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## Book Excerpt: OUT OF THE WOODS: Sharing the Path of Long Term Recovery

### INTRODUCTION: Why Do We Need This Book?

When we were “younger” in recovery we heard the disclaimers about length of recovery. Things like: “The person who got up earliest this morning is the one with the most sobriety”, or “All anyone has is this 24 hours.” We were cautioned to not be fooled into false security based on a number of years sober. They said, “While you’re in meetings, your addiction is over in the corner doing push-ups”, or “The longer you are sober the closer you are to a drink”.

These sayings are intended to remind us to not take stock in days or numbers. We were warned against hubris and pride. So why make a point of the ten-year mark in recovery? Why a special book for women who’ve been sober ten or more years? Because while the basics remain “Pray”, Don’t Drink, and “Work the Steps”, some things, after ten years, really are different.

Most women with ten-plus years know what I’m talking about. Yes, we still struggle, and no, we’re not perfect by a long shot. If we’re lucky and have a sense of humor, we’ve even given up hope of perfection and we’ve come to have a comfortable relationship with our flaws and ourselves.

We’ve learned, most of us, that the 12 steps and a program of recovery are part of a good life but that even these do not protect us from illness, job troubles, problems with kids and family, all manner of loss; the things that fall in the basket called “life happens”. Plenty of “life” still happens to recovering people and sometimes, when you have a few years of sobriety, it can feel like life hits harder or hurts more simply because we have fewer “helpers” to ameliorate our pain. We also know, in our wiser moments, that not having painkillers—the chemical or the human kind—helps us get through things faster even though we can still hurt like hell some days.

What women in long recovery have however is a set of skills and a richness of sober experience to fall back on. We recognize our patterns; we are able to cut through our defenses sooner; we learn not to fight the inevitable. We surrender when we see the wall coming instead of waiting, as we did in the past, to slam into it.

We are also able to see the things that happen to us with just a tiny bit more perspective. By the time we reach double-digit recovery most of us have had at least one or two experiences of something we were sure wasn’t supposed to happen. And in many cases we have the experience of finding that these turn out to be spiritual lessons or stepping stones to something really great.

But ten-plus years can have glitches and questions. This book is designed to help us compare notes, to see that there is common ground, and to reassure us that there is no one way and no right way to be a recovering woman. Some of us still go to three meetings a week while others go once a week or once a month, and yet others simply attend retreats a couple of times a year. For some of us meetings take place in new ways. And what about service? Giving back? All those things we did to recover or that we aspired to when we were “growing up” in AA? Some of us do bake cakes and chair meetings for our home group while others have taken the slogan: “Service is gratitude in action” and extended it into the broader community. The words and settings may be different and we may not read the steps out loud but when we teach adults to read or counsel teens after school or coach someone with mental retardation to compete in the Special Olympics it’s still service and gratitude.

And then God. The God question, which was there on our first day in recovery, remains. We learned early on that we had to figure out who, or what, we were turning our lives over to. That desire has led us down some pretty interesting paths. You can find 12-step women in yoga classes, meditation workshops, and in every kind of faith community. We’re probably disproportionately represented in alternative forms of

## **Book Excerpt: OUT OF THE WOODS: Sharing the Path of Long Term Recovery, continued**

worship and New Age studies; we pray, meditate, chant and participate in rituals. We've taken many a road less traveled on our way out of the woods.

When we were new to recovery we measured time much like parents do with a new baby. We gave our recovery "age" in numbers of weeks or months, and then we turned two and began to count in years. Very likely, in those "younger" years of recovery someone with more time said to us, "It will take 3 to five years to get out of the woods", and we wondered how we'd ever survive. As we closed in on that crucial five-year mark we realized that while we had more stability and a new set of habits, that "edge of the forest" we'd been hoping for was still a long way off.

In the five to six year stage we begin to understand that it actually takes five years just to get into the woods. At that stage we can start to tell "forest from the trees".

We see our own patterns and know our true feelings. We can discern what belongs to our personality.

If we have a good sponsor, or close circle of recovering friends, the five-year mark is a great time to take another 4th step inventory. We get to do a deeper one here because many of us, especially women, put off doing the inventory, which includes both plus and minus columns. At five years, in the middle of the "woods" of recovery, we can see that we do have talents and strengths. It gets easier, though never easy, to claim them along with our defects.

If we stay at this process we keep growing. We still have problems and struggles. We learn more about ourselves with each year. In the 6 to nine year stage we often become leaders in our groups. We have a lot to give back and we willingly do it. We chair meetings and coordinate conferences. We attend and sometimes lead retreats; we hold offices, in our home group and also in our regions and on service boards too.

At the same time our lives outside of AA grow as well. Our careers develop; we have kids, become better parents, and reclaim relationships with family. We find we are now welcome at holidays and sometimes we even host the family events. Humor returns for us and for those around us. We've made enough of our amends so we can laugh when we talk about the past with those who witnessed it up close. Our lives are rich and full.

Many of us change jobs, and sometimes careers, in these years. Going back to school is not uncommon. It's a consequence of learning more truth about ourselves. We choose new careers--and new fields--based on who we really are and what we really like, rather than what would please or impress someone else.

Our home groups delight in witnessing our transformation. First it's taking a non-credit photography class, then building a darkroom, later we enter a local photo contest and then one day we casually refer to ourselves as a photographer. We have the benefit of a powerful model for career development that comes from practicing "one-day-at-a-time" and "chunking it down"; the way we learned to do so many things in AA.

The day comes though when we realize that the world outside is as engaging as the one inside the rooms. Our confidence in chairing 12 step meetings allows us to say "Yes" to chair the PTA or the Rotary. Our comfort at public speaking, developed from years of standing at the AA podium, has prepared us to speak at conferences of our professional groups. Our human relations skills, honed by dealing with so many different kinds of people in AA, allow us to rise as leaders in our community. Life gets bigger thanks to AA, but at the end of our first decade in recovery we use these keys, which we cut in 12 step rooms, to open the door leading out of them. As we grow and change the trees begin to part and at year ten we begin to move out of the woods.

This is not an easy stage. But it's important to remember that it is in fact a stage. Many of us feel guilty or scared. We wonder if we're bad or wrong. Certainly there are people in the rooms who will encourage those feelings... "Where are all the old timers"? they ask, and "Where are the people with ten to 20 years?" When we hear those questions we wonder; we doubt ourselves; we feel shame.

But when we look closely at our lives or do an inventory, we seem to be okay. It's true we don't go to as many meetings and we don't make coffee at our home group anymore but we feel solid and life is good. We want to be sure that we're not kidding ourselves, that our drawing away from AA as we knew it for years is a move toward growth and not denial or relapse.

This book was written for you, a woman with more than ten years of recovery. Join me on this journey as we look at a variety of ways to live a sober life on this new path out of the woods.