

A Member's- Eye View of Alcoholics Anonymous



This is A.A. General Service
Conference-approved literature

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS[®] is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

- The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.
- A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.
- Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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**A Member's-
Eye View of
Alcoholics Anonymous**

This pamphlet is designed to explain to people in the helping professions how A.A. works. Though the A.A. program relies upon the sharing of experience, strength and hope among alcoholics, the recovery process itself is highly individual, adapted by each member to meet his or her needs. Therefore, the program is described here as it appears to one member; but the pamphlet does reflect Fellowship thinking since it has been approved by the A.A. General Service Conference.

The author of this paper delivered it first before a class on alcoholism counseling at one of our large universities. A.A. World Services, Inc. wishes to thank him for his generous permission to reprint and distribute this talk.

I SHOULD LIKE TO SPEAK to you tonight from a prepared text — for this reason: Heretofore in my association with Alcoholics Anonymous, I have spoken *in* A.A. or to one of its derivative organizations, Al-Anon or Alateen. I have been participating *in* a therapy, and *I* have been the subject. Therefore, the more *subjective* the talk, the better. Tonight I have been asked to talk *about* that therapy, and the difference becomes immediately apparent. It seems to me that I should try to be as *objective* as possible, and this seemed to me to call for advance thought and preparation. How objective a member can be about an organization which he feels has helped save his life and his sanity is a moot question, but I can try.

My task tonight is more difficult than it would first appear, because — as those of you who are members of A.A. already know — there is no *official* interpretation which I can blithely pass along to you. There is no “party line,” no official body of dogma or doctrine to which the members subscribe, no creed that we recite. Even if the surviving co-founder of A.A. himself* were standing before you tonight, he could tell you only how it all appears to him. I personally consider this absence of orthodoxy one of A.A.’s strongest and most therapeutic principles — and I hope to cover this in more detail later — but it can be a bit of a burden at a time like this. The fact remains that whatever I say tonight is and must remain a totally personal statement. In fact, what I am about to say might very well be titled “A Member’s-Eye View of Alcoholics Anonymous.” And since I am saying it within the halls of a university all I ask is that you listen in a spirit of honest and open-minded inquiry.

*Bill W. died January 24, 1971.

Why I have been asked to say it, I think you already know. Since one of A.A.'s strongest Traditions is that "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion," I am not here to try to sell it to you — whether you are a future counselor or a present alcoholic. A.A.'s track record as compared with other methods of recovery from alcoholism speaks for itself, and I am sure you have long since been apprised of that record in this classroom.

Now, it is quite logical to assume that if one method of approaching a problem yields noticeably better and more spectacular results than others, then that method must contain some unique factor or factors that set it apart and form the basis of its superiority. Is this true of Alcoholics Anonymous? If so, what constitutes this uniqueness?

Perhaps our search can be ended quickly with a definition of Alcoholics Anonymous. What might be termed its "official" definition and the one read at many A.A. meetings goes as follows:

"Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

"The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

Yes it is lengthy, and like most definitions abroad in the world today, it rather successfully evades telling you what it is by emphasizing what it is not.

Let's see if we can do better in A.A.'s basic textbook, the volume *Alcoholics Anonymous*,

first published in 1939 and written by Bill W., with the help and advice of the first hundred alcoholics who were able to achieve a year of sobriety. In Chapter V, entitled “How It Works,” we find these words:

“Our description of the alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas:

“(a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.

“(b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.

“(c) That God could and would if He were sought.”

These so-called ideas, while more specific, are certainly not unique to Alcoholics Anonymous. Man has been beaten to his knees in an admission of personal helplessness since time began. Likewise, since time began he has turned to the idea of a supernatural Being who would deliver him from his fate if he performed certain rituals and observed certain rules. There is obviously no new or different factor here, yet the three “ideas” we have just heard are the very cornerstone of A.A.’s philosophy. So where can we turn now in our effort to isolate A.A.’s uniqueness?

The first sentence of the first definition I read to you contains the only “is” statement I have ever been able to find in all of A.A.’s literature. Let’s listen to it again:

“Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.”

Once again, is there anything totally new here? The experiences of alcoholics are essentially the same. While they may differ in circumstances, the theme is always the same: a progressive deterioration of the human personality. And the levels of strength and hope these men and women possess vary from day

to day, in both degree and substance. What then is the *constant* factor? What is A.A.'s unique difference?

