ANYONE WHO CARES to go looking can find serenity. It leaves tracks: neat rows of folding chairs lined up in musty church basements; the dull buzz of fluorescent lights in hospital lecture halls; schoolrooms where half-erased algebra problems remain on green blackboards. Literally hundreds of thousands of people across the country and around the world make regular trips to such places—as often as once each day. They are members of 12-step and other “recovery” programs.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is the oldest and best known of these self-help programs, and its structure and philosophy have served as models for others: Narcotics Anonymous (NA); Overeaters Anonymous (OA); Incest Survivors Anonymous (ISA); Emotional Health Anonymous (EHA); Emotions Anonymous (EA) Gamblers Anonymous (GA); Al-Anon and Alateen (programs for family members and friends of alcoholics); and most recently, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA). The only requirement for membership in any of them is a desire to stop substance abuse or change a compulsive behavior.

There is strong impressionistic evidence that, in the past few years, these programs have become so popular within the gay and feminist communities that they virtually constitute a 12-step “movement.” Although many people know, through personal contact, that 12-step programs, especially AA, have literally been lifesavers, the programs sometimes have the look and feel of modern-day cults. They describe themselves in universal terms, pride themselves on excluding no one, suggest that their “fellowships” are supportive without ever being critical, and claim to offer a philosophy of spiritual enlightenment without any religious trappings. To the uninitiated, this description might sound like old-style evangelical religion or even like New Age pop psychology with a do-you-believe-in-magic touch thrown in for good measure.

I have never been a member of a 12-step program. In order to write this article, I attended a lot of meetings and talked to many people. Some of what I learned surprised me; all of it involved me. I have asked certain key
questions about the nature of addiction and the methods these programs offer for recovery: whether all the problems addressed by a variety of 12-step programs are fundamentally the same; what resources and analyses feminism and gay liberation have developed in response to addiction and other personal life crises; whether 12-step philosophy has anything to say about politics; what needs these programs are addressing that could or should have been met by political movements; and how living in a “just say no” culture can change the meaning of all of the above.

The Recipe for Recovery
The “steps” (see p. 13) are the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous and all the programs based on the AA model. They are twelve specific actions that the programs urge individuals to take and then repeat. They are the programs’ official recipe for recovery, the ingredients of an addiction-free life. Their purpose is “to relieve pain and suffering, fill our emptiness, help us find the missing something, help us discover ourselves and the God within us, and release great quantities of the energy, love, and joy dammed up inside ourselves”—all with a minimum of discomfort and a maximum of self-awareness.

Addiction has always been a dead-serious reality, and the fact that I.V. drug use and sexual behaviors favored by many gay men put people at high risk for AIDS has made the lethal consequences of addiction even clearer. The currently accepted estimate is that the rate of alcoholism and drug addiction among gay men and lesbians is about three times the rate in the general population—about one in three compared to one in ten.

Unlike medical professionals, therapists, or some political activists, 12-step programs do not dwell on the “whys” of addiction. It is simply understood that anyone who uses substances or activities in a way that interferes with living has an addiction problem.

Accordingly, programs offer very simple explanations and a decidedly behavioral approach, two important reasons why they seem to work for so many people. They pay serious
Feminist and gay 12-step program members complain that their political movements did not make good on promises to create supportive spaces where people could go to air and heal the traumas of daily living.

attention to ordinary pain by requiring people to pay attention to it themselves: taking inventories (steps four and ten); admitting wrongdoing (steps five and ten); making direct amends (steps eight and nine); praying and meditating (step eleven); and carrying the message of spiritual awakening (step twelve). "Working the steps" one by one, and then repeating them indefinitely, gives people at least two things that neither science nor politics seems to trust people with consistently: a largely self-determined behavioral routine and permission to understand our problems differently at different stages in our lives, in ways that make sense to us even if they don't to anyone else.

Day to day, what programs offer members are handy directories of meeting times and places, "approved" literature on a range of topics, and slogans to live by, like "one day at a time" and "let go and let God." A set of 12 "traditions" governs program structure. Members are strongly urged to attend meetings frequently, although meetings are completely voluntary. Still, it is not unusual for individuals to participate in four or five each week for many years running. Meetings roughly follow a standard format: an opening statement, a speaker who comes prepared to tell his or her story, time for spontaneous sharing by those present, and a closing statement. When people speak, they do so for as long as they like without interruption. No one responds directly to anything that is said. There are slight variations on this format, and a meeting in rural Nebraska would certainly feel different than one on Castro Street in San Francisco, but a 12-step meeting anywhere would be easily recognizable to anyone who had ever attended one before. Predictability is the point.

