

BILL W. AND THE STORY OF AA

The deliberate adoption of a healthy-minded attitude has proved possible to many who never supposed they had it in them; regeneration of character has gone on an extensive scale; and cheerfulness has been restored to countless homes.

William James

Looking at Bill Wilson's biography will help us build an understanding of the fundamental nature and role of Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill's life was so intertwined with the organization that he strove for years to create a clear separation between the two. The founding of AA is the direct consequence of Bill Wilson's biography, and even more so of some particularly deep spiritual experiences.

Bill W., as he would later be known, was born in East Dorset, Vermont, on November 26, 1895. It was a very difficult birth for both mother and son. Bill nearly died from asphyxiation. The place where he first saw the light of day was the room behind the bar run by his paternal grandmother. Alcohol was not very far away, in more than one respect. Bill's grandfather had had problems with it, but managed to put an end to the habit after joining a revival and making religion a part of his life. Bill's father was also a heavy drinker who would get himself into trouble. Partly for the above reasons, Bill did not have a drink until he was twenty-two.

Bill was born into a family that was hardly united, certainly not according to the standards of the times. His parents were divorced around the time of Bill's tenth birthday. Although Bill never spoke about it, he later characterized this time as "an agonizing experience." After the divorce, his mother left in order to study to become an osteopathic doctor, and Bill remained with his grandfather, Fayette.

The grandfather understood that it was an uncommon child who was under his care. There were many skills that Bill could rely upon: he had great gifts of observation and an ability to gather, digest, and understand complex information and see the laws behind the phenomena. These skills, mostly directed towards practical applications, later helped him in his years in Wall Street. He also had a gift for leadership, allied with an amiable personality. Two examples will highlight the breadth of his achievements. In school he became the first violin of the orchestra. Just to vindicate his reputation, he also became the captain of the baseball team, although he had no initial interest in it.

It was clear that this precocious ambition would come at a price. Bill was showing what could be called the tendency towards a bipolar personality. Every new situation introduced great anxiety. Moving to a new setting, or facing defeat, could create a cycle of depression, the same kind of depression he had first suffered upon his mother's departure after the divorce. Being Number One was a way to momentarily keep these feelings at bay.

A challenge to all his feelings of ambivalence arose in 1917. The call to serve his country was accompanied by an inner challenge. Was he fit for his dreams of being a leader? What were these bouts of patriotism, followed by a deep fear of death? When called to the test, the discovery that he had courage after all offered great relief. Bill had just passed his twenty-first year. The years immediately before and after show, in an

indicative way, the challenges he would face in his life. The young recruit was first stationed at Fort Rodham in New Bedford. It was here that Bill approached alcohol with foreboding. After an initial phase, his drinking became so serious that he would pass out, on average, at every third party.

During his years of service, Bill had his first deep spiritual experience while visiting Winchester Cathedral. For a young man exclusively at home within materialistic values and pursuits, Winchester became a window into the world beyond. He felt a sense of ecstasy, as if supported by a tremendous presence. He recalled, “For a brief moment, I had needed and wanted God. There had been a humble willingness to have Him with me—and He came.” Coming out of his experience, he saw the epitaph above the tomb of a young man, which read:

Here lies a Hampshire grenadier,
Who caught his death
Drinking cold small beer.
A good soldier is ne'er forgot,
Whether he dieth by musket
Or by pot.¹

The army showed the young officer that he could assume responsibility and acquit himself honorably. From this high point, a new low followed. Reintegrating the workplace after the war, Wilson passed through a series of jobs in quick succession.

The pattern of genius and success alternated with that of alcohol and failure. However, Bill soon found the optimal field of action for a person endowed with initiative and a pioneering spirit. Once again he quickly got familiar with a whole new world and put this knowledge to work in an original fashion. He entered the stock market in 1922 with amazing assurance—purchasing cheap, unpopular securities and becoming in effect one of the first securities analysts. In 1925 he investigated General Electric just in time, before the radio and cinema boom.

Alcohol was always at his side, although he could break the spell, particularly when he immersed himself in a whole new environment. By 1927, however, he was lying in order to get a drink. There was little change in the years that followed. Bill was now almost forty, and the constellation of events of his early twenties repeated itself with a crescendo. Both the abyss and the ecstasy were happening all over again. Soon, however, he entered a state of constant emotional stress and lost forty pounds. Alcohol was giving him such hallucinations and continual physical and emotional stress that he contemplated suicide. Dr. Silkworth—an authority in the treatment of alcoholics who had followed Bill's case closely—was concerned for his sanity. Nothing could help Bill at the stage he had reached. He was besieged with remorse for the pain he had imposed on his wife, Lois. Feeling that this was the end, he remembered his Winchester experience, and in despair he turned to God, promising that he would do anything to get better. This was his state of mind before the spiritual experience that AA has rendered famous.

