

## “You Cannot Fight No Addiction without God First”

### *The Permanent Moral Judgment of the Criminal-Addict Label*

Denise and I sat down for our first interview on a snowy Friday evening at Growing Stronger, the recovery home where she had resided for almost two years. The 45-year-old Black mother of five had a warm, engaging demeanor. Over the month or so leading up to our interview, we had chatted numerous times while I was at Growing Stronger for scheduled interviews. Denise would be hanging out near the front desk or in the living room, swapping stories and laughing with staff and residents. Without fail, she would tease me when I arrived, stating matter-of-factly, “You’re here for me, right?” fully knowing I was there to meet with someone else. It was hard to believe this cheerful, confident woman who was a central part of the Growing Stronger community had spent the past 20 years struggling with drug use and caught up in the criminal legal system. Over the course of our three interviews, Denise made clear just how much her life had changed and she had grown since her last arrest nearly three years ago. Her public defender had been confident Denise could beat the case, but it dragged on month after month, and Denise was eager to get out of Cook County Jail. She eventually pleaded guilty to possession with intent to deliver, even though it meant having a third felony conviction on her record. A judge sentenced Denise to two and a half years of intense probation, which required her to meet weekly with her probation officer, “drop” weekly (provide a urine sample for drug screening), and attend a monthly court date so a judge could monitor her progress. After Denise relapsed and had a “dirty drop” (a positive drug screening), she had to complete a residential drug treatment program, after which she moved into Growing Stronger.

At her monthly court dates, Denise repeatedly asked the judge to downgrade her to regular probation, which would have significantly reduced the surveillance she faced. Judge Hopkins refused each request. While these denials made Denise “boiling mad,” by the end of her probation, she was grateful for the judge’s strict approach. Denise recalled the day she successfully completed her probation. By that time, Judge Hopkins had transferred to another courtroom, so Denise had to seek her out to share the good news. Denise explained how she entered the judge’s new courtroom and asked the sheriff’s officer stationed in the seating area if she could speak with the judge. Judge Hopkins welcomed her into the main courtroom. Denise continued:

So I went in there and I stood in front of her and I said, “Judge Hopkins . . . I’m here today because I completed my probation . . . So it’s terminated satisfactory . . . And I want to tell you that I thought that you was really bein’ hard on me . . . and I was really angry, but once things . . . start comin’ into place, I realized that you cared more about my future than I did . . . I know you probably have never had a person come back and thank you . . . but I made it my business to thank you because I am truly grateful. God worked through you to help me.” And she came . . . out of her seat, and she said, “You gonna make me mess up my mascara.” And she started cryin’, and she hugged me. And the state’s attorney and everybody started clappin’. And she said, “Denise, I’m so proud of you. Stay on the right path.” And I said, “I will.”

While the specific details of this touching moment were unique, Denise’s story shared several components with the narratives other women told about their paths into and out of prison.

Denise explained her journey of personal transformation, from resentment and anger about her sentence to acceptance of the drug treatment she had to complete and the surveillance measures she experienced. Additionally, Denise grew to understand Judge Hopkins’s tough love approach as God’s work. Denise drew on her faith to make sense of what she initially thought was Judge Hopkins’s unfair treatment, and she came to believe the judge was hard on her because she cared for her. Beyond just completing her probation, Denise publicly verbalized her changed character and earned the state’s recognition of her rehabilitated identity, as evidenced by the state’s attorney’s applause and the judge’s hug, tears, and praise.

Although Denise successfully completed her probation, she was not finished with her project of personal transformation or with proving her commitment to her new identity. Judge Hopkins reminded her as much with her encouraging though cautionary words, “Stay on the right path.” With her response, “I will,” Denise pledged to continue this ongoing work. Indeed, she was eager to greet Judge Hopkins several months later when the judge visited Growing Stronger. Denise described their reunion:

I went upstairs [to my room]. I got all nice, and . . . when she came, I said, "Judge Hopkins! . . . I'm workin' now." I said I was in school. I said, "I am just on a whole new different path . . . Because I remember you used to always tell me, 'I'm doin' this for your good.' And I didn't see it. I was just so angry and resentful . . . But knowin' that somebody really do care about your future . . . you gotta tell 'em thank you." I said, "And I love you! You know, I love you." And she was like, "I'm just proud of you." And it's like every time I heard that she comin', I make sure I be in this house, because [pause] I look back where I was and where I'm at today. Man, that lady was Heaven sent.

Each visit Judge Hopkins made to Growing Stronger provided Denise with an opportunity to demonstrate and receive validation of the vigilant work she was doing to maintain her new self. Looking nice, holding employment, attending school, and maintaining her good standing at Growing Stronger provided evidence Denise was staying on the right path. Denise did not need Judge Hopkins's approval in any legal sense. She no longer was under correctional supervision and did not need to worry about the judge revoking her probation. Judge Hopkins's continued approval provided something more meaningful to Denise about her ongoing personal transformation process. It also served as a reminder that while Denise solely was responsible for the work of her personal transformation, it was possible because of God's support. God worked through Judge Hopkins to help Denise.

Like Denise, woman after woman shared their personal transformation processes with me and identified noncriminality, sobriety, spirituality, and morality as the building blocks of these processes. Women were not just fighting to stay out of prison; they also were fighting to prove to themselves and others they were good people who were abiding by God's plan for their lives. These personal transformation narratives revealed how women's experiences with the criminal legal system encompassed much more than punishment for breaking the law. As they became caught up in the system, women engaged identity projects to show just how far they had come in leaving behind their past *criminal-addict* identities.<sup>1</sup> Identity is not just a personal feeling or sense of self. As symbolic interactionists explain, identity is an accomplishment people create through their interactions with other people and institutions.<sup>2</sup> Poststructural theorists examine how subjectivities are constituted through available discourses and state interventions into people's lives.<sup>3</sup> Identity does not just exist; it is created and recreated over time and through different power relations. As women moved through the criminal legal system, they interacted with people, institutions, and ideologies that shaped their sense of self. This relationship was not unilateral, however; women did not passively or even fully internalize the discourses offered by people working within the criminal legal system and its related social service network.<sup>4</sup> Rather, women actively engaged available discourses about recovery from drug use and leaving behind the criminal lifestyle as they crafted *rehabilitated* identities.<sup>5</sup> Their personal

transformation processes reflected an assemblage of discourses women refashioned to suit their needs.

The next three chapters focus on women's identity work, particularly the creative ways they negotiated available raced and gendered discourses about criminality, addiction, and dependency in order to claim dignity and find joy. To contextualize that identity work, this chapter examines the dominant discourse women encountered as they moved through the criminal legal system, what I refer to as *the 12-Step logic*. I first explain what the 12-Step logic is and how it operates as an organizing force throughout incarceration and the postincarceration landscape that characterizes recovery and rehabilitation as lifelong interconnected moral and spiritual projects. This logic impacted criminalized women's identity work, providing an organizing narrative through which women made sense of their criminalization and rehabilitation and imagined new possibilities for their lives. I then argue that, following release, women's task was not to stay out of prison or to reintegrate into society, but rather to manage rehabilitated identities under omnipresent surveillance and moral judgment. Resuming drug use or breaking the law did not just introduce the risk of returning to prison. The stakes were much higher, as these behaviors also represented straying from God's path and returning to an immoral identity.<sup>6</sup>

While I critique the 12-Step logic for encouraging an individualistic, depoliticized understanding of the causes of women's imprisonment and the challenges they faced after release, I show how women engaged this logic in innovative ways that allowed them to access resources and support and to recast incarceration as a redemptive experience, while remaining critical of the dehumanizing treatment they endured. As such, the 12-Step logic resolved the tension introduced at the end of the preceding chapter between women's critique of the gendered violence of incarceration and their reframing of criminalization as God's intervention to save their lives.

### THE 12-STEP LOGIC

Every woman who participated in this project spent time in jail or prison on charges stemming from their drug or alcohol use either explicitly (e.g., intent to distribute) or implicitly (e.g., retail theft to secure the means to access drugs). As they moved through the criminal legal system, the linking of criminality and addiction intensified. Through jail and prison programming, court-mandated drug treatment, probation and parole conditions, and recovery home programming, women regularly learned that in order to end their entanglement with the criminal legal system, they had to end their drug and alcohol use. Abstinence was easier said than done, however. According to the 12-Step model, which is the dominant addiction framework used throughout the criminal legal system, drug and alcohol issues stem from a problem with the self.<sup>7</sup> Incarceration not only reduced women's identities

to that of *criminal* (or a *nobody*), as the previous chapter showed. It affixed *addict* to that identity, thereby relegating women to the distinct interconnected, socially degraded category of *criminal-addict*.<sup>8</sup> Exiting the revolving door of the criminal legal system required women to engage in a lifelong project of personal transformation.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, women had to end their drug use and establish a rehabilitated identity that would replace their *criminal-addict* identity.<sup>10</sup> This focus on creating a new self is a common objective of recovery programs that cater to criminalized low-income and poor women of color.<sup>11</sup> Throughout their incarceration and postincarceration experiences, women encountered the 12-Step logic as *the* mechanism to do just that.