Programs encourage a "sponsorship" system, where individuals who have been in the program for a while act as "buddies" for newcomers, orienting them to program philosophy and structure. In addition to their sponsors, members have no trouble finding willing ears outside meetings. Telephone numbers are exchanged and used, at all hours of the day and night, when people need help or support, or just want the comfort that comes from making contact with other human beings who care.

The Gay/Feminist Flood
Pick up almost any gay newspaper or resource guide and you will find listings for gay meetings, ads for "co-dependency therapy," and notices like this one: "SOBER, PROUD AND FREE, Friendly 12-stepping woman, 31, needs home...." Feminist publications from Ms. to Off our backs also routinely publish letters by readers who identify themselves as "ACOA" (adult child of an alcoholic). Many women's centers that operate as crucial information clearinghouses and gathering places for feminists also offer a wide and growing variety of 12-step meetings for anyone interested.4 During the past five years, organizers of women's music festivals and other such events around the country have started providing "alcohol and chem-free" spaces as a routine part of expressing their commitment to a feminist culture of inclusion. Women's bookstores have done a booming and steady business in recovery books and cards ("Expect Miracles—They are only 12 steps away!") during the past few years. Workers at New Words, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have even created a new category in the store's accounting system to keep track of what they say are literally hundreds of sales.

The number of "official" gay and women's meetings offered by the programs is astonishingly large. In the Boston area, for example, AA lists 20 weekly gay meetings (one specifically for lesbians) and 60 meetings for women. Al-Anon offers ten gay, two lesbian, two women's, and one bisexual meeting, with names like "Amazon Lesbians" and "Glitter and Be Gay."

There are few ways to document accurately the number of gay or feminist (or any other kind of) members of 12-step programs, since one of the 12 traditions specifies "anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films." The overwhelming consensus though, among the 12-step members and social service professionals I interviewed is that gays and feminists
have flooded the programs in recent years, and that the vast majority of predominantly gay meetings are "unofficial" (not designated by a "G" in program directories). People spoke repeatedly about the "phantom" growth of the programs, about "constantly overflowing" meetings, and about a 12-step consciousness among gays and feminists that has "spread," "mushroomed," and "gone wild."

Although feminism and gay liberation both tried to mend the personal/political split that seemed to be just a fact of life in progressive social movements, feminist and gay 12-step program members complain that their political movements did not make good on promises to create supportive spaces where people could go to air and heal the traumas of daily living, including addiction. One AA member described her experience this way.

I was very politically active up until the point when I entered the program, and ever since then I've thought maybe I'd get myself back into politics, but there is something connected for me in being sober and being afraid of political activism, being afraid of how I felt when I did it, like using drugs and feeling out of control. [In my political organization] I felt like I had to be such a together person, do a lot of work, take a lot of responsibility. People saw me as a very reliable person, but I felt that the people around me didn't realize I was falling apart inside... What I think now is that it was more important for me to get my personal shit together than to do the political work I was doing because I couldn't do good political work while I was such a mess.

It is ironic that many feminists and gay people felt, and continue to feel, that pressing personal concerns—like addiction—are often invisible within the movements that offered slogans like "the personal is political."

There are other important differences between belonging to a political movement and being a member of a 12-step program. Progressive organizations typically require people who may or may not like one another to get together often and for interminably long periods of time, to plan events or campaigns, divide chores, assign responsibilities, and periodically check in on the progress of their projects. When it's all over and everyone is completely exhausted, it's time to meet again for a humorless evaluation, a less-than-sincere session of criticism/self-criticism, or both.

Twelve-step programs literally require nothing. Meetings are always short and always start and end exactly on time. You can show up if you feel like it or skip it if you don't. If you do go, the format will be familiar no matter where you are. You listen. You might choose to share your story or socialize after the meeting. When it's all over, you leave with no

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The 12 Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.
obligation to anyone and you probably feel better than you did when you walked in.

In a homophobic and male-dominated culture, gay men, lesbians, and feminists are always searching for places in which their sexual and gender identities can be simply facts rather than lightning rods for hostility and violence. At their best, the 12-step programs have been such places. But homophobia and sexism also exist within the programs. As far as I know, only one program—SLAA—explicitly states in its literature that sexual preference is a non-issue.

