

PAIN AT THE BEGINNING OF AA

By Jim Mcl.

The Blue Book, Vol. XLV, 1994

Winter Park, Florida

My name is Jim Mcl., and I am an alcoholic. I belong to a group called the "Friday Morning Group," in Dunedin, Florida, the next town to where I live. I am real happy to be here. I am happy to be anyplace! At my high school graduation, just before the curtain went up in Town Hall, the Brother principal let go and put the imprint of his hand on my face. He said, "Mcl., you stink." That was during prohibition and we seniors had gotten into some "needle beer." I was an instant alcoholic. Instead of the title you have here on the program, I would just as soon call this the "nostalgic wanderings of a dyslexic old man."

I am going to try to tell you about some of the personal and AA problems in the early days. There were three waves of "growth" in AA, two ahead of the AA I entered. The first was the original people in 1935, the next were those who came to AA as a result of the Jack Alexander article. They came in after WWII. When I came in there were about twelve thousand members throughout the world. A lot of them were in the military in Germany. There were twelve groups in a radius of one hundred miles from New York. The meeting list was a simple mimeograph sheet. We did not have any steps. The meetings were so very different. I did not go immediately to closed meetings because the first problem I encountered in AA was a discussion going on about how we will "use the money." Send it to the alcoholic foundation? Will we make a club? The discussion got heated and I heard bones crack and I saw blood, and I said "What the hell am I getting into?" You know this is what I am trying to get away from! I was so frightened of closed meetings, I cheated myself.

I grew up in the South Bronx and went to school in Harlem. I was a street kid. I finally wound up going to the seminary; that did not last long! It was Christmas in 1931. We were in the chancel all dressed up and sitting on the little stools in St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was a very cold night. We knew some people up in the Bronx who had pretty daughters whose parents made homemade whiskey. We had gone up earlier for a visit, and they had been very generous. I can remember coming back into the back entrance of St. Patrick's after several drinks of whiskey. I was sitting out in front in the chancel. Cardinal Hayes, who was a short man, was sitting way up high behind me. My office book was on my kneeler and the next thing I knew there was a thud. It had fallen onto the marble, and it had resounded throughout the whole cathedral. The Cardinal was behind me, and I turned around. He held up his hand . . . that was my second clip. I will not burden you with the rest of it! This was an interesting thing: When the rector sent me on my way, he said to me, "Mcl., you are more like Martin Luther than Martin Luther. You've set the Church back four hundred years." I said, "Father, I know that the church has been set back, but don't feel as though I'm to blame for all of it." He told me that if I could take care of the drinking I could come back in a year. I traded what passing marks I had for social work at New York University. That was where you got the best exchange. I did not want to become a social worker particularly. However, I decided it would get me through school more quickly. It was still depression time. I worked for awhile and then went to two more schools after that, and then on to City College and Columbia University. I worked as a social worker. I only lasted until 1938. I was discharged from all the good agencies and sent to the agencies that were not so good. I was discharged because I put a bottle of homemade whiskey on my desk and said to a client, "Here, have a drink. Nothing I have will help you as much as this will help you!" That was the end of my social work. Many years later, after I had gotten into AA and got squared away, I went to Canada to redeem myself and become a social worker. I spent three years going to school there; it took me until 1968 to get my certification. But I did want to complete what I had started out to do. When I came into AA I weighed 137 pounds. I had a wine rash that extended from my waist to my toes. I had body lice. I had no hope. I lost a family and a beautiful daughter (fortunately today I have her back), but I did not get the wife back. I went to a retreat on Staten Island. I had a little overnight bag with about what you are wearing now, and also I had three one-half pint bottles of homemade whiskey — one for Friday night, one for Saturday night, and one for the benediction on Sunday.

I tried very hard. I can remember at one point going into St. Francis Church at 33rd Street. It was a Saturday morning and I had no money to bring home. I can remember saying to the priest, "Father, I have a problem." The Father said, "I can smell your problem." I made retreats. I went to seek medical help and there were no answers. I can remember when I got my first book on Social Psychology. I quickly looked up dipso-