In an otherworldly moment, he felt that the room was flooded with indescribable white light. He was in ecstasy standing upon a summit, thinking that he was now a free man. After this peak, the consciousness of his surroundings returned while he still felt a

tangible spiritual presence. He later recalled, “Even though a pilgrim upon an uncertain highway, I need be concerned no more, for I had glimpsed the great beyond.”² Simple as the experience may seem when verbalized, Bill owed to it that he neither doubted God’s existence nor drank another glass afterwards. Bill W. had just turned thirty-nine. This experience has the hallmark of an NDE or NDLE. What is truly incredible at this turning point was Bill’s recovered vitality. A man who had been besieged by an unsolvable problem and affected, both physically and mentally, found a new lease on life and lived another thirty-seven years, despite his heavy smoking.

The NDE was the initial spark that animated Bill in the following years. It lit a fire that sustained an inner certainty and convinced him that there was a way to do what few or none really thought possible: offer a permanent cure for alcoholics. Bill arrived at this formulation in stages, although the essence of these ideas lived in that moment of rapture and otherworldliness. It was a matter of capturing the experience and rendering it possible for others, and that was going to be a long road.

It was danger of relapse that brought forth a whole new chain of events and brought some important figures to the fore who would play a key role in the future of AA. Bill was in Akron, Ohio, where he had just lost a proxy battle to become an officer of the National Rubber Machinery Company. The old ghost of defeat conjured up feelings buried beneath the surface, and suddenly Bill had the thought that he needed the company of another alcoholic to avoid relapse. It was an insight that would have profound reverberations for the future. Through an initial phone call, Bill was put in contact with Robert Smith. Robert, a doctor and inveterate alcoholic, knew what Bill was going through. He knew it so well that the conversation between the two men carried on for hours and resumed the next day. The two decided to start working with other alcoholics right away. Bill’s meeting with Bob marked the symbolic beginning of AA in more than one way.

Bill and Bob were complementary in more than one way. It was their encounter that laid the foundation of the future AA. The modality of this encounter has been enshrined in the principles of AA. Bill needed to meet Bob in order to preserve the fruits of his spiritual experience. The two needed to meet each other for their own personal salvation rather than for any altruistic goals. Their differences and complements were a guarantee that AA would be inclusive enough for other individuals who gravitated around the two at first, and for all of those who joined later.

The Birth of Alcoholics Anonymous: A Pioneer Experiment

In the years 1935 to 1937, Bill started distancing himself from the Oxford Group. Bill’s exclusive interest in alcoholism was one reason. The other was the need to enlarge his frame of reference. For all its merits, the Oxford Group was based on traditional Christian tenets and on an active proselytism. Bill needed to offer his experience just as it had come to him, as a profound unbeliever until the critical time. It was the two groups of people around Bill and Bob who started to become the determining factor in all the choices that followed. Bill could propose ideas and try to implement them, but it was ultimately the group who would be able to endorse them. In this way an awe-inspiring degree of true “group consciousness” steered the fledgling experiment towards the future

form of AA. There was no ready-made blueprint that could be followed because this was clearly a pioneer experiment.

It was the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* that paved the way to the beginning of AA and gave it its initials. Writing it was a collective effort. Although Bill wrote the drafts, they were reviewed by Bob and by the New York members. The contributions of members were critical in making it a document that could be accepted by all and therefore could serve any possible type of alcoholic. Drafts were also sent to circles of organized religion and accepted by them. The processes and deliberations continued, down to the choice of the title. Finally, the editor, Tom Uzzell, reduced the book by a third.

The book contained the central Twelve Steps—an elaboration of all the principles that distilled Bill and Bob's experience in fighting alcohol. Bill had originally drafted six steps, and felt that they could be further broken down. Before proceeding to do so, he asked for inner guidance. He found himself writing the Twelve Steps with great ease.

This first momentous milestone was followed by the Twelve Traditions in 1950. Now that a way had been found for individual alcoholics, the next step was to find what could be done to make AA both self-supporting and protected from outer dangers. These were not only practical considerations, but also spiritual directives for an organization whose first tradition is that of anonymity. It was there to protect the reputation of the organization if an individual relapsed. Anonymity breaks had created trouble in AA's infancy. Anonymity was the prerequisite for keeping the ego at bay, for emphasizing the priority of principles over individuals, a symbol for the willingness to self-sacrifice. Another important principle was the idea that AA had to be self-supporting and autonomous. It would not resort to advertising or endorsements. Finally, it had to remain devoid of any specific profession of faith. AA was becoming a truly modern spiritual brotherhood, in all devoted to its human aims, over and above any commercial or political ties, or individualities.