Alcoholics Together (AT) was a 12-step program founded in Los Angeles by and for gay alcoholics before the AA Central Service Committee would officially permit gay meetings to take place. Although AA has since abolished its formal policy of homophobic exclusion, AT continues to meet regularly in many places (10 times each week at Boston's Gay and Lesbian Counseling Services)—an indication that homophobia within AA may be unofficial now, but it's still there. The subtle and crude versions of sexism are also alive and well. Program literature routinely uses sexist language, although this seems to be changing slowly. A few women's meetings I attended simply replaced every instance of “God” with “Goddess.” Women, however, also described feeling “unsafe” in mixed meetings with men, and lesbians and gay men talked about being “invisible” when surrounded by straight people in 12-step gatherings.

While homophobia and sexism may be alive and well in 12-step programs, one clear reason why feminists, gay men, and lesbians may have found 12-step programs so welcoming ultimately is their structure, which can best be described as decentralized democracy. The 12 traditions that govern the structure of 12-step programs feel familiar to people with experience in grassroots political movements. They guarantee open membership, group autonomy, financial self-sufficiency, and a non-professional and non-political status, among other things. These are the reasons women and gay people have been able to organize meetings of their own.

Twelve-step programs provide at least one thing that all people—but especially socially stigmatized people—are desperate to find: a predictably safe place in which to feel understood and accepted.

Twelve-step programs provide at least one thing that all people—but especially socially stigmatized people—are desperate to find: a predictably safe place in which to feel understood and accepted. Safety was almost tangibly present in many of the meetings I attended, and I believe the feeling of uncritical acceptance people find there may be one of the biggest reasons they flock to the meetings. The safe environment has been purchased at a rather high price, however: a community culture that does not allow room for direct reaction or interaction of any kind, criticism in particular.

**Addiction is Addiction?**

They look alike, but are all the 12-step programs really the same? Does it make sense to change compulsive eating behavior with the same techniques alcoholics use to keep sober? Is sexual addiction different from food addiction, and are they both different from addiction to mind-altering substances?

Food is something we all need to live; none of us ever needs drugs or alcohol, but alcoholism and drug addiction are characterized by a physiological process of dependence completely unknown to most overeaters or “sex and love addicts.” Food can be a way for people to establish and maintain relationships, express their cultural identities, or spend leisure time. At least one progressive political analysis of food and eating conflicts directly with the 12-step approach of Overeaters Anonymous: fat liberation.

In particular, feminists exposed cultural imperatives about the physical body—what it was supposed to weigh, look like, feel like, smell like, and act like—and pronounced accepted notions of clothing, diet, and appearance to be among the causes of women's self-hatred. Gay liberation as an organized movement has had less to say on this topic, but fat liberation is developing a voice within the gay community. Activists have pointed to ideal physical types that may be queer but are “fat-oppressive” nonetheless: the androgynous dyke with the curveless body of a teenage boy.
and the clone with a mania for Nautilus machines and the muscles to prove it. Fat liberationists have developed the very convincing argument that fat itself is far less of a health or self-esteem issue in the lives of fat people than are endless cycles of debilitating diets or stereotypes about what fat (and thin) people must be like.

Sex is no more a survival need than alcohol. Yet like the desire for food, the desire for sex often exceeds the body's need to satisfy the basic hungers of human emotion and spirit. It can be a tremendous source of pleasure, and so most people do not choose long-term celibacy. That people are "dependent" on sex because they enjoy how it makes them feel about their partners or simply look forward to the next time they have an orgasm can be considered perfectly ordinary, slightly neurotic, or completely obsessive. Whether an individual feels sexually "normal" or "abnormal" is determined by social attitudes as much as by the
specifies of sexual pain and pleasure in her or his own life.

SLAA (Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous) is a relatively new program; it was founded in Boston in 1976 by recovered alcoholics. The SLAA pamphlet entitled “40 Questions for Self-Diagnosis” asks: “Have you ever wished you could be less emotionally dependent?... Do you find yourself in a relationship you cannot leave?... Do you believe that sex and/or a relationship will make your life bearable?” I think many people—certainly large numbers of women—would be inclined to answer yes to questions such as these. Does that make us all “sex and love addicts”?