The 12-Step logic is the fusing of faith- and abstinence-based discourses that instills a lifelong commitment to rehabilitating the self and embracing personal responsibility for one's criminalization, drug use, and recovery. Rooted in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), the 12-Step logic extends well beyond 12-Step meetings and is deeply embedded throughout the correctional system and U.S. culture.<sup>12</sup> As sociologists Susan Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk point out, "the Twelve Step model so permeates the entire U.S. correctional-therapeutic system that it is not possible to untangle its impact."<sup>13</sup> Twelve-Step meetings typically are the only drug treatment available in prisons, and regular attendance at 12-Step meetings often is a requirement of parole.<sup>14</sup> Even drug rehabilitation programs that claim to use a trauma-informed or gender-responsive framework draw heavily on the 12-Step logic and often require participants to attend weekly 12-Step meetings. Program staff and participants regularly use 12-Step terminology in formal and informal conversations to explain the causes of women's drug use and incarceration, as well as the cognitive and behavioral changes women must make in order to turn their lives around.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, women seamlessly wove 12-Step ideas and lingo throughout our interviews as they reflected on their lives and plans for the future, and I constantly overheard this language when I was at recovery homes or their events.

The 12-Step model established its dominant position within the U.S. correctional system despite a lack of rigorous scientific research documenting its effectiveness.<sup>16</sup> Research on the impact of AA and NA participation is notoriously difficult given the anonymous nature of membership.<sup>17</sup> The limited research that does exist suggests participation in 12-Step meetings has no demonstrable impact on sobriety.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, resuming alcohol or drug use is viewed as a failure on the part of the individual, not the 12-Step model. According to 12-Step proponents, people relapse because *they* are not working the program hard enough, not because the program is inadequate.<sup>19</sup> As cultural and literary historian Trysh Travis concludes, "the question of whether, how, and to what degree 12-Step approaches to addiction are effective remains largely unresolved."<sup>20</sup> Yet, this model saturates the criminal legal system, which forces millions of people under correctional supervision to participate in 12-Step programming.

There are several practical and ideological explanations for why the 12-Step model has become so embedded throughout the U.S. correctional system. Practically, 12-Step programs are relatively inexpensive. The model explicitly rejects professionalism and is rooted in self-help and peer support.<sup>21</sup> Members, not licensed drug treatment specialists, facilitate 12-Step meetings, where people share their personal stories of drug use and recovery. The idea is that 12-Step meetings and groups will connect people to a welcoming community that helps them understand their drug and alcohol use and provides collective strength and resolve in managing their ongoing commitment to sobriety.<sup>22</sup> In this decentralized, peer-support model, no one is paid for the work they do as meeting facilitators or group officers.<sup>23</sup> Twelve-Step meetings essentially are a free service jails and prisons can offer by allowing members to come in and run meetings for those who are incarcerated. When state and local money runs out for contracted programming, 12-Step meetings can continue.<sup>24</sup>

The ideological reasons for the 12-Step model's dominance are perhaps even more noteworthy than the practical reasons. Institutionally, the model aligns with shifts in correctional policy and prison management. In a swift backlash to the progressive gains of the 1960s and 1970s, including those won by a robust prisoner rights movement, U.S. correctional policy took a punitive turn, explicitly abandoning rehabilitation as a goal. Decreased state and federal funding for rehabilitative prison programs was accompanied by an increase in Christian volunteers, materials, and programming.<sup>25</sup> In tracing the rise of faith-based prison ministries and programming during the buildup of mass incarceration, religion and gender studies scholar Tanya Erzen explains, "the corps of free labor drawn from conservative, nondenominational, faith-based groups has filled the void created by budget cuts, stepping in to do the work of the state."<sup>26</sup> In her research on incarcerated women's reading practices, English language and literature scholar Megan Sweeney notes a shift in the types of available books in prison libraries. Books offering more critical and radical analyses were replaced with those offering a Christian framing of self-improvement. This shift facilitated a shrinking of narratives available to women, from which they draw to make sense of their lives, selves, and futures.<sup>27</sup> Twelve-Step programming fit right in with this larger trend of increased religious programming and depoliticized prison education.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond prison, the 12-Step model is deeply embedded throughout U.S. society, as its approach resonates with U.S. cultural ideals of individualism, personal responsibility, and morality.<sup>29</sup> While these ideals are endemic to U.S. society,<sup>30</sup> they have taken on added significance in the current neoliberal era, with particularly damaging consequences for socially marginalized groups.<sup>31</sup> One of neoliberalism's hallmarks is its locating of the cause and regulation of social problems within the individual. Scholars refer to this process as "responsibilization."<sup>32</sup> This move absolves the state of responsibility for social problems, framing structural issues like poverty, racism, and patriarchy as peripheral concerns and excuses people cite

to avoid dealing with their personal inadequacies, and subjects individuals to invasive technologies of governance.<sup>33</sup> Following Foucault, these technologies make up the individual as a certain type of person and then induce a particular way of being to create a self-regulating subject. In this way, the state's power is not only repressive, but also productive, as it creates subjectivities. In other words, identity is a technology of governance.<sup>34</sup> In the case of criminalized women, the 12-Step logic is a particular technology of governance that promotes a distinct rehabilitated identity. It subjects women to lifelong performances of morality, spirituality, sobriety, and noncriminality and intersects with race, gender, and class to relegate women to a permanent degraded social status.

As the 12 Steps show, a sober lifestyle encompasses much more than abstinence from alcohol and drugs; it requires a full transformation of one's self.<sup>35</sup> This requirement follows from the 12-Step model's "hybrid"<sup>36</sup> definition of addiction as a "disease or illness . . . [that is] spiritual, mental, and physical."<sup>37</sup> In practice, the medical nature of disease takes a backseat. Managing addiction is less about treating a medical illness and more about morally and spiritually reforming the addict's identity. The 12-Step model is less concerned with identifying the cause of addiction than it is with prescribing rigid guidelines—famously known as the 12 Steps—one must follow to live a sober lifestyle.<sup>38</sup> The 12 Steps are:

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 short-comings.
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 wherever 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 the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.<sup>39</sup>

The first three steps stress a lack of willpower and control, situating the cause of the problem squarely in the addict's weak self. In addition to denying the legitimacy

of social factors that contribute to substance abuse, this focus is particularly concerning when applied to women survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Gender-based violence is a consequence of patriarchy and is rooted in a power imbalance and lack of control. It can be particularly retraumatizing for women to survive interpersonal, community, and state violence, only to encounter a recovery discourse that denies the impact of that violence and again positions women as powerless.<sup>40</sup> Regardless, adoption of the 12-Steps lifestyle necessitates taking on a weak identity and admitting that while one is not personally strong enough to overcome addiction, they are personally responsible for being an addict. Importantly, that weak identity is a permanent identity, not a temporary one through which a person progresses on their way to being recovered.

While the first three steps establish a particular identity, the next nine steps establish a particular way of being. They stress how lifelong commitment to moral and spiritual reform will empower the addict to regulate the weak self. Twelve-Step proponents stress that references to “a Power greater than ourselves” and “God” do not necessarily refer to a Christian God or even a religious being, but a wealth of research traces AA’s roots to the Oxford Group, an early 20th-century fundamentalist religious organization.<sup>41</sup> Undeniably, the focus on moral and spiritual reform remains, which resonates with the neoconservative ideology that has gained political influence and strength throughout U.S. culture since the 1970s.<sup>42</sup> The addict is not just weak, but also immoral and bereft spiritually. Recovery is a project of reforming one’s morality and achieving a “spiritual awakening” that must be maintained by deepening one’s relationship, through prayer and meditation, with a higher power and accepting that higher power’s will as one’s own. Step 4 makes clear “[t]he notion that people with addictions suffer from a failure of morality to be indexed and removed is fundamental to Alcoholics Anonymous.”<sup>43</sup>

A final noteworthy tenet of the 12 Steps is that recovery is a lifelong project. The addict is never recovered. At best, they are recovering. The 12 Steps do not offer a cure to addiction. Instead, they prescribe a new identity and lifestyle one must commit to in perpetuity for the program to work.<sup>44</sup> The recovering addict undergoes “a radical transformation of personal identity that signals a conversion and commitment to a new way of life;” this transformation and commitment make the recovering alcoholic an outsider to society, as their behaviors and values now contrast with the “larger society that continues to sanction the cultural and interactional use of alcohol on a regular basis.”<sup>45</sup> For this reason, Travis refers to recovery as a “subculture” since the “term accurately captures the sense of distance from the mainstream shared by many recovering.”<sup>46</sup> Being an outsider subjects one to stigma.<sup>47</sup> Stigma takes on added significance when the 12 Steps are applied in a criminal legal context, as the *criminal-addict* inhabits a double-outsider status and experiences the intensified judgment, discrimination, and social marginalization that follow. That outsider status intersects with multiple oppressions criminalized



women already experience based on multiple parts of their identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The 12-Step model's merging of personal responsibility, immorality, and lack of spirituality as the core of addiction is the key to its social and cultural dominance today. The model bridges two dominant political ideologies in the United States: neoliberalism, with its promotion of personal responsibility, and neoconservatism, with its promotion of morality and religion, thus making it a powerful governing technology for criminalized people, who overwhelmingly are people of color from socially marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities. The completely embedded nature of the 12-Step model throughout the criminal legal system merges recovery and punishment, creating the distinct subject position of *criminal-addict*. The criminal-addict is not only punished for breaking the law; she is judged as immoral and lacking spirituality and subjected to interventions that will reform both deficits. Regulating the criminal-addict is not a project of creating law-abiding citizens, but rather certain types of subjects who can maintain their freedom through demonstrating their ongoing moral and spiritual rehabilitation. In sum, the 12-Step logic is a distinct governing technology that integrates regulation of the self (the state's productive power) with regulation of the body (the state's repressive power) through surveillance and confinement. If the criminal-addict fails to self-regulate, the state will step in, in a more explicitly coercive way, regulating once again through the violence of incarceration.<sup>48</sup> Through its expansive and invasive reach, the 12-Step logic structures the lives and identities of criminalized women.

