

One Day at a Time(s)

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First Five Years of AA

In AA's First Five Years

Lois Wilson, wife of AA's co-founder, Bill Wilson, recalls the time in AA when there were few members and no Big Book.

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 from the January 1967 issue

In the early days of AA things were really different. For five years there was no Big Book. The only way to communicate with other people was to go and tell them, so that's what we did. Of course, all of the meetings were held in people's homes, the homes of those who were lucky enough to have them. Anybody who had one made it wide open to whomever the boys brought in. Our houses, Dr. Bob's in Akron and ours in Brooklyn, were just filled with drunks, either drinking, or stopped temporarily, or well on the way to real sobriety.

Yes, AA was quite different in those days for many reasons. One was that there were no people in AA except those who had gone to the very bottom. Only these would listen to the story that one drunk was telling another. When AA first started, before there was a book, it was more anonymous than it is now, because even the Fellowship was without a name. AA didn't have a name until the book was written. Before that it was just a bunch of drunks trying to help each other, a bunch of nameless drunks. They had to be worked with over and over; families and everybody did what they could to help.

There were many, many sad things that happened, many very humorous things, and inspirational things, too.

Several are coming to mind right now. Bill, as you know, came from Vermont and someone sent him some maple syrup from there. It came in a whiskey bottle. One of the boys saw this attractive container in the kitchen and he was so drunk at the time that he gulped the whole bottle of syrup, thinking it was whiskey.

We had a rule that no one could come into the house when he was drinking. One night one of the boys came home drunk. We wouldn't let him in so he pried open the coal chute and slid into the cellar. Since he was very fat it was surprising that he could slide down it, yet somehow he made it. But this same fat man did get stuck one night in the washtubs. He lived in the basement apartment. Old city houses used to have stationary tubs in the kitchen. He thought he'd try to take a bath in one. But after getting in he couldn't get out so one of us (and I think it was I) had to pull him out.

Step 1

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable “

1st Tradition

"Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close

**Concept One
 Final Responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole fellowship.**



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There were many other things...a man committed suicide in our house after having pawned our dress clothes, left over from more prosperous days. These included Bill's dress suit and my precious evening cape. We have never owned such articles again.

AA was always thrilling. The families were included in all of the meetings; wives and parents (there weren't many alcoholic women then), and the children came too. The children were vitally interested in everything that went on. They would inquire about all the members and want to know how they were. They'd learn the Twelve Steps and really try to live by them. I don't think youngsters can be too young to be thrilled by the AA program and be helped by it.

One of the first women who came in was the ex-wife of a friend of Bill's. She had been in Bellevue and had come from there to our house. At that time there was a wonderful man - I think he was the fourth or fifth AA - who was trying to start a group in Washington, D.C. This woman went down to help him and she stayed sober for quite a long time. Then she married a

man they were trying to bring onto the program. He really didn't go along with the idea himself and used to say to her every once in a while, "Florence, you look so thirsty." And so she did something about that, Florence disappeared. Everybody looked for her everywhere and couldn't find her. After a couple of weeks they found her in the morgue.

At that time each group used to visit every other group. New York members would go to New Jersey or Greenwich, Philadelphia or Washington or even Cleveland or Akron. Those were the groups I recall were in existence in the first five years.

If anybody had a car a bunch of us would pile in and we'd go wherever we knew there was a meeting. Families were just as much a part of AA as the alcoholics and we did feel we belonged.

But after a while the AA's thought that they should have an occasional meeting - at least one every week - of just alcoholics so that they could really get down to business. When this occurred the wives thought they'd meet together, too,

at the same time. At first these little gatherings of wives didn't have any particular purpose. Sometimes we'd play bridge and sometimes we'd gossip about our husbands.

Then a few of us began to see that we really needed the AA program just as much as the alcoholics. The famous case of my throwing a shoe at Bill started me wondering about myself and realizing that I needed to live by the Twelve Steps just as much as he did. He was getting way ahead of me. I always thought of myself as being the moral mentor in the house, but Bill, who never was a mentor, was certainly growing spiritually while I was standing still. Or perhaps there is no standing still - if I wasn't going ahead, I must be going backwards.