mania; they did not call it alcoholism then. The answer was quick and short. It said that this group is almost impossible to help. They generally wind up dead or in an insane asylum. I can remember standing on corners saying to myself, "I only need two drinks." Also saying to myself, "What will help?" I did not know what would happen. I did not know where I would wind up; that was frightening! I never heard of AA until I was in it. I was on one of those geographical drunks, and I walked on the railroad tracks from Providence, Rhode Island. I remember passing Yale University. I do remember waking up in a New York City subway. I remember a young man who was in a class ahead of me in high school bringing me to his house. I would not stay because he had two children, and I knew I had body lice. He brought me to a fellow that was in his last year in seminary when I was in my first year. I guess it was no secret this man was an AA Pastor at a church on the West Side of New York. Tom said it was a good thing you came, because I have a parishioner who had the same kind of problem, and he has been sober for three months. That was my introduction to AA. He and another fellow brought me to my first meeting. That was my spiritual experience. I wondered how anybody could get that close to anything. They gave me hope and understanding. I was able to have him as a sponsor for the next twenty-two years. It was all uphill. I worked as a day laborer. I worked as a coal passer. I worked as a fireman on steam boilers. After I got into AA, I wound up being an operating engineer setting steel and pouring concrete over tunnels and bridges. That is where I started to get really involved in AA. Early on my sponsor was asked to chair a meeting in the Bronx. It was the only group in the Bronx, Bronx County, Marion Avenue. The monsignor who was the Pastor there was going to be at our 5th Anniversary. Ronnie could not be there and asked me to chair the meeting. But the monsignor said, "I have good news! The Pioneers from Ireland are going to be here." The Pioneers and AA are a lot like Arafat and the Jewish community! I said, "I'm a traditionalist and how am I going to get around this because I don't understand the pastor." At the same time I do not want to have AA up in arms! To make a long story short, the priest from Ireland did not show up! He got lost and it saved the day for me. I was doing a fair amount of 12th-Step work. They used to send the priests to me. The priests could not go to AA. I had the occasion to ask why this was happening, and nobody wanted to talk about it. Tom Donnellon, who later became the Bishop in Atlanta, and I used to meet for lunch occasionally. I said, "Tom, could you see what you can do, these men aren't able to get to AA?" He told me a story. I will try to tell it quickly. You could appreciate that it was one of the problems. It seems as though that there was a woman in our group by the name of Kitty. Kitty was a wonderful AA member. She was also the housekeeper at the Cardinal's residence. She had been the housekeeper for the Vanderbilts! She was charming! Maybe about 40-45 years old, and we knew this to be fact because we were in the group with Kitty. She had a beautiful daughter in her early twenties. Kitty got drunk and told the Cardinal off. She told the Cardinal that she was now a lesbian and no longer going to the Catholic Church. I can appreciate why the Cardinal would feel the way he did, but that was a problem.

Then we had another religious problem. There was a monsignor who gave a whole series of lectures on apologetics. He was converting a great number of people. They were a lot of "biggies." Word got out that Bill W. was converting. I am not telling you anything you do not already know. The people out in the community did not take kindly to it at all. They felt very strongly that this was not the way to go. Fortunately, Bill did not go that way. It would have split AA down the middle! You see, the church has skeletons in the closet and so does AA. Bill W. and Dr. Bob were having a kind of misunderstanding over General Service. As I said, when I came into AA it was just the Steps and Recovery. Then later on we had the Traditions and Unity. Then after that we got the third Legacy. We ran samples of what it was going to be nationwide for all of North America. I wound up as chairman for the Southeast district of New York. People were not enthused (I do not even know if they are today), but at any rate, Bill came from an LSD/Niacin vitamin kick over to this way of thinking. It was healthy, but it did cause problems. Another thing that caused problems was theological drunkenness. That passed on from the clergy to the ladies. I was talking to one of the Jesuits earlier today about Father John Ford, who did a marvelous job on Depth Psychology and Alcoholism. When we were doing counselor training, we would insist that the trainees get that "under their belt." I noticed that in some way he opened the door for AA meetings in South Bronx, at St. Jerome's basement. We had a lot of Irish immigrants there. They were very interested in AA. They came into AA and embraced it wholeheartedly. After three to four weeks they would not show up at meetings. "Where have you been, we missed you." Now they were saying, "If a man goes to confession and communion that's all he needs." A Jesuit out in New Jersey came to the rescue. He posted a little pamphlet. It was called "A Jesuit Looks at AA." He talked explicitly about whose who substituted church for AA. The next sentence was, "That's where we get broken Christians from." It was effective! I figured

if I got my daughter through college then I would do what I set out to do in the first place. Get my M.S.W. I found a place in Alberta, Canada who would take me in, The Alberta Alcoholism Foundation. If you read Nell Wing's book, you will read about the man who endorsed it, George Strachan. I worked for him. The deal was I would go to school for three years, and I would work for him for three years to make sure I would pay him back. He would pay the tuition if I got a C or better. It was study all week, and study twelve hours on the weekend, six hours on Saturday, and six hours on Sunday, for three years. It accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. While I was there, the subject of "LSD" cropped up again. At Saskatchewan Medical School two doctors were working on it in conjunction with schizophrenia and alcoholism. Over in Alberta, if it came by way of a physician, they were allowed to use LSD. I was in the Edmonton office. Some of our staff down in Calgary used it, and it destroyed two of them. My superior in Edmonton used it, and it destroyed him. I had one patient, in outpatient group, who was the kindest man. He never had any sex problems. After taking LSD, he drank liquid shoe polish and attempted to molest a neighbor lady. LSD became a real problem in the AA community.

By now I was one of those "two hatters" working in the field. I was going to AA meetings, did not drink, and at the same time worked with the professionals. The polarization kept getting worse and worse. That was a real problem for us when we treated people and went to meetings ourselves.

