



Mastering Recovery

Rooted in the Steps. Growing Through Connection

With Barry Lehman

#5.32- When the Old No Longer Holds

February 4, 2026

What I'm Thinking

Spirituality

One of my favorite sessions to lead in primary treatment was the one on spirituality. We had a session for each of the hyphenated aspects of substance use disorder as a disease — biological, psychological, social, and spiritual.

I would usually begin with a simple question:

What do you think of when I use the word spiritual?

People offered the answers you might expect: God, prayer, faith, belief. One time one person, quietly and honestly, said, “*The Grand Canyon.*”

I had just been there the previous March. I smiled and nodded.

Places like the Grand Canyon are momentous not because of what they teach, but because of what they awaken. They invite us into a sense of awe — into an



awareness of something undeniably greater than ourselves. Even something as simple — and as vast — as a canyon.

That's when I would begin to reframe the conversation.

Spirituality, at its core, is about **connection**:

- Connection with ourselves — self-awareness and how that awareness shapes our actions, values, and sense of purpose.
- Connection with those closest to us.
- Connection with the wider communities we live in.
- Connection with what brings us joy or awe — nature, beauty, creativity.
- And connection with whatever we understand as a higher power — named, unnamed, or beyond understanding.

In my experience, spirituality in recovery is not one connection, but the **whole web** that helps us stay oriented and alive.

All connections are, by definition, two-way. Like current in a wire or water in a hose, connection requires both flow and reception. Without connection at the receiving end, flow becomes irrelevant — or worse, dangerous. We can be flooded. We can be overwhelmed. Or the power can be shut off entirely, leaving us in the dark.

A Crisis

Joe (not his real name) came into a 12-step meeting one night and dropped heavily into his usual chair. He had been coming regularly for three years and was almost twenty-three. He was angry.

When we broke into small groups, he let loose.

"You promised me," he said, almost yelling. "You told me that if I quit using, my life would be good — even great. Well, it isn't."

It was his first real spiritual crisis in sobriety.

The connections he had relied on were collapsing. Life was not happy, joyous, and free. Whatever he thought had worked... wasn't working anymore.

He had passed through the so-called pink cloud and found himself under gray, overcast skies. The future he had imagined was gone. He had no idea what his life might become — and nothing left to hold onto.

The Heart of the Week:

Some of us were probably ready to chalk Joe's outburst up to youth or immaturity. Maybe we were tempted to decide he wasn't working the program the

right way. One of us would have said “go talk to your sponsor.” A dyed-in-the-wool sponsor might have told him to “buck up”. Or, one like me would have opted for, “Relax. You’re right where you need to be.”

I’ll admit — those thoughts crossed my mind.

Being honest, though, I had been there myself. More times than I cared to remember. What I thought was the way for me sometimes just stopped working. The words of the Steps — once so clear, once so steady — could blur under the weight of very human reactions and limitations.

I may not have shaken my fist at Bill W., or my sponsor, or my friends.

But I knew the moment—
well enough to stay quiet and let it be what it was.

It’s a hard place to be — where you have nothing left to hold onto. When you reach for answers and come up with a handful of air. When bright lights don’t appear and voices from the heavens stay silent.

Life still happens.
Even then.

This isn’t something reserved for early recovery. It can be just as present — and just as disorienting — in long-term recovery. Three decades of sobriety doesn’t make one immune.

A Closing Invitation

So the question remains, and it’s not an easy one:

What do we do when what once held us no longer does?

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