#### A MORAL AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

The 12-Step logic provides a narrative structure adherents can use to contrast their recovering identity with their addict identity. As people work the 12 Steps, they chart ways they are different from who they were when they were actively using. The personal improvements they make, such as repaired relationships with loved ones or a sense of inner peace, become markers of their recovery. As they clean up the "wreckage of their pasts," a common phrase used throughout 12-Step programming, they become new people and establish a physical, moral, and spiritual distance from their disordered selves and the chaotic lives they previously lived. Overwhelmingly, the stories women shared about their lives and involvement with the criminal legal system followed this narrative structure, emphasizing personal transformation. Throughout our interviews and with their photographs, women contrasted their past *criminal-addict* selves with the *rehabilitated* identities they were working to achieve and maintain, strongly echoing the moral and spiritual dictates of the 12-Step logic.<sup>49</sup> Nyla was among the women who did so most clearly.

I sat down with Nyla, a petite 42-year-old Black mother of six, for our first interview on a December afternoon in one of the Chicago Public Library's South Side

branches. Just as when we had first met a few weeks prior at one of my recruitment sites, I was taken in by Nyla's humble demeanor, cheerful smile, and joyful laugh. Within the first five minutes of our interview, she began sharing multiple experiences of police sexual harassment and assault, including being forced to engage in sexual activities with officers to avoid arrest. As a Black woman living in public housing who engaged in sex work to support her heroin use, Nyla described continuous targeting and harassment by the police. There was a sense she could be arrested just for stepping outside her front door.

While Nyla critiqued the police, she also critiqued herself. At the time of our first interview, she had been out of prison for about four months and was living in a faith-based recovery home and regularly attending NA meetings, which was a requirement of the home. Nyla welcomed the religious focus, as she viewed strengthening her relationship with God as a critical part of her recovery process. She had struggled for years to stop using heroin. Each time she stopped and felt like she had turned her life around, something undermined her progress. Nyla described a two-to-three-year period of relative calm prior to her last arrest and incarceration, during which she sought drug treatment and stopped using. She eventually began a relationship with a man who became severely physically violent. His frequent attacks caused Nyla to fear for her life and prompted her to resume using heroin. It was not long before police profiled and arrested her, sweeping her back into the criminal legal system.

Nyla centered her own morality and spirituality in her analysis of this cycle of domestic violence, drug use, and criminalization. She recalled how she felt during the months she spent awaiting trial, six of them in Cook County Jail before a friend bonded her out. While quietly crying, Nyla said:

It was very scary to be in a place where I'm right back in that dark hopeless state of mind and body. Right? After havin' been taken out of it . . . because God began to do some things in me, unlike other times, because I sat still long enough to allow Him to work on me and get a relationship with Him. Only for me to return to that lifestyle, and even when I returned to it, I remember that first week how everything in me said, "You are playing with the devil."

Nyla continued, describing the horrific abuse she survived at the hands of her boyfriend and sinking deeper into "the lifestyle" of drug use and sex work over the year and a half leading up to her last arrest:

*Nyla:* While I'm sitting in this type of lifestyle, considerin' where I had come from and where God had brought me to, and then I picked back up again, and this was a result. All this was playin' itself out. So now I'm findin' myself sitting in it . . . And now I'm going dark, light, light, dark. Do you understand what I'm sayin'?

*CR:* What do you mean, what do you mean about that?

*Nyla:* Meanin' I know how it feels to be on the light side versus bein' on the dark. The dark I'm familiar with, meanin' the sexual immorality, the activity, the

doin' everything that God would have me not do. The dark side. And yet know what it feels like to be in the light.

CR: And what does that feel like to be in the light?

Nyla: Meanin' I'm bein' obedient. I'm doin' all the right things for the right reasons. I'm helpin' others. I'm helpin' myself. I'm bein' a mother to my children . . . I have first and foremost a relationship with my Father. And I'm protected. I'm covered. Unlike on the other side, you know, anything goes. Because I've put myself out there, and I'm not, I don't feel like I'm under my Father's, the umbrella of His protection because I'm doin' everything outside of what He would have me do.

For Nyla, using heroin did not just mean she had relapsed or broken the law. As she understood it, her behaviors represented a moral and spiritual failing. She held herself responsible for stepping out from under the "protection" of God's "umbrella." Her explanation of turning away from God invoked the 12-Step logic. Nyla explained that when she had turned her life over to God, she lived "on the light side" and was "obedient." In addition to following the law, she was living in a moral and spiritual way that aligned with God's plan for her. Resuming her heroin use meant she exerted her will over God's will, as she did "everything that God would have [her] not to do." While she had come to know God's will for her, the first part of Step 11, she lacked the "power to carry that out."<sup>50</sup> Of course, domestic violence and incarceration were experiences Nyla wanted to avoid, but in this recollection, she struggled just as much, if not more, with the moral and spiritual implications of falling back into this lifestyle, what she referred to as "the dark side" and "playing with the devil." Furthermore, she assessed her weak self as the cause of that fall, explaining she was not strong enough to stay on God's path.

#### ENCOUNTERING THE 12-STEP LOGIC

One interpretation of Nyla's reflections could wholly center the influence of faith and perhaps even link that influence to the important role the Black Church has played in providing protection against the onslaught of racist violence that characterizes Black life in the United States.<sup>51</sup> I argue that interpretation is incomplete for the women who participated in this study, however. I root that argument in the language women used and the explanations they offered about their recovery processes. Religion and spirituality alone cannot fully explain the identity work criminalized women engaged. The merging of 12-Step programs with religion and spirituality in the carceral context created a distinct redemptive/punitive hybrid logic that structured women's identity work. Only an interpretation that centers this unique mix of influences can provide a full understanding of Nyla's reflection. Neither faith, nor recovery, nor carceral discourses alone can unpack the complex web within which women's identity work occurred. Paying attention to women's stories about where and from whom they encountered lessons about recovery and rehabilitation brought the 12-Step logic into focus.

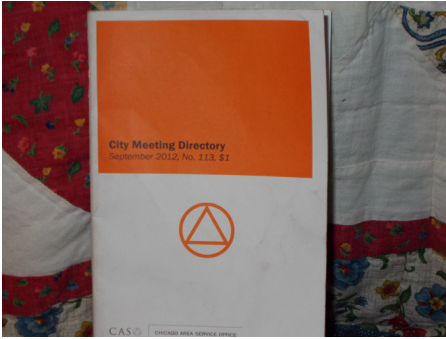


FIGURE 4. 12-Step meeting directory  
(Photo credit: Tinybig).

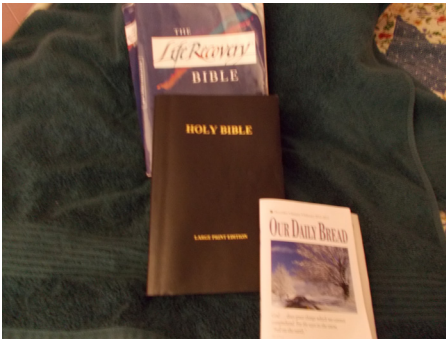


FIGURE 5. Religious books  
(Photo credit: Tinybig).

During our PEI, Tinybig, the woman whose photographs of an intersection near Cook County Jail open chapter 2, shared two photographs that symbolized the moral and spiritual underpinnings of the 12-Step logic.<sup>52</sup> We had been discussing some of the differences between 12-Step programs, such as AA versus NA. Tinybig concluded, “When it all boils down to it, the basic things about any A [i.e., Anonymous program] stems from the 12-Step program and the literature that goes along with it, because when you break it down it all reverts back to the Bible.” She then flipped through her photographs to find two she had in mind: one of a 12-Step meeting directory (figure 4) and one of religious books, specifically *The Life Recovery Bible*, the *Holy Bible*, and an “Our Daily Bread” booklet (figure 5). Placing the photographs side-by-side, she explained:

This is how come I put these two on there . . . it’s a format that some kind of way goes hand in hand . . . I admitted there was problems with my addiction, that my life had become a mess, but when once I got the manageability right, I still gotta admit that I’m powerless. And without a God of my understanding, I’m gonna remain powerless. Whereas now I have some deliverance that I see, I’m gonna keep on top, I’m goin’ to stand tall, I’m gonna sit back . . . and came to believe that a power greater than myself could restore me to sanity . . . all it is, is having had the spiritual awakening as a result of these steps. It all reverts back to the Bible to me.

