

A Conversation with Bill W.

A Synopsis of the Question-ANSWEr Period FOLLOWING BILL W.'S TALK AT THE NCCA SYMPOSIUM IN NEW YORK IN 1960.

Father N.: I'd like to ask this question. After a prolonged period of drinking, I think the nerves of the body are deadened, that is, the optical nerve. As the alcohol wears off there is sometimes an impression of blinding light. I merely want to know what you think about that.

Bill W.: Actually that was never my own experience. At the time of my sudden spiritual awakening I was perfectly sober. Perhaps you raise the question of hallucination versus the Divine imagery of a genuine spiritual experience. Perhaps nobody has ever defined what an hallucination truly is. But we who have been the fortunate recipients of great spiritual experiences are able to declare for their reality. We think that the best evidences of the reality of religious experiences are in their subsequent fruits. Those who receive these genuine gifts of grace are much altered people, almost invariably for the better. This can scarcely be said of those who hallucinate — Witness Hitler!

Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to say whether my own spiritual experience was real or unreal. But whether God made use of an alcoholic haze before my eyes, or whether I actually glimpsed His face, I can surely report that in my own life and in the lives of many others there has been a very considerable pay-off. Which ever way it may have happened, I am unutterably grateful for His unbelievable gift to me.

Father W.: Bill, could you explain what you mean by “mental obsession”? What is this?

Bill W.: Well, as I understand it, we are all born with a certain amount of freedom of choice. The degree of this varies from person to person, and from area to area in our lives. In the case of neurotic people, our instincts take on certain patterns and directions, sometimes so compulsive they cannot be broken by any ordinary effort of the will. The alcoholic's compulsion to drink is like that. As a smoker, for example, I have a deeply ingrained habit — I'm almost an addict. But I do not think this habit is an actual obsession. Doubtless it could be broken by an act of my own will. If badly enough hurt, I could in all probability give up tobacco. Should smoking repeatedly land me in Bellevue Hospital, I doubt if I would make the trip many times before quitting. But with my alcoholism, well that was something else again. No amount of desire to stop, no amount of punishment, could enable me to quit. What was once a habit of drinking became an obsession of drinking — a genuine lunacy.

Father X.: Bill, I noticed that in your talk you did not use the word 'disease.' Did you intend to make any kind of distinction between disease and sickness?

Bill W: We AAs have never called alcoholism a disease because, technically speaking, it is not a disease entity. For example, there is no such thing as heart disease. Instead there are many separate heart ailments or combinations of them. It is something like that with alcoholism. Therefore, we did not wish to get in wrong with the medical profession by pronouncing alcoholism a disease entity. Hence, we have always called it an illness or a malady — a far safer term for us to use.

Father Y.: Bill, you are, as it were, co-author of the Twelve Steps. We all realize that these steps are suggestions. Would you think it is possible for any alcoholic to neglect any one of these Twelve Steps and still hope to maintain his sobriety.

Bill W.: Well, where the break-even or safety is varies a great deal. But it is hardly prudent for any of us to take many chances with this sort of neglect. Nevertheless, it is truly amazing on what little practice of the Steps of AA some people stay sober. On the contrary, it is astonishing how difficult for certain others to remain dry even though they work diligently at the steps. In this connection, there is an observation to be made about the several motivations we have respecting the practice of AA's Twelve Steps. At first we try the Steps, or at least some of them, because we absolutely must.

It is a question of do or die. Then we observe AA principles because we begin to feel they ought to be observed because this is the right thing to do. We may still rebel, but we do try. Then there is a higher plateau which we sometimes touch. In a state of no resistance at all we practice AA's principles because we like to practice them, because we actually want to live by them all.

Of course, there is some virtue in following the AA program because we must. There is a lot more when, though in rebellion, we practice spiritual principles because they are right. When we are finally released from rebellion and when we live by AA principles because we actually and continuously want to live that way, then I think we are the recipients of a great amount of grace indeed.

