

After Twenty-Five Years

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Bill Wilson (right) and Dr Bob (left).
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IT IS VERY WONDERFUL TO

know that most of our world-wide anniversary gatherings will be so widely shared by our families and by our dedicated friends—the ones who have seen us through, the ones who have watched and who have so much helped our passage from the darkness of alcoholism into the bright sunlight of AA.

For Lois and me, and for AA people everywhere, this twenty-fifth anniversary time is one of warm and happy recollection, of gratitude for the sobriety and the new life that the last quarter century has brought to so many of us once hopeless people; of gratitude for the ever-widening opportunity to serve man and God which is today ours, an opportunity that will require of us an ever-deepening

dedication to our cherished AA principles of recovery, unity, and service—those themes of our Twenty-fifth Anniversary now on every tongue.

We are thinking deeply, too, of all those sick ones who still come to AA—thousands surely, and perchance millions. As they try to make their return to faith and to life, we want them to find everything in AA that we have found, and yet more, if that be possible. On our part, therefore, no care, no vigilance, no effort to preserve AA's constant effectiveness and spiritual strength will ever be too great to hold us in full readiness for the day of their homecoming.

When I think of our small and quite unnoticed beginnings of only twenty-five years ago; when I recollect the early struggles, uncertainties and perils of our pioneering time, I now find it both incredible and infinitely moving to realize that all this will be climaxed July next when Lois and I will be seeing so many thousands of you face to face at our International Convention in Long Beach, California. From now until then, we shall surely be exclaiming to each other, "indeed what hath God wrought?" This meaningful exclamation will be our constant reminder that AA is truly God's creation. No single one of us, nor any single group of us alcoholics

got together to invent Alcoholics Anonymous. Contemplating the totality of all that has happened in these twenty-five years we see that He has worked through the willing hearts and minds and hands of thousands. For this reason Dr. Bob and I have often deplored being called cofounders because such titles may create the impression that we pretty much invented, structured and spread AA all by ourselves.

Nothing could, in fact, be further from the truth.

To illustrate, we might review for a moment the basic ideas on which our recovery program is founded and then ask whence these ideas came to us—and just who brought them.

Our recovery Step Number One reads thus: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol . . . that our lives had become unmanageable." This simply means that all of us have to hit bottom and hit it hard and lastingly. But we can seldom make this sweeping admission of personal hopelessness until we fully realize that alcoholism is a grievous and often fatal malady of the mind and body—an obsession that condemns us to drink joined to a physical allergy that condemns us to madness or death.

So, then, how did we first learn that alcoholism is such a fearful

sickness as this? Who gave us this priceless piece of information on which the effectiveness of Step One of our program so much depends? Well, it came from my own doctor, “the little doctor who loved drunks,” William Duncan Silkworth. More than twenty-five years ago at Towns Hospital, New York, he told Lois and me what the disease of alcoholism actually is.

Of course we have since found that these awful conditions of mind and body invariably bring on the third phase of our malady. This is the sickness of the spirit; a sickness for which there must necessarily be a spiritual remedy. We AAs recognize this in the first 5 words of Step Twelve of the recovery program. Those words are: “Having had a spiritual awakening. . . .” Here we name the remedy for our 3-fold sickness of body, mind, and soul. Here we declare the necessity for that all-important spiritual awakening.

Who, then, first told us about the utter necessity for such an awakening, for an experience that not only expels the alcohol obsession, but which also makes effective and truly real the practice of spiritual principles “in all our affairs”?

Well, this life-giving idea came to us of AA through William James, the father of modern psychology. It came through his famous book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, when my friend Ebby handed me that volume at Towns Hospital immediately following my own remarkable spiritual experience of December 1934.

William James also heavily emphasized the need for hitting bottom. Thus did he reinforce AA’s Step One and so did he supply us with the spiritual essence of today’s Step Twelve.

Having now accounted for AA’s Steps One and Twelve, it is natural that we should ask, “Where did the early AAs find the material for the remaining ten Steps? Where did we learn about moral inventory, amends for harm done, turning wills and lives over to God? Where did we learn about meditation and prayer and the rest of it?”

The spiritual substance of our remaining ten Steps came straight from Dr. Bob’s and my own earlier association with the Oxford Groups, as they were then led in America by that Episcopal rector, Dr. Samuel Shoemaker.

