booklet*, Volume 13
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Comments from Cookie (San Diego, CA group):

I truly love this article! I believe everyone would benefit from reading this article every few months. Our disease was one of instant gratification. We lived our lives wanting and experiencing immediate changes. Alcohol is one of the fastest reacting drugs, changing our brain chemistry with record speeds. Combine the drug with our negative *automatic* thoughts, learned from years of low (or no) self-esteem, and we have created one huge obstacle to overcome. Jean's "New Life" Program provides the guidelines necessary to break through this self imposed prison.

Creating our new life is a *process*. The definition of the word "process" is a series of actions that achieve an end or result with a passage of time. I see so many women become discouraged in the beginning because change isn't occurring fast enough. Time constraints have no place in recovery. Each of us will create a new life by a conscious effort.

I see our Thirteen Statements as levels of awareness. Certainly before we can make any changes in our lives, we must accept the disease of alcoholism. Then we may become aware of that *automatic* negative thinking and start replacing it with life-saving positive thinking. We begin to add joy into our lives. I spent a very long time learning to recognize my negative thoughts. Now my positive thoughts are *automatic*, with negative thinking feeling "out of place."

It took us years to come to the end of our drinking days. That was also a process. My "*disease*" is in total remission as I have removed alcohol from my life. But, my recovery is a life long process. Thank you, Jean, for providing a program designed for women. The thirteen positive affirmations certainly saved my life, which is still in the process of changing! ☺ [August 2002]

Comments from "Bonnie":

**"Like a river that don't know where it's flowing,
I took a wrong turn, and I just kept going."**

Ah, yes, Bruce Springsteen song lyrics (Hungry Heart) that got stuck in my head many years ago. They truly resonated with me. So when I first got sober two years ago and stumbled upon WFS and began to read Jean's articles, I was drawn to this one because of its title. And, honestly, when I first read it, I didn't get the connection: her language was very pragmatic; she didn't even mention a longing, a lingering feeling of emotional hunger. She just talked about the program and the Levels and it just seemed so.....so..... so not hungering. Why did she use that title in an essay that talks about the development of the 13 Statements into levels?

In revisiting the article in the last year, I now believe that Jean envisioned the WFS Program as being a self-directed evolving entity, and she was sharing her personal evolution. As long as you accepted each of the statements as personal facts, you were on your way. By developing the statements into levels, she was making the program more accessible, more user-friendly. The way they had fallen into place as steps in her personal ascent to her new life, made so much sense and were such a natural progression. And her hungering heart beat not only for herself, but for all her sisters who were afflicted with this life-threatening problem. She knew that we are all truly bonded, not only by our addiction but also by our longing for a better life, a better understanding and acceptance of ourselves and the world around us.

So, both Bruce and Jean address the state of our hungering hearts; but, Jean takes it to the paramount by telling us there is hope and satiation, that we can take charge of our recovery by following the stair-like progression, by following the recipe.

Feed your souls, my 4C sisters - bon appetite! ☺ [January 2013]

Comments from "Wisteria":

We all want more than sobriety, more than a life of recovery. Jean didn't intend for us to live everyday thinking about 'not' drinking or build a life around abstinence. She wanted to give us a tool, the ultimate tool that covered all areas of our life, bringing wholeness where the heart hungered for more; for a life well-lived, one we could be proud of. And yet, though we start this journey alone, she didn't want us to continue alone. She gave us a program that "goes far beyond our seeing ourselves as persons with a drinking problem." She gave us the means in which to create our very own life, build friendships, and enjoy a confidence that allows intimacy and end the loneliness we have lived in.

We are each a promise, a promise of something great and loving and giving. Dr. Kirkpatrick recognized that self-knowledge is the key that opens discovery, rebirth and genesis. She showed that a program need not be reductive in nature but a loving gesture of openness and compassion. The ingeniousness of this gift is that we pay it forward with every choice we make. The life we choose to go beyond the work of quitting, the work of self-discovery, the work of self-discipline, and the courage to keep our heart open affects every soul we touch. I cannot embellish on the innate wisdom in this article, but I will take one sentence from each that has caused a shift in perception for me.