Father E.: I'd like to ask about Recovery, Inc., that society which deals with mental and emotional ailments. To what extent might Recovery, Inc. help along the person who just has a problem of drinking before it gets too bad. And also, after one is a member of AA might not Recovery, Inc. help him? Would this interfere with one's loyalty to Alcoholics Anonymous? Are you acquainted with how Recovery, Inc. operates?

Bill W.: I have always looked with great sympathy upon Recovery, Inc. The founder of that movement was a psychiatrist. In actuality, Recovery, Inc. is very much of a heresy to AA. But it's the kind of heresy that often seems to work. Those good people operate on the basis that through a program of discipline and constant exertion of the will, their several compulsions and hexes can be directly attacked and eliminated. When this is tried in a group such as theirs, they also get the benefit of group inter-communication and power. In many cases their results have been extraordinary. Perhaps some of you know that Father Edward Dowling took a great interest in this enterprise. Some time ago he told me that one of his Jesuit friends had benefited immensely from this group and had contributed much to it. I believe that Recovery, Inc. is undergoing considerable modification nowadays, since the death of its founder. They are broadening their scope. Altogether I have the highest opinion of that outfit.

Father W.: I'd like to make Bill feel more comfortable. He has brought out something that has impressed me very much when he said, "I'm called the author of the Twelve Steps. In them we have tried hard not to offend the medical profession or the clergy. I've just been trying to help drunks get sober and stay sober." In other words, Bill doesn't presume to speak as a prophet. He takes the stance that he is just the oldest living member of AA, an originator, only in that sense. He doesn't want to pontificate. Does this state your position correctly, Bill?

Bill W.: You are entirely right. Being such an early member and having been prominent in the production of our literature and the management of our service affairs, it is natural that my part in the founding of AA gets much overrated. As you may know, we have a history book called AA Comes of Age. This volume clearly reveals that grace flowed through a great many people to bring into being what is AA today. It took a whole lot of forces and influences, way beyond my own comprehension to bring our fellowship into being. At one time I felt pretty important to the AA venture. But the more I reflect on the past, the more I find nowadays that my own part diminishes in significance.

Father A.J.: Bill, I would like to tell you an experience I had a few years ago and have your comment. In Cleveland, on this occasion, I met one of the first fifty members of AA. I forget what his name was. We were talking about the similarity of the Twelve Steps and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. This old time AA made remarks which ran as follows: I don't know if everybody realizes it, but the Twelve Steps were not concurrent with the beginning of AA. They came into existence three or four years later. There were two men who were trying to be sober, but they couldn't. Some AA members at that time insisted that you and Dr. Bob write down the method by which they obtained sobriety. Either Dr. Bob or you said to a certain young man: "You heard us talk, you had an education. Now why don't you write down something in black and white, so that we can give it to everybody."

Then this nameless young fellow wrote down five or six short paragraphs, which were the sum total of the philosophy of AA at that time. The story is that you and Dr. Bob developed the Twelve Steps from these writings. So I would like you to say, Bill, whether this is fiction. Also I wish you would tell us more about Sister Ignatia — who she is, and what part she played.

Bill W.: The story of the writing of the Twelve Steps and what preceded this event has been told in our history book, *AA Comes of Age*. This account reflects not only my own recollection of the matter; it has been carefully checked with other AAs who were living at the time. I believe it to be substantially true. This account shows that AA's First Step was derived largely from my own physician, Dr. Silkworth, and by my sponsor Ebby and his friend, from Dr. Jung of Zurich. I refer to the medical hopelessness of alcoholism — our 'powerlessness' over alcohol.

The rest of the Twelve Steps stem directly from those Oxford Group teachings that applied specifically to us. Of course these teachings were nothing new; we might have obtained them from your own Church. They were in effect an examination of conscience, confession, restitution, helpfulness to others, and prayer.

Before the Twelve Steps were written, these ideas were circulated in some six "word-of-mouth" steps. I don't remember that anybody in particular formulated these. If this formulation was the work of some one person, he merely stated in our language what we had already learned from the Oxford Groups. When the Twelve Steps were written, it was thought wise to further define and amplify these basic ideas. That is the substance of it, as well as I can recollect. I have no recollection of the person you have described.