What exactly does recovery involve for an SLAA member? According to members, the goal is to find love and sex within a “true partnership,” a kind of relationship (generally understood to be monogamous) that does not fuel the addiction. If no committed, continuing relationship is possible, then total sexual abstinence is called for as the only method of maintaining “sexual sobriety.” Clearly, a traditional hierarchy of sexual values is being upheld: monogamy is the healthy ideal, and celibacy is preferable to promiscuity.

Many of the gay men with whom I spoke about SLAA said the program is a way for them and others to cope with AIDS and AIDS anxiety. At a time when sexual desire itself has started to feel lethal, and a virus that is transmitted sexually is killing incredible numbers of gay men and others, it is not surprising that
people have started identifying sexual feelings as symptoms of uncontrollable disease or addiction.

Whatever one thinks about overeating or sexual "addiction," it is clear that feminists, gay men, and lesbians in OA and SLAA are dealing with food, sexuality, health, and other important issues that were and are explored politically within the women’s and gay liberation movements. Likewise, the insights adult children of alcoholics have developed about the emotional consequences of growing up in "dysfunctional" families can be traced, at least partially, to a feminist analysis of the family, which understood that institution to be oppressive to women, children, and gay people.

The 12-step approach does not take up the significant differences between addictions or people. Although I assume that differences do exist, 12-step programs simply consider them to be beside the point.

The War on Excess
The programs level contradictions and differences by implying that all substances and activities are addictive when they enable the user (or doer) to "numb out," and suggest that people are trying to fill painful psychological/spiritual voids that no substance or activity can actually satisfy. Can and should all human pain be collected into one big bundle labeled addiction? What about the feelings of pleasure that people derive from food, drugs, alcohol, sex, and a host of other substances and activities? Are these merely self-delusions, the sneaky evidence of addictions-in-the-making? Or are 12-step programs just adding to the dose of guilt we are already handed by a pleasure-phobic culture?

If defining addiction is tough, the "just say no" campaign has made it even tougher by throwing every manner of "excess" into the addiction pot and suggesting that a stiff upper lip can lick everything from a monster federal deficit to urban crime. "Just say no" sounds catchy and you have probably seen it on everything from milk cartons to football stadium billboards, but what the slogan is really saying is that self-control is the entire answer, that standing up to _________ (fill in the blank) is an act of moral significance, and that the people who do so are strong and true, whereas people who don’t are unable to because they are pathetic weaklings. This trend toward championing the heroism and romanticizing the virtue of sheer will is probably a significant contributing factor to the growth and popularity of 12-step programs.

The current war on drugs, sex, and other modern "evils" is a hypocritical effort to rub out the cultural changes of the past two decades by masquerading as a caring crusade. Take, for example, the dismal state of sex education. The Reagan administration has suggested that parents instill "chastity" in their children by whatever means they see fit. Millionaire John LaCorte recently made national headlines with his modest contribution to the "just say no" campaign: an offer to pay $1000 to any girl who guarded her virginity until age 19.

AIDS educators know that they too must play by rules that put them in an impossible bind. They can squeak by only as long as they say "no" to frank discussions about sexual pleasure, as a recent case in Massachusetts clearly illustrates. In November 1987, when it looked like a long-fought-for state gay rights law might finally pass, opponents of the bill created extensive publicity about sexually explicit AIDS education materials and succeeded in killing the bill for yet another year. Even "friendly" legislators and liberal governor Michael Dukakis self-righteously demanded an explanation from the AIDS Action Committee for a pamphlet distributed to gay men in the bars called "Safer Sex Can Be Sensuous," Dukakis and the legislators said they were offended.

As for alcohol and drugs, if our government were really interested in eradicating substance abuse, it would be spending time and money on rehabilitation, but it is not. In January 1987, while Nancy Reagan was having her picture taken with born-again drug addicts, her husband cut nearly $1 billion from the national anti-drug budget and actually
The programs’ core concept—accountability for one’s actions—is decidedly apolitical: the responsibility for both addiction and recovery rests squarely within the individual.

Douglas Ginsburg is the most ironic casualty in the war on drugs to date. Nominated to the Supreme Court in the aftermath of the Bork defeat, revelations that he smoked marijuana while teaching at Harvard Law School not only forced him to exit the confirmation process before it began (his swan song was a half-hearted call for young people to “just say no” in spite of Ginsburg’s own errors), but brought forth a chorus of unsolicited confessions from politicians across the political spectrum that might have been comical if it hadn’t seemed so mandatory. Dope-smoking has clearly become a litmus test that all public figures must pass.