Could our answer lie in the *manner* in which this experience, strength and hope are shared, and — much more important — *who* is sharing them? Is the secret contained, as most secrets are, in how it all began?

Long before there was a definition of A.A., before there was a book or Steps or Traditions or a program of recovery, there was a night in Akron, Ohio, only a short 33 years* ago. A night when a man named Bill W., alone in a strange city, shaken and frightened, concluded that his only hope of maintaining his present hard-won sobriety was to talk to and try to help another alcoholic. So far as I know, that is the first recorded instance where one alcoholic *consciously* and *deliberately* turned to another alcoholic, not to drink with, but to stay sober with.

In the fateful meeting of Bill W. and Doctor Bob the next evening was an answer finally given to that rhetorical question which Christ asked two thousand years ago? "If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into the pit?" And in 1935 was the answer, strangely enough, "No"? But perhaps what occurred that evening was not a contradiction of Christ's maxim. Perhaps one who was a little less blind, one who was at last able to discern vague shapes and forms, described what he saw to one who still lived in total darkness.

Much more important than *what* was said that evening was *who* was saying it. Long before the average alcoholic walks through the doors of his first A.A. meeting, he has sought help from others or help has been offered to him, in some instances even forced upon him. But these helpers are always *superior* beings: spouses, parents, physicians, employers, priests, ministers, rabbis, swamis, judges, policemen, even bartenders. The moral culpability of the alcoholic and the moral superiority of the helper,

*At the time this paper was written. The year referred to is 1935.

even though unstated, are always clearly understood. The overtone of parental disapproval and discipline in these authority figures is always present. For the first time, 33 years ago an alcoholic suddenly heard a different drummer. Instead of the constant and menacing rat-a-tat-tat of “This is what you should do,” he heard an instantly recognizable voice saying, “This is what I did.”

I am personally convinced that the basic search of every human being, from the cradle to the grave, is to find at least one other human being before whom he can stand completely naked, stripped of all pretense or defense, and trust that person not to hurt him, because that other person has stripped himself naked, too. This lifelong search can begin to end with the first A.A. encounter.

One of A.A.’s early differences — the idea that alcoholism is a disease — is now no longer unique. While discussion of the exact nature of this disease and its possible cure may well go on forever, no reasonably intelligent person seems any longer to quarrel with this conclusion. However, the impact of the alcoholic’s discovery of this fact from the lips of another alcoholic remains undiminished. To alcoholics swamped with guilt and shame, the words “I found I had a disease, and I found a way to arrest it” constitute immediate absolution for many, and for others at least a ray of hope that they might one day earn absolution.

It seems to me that what happens to an alcoholic on his first encounter with A.A. is that he realizes he has been invited to *share* in the experience of recovery. And the key word in that sentence is the word “share.” Whether he responds to it immediately or ever is not at that moment important. What is important is that the invitation has been extended and remains, and that he has been invited to share as an equal and not as a mendicant. No matter what his initial reaction, even the sickest alcoholic is hard put to deny to himself that he has been offered understanding, equality, and an

already-proved way out. And he is made to feel that he is, in fact, *entitled* to all this; indeed, he has already earned it, simply because he is an alcoholic.

If the alcoholic responds to this invitation, he then encounters what I believe is A.A.'s second unique factor: A.A. treats the *symptom* first. It may come as a surprise to some that, from a short 30 years ago, when the idea was fairly revolutionary, Alcoholics Anonymous has consistently emphasized its conviction that alcoholism is, to use its own phrase, "the symptom of deeper troubles." However, A.A. also believes that the cleverest diagnosis of these troubles is of little benefit if the patient dies. Autopsies do not benefit the person upon whom they are performed. Sometimes sooner, sometimes later, A.A. seems to be able to get over to its neophytes that total abstinence is the name of the game. In A.A., the cart does come before the horse. The first step is still the First Step. No newcomer to A.A. is ever left in any real doubt that recovery can begin only with a decision to "stay away from the first drink." And he soon learns that no one can or will make that decision for him. In fact, he soon further learns that if he makes the decision, no one can or will force him to implement it. In A.A., the choice begins and always remains with the alcoholic himself.

The desire, as well as the ability, to make this decision often results, I believe, from what appears to be A.A.'s third unique quality: The intuitive understanding the alcoholic receives, while compassionate, is not indulgent. The "therapists" in A.A. already have their doctorates in the four fields where the alcoholic reigns supreme: phoniness, self-deception, evasion, and self-pity. He is not *asked* what he is thinking. He is *told* what he is thinking. No one waits to trap him in a lie. He is told what lies he is getting ready to tell. In the end, he begins to achieve honesty by default. There's not much point in trying to fool people who may have invented the game you're playing.