In passing, I should record our great debt to the Oxford Group people. It was fortunate that they laid particular emphasis on spiritual principles that we needed. But in fairness it should also be said that many of their attitudes and practices did not work well at all for us alcoholics. These were rejected one by one and they caused our later withdrawal from this society to a fellowship of our own — today's Alcoholics Anonymous. Sister Ignatia was the marvelous associate of my partner, Dr. Bob, in AA's early time. Though not a Catholic, Dr. Bob was admitted to the Staff of St. Thomas Hospital in Akron. Sometime prior to this, he had hospitalized alcoholics there and Sister Ignatia ministered to both their physical and spiritual needs. Dr. Bob as a physician tended them medically at no cost whatever. Of course he brought them the AA message. From about 1940 until Dr. Bob's death in 1950, these two great people gave hospital care and took the AA message to some 5,000 sick alcoholics. Since that time, at St. Vincent's Charity Hospital in Cleveland, Sister Ignatia has been provided with a special ward, largely through the aid of local AAs who helped to construct it. And there she has since treated and ministered to some 7,000 cases more. What all these thousands of alcoholics owe to her, what AA as a whole owes to this dear lady, is a total which only God Himself could reckon.

Before leaving the subject of the Oxford Groups, perhaps I should specifically outline why we felt it necessary to part company with them. To begin with, the climate of their undertaking was not well suited to us alcoholics. They were aggressively evangelical, they sought to re-vitalize the Christian message in such a way as to "change the world." Most of us alcoholics had been subjected to pressure of evangelism and we had never liked it. The object of saving the world — when it was still much in doubt if we could save ourselves — seemed better left to other people. By reason of some of its terminology and by the exertion of huge pressure, the Oxford Group set a moral stride that was too fast, particularly for our newer alcoholics. They constantly talked of Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Honesty, and Absolute Love. While sound theology must always have its absolute values, the Oxford Groups created the feeling that one should arrive at these destinations in short order, maybe by next Thursday! Perhaps they didn't mean to create such an impression but that was the effect. Sometimes their public "witnessing" was of such a character as to cause us to be shy. They also believe that by "converting" prominent people to their beliefs, they would hasten the salvation of the many who were less prominent. This attitude could scarcely appeal to the average drunk since he was anything but distinguished.

The Oxford Groups also had attitudes and practices which added up to a highly coercive authority. This was exercised by "teams" of older members. They would gather in meditation and receive specific guidance for the life conduct of newcomers. This guidance could cover all possible situations from the most trivial to the most serious. If the directions so obtained were not followed, the enforcement machinery began to operate. It consisted of a sort of coldness and aloofness which made recalcitrants feel they weren't wanted. At one time, for example, a "team" got guidance for me to the effect that I was no longer to work with alcoholics. This I couldn't accept.

Another example: When I first contacted the Oxford Groups, Catholics were permitted to attend their meetings because they were strictly non-denominational. But after a time the Catholic Church forbade its members to attend and the reason for this seemed a good one. Through the Oxford Group teams Catholic Church members were actually receiving very specific guidance for their lives; they were often infused with the idea that their own Church had become rather horse-and-buggy, and needed to be "changed." Guidance was frequently

given that contributions should be made to the Oxford Groups. In a way this amounted to putting Catholics under a separate ecclesiastical jurisdiction. At this time they were few Catholics in our own alcoholic groups. Obviously we could not approach any more Catholics under Oxford Group auspices. Therefore, this was another and the basic reason for the withdrawal of our alcoholic crowd from the Oxford Groups notwithstanding our great indebtedness to them.

Writing Down the Twelve Steps

Perhaps you would be interested in a further account of the writing down of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In the spring of 1938 we had commenced to prepare a book showing the methods of our then nameless fellowship. We thought there should be a text for this which could be supported by stories, or case histories, written by some of our recovered people.

The work proceeded very slowly until some four chapters were done. The content of these chapters had been the subject of endless discussion and even hot argument.