“Do you now or have you ever…” may have conveniently eliminated the prospect of a Supreme Court justice with libertarian to right-wing views, but the point of the question was as much to stamp out the radical political legacy of the 1960s as it was to stigmatize anyone caught red-handed with drugs.

It was a coded warning to anyone who remains attached to values associated with the counterculture: personal freedom, experimentation, and pleasure, to name just a few. Politically, that means us—feminists, lesbians, and gay men. We have little to gain from jumping onto a “just say no” bandwagon that equates pleasure and experimentation with addiction. We and all that we represent will be among the first things sacrificed.

No matter where the political winds are blowing, however, the 12-step programs are determined to ignore them. In fact, avoiding public controversy at all costs is one of the programs’ most consistent structural features. The tenth tradition specifies: “Our fellowship has no opinion on outside issues, hence our name ought never be drawn into public controversy.” This tradition implicitly recognizes that diverse individuals with conflicting views participate in 12-step programs, and it concludes that a formal, non-political identity is the only logical way to preserve internal unity and prevent groups from being diverted from their purpose by secondary issues. Some important questions do remain, however, about the political implications of 12-step philosophy and structure.

The programs’ core concept—accountability for one’s actions—is decidedly apolitical: the responsibility for both addiction and recovery rests squarely within the individual. In particular, the programs’ philosophy that addiction is a “disease” emphasizes the person and problem in isolation from any outside social forces. This may ease some of the guilt that people feel for pain that they and others have experienced. One Al-Anon member, in great relief, told me: “I make no decisions. The disease does. I am sick.” This kind of language and the steps themselves constantly refer people back to themselves with the message that their old negative ways of thinking and behaving are the sources of their pain. Consequently, only new, positive approaches, nurtured by the programs themselves, will produce serenity.

I rarely heard any speakers in meetings—whether recounting stories of assault, workplace hassles, or matters of the heart—mention directly the realities of physical power, economic inequality, racial bigotry, or sexual coercion, even in instances where these were clearly being described. This is true even in Women for Sobriety (WFS), a “new life” program for women alcoholics that differs from 12-step programs in that it tries to identify the unique recovery needs of women. For example, one WFS member was talking happily about her new job as a clerical worker in a big law firm but started sounding anxious when she described her new boss as “a man with a bad reputation for kicking his secretaries around like dogs.” She concluded that this worrisome situation was really a test of her sobriety and she resolved to “meet the challenge to be a pleasant person, no matter what.” Because meeting rules do not permit direct responses from others present, and also be-
cause no larger social context is officially recognized, no one in the room suggested to this young woman that she did not deserve to be treated like an animal or that she was the potential object of sex discrimination. As far as the program went, the answer was for her to "think positive."

"Powerlessness is My Goal"
The conflict between seeing responsibility in purely individual or purely political terms comes up right away, in the first of the 12 steps: "We admitted we were powerless over _______ —that our lives had become unmanageable." For many feminists, lesbians, and gay men in these programs, this step is problematic because it turns a progressive political practice of empowerment on its head. Unlike the women's or gay movement, 12-step programs are anything but laboratories in which to experiment self-consciously with forms of personal and political power. But because people generally do not like living with intense contradictions, politically aware and active 12-step members creatively manage the conflicts between their politics and their 12-step experiences. Here is how one politically sophisticated lesbian explained the importance of taking the first step, admitting powerlessness, and another sticky concept, the Higher Power.

When I was first getting sober, AA was completely in opposition to my experience as a political because one of the big words was powerlessness. Every activist's hair stands on end at the idea of embracing powerlessness, which you're supposed to be wild about in AA.... I found a way to rework the philosophy. It was clear to me that the minute you "give up," you begin a process of empowerment.... The big stumbling block for me was the whole God thing.... To me, this was completely patriarchal and repugnant. So someone suggested a concept of God that wouldn't offend me—historical materialism (the orthodox Marxist theory of history).

Members who aren't quite as good at fine-tuning the 12-step approach to their own personal philosophies are simply reminded to "take what you need and leave the rest," a handy slogan designed to minimize conflict and help people feel comfortable.