There is yet a fourth factor in A.A. which I feel can be found nowhere else, and that is the recovered alcoholic's omnipresent, bottomless, enthusiastic willingness to talk about alcoholism — its ins and its outs, its whys and its wherefores, its because and begats. Without the newcomer's ever becoming fully aware of it, his fascination with alcohol, his thirst, his desire, yea, even his need for a drink is literally talked to death. It has always seemed exquisitely fitting to me that people who once used their mouths to get sick now use them to get well.

Finally, there is the reversal of form which A.A.'s educational process takes. The newcomer to A.A. is asked, not so much to learn new values, as to unlearn those he comes in with; not so much to adopt new goals, as to abandon old ones. To my mind, one of the most significant sentences in the entire book *Alcoholics Anonymous* is this: "Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely." The rigidity with which even some nondrinking alcoholics will cling to the opinions, beliefs, and convictions they had upon entering A.A. is well-nigh incredible. One of the major objectives of A.A. therapy is to help the alcoholic finally recognize these ideas and become willing to relinquish his death grip on them.

Now then, you ask, where can these unique factors be found? Where are they at work? Where do they occur? Is the answer always such and such a meeting at such and such an address at such and such a time? No. The real answer is that this unique therapy occurs wherever two alcoholics meet: at home, at lunch, in a street, in a car, on the sidewalk, on a porch, and oh God, on the telephone. There is only one requirement: One of them should be sober. But even this is not absolutely necessary. I am living proof that two drunken alcoholics, once having been exposed to A.A., can talk each other into returning.

At this point you may very well ask: Out of all this uniqueness, what finally happens?

Well, I'll admit that's the heart of the matter, all right, and I only wish the answer was as easy as the question. On second thought, there is an easy answer. I could echo a saying that has long winged its way down the corridors of A.A.: "The miracle of A.A. occurs." There's no doubt that those words would get me out from under — poetically and beautifully. But I don't think either of us would know very much more than we did before the question was posed.

There is a widely held belief in A.A. that if a newcomer will simply continue to attend meetings, "Something will finally rub off on you." And the implication, of course, is that the something which rubs off will be this so-called miracle of A.A. Now, there is no doubt in my mind that many people in A.A. accept this statement quite literally. I have observed them over the years. They faithfully attend meetings, faithfully waiting for "something to rub off." The funny part about it is that "something" is rubbing off on them. Death. They sit there — week after month after year — while mental, spiritual, and physical *rigor mortis* slowly sets in.

I believe the real "miracle of A.A.," the "something" that will rub off, we hope, is simply the alcoholic's willingness to *act*. *Why* he finally becomes willing, I hope to touch on later. Right now, let's turn our attention to what it is he becomes willing to do.

A.A. has been happily called "a program of action." In fact, one of our most-quoted aphorisms is "Action is the magic word." When the newcomer hears this, he invariably gets a mental picture of his attending meetings, making what are known as "Twelfth Step calls" on other alcoholics, speaking at meetings, joining committees — in general, a kind of constant rushing to and from. Let's see whether this is what it really is.

Quoting from Chapter V of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*:

"Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

"1. We admitted we were powerless over

alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

“2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

“3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

“4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

“5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

“6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

“7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

“8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

“9. Made direct amends to such people 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.”

What you have just heard are A.A.’s famed Twelve Steps. They have been described by various members at various times in various phrases, ranging from “The Golden Stairs to Happiness” to “all that God stuff.”

Now I shall try to pose some questions which may help us understand the impact the Twelve Steps have had upon the lives of thousands of alcoholics, and their already-demonstrated efficacy in dealing with the problem of alcoholism.

First, does it come as a surprise to you, as it did to me, that there is nothing physical in

this program — no leafy, green vegetables, no vitamins, no daily calisthenics? I think this is because, from the very beginning, the alcoholic in A.A. has believed that the physical aspects of our disease would have little import if they were not accompanied by an equally progressive spiritual deterioration. If the major thing we had to worry about was the physical allergy to alcohol, then I believe A.A. would never have happened, because it would never have been needed. At various times I have been strongly allergic to various foods: to strawberries, but I have never had to join Strawberries Anonymous; to pork but I didn't have to change my religion to abstain from it.