The preliminary chapters consisted of my own story, a rationalization of AA for the benefit of the agnostic, plus descriptions of the alcoholic sickness. Even over this much material the haggling had been so great that I had begun to feel much more like an umpire than an author.

Arrived then at what is now Chapter Five, it was realized that a specific program for recovery had to be laid down as a basis for any further progress. By then I felt pretty frazzled and discouraged.

One night, in a bad mood I must confess, I lay in bed at home considering our next move. After a time, the idea hit me that we might take our "word-of-mouth" program, the one I've already described, and amplify it into several more steps. This would make our program perfectly explicit. The necessary ground could be covered so thoroughly that no rationalizing alcoholic could misunderstand or wiggle away by that familiar process. We might also be able to hit readers at a distance, people to whom we could offer no personal help at the moment. Therefore, a more thorough job of codification had to be done.

With only this in mind I began to sketch the new steps on a yellow pad. To my astonishment, they seemed to come very easily and with incredible rapidity. Perhaps the writing required no more than twenty or thirty minutes. Seemingly I had to think little at all. It was only when I came to the end of the writing that I re-read and counted them. Curiously enough, they numbered twelve and required almost no editing. They looked surprisingly good — at least to me. Of course I felt vastly encouraged.

In the course of this writing, I had considerably changed the order of the presentation. In our word-of-mouth program, we had reversed mention of God to the very end. For some reason, unknown to me, I had transposed this to almost the very beginning. In my original draft of the Twelve Steps, God was mentioned several times and only as God. It never occurred to me to qualify this to "God as we understand Him" as we did later on. Otherwise, the Twelve Steps stand today almost exactly as they were first written.

When these Steps were shown to my friends, their reactions were mixed indeed. Some argued that six steps had worked fine, so why twelve? From our agnostic contingent there were loud cries of too much "God." Others objected to an expression which I had included which suggested getting on one's knees while in prayer. I heavily resisted these objections for months. But I finally did my statement about a suitable prayerful posture and finally went along with that now tremendously important expression, "God as we understand Him" — this expression having been coined, I think, by one of our former atheist members. This was indeed a ten-strike. That one has since enabled thousands to join AA who would have otherwise gone away. It enabled people of fine religious training and those of none at all to associate freely and to work together. It made one's religion the business of the AA member himself and not that of his society.

That AA's Twelve Steps have since been held in such high esteem by the Church, that members of the Jesuit Order have repeatedly drawn attention to the similarity between them and the Ignatian Exercises, is a matter for our great wonder and gratitude indeed.

Father Z.: You mentioned Dr. Shoemaker, the Episcopal Rector and one time Oxford Grouper, who helped you so much. Somewhere I have seen him quoted to the effect that three men started it all. So do you mind telling us what happened to your own sponsor, your friend Ebby?

Bill W.: I think I have already traced the connection between Dr. Jung, his alcoholic patient Roland, and my friend Ebby. They were, of course, associated in the Oxford Groups when Ebby came to me that November day in 1934 at my home in Brooklyn. It was Ebby who brought me the message that saved my life and uncounted thousands of others.

Because of gratitude and old friendship, my wife Lois and I invited Ebby to live at our home shortly after I sobered up. The son of a well-to-do family in Albany, he had never learned any profession. So he was broke and had to begin all over. These were difficult circumstances, naturally. Ebby stayed with us something like a year and a half. Being intent on getting re-established in life, he took little interest in helping other alcoholics. Little by little, he commenced the rationalization we have seen so often. He began to say that if only he had the right romance and the right job then things would be okay. At length, he fell by the wayside. He would not mind if I tell this — it is a part of his story today.

For many years, my friend Ebby was on the wagon and then off. Sometimes he could stay sober for a year or more. He tried living with Lois and me for another considerable period. But apparently this was of no help. Maybe we actually hindered him. As AA began to grow, his position became difficult. For a long time things went from bad to worse.