For Tinybig, her recovery and faith were one in the same. In order to turn her life around, she had to have a “spiritual awakening,” and the 12 Steps provided her with a structure to nurture that awakening and subsequently her sobriety. She ticked off the core tenets of the 12 Steps, in the process accepting her weak identity and trusting God would give her the strength to return order to her life. *The Life Recovery Bible*, for instance, connected each of the 12 Steps to corresponding Scriptures. As explained in a promotional video for the book, “Its personal notes, themes, and helps will walk you through the 12-Step program, as it integrates what God has to say specific to what you are facing. Each and every day, it will point you back to your Creator, who alone is the source of recovery and capable of bringing new hope and healing.”<sup>53</sup> Like Nyla, Tinybig understood ending her drug use and criminalization required nothing less than her complete moral and spiritual transformation, and she must remain vigilant in continuing that transformation.

Xenia, a 41-year-old Puerto Rican woman, who had briefly stayed at Starting Again but had moved out by the time of our first interview, spoke about her own recovery work in ways that closely echoed Tinybig’s reflections. While incarcerated, Xenia participated in an intensive drug treatment program she described as “a 12-Step program based on a God of an understanding. And they’ll teach you biblical with treatment . . . And they also have a 12-Step Bible, recovery Bible. It’s called *12-Step Recovery Bible*. And, it’s a regular Bible, but it also speaks to you in an addict’s point of view.” I asked Xenia for an example of how the recovery Bible used an addict’s point of view. She explained:

They’ll break it down. First it’ll talk about the Bible, then it’ll break it down in what terms [an addict can understand]. And then it’ll say in an addict’s point of view, like me being the addict . . . I don’t know how to explain it . . . All I can tell you is it speaks as saying, “Me, as the addict.” The addict, if they talked about Abraham having a baby and, or like when you trust in faith, us, as in addicts, we don’t have faith because, and then it breaks it down . . . When they talk about faith or love—it has love, it has faith, and it has other stuff in there broken down into an addict’s point of view. And then they have Scriptures you can read up on it.

While Xenia struggled to precisely explain the recovery Bible, the point she stressed was addicts are different from everyone else. They are so different, in fact, they cannot understand the Bible, a text widely regarded as universal and applying to all people. The prison’s drug treatment program had taught Xenia new insights about her drug use. One insight she named was “powerlessness,” meaning “knowing when you’re just powerless over certain situations, you know? Meaning, I’m powerless over this. I have no control over that. You know, and having accepting it. You know, ‘cause at first I just would challenge it. You know, now I just let go and let God. You gotta learn how to let go and let God. That’s what it taught me: to believe in a higher power greater than yourself.”

That lesson about the co-constitutive nature of morality, spirituality, noncriminality, and sobriety is the core of the 12-Step logic, and it pervades jails, prisons,

and the postincarceration landscape. Whether women internalized that logic and regardless of if they would have embraced it on their own, it is noteworthy that encountering this logic as part of their criminalization was inescapable. Treatment interventions that centered the 12-Step model and a Christian God were standard fare across incarceration and postincarceration programs. Consider Susan, a 59-year-old Black woman, who estimated she had been arrested more than 50 times for various behaviors, such as shoplifting, associated with her ongoing heroin use. It had been just under a year since she had been released from jail when we sat down for our interview at Women Helping Women's storefront office on Chicago's southeast side. Susan explained she had served her most recent sentence, about four months for a probation violation charge, in Cook County Jail's Division 17, a drug treatment unit for women. She recalled, "That's where I learned . . . that you cannot fight no addiction without God first." Susan described how she thrived in the program and gained an understanding that had eluded her previously. "I wanted to know how to stay clean," she said. "They told me that I had to pray about it and go to meetings, you know, take a few suggestions, and, you know, call somebody, you know. And that was a sure way of staying clean."

Susan's recollection mapped on to Tinybig's photos. In Division 17, Susan learned that prayer and attending 12-Step meetings, both of which would help her reestablish her relationship with God, were the keys to turning her life around. These lessons resonated with Susan's religious upbringing and aligned with the beliefs and values of her "very professional and religious family." But Susan did not identify her family or her personal beliefs as catalysts for embracing recovery and understanding the work it entails. Court-mandated drug treatment within the confines of Cook County Jail was the catalyst.

Women frequently recalled how they began to understand the relationship among spirituality, sobriety, morality, and noncriminality—in other words, the 12-Step logic—during their time in jail or prison. Their experiences with reentry programs, specifically recovery homes, reinforced that understanding. While Tinybig acquired *The Life Recovery Bible* in prison, she received her copy of the Holy Bible upon arriving at Starting Again from the director's "box of Bibles." Growing Stronger and Starting Again were explicitly faith-based recovery homes. They accepted any woman regardless of religious beliefs, but an explicit embrace of Christian beliefs undergirded programming and events (e.g., family gatherings, graduations, barbecues), even beyond the required participation in 12-Step meetings. Throughout interviews, women shared their experiences staying at a variety of recovery homes over the years. Every recovery home women discussed were faith-based programs that required 12-Step meeting attendance, with many offering 12-Step meetings on-site.

New Life, a Black 30-year-old mother of two had been out of prison for a little over four months when I met her at Growing Stronger. While she had since settled into the Growing Stronger community, she recalled having struggled early in her

stay with the program's rigid schedule and requirements. New Life had preferred to spend most of her time away from the home, but Growing Stronger staff wanted her to participate fully in the daily groups and spend more time in the house. This tension almost prompted New Life to move out of Growing Stronger about a month after she arrived. She recalled a weekend when, without explanation, the staff revoked all residents' weekend passes, preventing her from staying out overnight as she had planned. New Life decided to pack her bags and move out. As she waited for a family member to pick her up, the on-duty staff member phoned Pastor Geraldine, one of the administrators who oversaw the house, at home and told her New Life was preparing to leave. Pastor Geraldine came back to the recovery home to try to change New Life's mind. When she asked New Life what was going on, New Life replied:

"I'm fittin' to go, because, you know, I don't get my weekend pass, I didn't do anything." She [Pastor Geraldine] said, "Stop right there. It's much more than just a weekend pass. Just say you don't wanna be here." I say, "It's not that." She said, "Yes it is. You know how bad the devil wants you back?" And it was like, when she said that, it was like, "Oh my God!" Cuz if I leave here, what is my plans? You know, I mean, seriously what is gonna be my plans? To get back in contact with the same old people. And she was just breaking it down to me, and I was like, "Wow."

Pastor Geraldine presented New Life's decision as a choice between staying with God's plan or succumbing to the devil's wishes. In the process, she reframed New Life's concern about an arbitrary rule change that limited her freedom as an excuse to go back not just to her old ways, but also to a lifestyle that the devil wanted for her. Within this framework, New Life recognized her impulse to leave as a moral and spiritual decision between good and evil. To borrow Nyla's language, leaving Growing Stronger meant being out from under the umbrella of God's protection. New Life explained that had she moved out that night, she likely would have resumed selling and using drugs, or, as Nyla and Pastor Geraldine put it, playing with the devil. Pastor Geraldine had told New Life that her decision was not really about the weekend pass; rather "It's you battling with yourself because you really want that freedom, but you know the consequence of that."<sup>54</sup>

While neither New Life nor Pastor Geraldine explicitly cited the 12 Steps during this encounter, the 12-Step logic undergirded their interaction. In addition to the clear moral and spiritual overtones, New Life referenced the common 12-Step admonition to avoid the "people, places, and things" associated with one's past alcohol and drug use. Additionally, Pastor Geraldine invoked New Life's weak self by warning her that she was not yet ready to handle the freedom of living outside of Growing Stronger; New Life still needed the program's structure to impose the regulation she could not yet provide for herself. Recalling the story in our interview, New Life agreed with Pastor Geraldine's assessment and explained that, at the time, leaving Growing Stronger would have meant a return to her past lifestyle: "Like, if I can sell drugs without being incarcerated, I'm serious! And without





FIGURE 6. Starting Again exterior  
(Photo credit: Red).

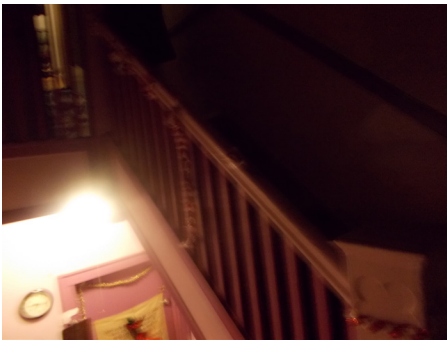


FIGURE 7. Climbing the ladder  
(Photo credit: Red).

having the conscience that I have now, I would do it . . . If I could smoke weed without worrying about getting dropped out of nowhere, I probably would do it. You know, but I'm more grown up now." Her final comment here was instructive: New Life clarified she was stronger today. She had grown up and had a different conscience. She felt confident she could handle the freedom today, but on the night she had contemplated leaving, she would not have been able. As the pseudonym she chose for this project suggests, she was a new person, one who was moral, spiritual, law-abiding, and sober.

Red, a 41-year-old Puerto Rican woman who had been living at Starting Again for about five months since her release from prison, captured the recovery home's interconnected focus on faith and recovery perfectly with two photographs. Although the images were dark and hard to decipher, Red made her intention behind them clear. She explained her photograph of Starting Again's exterior (figure 6) showed how the building "looks like a castle. So it reveals a second chance in life to be honest with you . . . and just thinking of a castle just reminds me of God . . . like His mother, she's the queen, and it just reminds me of just a castle. It just looks like a castle." Turning to her photograph of a staircase inside Starting Again, Red said it showed "Climbing the ladder, like 12 Steps, 'cause this is a place, you know, that provides 12-Step routines and helps you through them. So that's our ladder . . . 12 Steps of recovery" (figure 7). Like Tinybig, Red



visually represented the two cornerstones of her postincarceration process: faith and the 12 Steps. God was so central to Red's experience at Starting Again that the building, itself, embodied His presence. Similarly, the 12 Steps provided such an all-encompassing structure and were such a part of Starting Again's programming that Red saw reminders of them in the physical layout of the building. These two photographs represented the organizing principles of her life.