Ironically, the programs seem to be places where women in particular can safely express the feelings that the women's movement first identified as the result of sexism and then criticized in individuals: passivity, confusion,
powerlessness. As one woman explained:

I have finally learned to accept fear. I have finally learned to accept confusion. I have finally learned to accept passivity. I think that powerlessness is the whole point of the program, overcoming the will, giving in, giving up. Powerlessness is the same as serenity. It is my goal.

The consciousness-raising groups of the early women’s movement were also extremely supportive spaces where personal sharing contributed to a sense of common female experience, which in turn generated commitment and community among individuals who had previously felt alone. Personal transformation, when it occurred, was simply considered to be one logical consequence of developing an analysis of gendered power and making social changes on behalf of women. Powerlessness in all its forms was challenged. Living a serene life was not the point; personal and political liberation were.

The custom fit of the 12-step experience is undoubtedly part of its appeal, but in the context of a “just say no” culture, it risks distorting personal pain to the point where people who really do not have addiction problems are encouraged to think they do. The most striking evidence of this is that many people who do not fall into any of the programs’ target groups (such as alcoholics, overeaters, drug addicts) are regularly attending meetings and adopting the 12-step philosophy as their own. The presence of “non-addicts” is controversial in some, but not all meetings, where addicts consider them to be “diluting” the program and dis-
tracting members from their main goal of recovery.

There are some people—I won’t say they’re addicted to the programs because that’s not an appropriate use of the word—who do use the programs as a crutch. The meetings aren’t about making friends. They’re about changing your life.

But for many, the programs are about making friends, and it is not at all unusual for members’ friendship networks to change radically, even completely, after entering the program. For some, this is a necessary part of learning that friendships that do not revolve around alcohol or drugs are possible. For others, the programs are just new ways of feeding never-to-be-satisfied hungers for visibility and recognition and a place to experience unrealistic interactions dressed up as recovery. The latter experience is nothing but a new form of dependency.

**Getting to Serenity**

Substance and other abuses clearly exist, taking terrible tolls on individual lives, and total abstinence must be supported for those who feel it is their only non-abusive option. But just because many things can be dangerous does not mean that they always are. Positive and negative potentials exist side by side. Drugs, sex, food, and other things can be quite wonderful. We should be as determined to defend our right to pleasure as we are to eradicate the reality of our pain. To some degree, our dignity as a society will be measured by our success or failure.

Progressive political movements should be taking notes on what is so appealing about the recovery movement. Political leaders and artists inspire us with visions of peace and social justice; activists discuss and strategize; foot soldiers do the work of getting us from here to there. Meanwhile, we all have to get through the day. Getting through the day might mean staying away from a bar, finding a friend to cry with in a moment of sadness, or having wonderful sex all afternoon. It might just be another day at work. Whatever it means, it is what the women’s movement and the gay movement should be about. Changing the structure of political power is not as possible, certainly not as meaningful, when changing ourselves is absent from the agenda.

There is no doubt that 12-step programs have helped people get through a lot of days. But they do nothing to decipher or change the larger context in which time passes, especially in a “just say no” culture that would like to wipe out progressive gains for good.

Political movements can address the larger context, and they have something unique to contribute to the recovery process: an understanding that prevailing cultural messages affect how people feel about themselves just as much as “think positive” slogans do. Self-hatred and self-love are not matters of luck or fate; they do not come and go only on uncontrollable tides of will power. People struggle for and against them, and they will be won or lost just as all contests of power are won or lost. We must keep our eyes on the prize of pleasure even when we are in pain, not allowing suffering to become a symbol of sin or sainthood, not endorsing sickness as a test of moral character, and not making addiction a pre-requisite for support and community. If we succeed, we may all get to serenity. ▼

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1 This list is not intended to be comprehensive. Because of the autonomous structure and self-help philosophy of 12-step programs, new ones seem to spring up with great regularity.

2 The Twelve Steps for Everyone... who really wants them by Grateful Members (Minneapolis, MN: CompCare Publishers, 1975), p. 13.

3 Susan Greenwood, Gay and Lesbian Counseling Services in Boston, personal communication.

4 The Cambridge Women’s Center, for example, currently provides space for weekly meetings of Women for Sobriety, NA, and lesbian Al-Anon.


7 Ibid., p. 4, and press release.

8 Each program uses different words. AA uses “alcoholism”; OA uses “food,” and so on.