I decided I'd better live by the Twelve Steps. Annie S. and a number of other people had come to the same conclusion. So, whenever we visited another group, we would tell the wives and families how we found that we, too, needed to live by the Twelve Steps of AA. Little groups of wives and families all over the country began to feel the same need for something to help overcome their frustrations and help them become integrated human beings again.

That's the way Al-Anon started. We followed the AA program in every principle. I want to thank AA's so very much for showing us the way. Without your leading us we would still be the unhappy folks we were.

In our meetings we tell our own experiences just as AA's do. We tell how we came to find that we needed Al-Anon and what Al-Anon has done for us. And we seek to help other families that were, or are, having the same sort of experience.

In 1950 Bill traveled all over Canada and the United States to see how AA's would react to the idea of a general conference for Alcoholics Anonymous, and in doing so he discovered quite a few types of groups of the family of alcoholics. He thought that they should have a Central Office here in New York, just as AA did, so that they could be unified in their use of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions - a place where inquiries could be received, literature prepared and the public informed so that those in need would know where to turn.

A good friend and I started a small office in Bedford Hills. By then AA had had eighty-seven inquiries from wives or groups who wished to register.

As AA was not equipped to handle the families of alcoholics it handed over this list to us and we wrote to them. Fifty groups responded and were registered with us. That was in '51. Today (1967) there are over 3,000 Al-Anon groups.

The numerical potential of Al-Anon is greater than AA's because it is composed not only of mates of alcoholics, but children, parents and other relatives and friends. It is estimated that five people are seriously affected by one alcoholic.

Though we have barely scratched the surface, the future is bright, thanks to you AA's for your wonderful example and inspiration.

Step One

Step Discussion < become had lives our .that . alcohol. over powerless were we admitted One:

STEP One involves two distinct though closely related admissions both of which are strong medicine for me as a person with a drinking problem. If I feel that I have accepted this Step without *any* difficulty, there is a good chance that I am self-deceived as to its depth of meaning. On the other hand, if I balk at it, I have seriously damaged my capacity to get any help from the eleven Steps which follow. In either case my life on the AA program, my ability to have a sane understanding of my alcoholic problem, and my chance for lasting sobriety are endangered. Therefore, it follows that the course of safety for me must avoid these pitfalls and must involve a coming-to-terms with the whole Step at some depth.

The first admission is that of powerlessness over alcohol; the second is that of unmanageability in the life. At once I am thrown into conflict with one of my most deeply held and dearly cherished ideas, one which seems to have the strong support of much of the secular wisdom of my society, namely, that as long as I am alive and possessed of even the smallest shred of my rational faculty, I must retain *some* control over every aspect of my conscious behavior. Am I not "the master of my fate. .the captain of my soul" (never mind that the author of those lines died a suicide)?

That I do not have total control over my drinking is obvious. That I have less control over alcohol now than I did a year ago I can accept--likewise that if I continue my course for another year (provided I survive the experiment) I will have less control than I do now. I will even concede a 99 per cent loss of control, for that still leaves my willpower and self-respect some little place of refuge. But the word "powerlessness" clearly implies a total and complete failure of willpower and self-help of all descriptions in the area of my relationship to alcohol. All those deeply ingrained ideas about self-reliance, pride, backbone, intelligence, gumption, etc., rebel at the thought of such an unconditional surrender.

The first answer to the emotional and intellectual objections to accepting for fact that I am completely powerless is a pragmatic one. Three hundred and fifty thousand or more people have gained freedom from the same problem through the means of the AA program which has this assertion as its starting point. The proposition that victory can begin with an admission of total defeat seems at first impossible, ridiculous. Experience has proven it to be in actuality that most effective of truths, a paradox and, most important, a paradox which is uniquely effective for people in trouble with alcohol.