Later on, when I came to work for Marty Mann, there was a thrust for "homework" at the National Council. It was to extend to physicians the knowledge that AA had. It was totally misunderstood. In New York another one of the problems was that they wanted Marty's "head on a platter" because she was a professional!! I went with the "mighty Mann" to the National Council in Milwaukee. The thrust there was good. It was a community saturated with information on alcoholism. The AA community was a good healthy one. The work that we did at the office was in guidance and referral. That got me very attached to the workings of Al-Anon. I cannot say enough good things about Al-Anon. In my mind Al-Anon is very important. I once did an in-house survey: For every one person sent off to AA, I sent eleven to Al-Anon. Then you would go to meetings, and generally the woman that you sent off to Al-Anon would introduce you to her husband!! In our work we focus on the alcoholic, and you cannot treat an alcoholic in a vacuum. What brought me and a lot of other people into AA is social pressure of some kind. Even a passive threat, — a partner or family member going to Al-Anon — makes it possible. It is a threat to the poor, sick alcoholic.

I would like to say something about Milton Maxwell. There were two other fellows and myself who worked with him on a book. It took twelve years of work to complete it. The book was called The AA Experience. It was published in 1984. It is the only real authentic book on AA because it was written, every word in it, by members of AA. There were some good books out there. I am not saying that some of the stuff, what I call "bootleg" stuff, was no good. You know Clinebell's work was wonderful. There again, there were problems. There were problems because he gave too much of himself to AA. He made a deal with the treasurer of the group at St. Elizabeth's Church to give them half of the treasury. He was selling his books, and he got so enthused that he gave them the whole treasury and never functioned from then on. I am the first one to say his books were great. They were wonderful!

Then I was pirated away from the National Council, which was only ninety miles north of Milwaukee, in Northridge. Pastor John Keller knew me from this school in Northridge, and he tracked me down through Milton Maxwell. He made me an offer. He said to me, "Why don't you leave what you're doing?" I was trained in treatment. I started out at the Burt Foundation to work in education. I never got out of the treatment part of it because you had to go three months to the treatment section before you took your job. I liked treatment!! I went to work for them (Dr. Bradley and Pastor John Keller) in Park Ridge, Illinois, and that was one of the best things that happened to me in my life. Here were four of us who developed this program. It was built on "Human Ecology" that fit very comfortably in the philosophy of AA that a person is sick physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

My job was to build a bridge between a hostile AA community and a treatment program. A lot of people in the AA General Service office had grown up in my local group. I called and talked with them about taking a job and they said, "Jim, you're crazy to go Chicago. There are problems there." Maybe not because I am a catalyst, but because I am really crazy I took the job! I never looked back. We had a psychiatrist, psychologist, Lutheran Pastor, and myself. What they wanted was a social worker who was also a recovering alcoholic. We were calling the shots. We did put together a very fine program that became a prototype for almost all the programs around the country for many years. My job in a five year period was to bring some harmony

between the professionals and AA. I tried going out to a couple of different groups, and I felt like I was poison! Everybody ran to the other end of the room when they found out where I worked. I said, "We are so decent and so respected that there must be a way to let them see what we are like." So we developed a thing called the "bridge group." We invited AA, Al-Anon, clergy, physicians, employers, . . . everyone, once a week to sit with the patients, and asked them to talk about whatever they wanted to talk about. It took off to a point that we wound up with eight of these groups each Friday. We kept having it in the daytime because if we had it at night we could not accommodate the members. It took three years to build a huge waiting list. But we did more than that; we let the AA community know what we were like. By then we developed a volunteer system. It was not a new thing with me, because in Towns Hospital there was a volunteer system. The volunteers would stay the night on a cot and we developed an overnight volunteer program. If I am not mistaken, we had over a thousand very tightly supervised volunteers. We made it a badge of honor to be a volunteer. There was a waiting list, even though you had to be sober for at least a year. Those were the days of glory because we were able to teach people before they were discharged. If they wanted to learn AA, they had to read the AA literature. They had to find out what the three Legacies were. Today it is a very helpful community. Wherever there is really good AA and good Al-Anon, there is a good treatment center. Where there are good treatment centers, there is good AA and good Al-Anon. I think they complement each other. I left Park Ridge; as a matter of fact, all four of us left about the same time and went in different directions. I went to a place called Little Alina Lodge. I only stayed there a year because I had philosophical differences with the management. Then I went to South Miami Hospital and found a good healthy AA community. There used to be a pamphlet called "Medicine Looks at AA." Now I would be more inclined to say "AA Looks at Medicine." We are in a position, those of us who are comfortable with church, religion, and theology, to develop some spirituality and value systems that are compatible with AA.

I would like to thank you for having me. If you are looking for sobriety, I hope you find it. If you have not, may God guide your feet there. I hope you live all of your life! And remember, all of us, each one of us is part child of God and part horse's ass. Thank You.