The last brick added to the edifice of AA came from Bill's stubborn conviction that AA needed to emancipate itself from its founder, even when most members did not perceive such a need. The climax was reached in 1955 at the St. Louis Convention. The group consciousness that had worked wonders until then had to sever the last tie of dependence. Bill said that now AA was safe, even from himself. The convention gave birth to the political and administrative structure of AA. Two panels were elected a year apart from each other, for the duration of two years. The delegates needed to receive two-thirds of the local vote. It was a new, emancipated group consciousness now ready to lead AA.

We have followed Bill's official life closely because it accompanied so intimately the destiny of Alcoholics Anonymous. Other facets of his biography are also very indicative of another aspect of the fight against alcohol. Bill's recovery was far from ended with his spiritual revelation of 1934, although he found in it the inner strength that completely transformed his life. The years from 1934 to 1955 gave Bill and the world many insights about the nature of alcohol addiction and the plight of the alcoholic.

The year 1934 had marked a cardinal life change, but not a deliverance from life's challenges. Soon after the founding of AA, Bill's previous hypochondria resurfaced. He

started suffering from imaginary ulcer attacks and suffering all the ills of being a “dry drunk.” Alcohol leaves a host of psychological effects and personality modifications that need to be known in order to move beyond the first stage of withdrawal from the addiction.

In 1944, returning from a long tour of AA programs in the country, Bill fell into a very deep and long depression that accompanied him until 1955, partly due to the fact that AA was starting to be independent and did not need him as much anymore. The sudden crisis surprised him. He would spend days in bed and feel suicidal. The worst time of this abyss occurred from 1944 to 1946.

After the deepest spell, the depression cleared momentarily in 1946. At that time he experienced a sense of balance, like a glimmer, between the ecstasy of his spiritual experience and the depth of his own personal abyss. It was then that he envisioned the idea of the General Service Conference that he struggled for years to realize. Bill’s experience is reminiscent of what we have seen clearly expressed in Henri Nouwen’s instance: the heights of ecstasy were followed by the necessary integration of the abyss that preceded it. It is no wonder that it took so long in Wilson’s case.

A Closer Look at the Twelve Steps

In a fashion typical of our times, 1939 marked the starting date of a devastating world war, as well as the beginning of an organization that helped the recovery of hundreds of thousands individuals. There were about a hundred recoveries by April of 1939, and an estimated one million and more by 1986. Along the way the Twelve Steps of AA have spawned innumerable sister organizations: Al-Anon was founded in 1951, and from it grew ACOA for adults and children of alcoholics. Nowadays about 120 organizations use the guiding principles of AA. In addition, it could be argued that AA stands as the archetype for innumerable support and peer groups, and crisis and suicide lines that cover our social landscape with an extensive network.

The following are the official Twelve Steps of AA:

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 is it that makes AA unique? It is a path that seeks the spiritual in a nondogmatic way. God is defined as the Higher Power, and the person is asked to seek it “in as far as he/she understands it.” Spiritual depth is sought in the social dimension of working together, done from a ground of respect for the individual’s freedom.

Let us take a closer look at the sequence of the steps.³ Steps 1 and 2 require respectively: admitting powerlessness and accepting a Higher Power in our lives. At the heart of step 2 lies the process of developing trust. In order to do so, the recovering alcoholic needs to let go of living in a self-created fantasy and—leading to step 3—start to observe the life patterns the alcoholic has generated. Step 3 implies turning to God in a nondogmatic way. We can already recognize here the gesture of letting go of our attachment to our persona and seeking a connection to our higher self. This gesture is a recurrent motif reappearing at different stages, progressively enhanced. At the first stage it touches only the level of awareness. Steps 4 and 5 move on to the taking of a moral inventory and the supremely humbling step of admitting all of one’s wrongdoings to another human being. This is what it takes for the ego to break through the shield of denial that alcohol has built up. Many alcoholics who cannot achieve this step will slide back into the habit. In step 6 one is asked to look at how character defects have been of help in the past. Difficult feelings have also served to protect the recovering alcoholic. Thus, fear can be of help in calling for protection, but too much fear paralyzes us. At this point, at the idea of giving up these protective feelings, the individual feels very much lost. The support of the group is what helps the addict find the strength to face this inner emptiness. Other supports are the sponsor, AA’s literature, and even the simple well-known slogans that AA has contributed to popular culture: “One Day at a Time,” “Easy Does It,” and “Let Go and Let God,” among others.