Red also explicitly connected her faith and the 12 Steps to her personal transformation process. As she flipped through her pile of photographs, she shared a summative reflection about Starting Again: "This is what this is about, right? Us recovering, us changing from bad to good. God giving us a chance in life instead of keepin' us in prison or keepin' us sick, addicted to the wrong thing. So the pictures that I took of Starting Again would be like the entry. And then these NA pictures, it's documenting the information of what, you know, some things you have to do to get ahead in life."<sup>55</sup> Like Nyla's fight to go from dark to light, Red was working to change from bad to good. Red had not had an easy life. For years, she had struggled with domestic violence, mental illness, her mother's death, losing her children to Child Protective Services, drug use, and incarceration. Also like Nyla, for Red, these very real issues that largely were outside of her control took a backseat to her personal responsibility to become a good person by following the 12 Steps and allowing God to do His work. Red embraced the 12-Step logic, with all of its lessons about morality, spirituality, criminality, and sobriety. The moral transformation from good to bad was interdependent with the transformation from addicted to sober, criminal to noncriminal, and distant from God to close to Him.

The 12-Step logic puts the authority of the state behind faith-based recovery, creating a merging of church and state that powerfully prescribes how women should understand their very sense of self—as moral, worthy, redeemable, or not. That message coming from either institution alone would be quite authoritative. To have that message imposed by both institutions is concerning, at best, and potentially oppressive, at worst, in ways with which carceral studies scholarship has not fully grappled.<sup>56</sup>

#### PERMANENT OUTSIDERS

The all-encompassing transformation of identity the 12-Step logic requires means, following release, women's task was not solely to stay out of prison or reintegrate into society. The postincarceration process required women to manage rehabilitated identities that aligned with the moral and spiritual dictates of the 12-Step logic under omnipresent surveillance and moral judgment. While recovery homes and reentry programs offered much-needed support and affirmation, they also extended the dominant 12-Step logic into women's lives and closely monitored women's adherence to it. Between parole conditions and recovery home rules, women had to meet a host of requirements that far exceeded simply being lawful,

such as attending 12-Step meetings and at times more intensive drug treatment programming; participating in individual and group therapy; completing a variety of mandated classes, such as parenting and life skills; following program rules like adhering to a curfew, completing daily chores, and participating in program meetings and activities that centered faith and the 12 Steps; embracing prayer as a recovery practice and in some cases even attending church; and becoming fluent in the 12-Step lingo. Indeed, there was a distinct culture—language, beliefs, and ways of being—that structured the postincarceration landscape.

The expansiveness of this culture is significant. Sociologists like Jill A. McCorkel, Lynne A. Haney, and Allison McKim also have critically analyzed the invasive reach of gender-responsive drug treatment programs that subject criminalized women to intense surveillance as part of an effort to remake the self.<sup>57</sup> While these scholars have conducted extensive ethnographies of specific programs, my research approach allows me to show how the identity transformation dynamics that are so prevalent in criminalized women's lives are not confined to individual sites or even to particular drug treatment models. I focus on the network of programs and overarching discourses that work inside and outside prisons to create a far-reaching carceral web that zeroes in on criminalized women's selves.

Even when women adapted to that distinct culture, the postincarceration process never was complete, because the personal transformation process never was complete. In the context of the 12-Step logic, linking criminality and addiction meant that just as women were always recovering, never recovered, women were always rehabilitating, never rehabilitated. There was no endpoint to the postincarceration process. There was no marker that denoted when one was rehabilitated or no longer viewed with suspicion of criminality.<sup>58</sup> McCorkel's incisive analysis in *Breaking Women: Gender, Race, and the New Politics of Imprisonment* deeply informs my argument here.<sup>59</sup> Based on her ethnographic research of a drug treatment program in a women's prison, McCorkel examined how women experienced and responded to routine institutional practices that sought to break down their sense of self. Rooted in a habilitation model of drug treatment, the private program taught women their diseased selves were the cause of all their problems and that creating and managing a new self was a lifelong process. Women's responses to the program's harsh treatment practices varied, but a noteworthy portion accepted and internalized the program's assessment of their diseased selves and moral blameworthiness. Borrowing the phrase more skeptical program participants used to describe these women, McCorkel referred to this process of surrendering to the program as "rentin' out your head."<sup>60</sup>

Building upon McCorkel's analysis in *Breaking Women*, I conceive of postincarceration as a permanent liminal state. Women existed "betwixt and between" mainstream society and prison in a distinct marginalized space constituted by the intersection of criminalization, racism, patriarchy, and class.<sup>61</sup> Thus, even as women "succeeded" at reentry, they remained set apart from society as they

faced distinct expectations and social norms that connected their moral worth to their sobriety and, by extension, to their “noncriminality.” In addition to the well-documented, pervasive collateral consequences and legal discrimination based on felony conviction, women encountered a distinct, closely regulated recovery lifestyle postrelease.

### SURVEILLANCE

While almost every woman spoke positively about the support and resources they received at the recovery homes where they lived, they also explained how surveillance was a trade-off they accepted in exchange for that support. That surveillance took explicit and subtle forms, which at times created a sense of instability and reminded women the recovery home’s support could be withdrawn at any time. It included the objective enforcement of rules—like maintaining sobriety and participating in mandated programming—and the subjective assessment of women’s rehabilitation.

Parole officers and recovery home staff explicitly monitored women’s abstinence from drugs and alcohol through mandating 12-Step meeting attendance and random urinalysis. Even for women who were in compliance, these surveillance technologies caused significant stress. During our PEI, Red shared a photograph of her NA meeting attendance sheet.<sup>62</sup> One of Starting Again’s program rules required residents to attend a minimum number of 12-Step meetings each month. Attending these meetings also was a condition of Red’s parole. By attending meetings, she fulfilled two requirements. If she missed a meeting, though, she faced double consequences, such as termination from Starting Again and revocation of parole. Red had no trouble meeting the 12-Step attendance requirement, but she struggled to provide proof of her attendance. On three occasions, she had lost her NA sign-in sheet, which Starting Again’s director required residents to submit weekly. Red faithfully carried the sheet to every meeting, noting the date and location and securing the signature of the person chairing the meeting. But when she misplaced the sheet, she had no documentation of her compliance with Starting Again’s rule and this parole condition. When she lost her sheet, Red sought out the meeting chairperson, hoped they remembered her face, and had them re-sign her sheet. Red commented, “I always got saved. I always saved my life. But if the person, like, doesn’t want to do it or all of a sudden that person’s not chairing anymore . . . she [Starting Again’s director] could take us out for it, too . . . Because you never know what people are fed up with.”

The phrases “saved my life” and “could take us out” revealed how much Red needed Starting Again and how much she valued the support and sense of community she had found there. She equated losing her spot in the home with death. The statement was not hyperbolic. Red carefully was working to put her life back together. Without stable housing, she easily could end up back in prison. Even if



FIGURE 8. Drop cups at the recovery home (Photo credit: Jean Grey).

Starting Again's director gave her a pass on the documentation, Red still would have to convince her parole officer not to impose further restrictions or even move to revoke her parole, which could send her back to prison.

In addition to mandating 12-Step meeting attendance, recovery homes monitored women's abstinence from drugs through the more invasive practice of random drug tests. Jean Grey,<sup>63</sup> an African American woman who was about one year into serving a five-year probation sentence at the time of our interviews, drew my attention to the impact of this surveillance technology during our PEI. At 20 years old, she by far was the youngest woman who participated in this project and who was residing at Growing Stronger. In addition to her age, Jean was distinct from many of the women at Growing Stronger because she had never been to prison and did not identify as having a drug problem. She still had to adapt to the 12-Step logic, however, and submit to the recovery home's random drug tests. She documented this practice with her photograph of a box of "drop cups" on the counter at Growing Stronger (figure 8).<sup>64</sup> She explained the photograph:

These are the drop cups. Like randomly, you know, they'll just be sittin' out there on the desk, and, you know, word'll pass that we're being dropped today. And . . . it's like if I've made it this far into the recovery process, why do you have to drop me? Like, do you not trust me? Well, you know, I guess not 'cause you have to drop me . . . I don't really like that, because I don't identify with being an addict, but it's one of the

stipulations to stay here, so . . . I don't like how it looks. I don't like how they present it. I don't like how it makes me feel.

Jean described the invasive mechanics of going through the drug test, including drinking a bunch of water, avoiding going to the bathroom so she would be able to drop when it was time, urinating into the cup, waiting for 15 minutes after a staff member put the test strip into the urine, pulling the strip together with the staff member to reveal the results, pouring the urine out of the cup, and finally throwing the cup in the garbage. But what she returned to was how the process and even just seeing the cups on the counter made her feel: "It just makes me feel real untrustworthy. Like, it makes me feel like I'm not working on anything, like, especially 'cause it's random . . . I just don't like it. It makes me not feel good."