If, then, alcoholism is largely a spiritual disease requiring a spiritual healing, does it come as a surprise to you, as it did to me, that there is nothing new in a spiritual sense, nothing startlingly different or unique in this program? Most of these ideas have been around since man crawled out of the cave. Many of them existed in even primitive societies, and every alcoholic — no matter how irreligious or unethical he may have succeeded in keeping himself — at some time must have used some or all of them as a set of values by which to measure himself. To believe that the alcoholic who approaches A.A. is an unprincipled, untaught barbarian, suddenly transformed by the previously unavailable spiritual illumination of the Twelve Steps, is, to me, utter foolishness.

Once again, we are confronted with an aspect of A.A.'s therapy which has had a totally new impact without, apparently, any accompanying newness of substance. Where, then, could the difference be?

I believe it lies in *the way the Steps are presented*, rather than what they contain: They are reports of action taken, rather than rules not to be broken under pain of drunkenness.

I have often wondered what the course of mankind might have been if the Ten Commandments had been presented in this same manner, rather than as blunt commandments negatively expressed: "We honored our father and our

mother.” “We remembered to keep holy the Sabbath.” “We honored the name of the Lord our God and took it not in vain.” “We bore no false witness against our neighbor.”

In A.A., the reporting is clear and unmistakable. “Here are the steps we took,” say those who have gone before. The newcomer finally sees that he, too, must take these Steps before he is entitled to report on them. And in an atmosphere where the constant subject is “What I did” and “What I think,” no neurotic can long resist the temptation to get in on the action. In an organization whose members are always secretly convinced that they are unique, no neurotic is long going to be contented with a report of what *others* are doing. Whether by accident or design or supernatural guidance, the Twelve Steps are so framed and presented that the alcoholic can either ignore them completely, take them cafeteria-style, or embrace them wholeheartedly. In any case, he can report only on what *he* has done. Till he does, he knows that he is more a guest of A.A. than a member, and this is a situation that is finally intolerable to the alcoholic. He must take at least some of the Steps, or go away. In my opinion, this is the answer to what finally rubs off on the waiting, inactive, often hostile A.A. member, and also the answer as to *why* it happens.

The presentation of the Twelve Steps as reports of action taken, rather than as commandments to be followed, also forms the basis of A.A.’s conspicuous absence of any formalized body of dogma or doctrine. No member is ever told that he *must* perform these Steps or return to a life of drunkenness. A person who says he is a member of A.A. is a member of A.A., no matter how sparingly or wholeheartedly he takes the Steps. Members range from those who loudly and untiringly proclaim, “I’ve stayed sober for x-number of years on the First and Twelfth Steps,” to those who just as untiringly exhort, “Utilize, don’t analyze.” The first group seems to be able to blithely ignore the qualifying cause of the Twelfth Step, “Having

had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps,” and is apparently content with what to others may be a sadly circumscribed and impoverished sobriety. The latter group seems equally able to ignore the fact that the very exhortation *not* to analyze is the result of these members’ own analysis.

Since I am speaking to you as present and future counselors, rather than as alcoholics, I do not wish to dwell on the Steps at length. But there are some aspects of these Steps which I feel must not be overlooked, since I am sure they will come up again and again in your future work.

The first is what is sometimes called, crudely if aptly, “the God bit.” As A.A. becomes more and more international, as it moves abroad from the Judeo-Christian ethic of the American society in which it was founded, while it is even now being tested more and more here at home, this basic principle of A.A.’s recovery program is bound to come under more and more scrutiny and be held more and more in question.

The founders of A.A., it is obvious, felt that alcoholics need the help of a Power greater than themselves. But again, whether by accident, design, or divine guidance, they have wisely refrained from strictly defining this Power. While A.A. literature has used and continues to use the personal pronoun which describes the concept of a personal deity, a belief in this concept is by no means required. In fact, I am convinced that the greater a member’s years in A.A., the less important the *nature* of this Power becomes. I and most of the members I know seem to progress over the years from a search for a God we can understand to a belief in a God who understands us.

The founders of A.A. also hastened to clarify their original use of the terms “spiritual experience” and “spiritual awakening” to describe the personality change they believed to be indispensable to permanent recovery. In the Appendix to the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, we find these words:

“Among our rapidly growing membership of thousands of alcoholics, such transformations [i.e., sudden, spectacular upheavals of a religious nature], though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the ‘educational variety’ because they develop slowly over a period of time.... He [the newcomer] finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone.”