At this point in our very early experience there remained, however, one missing link—an absolutely vital one. We still lacked a full comprehension of the terrific impact at great depth which one alcoholic talking to another could make. I had partly realized this when my alcoholic friend and sponsor, Ebby, told me about his own drinking, his release from it and of the Oxford Group principles which had made this possible. Still more realization came during my own spiritual experience which had included the vision of a chain reaction among alcoholics, one alcoholic talking to the next. But it was not until I met Dr. Bob that I knew I needed him as much as he could ever need me. This was perfect mutuality, this was full brotherhood.

This was the crucial and the final answer. The missing link was then fully forged and somehow we knew this at once.

To those wonderful friends who thus brought Dr. Bob and me within reach of recovery, our debt is quite beyond calculation or repayment. But even those great gifts could not have amounted to anything had they not been passed from hand to hand in these last twenty-five years. You, the members of AA, have continued to forge countless fresh links in the chain of recovery that now encircles the world. It is your example, your influence, and, under God, your work which has already brought hope and health and happiness to millions—alcoholics and nonalcoholics alike.

A great many of you can well recall the perils of AA’s time of frantic mushroom growth. You remember how we feared that an all too human scramble for money, fame and power might ruin us. You remember how we feared any public exploitation of the AA name, whether by our own members or by others. Then there were the bogies of political

The 1951 Lasker Foundation Group Award Citation, which in part read, “Historians may one day recognize Alcoholics Anonymous to have been a great venture in social pioneering which forged a new instrument for social action; a new therapy based on the kinship of common suffering; one having a vast potential for the myriad other ills of mankind.”

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and religious strife—bogies that might break loose and smash us. There was the fear, too, that if we ever created a world service organization, our servants working there might presently become our masters and so saddle us with an expensive and disastrous government. There was apprehension about wide publicity, lest it turn into promotional ballyhoo that would garble our message and bring ridicule upon us and so keep alcoholics and their families at a distance. We also feared that we might be tempted to take great gifts of money, thus making us dependent upon the charity of others, and tempting us to foolishly scatter our energies into outside projects that could be better handled by others. You can remember our fierce hostility toward any and all AA members who had the temerity to enter these other ventures in the field of alcoholism. You can recall how we lambasted any AA who, for any purpose, received a cent of money; how we so feared professionalism that we scarcely dared hire any full-time AA gals to answer the phones in our local offices. Above all, you remember how we shuddered at that first rash of public anonymity breaks by both well-meaning and self-seeking members.

Such were our fears—some of them ridiculous and some of them abundantly justified. What, then, could we do?

For a long and anxious time we simply did not know whether we could live and work with each other or with the world about us. Could we hold in unity at all levels, could we effectively function to carry AA's message? We simply did not know.

Then, little by little, we moved away from the fear of our growing

pains. We began to learn from these experiences. Genuine prudence replaced destructive fear. And out of our collective experience in working and living together there finally emerged the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous—the present-day basis for the truly splendid unity that is nearly everywhere ours; the basis for an excellent service structure now so highly effective that not many more years can pass before alcoholics everywhere will have the marvelous opportunity for sanity and for sobriety that we who are gathered here know so well. Certainly it is not only to the few that we owe these remarkable developments in our unity and in our ability to carry AA's message everywhere. It is to the many, indeed it is to the labors of all of us that we owe these prime blessings.

This is the brand of dedication and unity that, little by little, has enabled us to cross nearly every barrier of race and creed, of nationality and of language. In fact, we have been gradually learning to deal with all conditions and with all obstacles. With joy we have watched the good news catch up with the young and not too badly damaged alcoholics, as we have learned to raise the bottom and hit him with it, so saving him years of misery. With equal satisfaction we have witnessed the salvage of the very rich and the very poor. Today we see them learning what the true wealth of spirit can be.

We note with high interest how so many of us are trying to practice AA's principles in all of our affairs, how the quest for emotional and spiritual growth is quickening and is being reflected at home, at work, and in the world at large. Our families, too,

have adopted AA's Twelve Steps as their own. Their Al-Anon Groups now numbering more than a thousand, are growing prodigiously. Again this reflects the progress of the many, of all of us.

Such is a mere glimpse of the vast panorama of AA today, and it surely must be a good token of still finer things to come. Of course this recital of our past accomplishment and the vision we have of our hoped-for future cannot possibly create any mood of complacency or self-congratulation. We well know that our defects, as people and as a society, have been and still are very great. And we hope that we shall never cease to rededicate ourselves to their correction.

May we continue to deepen our humility and our devotion to man and to God that we may meet and transcend all future problems and perils. Let us pray that both we of today and the new generations of our tomorrow will become increasingly worthy of the happy and useful destiny that our Creator is most surely holding in store for us all.