Although these steps have already contributed to a deflation of the ego’s self-importance, they would amount to nothing without what AA calls “vigorous action.” The admission of one’s shortcomings needs to be accompanied by the desire to provide compensation for the sorrow caused in the world because of alcohol abuse. At Step 7, having seen the difficulties to overcome and sustain new attitudes, the need arises to develop new strategies and support them with tools for consciousness. Such can be the practice of journaling, calling the sponsor or other supports, or outlining strategies ahead of time to help face specific situations. Steps 8 and 9 require that we write a list of people we have offended, make amends, and offer reparation for our trespasses. It goes so far as to require us to be willing to pay whatever the price may be rather than carry the weight of guilt on our conscience. This step may be daunting to the addict who has often shaped a life around avoidance and is afraid to confront things head on. The preparation for step 7 has built up the strength for this moment.

The final humbling of the ego consists in taking up what so far has felt like a duty as an act of love towards our fellow human beings who struggle with the problem of alcohol. Being our “brother’s keeper” is the twelfth and final step, a humbling of the higher self toward the lower self. “To be vital, faith must be accompanied by self-sacrifice and unselfish, constructive action.”⁴ This is the embodiment of empathy, the capacity of shedding judgment of our fellow human being, and providing an open space for another. The higher self of the individual and the strength of the group can serve as the foundation for the assistance given to individuals seeking recovery. All of the steps serve to reorient the will from being self-centered to being inspired by the spirit, moving from dependence on others to dependence on God, or the inner voice that speaks within each individual. This is explicitly stated in Step 11 with the recourse to prayer and meditation.

AA has laid the foundations for a new consciousness, for the pioneering idea of taking responsibility for our lives that it has helped to spread and popularize. This dimension is further made explicit in the recommendation to take on the practice of daily review, particularly addressing the moral content of the day, and the practice of daily preview, envisioning the day and the tasks to come.⁵

The idea of taking responsibility for our lives is reiterated in the recurring theme that we need to forget what others have done to us and exclusively focus on the self as the source of all events that affect our lives, as well as the turning point from which change proceeds. Thus, it is recognized that we must be demanding on ourselves while considerate of others. Once we focus on the self, we have to identify our real enemies—the inner forces of resentment, self-pity, and guilt. These are the real causes of relapse into alcohol.

Looking at AA alone may make us lose sight of the fact that the Twelve Steps apply not only to alcoholics or drug addicts. With the extension of Twelve Step work, Ruth Hock’s insight that this work has a universal quality has acquired more and more justification. This can be particularly seen in later manifestations of its work: Emotions Anonymous (EA) and Co-dependence Anonymous (CoDA). These are truly universal aspects of the human condition. It is the universal human experience to be swayed to a varying degree by emotions over which the self does not rule in full consciousness. On the other hand, even if the term co-dependence lends itself to confusing interpretations, it is within immediate human grasp that many of our close relationships are clouded by mechanisms of unhealthy mutual dependence and lack of true inner freedom.

Let us take a closer look at the first of these two movements, EA, and understand how it operates, whom it addresses, and its results. EA was officially started in 1971 in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1978 it already counted about two hundred chapters in the US and five other countries. Like all other Twelve Step groups, EA does not judge, diagnose, or offer personal advice. Its overall goals are to enable individuals to solve some of their emotional problems and learn to live in peace with those that have not been solved.

The general qualification for EA membership is a realization of being unable to control a certain emotion. In fact, people who apply experience a very large spectrum of these emotions: from compulsive perfectionists to universal “acceptors” or “rejectors,” from depressives to paranoids, and everything in between. Phobias can also be treated within EA.⁵ But, more interestingly, EA can be effective no matter what the degree of

psychological illness or the initial degree of individual consciousness. Well-adjusted individuals may be able to get hold of relatively minor challenges (such as an escape into workaholism); other individuals' symptoms may have reached what could be defined as irreversible psychoses, those in which physical symptoms have permanently set in. In the latter instance, the physical symptoms can be kept in check, but—so it seems—only if the individual continues to rely on the group. Interestingly, through EA many depressives find a solution to a problem that very few other medical or psychological therapies succeed in treating. Individuals who heavily depended on psychoactive medications have found in EA a way to manage their personal challenges with no recourse to medication for the first time in their lives.

Ultimately, the path that AA lays out marks the beginning of a new way of envisioning spiritual development, in which the social dimension is added to the purely personal path of development. Spiritually, AA leaves individuals free to turn to their own sources of inspiration. The social element also respects individual freedom, since AA does not offer judgment or guidance. The individual and social aspects form a natural complement to each other.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1) *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 1984), 60.
- 2) *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*, Third Edition, (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976).
- 3) *Ibid.*, Chapter 7: "Working With Others."
- 4) *Ibid.*, Chapter 6: "Into Action."
- 5) *Emotions Anonymous*, (St. Paul, MN: Emotions Anonymous International, 1978), see Chapter VII (1): "A Prisoner of My Fears," 68–78.