In the Twelve Traditions, A.A. claims “but one ultimate authority... a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.” However, I would remind you that these groups are made up of alcoholics, and by the time it can be determined *what* the collective conscience has decided, even the most militant atheist or persistent agnostic can have stayed sober for years.

It may also appear to some of you that in the Fourth and Fifth of its Twelve Steps, A.A. might very well be accused of talking out of both sides of its mouth at once. If you will recall, these Steps are:

“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.”

Here, it would appear, is an organization that on the one hand claims there is no moral culpability involved in the disease of alcoholism, and on the other suggests to its members that recovery entails a searching and fearless accounting of this culpability to God and to another human being. I personally feel that this apparent paradox results from the empirical knowledge gained by the founders of A.A. I believe they found, as we all have since, that no matter what you tell the newcomer about the disease of alcoholism, he still *feels* guilty. He cannot blind himself to the moral *consequences* of his drinking: the blight he has

visited upon those around him and the shame and degradation he has inflicted on himself. This load of conventional guilt — and I use the word “conventional” advisedly — as well as the alcoholic’s stubborn and perverse wish to cling to it, is the oldest of his “old ideas.” It is the oldest because it started first, and in most cases it will be the last to go. But go it must if the alcoholic’s attitude toward himself and hence the world around him is to undergo any basic change. That’s why I believe the founders of A.A. learned in their own experimentation that the alcoholic must be given a *conventional* means of unloading this burden of *conventional* guilt. Hence the Fourth and Fifth Steps.

It is also apparent by now, I hope, that A.A.’s program of action is not the rushing to and fro so often envisioned by the newcomer, nor even the unflagging carrying of the message to other alcoholics. Instead, its action is concentrated for the most part on the inner man, involving his deepest sensibilities and values. Only three Steps — the Fifth, Ninth, and Twelfth — involve other people. The other nine concern themselves with the interior life of the alcoholic. Yet in their observance the ultimate result is to turn the alcoholic inside out — from himself to others.

An oft-quoted sentence from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* is: “Self-centeredness... is the root of our troubles.” And one of the earliest evidences of the basic change in the personality of the recovering alcoholic is the slow, hesitant, frightened, but persistent offering of himself to others. Alcoholics are numbered among the great “gimmes” of the world. “Gimme a break... Gimme a chance... Gimme time... Gimme understanding... Gimme love.” In A.A., these self-same “gimmes” come to be numbered among the great givers, and lo, some of them even learn to want nothing in return.

The house that A.A. helps a man build for himself is different for each occupant, because each occupant is his own architect. For many, A.A. is a kind of going home — a return, like

the Prodigal Son's, to the house and the faith of his fathers. To others, it is a never-ending journey into lands they did not dream existed. It does not matter into which group one falls. What is really important is that A.A. has more than demonstrated that the house it builds can accommodate the rebel as well as the conformist, the radical as well as the conservative, the agnostic as well as the believer. The absence of formalized dogma, the lack of rules and commandments, the nonspecific nature of its definitions, and the flexibility of its framework — all the things we have thus far considered contribute to this incredible and happy end.

But what clinches the result and keeps the recovered alcoholic in A.A. forever self-determining is, I believe, one of the most important if seldom-noticed principles at work within it. The very factors which I have just enumerated mean that any alcoholic on any given day at any given time can find someone in A.A. who will in all good faith agree with what he has already decided to do. Conversely, on any given day at any given time, the same alcoholic can find someone in A. A. who in all good faith will disagree with what he has already decided to do. Thus, sooner or later, the recovering alcoholic in A.A. is literally forced to think for himself. Sooner or later, he finds himself akin to the turtle, that lowly creature who makes progress only when his neck is stuck out. The formless flexibility of A.A.'s principles as interpreted by their different adherents finally pushes our alcoholic into a stance where he must use only himself as a frame of reference for his actions, and this in turn means he must be willing to accept the consequences of those actions. In my book, that is the definition of emotional maturity.

It would be wonderful if I could now close my book and depart in a glow of sweetness and light, leaving my beautifully established premises to fend for themselves. But if I did, I would be doing you, as future counselors, a grave disservice. To every member of A.A., there

comes a day — admitted by some, kept secret by others — when he begins to ask himself a gnawing, troubled question. Sometimes, the words are: “Is A.A. enough?” Other times, the question takes a more fatalistic overtone: “Is A.A. all there is going to be?” And in still other instances, it comes out simply as “What now, little man, what now?”