Level 1: . . . *have a physical disorder that I must acknowledge, and accept as having.*

Level 2: *It is a time for total honesty and recognition of my negative thinking, whatever it may encompass.*

Level 3: *Good thoughts, pleasant thoughts, positive thoughts now form the skeleton of my day's events.*

Level 4: *... that happiness is relative and that it is at hand wherever and whenever I choose to acknowledge it.*

Level 5: . . . *that is to be a loving person, one who loves and who accepts love.*

Level 6: *My spiritual development, which is very personal; it is also the stage that requires my most careful nurturing.*

To my mind, I've viewed the levels as a spiritual spiral, like a labyrinth; Chartres Cathedral being the most famous [virtual labyrinth: <http://www.gratefulness.org/labyrinth/index.htm>]. A labyrinth is a metaphor for life; that life does not proceed in a straight line. We pass the same point over and over. If you've ever walked a labyrinth you will walk side by side with the steps you have walked in the past and the gentle destination of what the future holds. Each turn along a labyrinth is an opportunity to stop and process where you have been and where you are right now. The path often doubles back on itself getting farther from the source reminding one that this is indeed a journey. It also reminds me that being fully there is not necessarily being right or being ahead or winning. It just is. Sometimes there is a long stretch far from the center where I wonder when it will finally end, but I try and bring my focus back to my walk, where I am. I think drifting is just a sign that I'm bored, that I've lost the excitement of being engaged.

Jean mentions boredom twice in this article. I realize when walking that often boredom is when my mind wanders. I think that is why it is imperative when we choose a path out of alcoholism and into recovery we use a program and work on a passion. Something that keeps us engaged, that continues to fuel and challenge our creative, spiritual, physical and mental attributes.

I'm going to ask something of you, of myself. I have a recovered friend whose life changed forever, whose life went far beyond recovery because of the Statements and her passion for Reiki. It was her answer, it's what spoke to her soul, inflamed her desires, brought forth her gifts and graces. For some of us, that is a faith in a set of beliefs, for some it is pursuit of an education, for others physical activities, others art and dance and music, and for others it is homemaking. The point is, we are lucky if we find a passion, and that passion will inspire others. Sometimes we have to do a little searching - but that means actually *doing*, not reading about. Stop with the excuses or waiting until you are skinny enough, just go take the class or join a club on meetup.com. It doesn't have to be a forever commitment, just try; 'just keep on swimming', as our famous fish, Dori, sings. I've seen the most healing done, the most success, from women who have chosen to learn a program of self-help, and have worked on a passion. That is dogged determination. That is learning something beyond the surface. It requires diving deep into one's soul. It births character.

I recently learned to knit. You'd think it was no biggie. I started in August and just kept fearlessly going even when I wanted to quit. First the stitches, then different needles, reading a pattern, then yarns, a new vocabulary and tons of goof ups, tearing out, frustration - turns out knitting, as my husband will testify - involves plenty of cuss words - quite a leap from my picture of granny in the rocking chair, in the log cabin, in front of the fireplace calmly clicking needles. But I was filled with a mission to learn every single stitch and how to read a pattern and now I'm into the discovery of yarns, fiber and color. So far this is a baby passion. I enjoy it. In the past, the second I liked something I wanted to turn it into a business I could make money from and then oops, promptly lost my passion. Just enjoy. My whole family is thrilled with this new 'thing' I'm doing. It's gotten them excited about what is going to be created next. It was a topic of conversation all through the holidays and it's actually inspired a philosophical discussion. The thing is, when I enjoy what I'm doing, I am creating joy around me, and in the work of the day, good things like these aren't around every corner. We create them and they give us closeness to ourselves and others.

The first year of sobriety I was a Sudoku nut, then photography, then a swimming fiend, then I liked fishing, turns out that was short lived -- but I learned. I think we get afraid of investing money in anything because we fear it will be a waste. Well, though I don't fish often anymore, or even take my camera with me where ever I go, I am comforted when I see my tackle box or my camera bag. I have new skills and a conversation tidbit! These are the things that make up a life. It's memories and skills. Well worth time and effort - and even a few cuss words. Turns out fishing involves cuss words as well. (And, there are passions that don't require money.)

Finally, speaking to the use of the Levels, this is what I have found to be an accurate truism. They aren't a put in your pocket, pull out, follow the directions and we are on our way. They are a reference. They succinctly give us another tool to use. I don't *use* them so much as *refer* to them. They kind of bring me up to date as to where I am and if perhaps another perspective is needed.

Jean says at the end of her essay, "Over the years of its history, thousands of women have found a way to happiness and peace and liberation to do and be all that each of us can be." This is not speaking to a downtrodden alcoholic woman; it is speaking to a woman who is aware that she is free. She gave us a step-by-step guide to fulfill that promise. 🌸 [January 2013]