The cups were not only a way to monitor and enforce the recovery home's rules. They assessed the women's character. Even a negative urinalysis result, which affirmed women's recovery work, required women to participate in a paternalistic process shrouded in suspicion. As Jean explained, the cups reminded her that other people, particularly people who held a significant amount of power over her life, viewed her as untrustworthy and that she must be able to prove her commitment to her rehabilitation and recovery at a moment's notice. Like Red's signed NA meeting attendance sheet, Jean's clean test result communicated her recovering/rehabilitating identity in a language recovery home staff and parole and probation officers recognized as legitimate.

Recovery home staff also monitored women's recovery and subsequent rehabilitation in more subjective ways, such as by paying attention to signs of so-called risky behavior that suggested women had not embraced the 12-Step logic. Abstaining from drugs and alcohol alone was not a sufficient indication of recovery. As sociologist Norman K. Denzin explains, people who abstain without also committing to the complete transformation of identity the 12 Steps demand are viewed by AA members as likely to relapse because they "did not make the commitments and side bets into AA that would have anchored the recovering self in the AA way of life."<sup>65</sup> Any sign that women were not fully invested in the recovery home's programming could be considered risky. Not spending enough time in the home was a telltale sign, as I learned one day sitting in Growing Stronger's front room, waiting for a participant to return home for our scheduled interview. While I waited, Iris, a 49-year-old White mother of two, returned home from another long day of submitting job applications. I knew from my prior interview with Iris that she was desperate to secure a job so she could move into her own apartment. Only then would she be able to see her children, who lived in another state with her ex-husband. Iris held a bachelor's degree, and prior to her troubles with alcohol and DUI convictions, she had enjoyed a solidly middle-class lifestyle with her family. She was confident she could attain that level of financial stability once again. While Iris was deeply grateful for the support Growing Stronger provided, many of its programs did not apply to her. The education programs were geared toward people

with lower levels of education than Iris, and the vocational programs could not offer much to assist her reentry into the accounting profession. Iris knew it was up to her to make the progress she needed to make. It was unlikely Growing Stronger would be able to connect her with the type of job or housing that met her needs.

Iris looked distressed as she signed the residents' logbook to indicate her arrival time back at the house. She explained to the staff member working at the front desk that she would be unable to go out the next day to continue to look for employment because she did not have enough money to purchase another bus card. Pastor Geraldine overheard Iris and sternly told her she needed to "sit still" and "let God do His work." She admonished Iris for "moving too fast" and running all over the city, when what she really needed to do was focus on working on herself. The message was clear; Pastor Geraldine had drawn a connection between Iris's absence from the house and her unsuccessful job search. Presumably, if Iris would spend more time at the recovery home participating in its groups and activities, God would help her strengthen her inner self and thus be more successful in her employment search. By taking matters into her own hands and setting her own agenda, Iris was not giving her will over to God or accepting her weak identity and powerlessness. She was not waiting to be restored to sanity by a power greater than herself.

What the 12-Step logic demanded of Iris clashed with the structural reality of her life, particularly the need to have her own stable apartment in order to meet the criteria of her custody agreement that would allow visitation with her children.<sup>66</sup> While the 12-Step logic required her to slow down, Iris felt an urgent need to move forward. Despite her sobriety, Iris failed to demonstrate her internalization of the 12-Step logic. Fully participating in Growing Stronger's programming and being an active part of the Growing Stronger community communicated women's serious commitment to turning their lives around, as opposed to just going through the motions or relying on the recovery home as just a place to stay. As such, Pastor Geraldine read Iris's recovery as superficial and anticipated Iris was setting herself up for another relapse and subsequent run-in with the criminal legal system.

Chicken Wing, the 55-year-old Black woman who enjoyed taking the bus to her new job, shared how staff members' subjective assessments of one's character seemingly could come out of nowhere. In the six months or so since she had been released from prison, she already had secured part-time employment, had become deeply involved with a church she identified as providing her with critical support and community, and was in a romantic relationship she described as the healthiest and most fulfilling of her life. Throughout our interviews, she exuded confidence and joy, laughing frequently and speaking bluntly about her past, present circumstances, and future plans. Having served more than 20 years in prison, she seemed determined to fully enjoy this second part of her life and not take anything for granted. Nevertheless, she still faced challenges at Growing Stronger, typically as the result of conflicts with roommates or staff. She reflected



on one particularly significant disagreement with a staff member who, when a two-person room became available, did not ask Chicken Wing if she was interested in moving from her three-person room to the newly available room. This oversight was consequential, since the only way to move into a single room was to first progress from a three-person to a two-person room. Chicken Wing elaborated:

When the two-man came open she [the staff member] never asked me. But she said she heard I didn't want a two-man because they was too small. But I told her, I said, "But you never *asked* me." And then I said, "Well, forget it then. I'm movin' anyway, so leave me where I'm at." I got cocky cuz I was *pissed*. You know what I'm sayin'? I was mad because I felt that she overlooked me.

The disagreement took on added significance when Chicken Wing's parole officer revoked her movement for the upcoming weekend and New Year's Day because of it. Chicken Wing had not even been aware recovery home staff could or would share such information, but they had, and her parole officer responded by punishing Chicken Wing for being "cocky." Chicken Wing had not violated a condition of her parole or even a house rule. But the staff member and parole officer did not like her attitude, which was enough to warrant a punishment that cut deep. Chicken Wing explained, "It affected me bad. I cried. I cried like a baby. I was hurt. This is my first New Year. You took it from me."

It is noteworthy how Chicken Wing's assertiveness contrasted with the humble, powerless identity prescribed by the 12-Step logic and with racist, sexist, and classist respectability politics.<sup>67</sup> As a poor, criminalized Black woman, Chicken Wing was supposed to perform subordination. Voicing displeasure and asserting her impending independence ("I'm movin' anyway") were read as insubordination and "cockiness," which were antithetical to the rehabilitating/recovering identity she must embody. Chicken Wing explained that while she still disagreed with her punishment, she learned an important lesson about how she must present herself: "I should've kept my mouth shut. And that's why I say, I've got to learn how to keep my mouth shut. I've got to learn how to talk to people. So I was wrong. But I didn't feel that you should go tell my parole officer that. And then she take my movement for the weekend. And then took my movement New Year's Day. I couldn't go nowhere. Snatched it." Regardless that she was abstaining from drugs, not breaking the law, following her parole conditions and the recovery home's rules, working, engaged in a church, and attending 12-Step meetings, if she did not present herself accordingly, her parole officer would treat her like a criminal. Chicken Wing reflected:

Anything negative is right up her [the parole officer's] alley to take your . . . movement from you, to make you feel like you ain't nothin'. I did twenty years. Give me a break. You know what I'm sayin'? I work. You would think they'd be encouraging you more instead of like the system is designed for them to send you back. And she told me, "If you go out of the house, I'm gonna violate you. I'm gonna put a warrant out

on you.” Like I stole somethin’. Like I did a crime or somethin’. Like I did, like I tested dirty. You know. I just said somethin’ out of my mouth!

Chicken Wing’s parole officer could ignore all of her markers of rehabilitation and recovery in favor of surveilling her speech and attitude in ways that effectively returned Chicken Wing to her past *criminal-addict* self. Her parole officer made her feel like she was nothing, a nobody, which was exactly how Chicken Wing described feeling about herself at the time she was arrested more than 20 years ago. Despite all she had accomplished, the parole officer’s punishment made her feel as she had before she became a changed person, the new Chicken Wing that she was today. Working in concert, the recovery home staff and the parole officer guided Chicken Wing not just toward sobriety and noncriminality, but also toward a particular way of being.

#### NEVER REHABILITATED, ALWAYS REHABILITATING

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the 12-Step logic is that the surveillance and judgment women described enduring after their release never quite ended. They might become less explicit and overtly intrusive over time, especially as women moved into their own residences and accumulated a track record of sobriety and noninvolvement with the criminal legal system. Once Chicken Wing completed her parole, for instance, she would not have to worry about losing her movement over a weekend or holiday. Once Red moved out of Starting Again, she would not have to fear losing her housing if she lost her 12-Step meeting attendance sheet. In fact, she would not even have to carry around the sheet and secure signatures from meeting chairs. She would be able to simply attend meetings for herself, without needing to prove attendance to anyone. Even so, the work of personal transformation—of maintaining and demonstrating a rehabilitating/recovering identity—and some degree of surveillance never ended. As Cathy, a 52-year-old White mother whose life had been upended by DUI charges related to alcohol, commented, “You’ve got to remember, once you’ve crossed the line and become addicted to this, it’s always inside of you, and it can be woken up at any time.” Cathy returned to this point throughout our interview, later adding, “You’re labeled for the rest of your life.” Ms. Fields, a 47-year-old Black Afro-American woman, similarly reflected on the permanence of addiction and never-ending work of recovery:

*Ms. Fields:* You have to work the steps for the rest of your life. You know, once you do 12, then you can start all over. You know.

*CR:* Back at one?

*Ms. Fields:* Yeah, back at one. ‘Cause see, ‘cause every year, you know, like I might have a resentment about you . . . maybe I felt like you didn’t help me with my homework good enough or somethin’ . . . I’m just hypothetically



speaking. And so then I have to, I have to do a 4th Step on that. And so then, you know, every time, you can't let them things sit in you . . . So, I want to at least work the first 12, you know. And I'm willin' to just keep workin' them over and over, 'cause one thing I know [is] that AA'll be a part of my life until I die.