There may come a day when one of these troubled souls reaches your desk or your office, and the reasons he gives you will be found among these:

“A.A. is an organization of sick people, and I feel it is a handicap for me to be around them any longer.”

“A.A. is always oriented to the newcomer. There is no way for the oldtimer to continue growing in it.”

“A.A. is really a kind of subculture, and it can serve to shut you off from the mainstream of life.”

Why do these statements come so readily to my lips? Because I first said them to myself, and over the years both those who preceded me and those who have come after have also echoed them in my ears.

If, as, and when you hear any or all of them, do not — I beg of you — brush them lightly aside. The very reason they are so persistent is that there is more than a grain of truth in them.

The guilt, fear, and worry that these thoughts arouse in the A.A. member are due in the main, I believe, to this simple fact: Long before we dare admit these thoughts to our consciousness, we have been exhorted by many defenders of the A.A. faith that “A.A. is all you need.” It never seems to occur to them — nor to their listeners, for that matter — that just a simple change of the pronoun in that exhortation would make it completely accurate. “A.A. is all I need” is an individual statement that can strengthen many and trouble no one.

In all of A.A.’s literature, I can find no substantiation for the sometimes assumed and

sometimes advocated precept that A.A. therapy is all the recovering or recovered alcoholic should ever be interested in. In fact, the stories of thousands of A.A. members reveal quite the opposite. I myself have been a lifelong Catholic, of varying degrees of intensity and varying levels of virtue. I also had several years of psychoanalysis after being sober in A.A. for 11 years. I have yet to find any of these interests or endeavors to be mutually exclusive of the others. It seems to me that it always comes back to the Biblical injunction "There is a time and a place for all things." If tonight any of you would ask my help with your drinking problem, I most certainly would not ask you, "Would you like to go to Mass with me next Sunday?" Nor would I ask whether you wanted an appointment with my former analyst. But I *would* unhesitatingly ask you, "Would you like to attend an A.A. meeting with me?"... "There is a time and a place for all things." The real danger lies, in my opinion, in the recovered alcoholic's assumption that if he wishes to move to another time and another place he must perforce leave A.A. behind. Nothing could be more untrue; nothing could be more unnecessary.

The oft-heard cry "A.A. is all you need" has the hollow ring of fear — fear that if any member dissents from the belief that A.A. is the one and only, the total and complete answer to all the alcoholic's ills, then all the other members will perish with him. I once clung to this self-same attitude about my religion. Indeed, I came into A.A. stubbornly clutching it to my breast. How sad it would have been if I had learned to let go of one "old idea," only to substitute another for it.

This search for perfection, for the one Perfect Answer, is the hallmark of the neurotic. Ever since Eden, man has cried out: "Give me a ritual; give me some word; give me a prayer; give me a chant; give me a cross, a relic or a string of beads; give me a mantra; give me a conundrum; give me something; give me anything, just so long as it's a magical, mechanical

formula I can touch or hold or say or do — and all will be well.”

To apply this same unrealistic yardstick to A.A. is as unfair to the Fellowship as it would be, or has been, to any other human institution. True freedom lies in the realization and calm acceptance of the fact that there may very well be no *perfect* answer. It remains then for each man to discover and to share whatever works for him.

In the final analysis, I am convinced that I, as well as so many others, have elected to remain in A.A. because only there can we actually relive the original experience of recovery. Only there can we be an active part of the daily striving on the part of all the members — a striving that is sometimes better, sometimes worse, sometimes strong, sometimes weak — but always the striving to be human beings a little better than we were the day before. If you are a nonalcoholic or not a member of A.A., I can almost hear you saying, “Surely, that man must realize that this daily striving goes on in other groups and in other organizations.” Of course, I realize this. I have been, and still am, a member of some of those groups and organizations. But only in A.A. can I *share* in this striving to the extent and the intensity that have given my life new meaning. More and more with each passing year in A.A., everywhere I turn and everywhere I look, the key word, the activating agent, the supreme catalyst seems to be that simple word “share.”

However, like all great blessings, this intensity of sharing, this feeling of one alcoholic for another carries with it a corresponding danger. In some subtle way, it also serves the alcoholic’s omnipresent, ever-lurking need to withdraw from the mainstream and turn in upon himself. Learning to substitute a group, no matter how large, for one’s own self-centeredness is only partial recovery.