About six years ago the groups down in Texas decided to try their hand. Ebby was shipped non-stop to Dallas and placed in an AA drying-out place. In these new surroundings in Texas, far from his old failures, he has made a splendid recovery. Excepting for one slip which occurred about a year after his arrival down there, he has been bone dry ever since. This is one of the deepest satisfactions that has ever come to me since AA started and many another AA can say the same.

Father A.B.: Bill, you have undoubtedly through the years had much experience with people who slip. Doubtless you know how difficult it is for some priests to make the program. Have you anything to say about this?

Bill W.: Well, I must confess that in recent years I have been greatly pre-occupied with our World Service structure, and all the sort of thing. Nevertheless, some of my closest friends are priests who have recovered through AA. From time to time I hear about their specially difficult situation.

Though priests enjoy very special advantages, they are, at the same time, severely handicapped. Like medical men, they are experts in treating people — the MD treats the body, the priest, under God's grace, treats the soul. The priest, especially, must feel a huge burden of guilt. On the other side of the coin marked "guilt" is often inscribed the words "false pride." As a professional teacher it is pretty hard for a priest to take AA lessons from plumbers and bankers, many of whom never had any religious training or instruction whatever. It's the same way with the doctors, particularly with the psychiatrists.

Therefore, we are extremely glad that the Church, through the agency of this Conference, is taking great notice and a new understanding of the plight of these clergymen who are in alcohol difficulties.

I know that many experiments of a special nature are being tried for their rehabilitation. These range all the way from straight attendance at AA meetings to private groups and to specially constructed institutional care. I am sure that all of these resources will find applications according to the several necessities of those needing such care, understanding, and treatment.

Father A.B.: What about slips in general? You must have witnessed a lot of them.

Bill W.: The subject of slips is a very large one. It takes in a lot of territory. Slips can often be charged to rebellion and some of us surely are more rebellious than others. Slips can be charged to carelessness, to complacency. Many of us fail to ride out such periods sober. Slips are due to the illusion that one can be "cured" of alcoholism. Things go fine for two or three years then the member is seen no more. He gets busy putting two cars in the garage and again returns to keeping up with the Joneses. That almost surely spells trouble. Some of us suffer extreme guilt because of vices or practices that we can't or won't let go of. Too much guilt, too little exertion, too little prayer — well, this combination certainly adds up to slips. Then some of us are far more alcohol-damaged than others. Still others encounter a series of calamities and cannot seem to find the spiritual resources with which to meet them, or else in frustration they simply won't try as hard as they can. There are those who are physically ill. Others are subject to more or less continuous exhaustion, anxiety, and depression. These conditions often play a part in slips. Sometimes they seem utterly controlling.

Then there is the sort of acute physical tension which greatly aggravates our emotional reactions. There seems little doubt that the glandular system in many alcoholics is much out of whack, that this condition is responsible for a high degree of physical tension. This tension and its emotional consequences finally become so terrific that some of us are literally driven back into alcohol, or worse still, into becoming sleeping pill addicts. Therefore, we sometimes slip because there is a limit to our endurance. While sleeping pills are an addictive menace, a relief we cannot use at all, it may be that the actual physical causes of these tensions will one day be located. If this happens, it may be that these defects can be medically corrected without resort to addictive materials. Let us prayerfully hope so.

This condition of physical tensions explains the behavior of many people who try ever so hard to get the AA program, the ones who mystify us because they cannot make the grade. They may well be the subject of unbearable emotional pain. Of course this does not absolve them from all responsibility. It was their former behavior that doubtless deranged them physically as well as emotionally. But as I have said, this matter of slips is a very big subject. We can know ourselves only a little, and other people not much at all. Therefore, these observations of mine are largely speculations, speculations in which I trust there is at least a degree of truth.

Father Kennedy: Bill, I want to tell you in the name of this entire Conference that we are deeply grateful to you for coming down here.

Bill W.: With all of the earnestness and feeling that I can command, I wish to thank you for this hour and for what each and all of you have contributed to it. Most gratefully I acknowledge what the Church has meant to me, and to so very many of us.

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