As a self-styled intellectual I may need more in the way of convincing than an appeal to results. Why does this paradox work? Quite simply, Step One works because it does not stand alone. Clearly, it would be dangerous for me to admit powerlessness if I then had no further steps to take to fill the power vacuum in myself. Such a surrender as an only or final step could, followed to its logical conclusion, lead to utter despair and the various ugly consequences which go along with that state. But Step One is not in any sense a final one. Rather, it is the gateway to the whole program of twelve interrelated and interdependent Steps which can serve to connect me in a practical, everyday way with a source of power strong enough to let me live a normal, useful existence.

As an alcoholic I am a man with life-trouble comparable to a house on fire. My self-will has proven to be about as effective a fire extinguisher as gasoline. The flames have trapped me on the ledge of a fifth-floor window. Below me on the ground stand firemen holding a net. Do I jump, or do I re-enter the house and try to put out the fire with my last, half-empty can of gasoline? Does it make sense that I can save my life by jumping out of a fifth-story window? If I believe that the net will catch me as it has caught so many before me, it makes sense. But whether or not it makes sense to my frantic remnants of understanding, the fact is that *only* by jumping from the window do I have a chance to live. The first Step is like that.

T. P., Jr.
Hankins, New
York



Tradition One

"

Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward."

Our whole A.A. program is securely founded on the principle of humility--that is to say, perspective. Which implies, among other things, that we relate ourselves rightly to God and to our fellows; that we each see ourselves as we really are--"a small part of a great whole." Seeing our fellows thus, we shall enjoy group harmony. That is why A.A. Tradition can confidently state, "Our common welfare comes first."

"Does this mean," some will ask, "that in A.A. the individual doesn't count too much? Is he to be swallowed up, dominated by the group?"

No, it doesn't seem to work out that way. Perhaps there is no society on earth more solicitous of personal welfare, more careful to grant the individual the greatest possible liberty of belief and action. Alcoholics Anonymous has no "musts." Few A.A. groups impose penalties on anyone for non-conformity. We do suggest, but we don't discipline. Instead, compliance or non-compliance with any principle of A.A. is a matter for the conscience of the individual; he is the judge of his own conduct. Those words of old time, "Judge not," we observe most literally.

"But," some will argue, "if A.A. has no authority to govern its individual members or groups, how shall it ever be sure that the common welfare does come first? How is it possible to be governed without a government? If everyone can do as he pleases, how can you have aught but anarchy?"

The answer seems to be that we A.A.s cannot really do as we please, though there is no constituted human authority to restrain us. Actually, our common welfare is protected by powerful safeguards. The moment any action seriously threatens the common welfare, group opinion mobilizes to remind us; our conscience begins to complain. If one persists, he may become so disturbed as to get drunk; alcohol gives him a beating. Group opinion shows him that he is off the beam, his own conscience tells him that he is dead wrong, and, if he goes too far, Barleycorn brings him real conviction.

So it is we learn that in matters deeply affecting the group as a whole, "our common welfare comes first." Rebellion ceases and cooperation begins because it must; we have disciplined ourselves.

Eventually, of course, we cooperate because we really wish to; we see that without substantial unity there can be no A.A., and that without A.A. there can be little lasting recovery for anyone. We gladly set aside personal ambitions whenever these might harm A.A. We humbly confess that we are but "a small part of a great whole."

(All of the editorials by Bill covering the 12 Points of Tradition appear in the new 48-page Tradition pamphlet, along with the 12 Points themselves. Copies of the new pamphlet were distributed free during November by the Alcoholic Foundation through the group secretaries. Extra copies may be had at 10 cents each by addressing requests to: Alcoholic Foundation, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Annex, New York 17, N. Y.)

Tradition One Checklist:

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

1. Am I in my group a healing, mending, integrating person, or am I divisive? What about gossip and taking other members' inventories?
2. Am I a peacemaker? Or do I, with pious precludes such as "just for the sake of discussion," plunge into argument?
3. Am I gentle with those who rub me the wrong way, or am I abrasive?
4. Do I make competitive AA remarks, such as comparing one group with another or contrasting AA in one place with AA in another?
5. Do I put down some AA activities as if I were superior for not participating in this or that aspect of AA?
6. Am I informed about AA as a whole? Do I support, in every way I can, AA as a whole, or just the parts I understand and approve of?
7. Am I as considerate of AA members as I want them to be of me?
8. Do I spout platitudes about love while indulging in and secretly justifying behavior that bristles with hostility?