A.A. will probably always number among its ranks those who, in their fear and their anger, would make of A.A. a kind of spiritu-

al ghetto, a sort of co-ed monastery; where alcoholics hide and lick their wounds, coining childish and defensive words like “normsie” and “alky,” and pointing accusing fingers at the tigers “out there.”

There must come a day, it seems to me, when every alcoholic, in or out of A.A., finally sits down in the presence of his enemies. When he does, he will be amazed to discover that he is attending a meeting of one — himself. The day the alcoholic in A.A. realizes that his enemy is within, that the tigers are largely creatures of his own design and lurk in his own unconscious, that is the day when for him A.A. becomes what I believe its founders meant it to be: a flight *into* reality.

I happened to be in San Francisco not long after I had attended *my* meeting with *my* enemies, and I took a ride on one of those wonderful little cable cars, down Powell Street, to Fisherman’s Wharf. It was then I saw something strange and wonderful happen. All the passengers who had ridden the car down the hill with me piled out, and, not waiting for the crew, proceeded to turn it around themselves and head it back up the long, steep hill it had just come down. And I rode it all the way back up with them, all the way back up to that breath-taking view of the Golden Gate.

It occurred to me then that this is what A.A. had been for me, and, I hoped, would always be for others: a ridiculously simple, jerry-built, noisy, clanking but sturdy, fiercely loved, and joyous kind of vehicle that had asked me and all its other passengers to turn it and ourselves around so that all of us could head back up the hill we had come down, back up to where we could once again see the bridge — the bridge to normal living.

Tonight, if I could find one fault with A.A., it would be that we have not yet begun to tap the potential hidden in the last seven words of the Twelfth Step: “practice these principles in all our affairs.”

It occurred to me not long ago that when-

ever I am sitting in an A.A. meeting, I am never aware that I am sitting next to another white man, another Catholic, another American, or a Frenchman, Mexican, Jew, Moslem, or Hindu, black man or brown. I am aware only that I am sitting next to another alcoholic. And it seemed deeply significant to me that this feeling of common humanity had been purchased by me at the cost of considerable pain and suffering.

Should this hard-won understanding of, and feeling for, others be confined to the meeting halls and members of A.A.? Or does it remain for me to take what I have learned and what I have experienced, not only in A.A., but in every other area and endeavor of my life, to lift up my head, and to assume my rightful place in the family of man? Can I there, in the household of God, know that I am not sitting next to another white man, another Catholic, another American, nor yet a Frenchman, Mexican, Jew, Moslem, Hindu, black man or brown, not even another alcoholic, and can I finally — at long last, please God — come home from all the wars and say in the very depths of my soul, “I am sitting next to another human being”?

Ladies and gentlemen, who would dare attempt to analyze a phenomenon, diagram a wonder, or parse a miracle? The answer is: only a fool. And I trust that tonight I have not been such a fool. All I have tried to do is tell you where I have been these past 16 years and some things I have come to believe because of my journeyings.

This coming Sunday, in the churches of many of us, there will be read that portion of the Gospel of Matthew which recounts the time when John the Baptist was languishing in the prison of Herod, and, hearing of the works of his cousin Jesus, he sent two of his disciples to say to Him, “Art thou He who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Christ did as He so often did. He did not answer them directly, but wanted John to decide for himself. And so He said to the disciples: “Go and report to John what you have heard and what you have seen:

the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise, the poor have the gospel preached to them.” Back in my childhood catechism days, I was taught that the “poor” in this instance did not mean only the poor in a material sense, but also meant the “poor in spirit,” those who burned with an inner hunger and an inner thirst; and that the word “gospel” meant quite literally “the good news. “

More than 16 years ago, four men — my boss, my physician, my pastor, and the one friend I had left — working singly and together, maneuvered me into A.A. Tonight, if they were to ask me, “Tell us, what did you find?” I would say to them what I now say to you:

“I can tell you only what I have heard and seen: It seems the blind do see, the lame do walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise, and over and over again, in the middle of the longest day or the darkest night, the poor in spirit have the good news told to them.”

God grant that it may always be so.

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people 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.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

THE TWELVE CONCEPTS FOR WORLD SERVICE

I. Final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.

II. The General Service Conference of A.A. has become, for nearly every practical purpose, the active voice and the effective conscience of our whole Society in its world affairs.

III. To insure effective leadership, we should endow each element of A.A. — the Conference, the General Service Board and its service corporations, staffs, committees, and executives — with a traditional “Right of Decision.”