Cathy and Ms. Fields made clear they never would be recovered, even if they established a lengthy amount of clean time. The risk of waking up the addiction that permanently resides within them always was present. As Ms. Fields explained, she must diligently monitor herself for signs that her addiction was waking and proactively work to contain it.

The reawakening of addiction was interconnected with vulnerability to recriminalization. Resuming drug or alcohol use did not just signal a return to one's addict identity, but to one's *criminal-addict* identity. Whereas drug treatment specialists routinely note relapse is a common part of the recovery process, formerly incarcerated women did not have the luxury to relapse.<sup>68</sup> That luxury typically was reserved for more privileged groups for whom criminalization, drug use, and recovery are not intricately intertwined.<sup>69</sup> When the women who participated in this project relapsed, they encountered severe consequences, such as terminated stays at recovery homes and revocation of probation or parole. The permanence of the criminal-addict label played out in women's lives in significant ways, particularly when past criminal records impacted new criminal court cases and limited women's chances of avoiding additional prison sentences.

Olivia, a 49-year-old Afro-American woman who had served three prison sentences and was detained numerous times in jail, spoke powerfully about this impact, likening the practice of judges and state's attorneys taking defendants' backgrounds into consideration when determining guilt and sentencing to "double jeopardy." She explained, "Instead of your case carryin' one to three [years], they're gonna upgrade it to three to six [years]. That means you're lookin' back in my background, and in a way I feel like that's double jeopardy, 'cause I did the time for that, and you're gonna bring it up again . . . You bringin' up my old case. You tryin' me again off of that case. I don't think that's fair." Olivia's past cases and prison time were albatrosses from which she never could escape. A new charge erased whatever rehabilitative progress she had made and amplified the impact of her old case. She effectively was punished again for her past behaviors and for her new case.

Corrine, a 63-year-old African American woman who had been incarcerated eight times and whose experience giving birth while incarcerated was discussed in the previous chapter, shared a strikingly similar assessment of this type of double jeopardy. Prior to her last incarceration, she had sought drug treatment on her own while she was out of jail, awaiting sentencing for a shoplifting charge. At the time of her sentencing date in court, she had completed nearly six weeks of outpatient treatment. Two counselors from the program accompanied Corrine to court and vouched for her progress, legitimizing her claim that she actively was working

to turn her life around. Corrine hoped the judge would realize yet another prison sentence was unnecessary, since she already was getting the help she needed to address the root cause of her troubles with the law. The judge praised Corrine's initiative but did not spare her another trip to prison. With her voice cracking and holding back tears, Corrine recalled the judge's exact response: "She said, 'I would never be able to face society or my constituents,' as she kind of put it, 'if I were . . . to let you back out on the streets today. And I hereby sentence you to four to ten [years]. And I hope that when you're done that you still continue on your path.'"

The judge acknowledged Corrine already was on the right path. She made no pretense the prison sentence was about rehabilitation. Rather, she was clear the sentence was a purely punitive act to benefit her constituents and assuage her own concerns about public backlash. The judge did not address how another prison sentence would sever Corrine's relationship with a helpful treatment program and separate her from her young daughter or how these two losses would derail Corrine from the positive path she was following. Further, the judge reminded Corrine that, in the eyes of the court, she was a *criminal-addict* above all else. Corrine explained, "So here's a judge telling me that I was such a menace to society and that she would never be able to face society if she gave me a chance. And here I was goin' to prison for thirty-seven dollars." Corrine's recognized criminality precluded any acknowledgment of her identity as a woman in recovery or as a mother.

Like Corrine, Ann Williams was a Black mother who struggled with drug use throughout her adult life and never received mercy from the judges or prosecutors she faced. At age 44, she already had served four prison sentences, her most recent one following a conviction for retail theft. Throughout our interviews, Ann drew connections among her drug use, homelessness, and ongoing entanglement with the criminal legal system. She shared a nascent critique of the system's reliance on punishment over rehabilitation when recalling how, while being processed for her last arrest, she already knew she would have to return to prison yet again. Unlike Corrine, Ann had no hope of leniency. She explained, "Now some people have, they go to the County [Cook County Jail], they get treatment and all that. I never got none of that. Treatment, probation, none of that, I went straight to prison." "Every time?" I clarified. "Every time," Ann responded. "I never got treatment. I did detoxes in my life when I was out on the street, but I never did treatment . . . And now that I look back on it, I felt like I should've maybe . . . that that's what I should've got a share of. I mean . . . even if then if I wasn't ready, I felt like I should've got treatment."

Rose, who took the alley photograph that opens this book, shared a story that echoed Ann Williams's experience. Following her first stay at Growing Stronger, Rose had moved into her own apartment, secured a job, and enjoyed a brief period of relative stability. When her boyfriend cheated on her, that stability ended. She began using drugs again and eventually lost her job and apartment. Rose

commented, “I gave up. It’s like I gave up on life.” With her being unhoused and actively using, it was just a matter of time before she was arrested again. A police officer stopped Rose and two of her friends one night after she had been unable to secure a spot at an overnight homeless shelter. Rose was holding a couple of bags of crack. The officer arrested and detained her for possession of a controlled substance. When she eventually met with a public defender (PD), he explained the state’s offer: if Rose pleaded guilty, she would receive a sentence of 18 months in prison. Rose recalled, “I guess this PD . . . had already seen my file, so, when he came out and talked to me, he was like, ‘This is what they offerin’ you. Probation is not an option.’” Rose made the connection between her background, which included two prior incarcerations, and the state’s refusal to offer probation and treatment. Because of her permanent *criminal-addict* identity, the consequence for Rose’s relapse was a severe form of punishment, not treatment.

Corrine, Ann Williams, and Rose would have welcomed treatment. Like the other women in this study, however, the permanence of the *criminal-addict* identity kept them stuck in a cycle of trauma, poverty, relapse, and punishment. The benefits of Whiteness, financial means, and lack of a criminal record converge for some to construct relapse as a painful but useful turning point that can trigger more intensive treatment and support to overcome recurring drug use. Those benefits eluded women like Corrine, Ann, and Rose, as the criminal legal system effectively criminalized recovery for women living on the margins of society. Before the court, they were nothing more than *criminal-addicts*. The permanence of that identity shaped each encounter with the criminal legal system, leading to what seemed like a predetermined outcome.

#### FINDING DIGNITY THROUGH THE 12-STEP LOGIC

The 12-Step logic was the dominant framework women encountered as they moved through the criminal legal system and postincarceration landscape. Its ubiquitous presence bridged larger political and cultural discourses, particularly neoliberalism and neoconservatism, and distilled them into a specific, enforceable framework that structured criminalized women’s lives indefinitely. The logic encouraged an individualistic, depoliticized understanding of the causes of women’s imprisonment and the challenges they faced after release, locating responsibility squarely within the individual and casting aside structural forces as mere excuses drug-using women made to detract focus from their weak selves and shirk the real work of personal rehabilitation. Yet, women engaged this logic in innovative ways that allowed them to claim dignity and recast incarceration as a redemptive experience, while remaining critical of the dehumanizing treatment they endured.

Recall Denise’s recollection of her evolving relationship with Judge Hopkins. At the end of her probation, Denise told Judge Hopkins, “God worked through you to help me.” Multiple women similarly explained how God worked through the

criminal legal system to directly reach and save them. Referring to the period prior to her last arrest when she was homeless and using drugs again, Rose said, “I really felt like I wanted to die . . . but, I also knew that, that ain’t how God sees everything. You know. It’s not up to me to say that I want to die, so. And I walked around like that, feelin’ like that, for a while.” Rose asked God to help her; she explained how He did:

*Rose:* Well, actually it was the police. It was the police because . . . I got arrested for these certain amount of bags that I had on me. And . . . if it was [not] for them, you know, who knows where I’d be today . . . I think that God sent them, you know, for that to happen. All the time that I was tellin’ Him that I was tired, you know, didn’t have nowhere to go, I didn’t want to live my life like this, so, He just put me in a situation and a place to think about all of it. You know.

*CR:* And where was that?

*Rose:* Prison. Prison. From the County [jail] to the prison . . . by the grace of God, He gave me these amount of months, you know, to think about it. And I thought about it strongly . . . I thought about it real, real strongly after I got in jail and a couple of weeks went by and stuff, and I started gettin’ my strength.

Faye, a 46-year-old Black woman, described a similar process of growing tired and asking God for help: “You get tired of that pain . . . Tired of goin’ to jail . . . Tired of people tellin’ you what to do, what you can’t do, and how to eat and all that. Tired of being homeless and, you know, all that. Out there, you get tired of that. Nuh-uh. I’m through, I’m done. God help me.” Like Rose, Faye believed God answered her call for help through arrest: “I looked in the mirror and said, ‘God help me.’ And that night I was in jail.”