2011 CALENDAR

- January 14-16** AREA ASSEMBLY – Madison Hotel
120 MADISON AVE
MONTGOMERY AL 36104-3624
(334) 264-2231
<http://www.madisonhotelmontgomery.com/>
- February 3-6** HUNTSVILLE 20TH EVER ROUNDUP
Holiday Inn Select
401 WILLIAMS AVE SW
HUNTSVILLE AL 35801-5045
(258) 533-1400
<http://www.aaarea1.org/events/default.php>
- February 4-6** SANDS OF SURRENDER – 40th Annual Gulf Coast Roundup
Ramada Plaza Beach Resort
1500 MIRACLE STRIP PKWY SE
FORT WALTON BEACH FL 32548-6213
(800) 874-8962
<http://www.gulfcoastroundup.com/>
- February 26-27** 27TH ANNUAL JUBILEE CONVENTION – Serenity Happens
Erie Meyer Civic Center
1930 W 2ND ST
GULF SHORES AL 36542
<http://gulfcoastaa.org/events.html>
- April 8-10** AREA ASSEMBLY – Madison Hotel
120 MADISON AVE
MONTGOMERY AL 36104-3624
(334) 264-2231
<http://www.madisonhotelmontgomery.com/>
- April 29-May 1** 16TH ANNUAL COUNTRY ROUNDUP
AG CENTER
1424 JACKSON AV (HWY 90)
CHIPLEY FL 34628
email: chipleycountryroundup@hotmail.com
- April 30-May 7** GENERAL SERVICE CONFERENCE
"We are Responsible for AA's Future—Let It Begin with Us."
NEW YORK, NY
- May 20-22** 1ST ANNUAL SUNSHINE CONVENTION
CRESTVIEW COMMUNITY CENTER
1446 COMMERCE DR
CRESTVIEW FL 32539-6945
email: sunshineconvention@hotmail.com
<http://www.aadist14.org/District14/Calendar/pages/SSConv20-22May11.pdf>

**Events for
January 2011**

9:30am Sun Jan 2
Hosted by:
Intergroup Committee
**Intergroup
Breakfast
Amvets in
Val'P**
Speaker:
Andrew M. of
Weekenders Group

District 14 GSR Meeting
Amvets 6:30 pm Mon
January 3rd

Intergroup Committee Meeting
6:30 pm Monday January 16th
At Central Office

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information.**

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For information on meeting Schedules and maps to meetings please visit...
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Birthdays

Val-P Hope Group
(Correction from December)
Seb N. - Dec. 28, 1976 - 34 yrs
January ;
Lynn C. - 1-7-1986 - 25 years
Ron V. - 1-15-1992 - 19 years

2nd Chance Group
Gary R. - 1-19-2008 - 2 years
John W. - 1-4-2007 - 3 yrs

Miracle Group
Brad K. - 1-5- 2009 - 2 years
Jack M. - 1-2- 2010 - 1 year

The Men's Group
(Belated December)
Neil G. - 12-1984 - 26 years
Vince M. - 12-1992 - 18 years
January
Dave E. - 01-1996 - 15 years
Roger L. - 01-1996 - 15 years

Straight Up Group
Michelle O. - 1-18-2007 - 4 yrs

Buster's
Paul F. - 1-10-1991 - 20 years

Brownbaggers Group
December
Richard B. - 12-19-2008 - 2
years

January
Cheryl H. - 1-14-2006 - 5 years
Trisha G. - 1-4-2009 - 2 years

Weekenders Group
Cliff W. - 1-17-1985 - 26 years
Lonny R. - 1-15-2001 - 10 years

Cover to Cover Group
Sid S. - 1-8-1984 - 27 years
John O'N 1/1/04 - 7 years



GRAPEVINE "... a magic carpet on which each of you can ride to the more distant reaches and watch new brothers and sisters emerge from darkness into light." Bill W., 1959, referring to the AA Grapevine.

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