IV. At all responsible levels, we ought to maintain a traditional “Right of Participation,” allowing a voting representation in reasonable proportion to the responsibility that each must discharge.

V. Throughout our structure, a traditional “Right of Appeal” ought to prevail, so that minority opinion will be heard and personal grievances receive careful consideration.

VI. The Conference recognizes that the chief initiative and active responsibility in most world service matters should be exercised by the trustee members of the Conference acting as the General Service Board.

VII. The Charter and Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments, empowering the trustees to manage and conduct world service affairs. The Conference Charter is not a legal document; it relies upon tradition and the A.A. purse for final effectiveness.

VIII. The trustees are the principal planners and administrators of overall policy and finance. They have custodial oversight of the separately incorporated and constantly active services, exercising this through their ability to elect all the directors of these entities.

IX. Good service leadership at all levels is indispensable for our future functioning and safety. Primary world service leadership, once exercised by the founders, must necessarily be assumed by the trustees.

X. Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority, with the scope of such authority well defined.

XI. The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs, and consultants. Composition, qualifications, induction procedures, and rights and duties will always be matters of serious concern.

XII. The Conference shall observe the spirit of A.A. tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds and reserve be its prudent financial principle; that it place none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others; that it reach all important decisions by discussion, vote, and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity; that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy; that it never perform acts of government, and that, like the Society it serves, it will always remain democratic in thought and action.

A.A. PUBLICATIONS Below is a partial listing of A.A. publications. Complete order forms are available from the General Service Office of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Telephone: (212) 870-3400; Website: aa.org.

BOOKS

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS
DAILY REFLECTIONS
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE
AS BILL SEES IT
DR. BOB AND THE GOOD OLDTIMERS
'PASS IT ON'

BOOKLETS

LIVING SOBER
CAME TO BELIEVE
A.A. IN PRISON: INMATE TO INMATE

PAMPHLETS

Experience, Strength and Hope:

WOMEN IN A.A.
A.A. FOR THE BLACK AND AFRICAN AMERICAN ALCOHOLIC
A.A. FOR THE NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN
YOUNG PEOPLE AND A.A.
A.A. FOR THE OLDER ALCOHOLIC — NEVER TOO LATE
LGBTQ ALCOHOLICS IN A.A.
THE "GOD" WORD: ATHEIST AND AGNOSTIC MEMBERS IN A.A.
A.A. FOR ALCOHOLICS WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES —
AND THOSE WHO SPONSOR THEM
ACCESS TO A.A.: MEMBERS SHARE ON OVERCOMING BARRIERS
A.A. AND THE ARMED SERVICES
DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DIFFERENT?
MANY PATHS TO SPIRITUALITY
IT SURE BEATS SITTING IN A CELL
(An illustrated pamphlet for inmates)

About A.A.:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT A.A.
IS A.A. FOR ME?
IS A.A. FOR YOU?
A NEWCOMER ASKS
IS THERE AN ALCOHOLIC IN YOUR LIFE?
THIS IS A.A.
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SPONSORSHIP
THE A.A. GROUP
PROBLEMS OTHER THAN ALCOHOL
THE A.A. MEMBER—MEDICATIONS AND OTHER DRUGS
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THE TWELVE TRADITIONS ILLUSTRATED
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MEMO TO AN INMATE
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LET'S BE FRIENDLY WITH OUR FRIENDS
UNDERSTANDING ANONYMITY

For Professionals:

A.A. IN YOUR COMMUNITY
A BRIEF GUIDE TO A.A.
IF YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS A RESOURCE
FOR THE HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL
A MESSAGE TO CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
IS THERE A PROBLEM DRINKER IN THE WORKPLACE?
MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY ASK ABOUT A.A.
A.A. MEMBERSHIP SURVEY
A MEMBER'S-EYE VIEW OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

VIDEOS (available on aa.org)

A.A. VIDEOS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
HOPE: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
A NEW FREEDOM
CARRYING THE MESSAGE BEHIND THESE WALLS

For Professionals:

A.A. VIDEO FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR LEGAL AND CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR EMPLOYMENT/HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

PERIODICALS

AA GRAPEVINE (monthly)
LA VIÑA (bimonthly, in Spanish)

A DECLARATION OF UNITY

This we owe to A.A.'s future: To place our common welfare first; to keep our fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come.

I am responsible...

When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there.

And for that: **I am responsible.**