Ann Williams recalled the same progression of growing tired of using drugs and “tired [of] the pain. The things that I did in my life, the pain . . . bein’ homeless with my kids, by myself, sleepin’ on the train, sleepin’ under Wacker Drive.” She continued, “I said, ‘Man, there’s gotta be a better way.’ ‘Cause I felt like I wanted to die.” After her last arrest, she “felt like I was rescued . . . God saved me from myself, because the stuff that I was doin’ out there, you know, and to me that’s why I said I felt like I was rescued ‘cause it, I got another chance.” Nyla also had come to understand her last arrest as God’s work to save her. She explained that on the night of her last arrest, the police had not had any legal cause to stop and search her. She was in an area with high drug activity and felt the police were simply trying to meet a quota when they targeted her. In hindsight, she said, “When I look at it, it was actually God doin’ for me what I couldn’t do for myself, because I was really out there really bad.”

Nyla, Ann Williams, Faye, Rose, Denise, and many more women reached a point where they were desperate for their lives to change but felt powerless to make that change happen. At what they described as their weakest and most vulnerable moments, God did what they felt they were not able to do themselves. God saved them by acting through the criminal legal system—specifically judges, police, and

correctional officers—to physically remove them from dangerous environments and lifestyles. Yet, a noteworthy tension existed between the women's reframing of their arrests and subsequent incarceration and their critiques of the system. Nyla knew the police legally should not have stopped and searched her. Ann Williams wondered if she perhaps did *not* need to go to prison and might have benefited from treatment. Still, they reframed these unjust encounters with the system as God quite literally saving them from death.

This redemptive arc, in which God saves women's lives through incarceration, is familiar. Indeed, the language women used in interviews with me was almost interchangeable with quotes shared by scholars Megan Sweeney, Lora Bex Lempert, and Rachel Ellis in their research with incarcerated women.<sup>70</sup> A distinct quality of the narratives women shared with me was the completely intertwined nature of drug recovery and religious discourses, as encapsulated in the 12-Step logic. Faith *and* recovery were required for redemption. Women's identity narratives did not just "shift from 'flawed' to 'faithful,'" as Ellis found, but from flawed to faithful and sober.<sup>71</sup> Denise's account of her initial resistance and then growing acceptance of the court's mandated drug treatment in jail and harsh probation restrictions again provides an illustrative example. Drawing heavily on the 12-Step logic, Denise explained how she now viewed her recovery work as a partnership with God. He would keep her sober, as long as she did her part:

I know that I didn't have no control [over my drug use] at all. And I still don't have none. I still don't have no control . . . It's a daily reprieve. I always ask God to keep me sober, help me. Yeah, because I can't do it without Him, and He told me, "As long as you trust that I will keep you sober, I'm gonna keep you sober. As long as you don't go back and do what you was doin', because then you're takin' your will back. I can't keep you sober if you're steady runnin' in the crack house." You know what I'm sayin'? So . . . I got work to do, too.

Denise's partnership with God followed the first three of the 12 Steps: admitting powerlessness and turning her will and life over to God. It also required that she change her behavior and avoid the "people, places, and things" associated with her past drug use. Like Denise, women embraced the 12-Step logic, rooting their recovery in their relationships with God. In doing so, they took up the 12-Step logic to make sense of the unfairness and violence they had endured, casting it as a necessary prerequisite for the dignity now made possible through the lifelong work of recovery and rehabilitation.<sup>72</sup>

The 12-Step logic demanded women divert their focus away from the very real structural factors that lead to their criminalization and accept personal responsibility for the many forms of violence—interpersonal, institutional, and structural—they survived. Despite this rigid framework and restrictions, women took up the 12-Step logic in such a way that they found joy in the never-ending personal transformation work. Julia, a 51-year-old African American woman who had been



FIGURE 9. Certificates (Photo credit: Julia).

incarcerated nine times, used a photograph for our PEI to share evidence of her personal transformation process (figure 9).<sup>73</sup> The photograph showed a number of personally meaningful items she kept on the windowsill next to her bed at Growing Stronger, including framed certificates of completion for a drug treatment program, self-improvement class, and nutrition program; memorabilia from a large AA convening; a figurine of Mary holding baby Jesus; and a “spiritual warfare prayer” a drug treatment counselor had given to her. The objects were a physical manifestation of the 12-Step logic.

Julia explained the “spiritual warfare prayer” is “a prayer you pray every day to like clear your way for that day. Any type of spirit that’s not right, ask God to remove that spirit from around you . . . ’cause that’s not how you want to be, you don’t want to be a part of that. ’Cause those the type of spirits that can keep you in depression. Or can get you in trouble. Or how you said things out your mouth that’s gonna get you in trouble.” In the self-improvement class, Julia learned “self-improvement is changing your thinking pattern, your behavior pattern, but you have to get to the core of the situation to find out. It’s like doin’ inventory. You have to dig deep in yourself to find out what these defects of character you have are doin’ to you, how they damagin’ you, how can you improve ’em.” She planned to add to her windowsill a certificate for a “mortification program” she completed,



where the instructor taught “deliverance through recovery. It’s like puttin’ the AA, NA with the Bible. Because that’s where the AA originated from, the Bible.” Julia expressed admiration for the instructor, who drew on his own recovery process to teach the 12 Steps, “but then he could tell you about the Word of God because . . . he was brought up with the Word . . . so he combined everything together and he made all things possible.”

Building upon the religious imagery, Julia described her windowsill as “a shrine. It’s a reminder of the achievements that I made and that it could be more if I keep goin’. And I’m proud of it.” At the time she took the photograph, Julia was relatively early in her recovery, with less than a year of clean time. She was not employed, had not earned her high school diploma, and did not have her own apartment—all accomplishments she later achieved. Julia knew she had a long road ahead of her, yet she was able to feel pride in how far she already had come and a commitment to continuing her personal transformation. The certificates testified to Julia’s recovering identity and provided a reminder of her self-worth, dignity, and deservingness of a better life than she previously experienced while unhoused, using drugs, and regularly surviving gender-based violence. Her particular engagement of the 12-Step logic unlocked that joy and dignity.

Like Julia, many women indicated how they used the 12-Step logic to achieve a delicate balance between accepting personal responsibility and demanding more. Taken together, their recollections showed the immense pain and overwhelming hopelessness that emerged from the intersection of drug use and structural violence. For these women, the alternative to incarceration was death, either as a result of drug use or the routine violence they faced. Their limited life chances reflected the social reality of living in disadvantaged communities in the U.S. “prison nation.”<sup>74</sup> In the wake of disinvestment from public institutions and social welfare programs, jails and prisons have stepped in to fill the gaps.<sup>75</sup> As a result, women are caught up in a hostile system that demands not only that they stop using drugs and breaking the law, but also that they accept their subordinated position within a larger social system. While they can be critical of racism, sexism, poverty, and the violence and discrimination the criminal legal system perpetrates, they ultimately must accept personal responsibility for their situations and embrace the 12-Step logic, with its perpetual surveillance and moral judgment, as the only viable way to survive in such a hostile world.

Despite this oppressive circumstance, women found ways to work within the 12-Step logic to claim self-worth and advance legitimate critiques. Women embraced the religious disposition of the 12-Step logic, in particular, to take ownership of their recovery, without justifying the criminal legal system’s violent and unfair treatment. They used the logic to resolve the tension among violence, personal responsibility, and critique of systems and individuals who repeatedly failed and outright harmed them. Although the system judged and punished them for their drug use and mandated that they get “clean,” it was God who offered

a way for them to save their lives. While the state labeled women as *criminal-addicts*, women used the 12-Step logic to contest this stigmatized identity. In doing so, women subverted the underlying judgments and affirmation of the criminal legal system that are embedded in the 12-Step logic.

## CONCLUSION

As Mariana Valverde explains, recovery programs rooted in the 12 Steps hinge on the concept of freedom: people are “addicts” because they lack the willpower to control their substance use.<sup>76</sup> Freedom from addiction requires strengthening one’s will. For criminalized women, the relationship between freedom and will took on added significance. Willpower was necessary not only to be free from addiction, but also from incarceration and the overarching violence of the criminal legal system. Women embraced the 12-Step logic to have the best chance of achieving some semblance of freedom. Personal responsibility did not justify or excuse the violence they endured throughout the criminalization process or the trauma that so often led to their drug use. The 12-Step logic’s focus on personal responsibility offered a way for women to claim control, albeit limited, over their lives, while the logic’s religious nature offered an opportunity, albeit rigid, for women to feel worthy of love, salvation, respect, and a chance at a more peaceful, fulfilling life.

My goal is not to critique 12-Step programs or people’s engagement of 12-Step discourses. Countless people, including many women who participated in this study, credit 12-Step programs with saving their lives, and it is important to honor those experiences. What I am critiquing, however, are the venues and institutions through which criminalized women engaged the 12-Step discourse.<sup>77</sup> In the context of criminalization, the 12 Steps become something other than a helpful, voluntary program that can provide an opportunity to connect with a supportive community. They become what I have termed the 12-Step logic, an organizing discourse that totally structures women’s lives and creates a particular type of self—specifically a moral and spiritual self that, if constantly tended to, might keep women out of the clutches of the carceral system, though the threat of criminalization remains ever present. The 12-Step logic provides the discourse the state uses in tandem with punitive laws and policies that promote social exclusion.

Throughout the next three chapters, I examine women’s identity work, particularly how they engaged the 12-Step logic to create *rehabilitated* identities in contrast to past *criminal-addict* identities. Foregrounding women’s gendered markers of rehabilitation, I show how redemption, much like mortification, was a gendered experience.