

“Bill’s Story”, as a Tool

If you’re anything like I was the first couple times you read “Bill’s Story” in the Big Book, you probably thought to yourself some, if not all, of the following:

“I’m not like this guy. Sure, he might be an alcoholic. Probably the best example they could have possibly found for the book, but I don’t live in New York.” “I’m not a stockbroker in the 1930s.” “I didn’t got to war!” Or if you’re a woman you may have thought to yourself, “I can’t identify with Bill. He’s a man. I’m a woman. We’re totally different!” And of course, my most laughable excuse, “I never drank bath-tub gin! YUK!” (Of course, guzzling down a pint of Southern Comfort while holding my nose to avoid burning the inside of it was completely normal for me. Ha!)

Soon, I began to see the importance of the suggestion: “try to identify rather than compare.” One day, I heard a couple gentlemen talking about the Big Book and they made the following recommendations while reading “Bill’s Story”. They said something like, “Since the first eight pages of Bill’s story deal with his drinking and his alcoholism, go through those pages with a highlighter and **mark everything you can identify with, in the way Bill thought, the way Bill felt, and the way Bill drank.**” That made sense to me. So I tried it. Scanning through page 1 of “Bill’s Story” using this tool, which later I heard people refer to as the “**Bill W. Exercise**”, combined with an open mind and the willingness to have a new experience, I began to instantly identify with statements like:

“I was part of life at last, and in the midst of the excitement I discovered liquor.” And

“I forgot the strong warnings and the prejudices of my people concerning drink.”

Then on page 2 Bill goes on to say,

“Potential alcoholic that I was, I nearly failed my law course.”

Well, potential alcoholic that I was, I nearly failed my Telecommunications course which I achieved a 4.0 GPA in the previous semester. He then states,

“Though my drinking was not yet continuous, it disturbed my wife.”

Though my drinking was not yet continuous, it disturbed my father, girlfriend, and schoolmates. In the next paragraph on page 2 he says,

“By the time I had completed the course, I knew the law was not for me.”

With that statement, I had to ask myself, “Did I ever use all my willpower to complete something and then realize that it wasn’t what I wanted after all?” Or, “How often did I start something with all my might and enthusiasm and then by the time I was half-way through I move onto something else; never to complete the first project.” It’s been said of me more than once that **I am an excellent starter but lousy finisher**. How true that is with most alkies, I’m sure.

One of my favorite statements can be found on page 3:

*“For the next few years fortune threw money and applause my way. **I had arrived.**”* I asked myself, “Have I ever felt like that?” “I had arrived...” You bet cha’, I did! In the next paragraph Bill describes my drinking to a tee:

*“**My drinking assumed more serious proportions, continuing all day and almost every night. The remonstrances of my friends terminated in a row and I became a lone wolf.**”*

Have I ever said, “I prefer to drink alone”? Or, “I wish everyone would just mind their own business and leave me the hell alone!” Nahhhh, no alkie has ever felt like that!

As I worked my way through the first 8 pages of “Bill’s Story” using this method I began to see, where I hadn’t before, that I could indeed identify with Bill -- more than I ever thought I could! As a matter of fact, when I read on page 8, what I refer to as “Bill’s bottom”, I could no longer use the excuses I once did for feeling alone, different, a part from, and separate. He says,

*“**No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master.**”*

I remember thinking, “**I felt like that! I felt like that! The morning after my last drunk, sitting in a cell, I felt like that!**” As a matter of fact, having taken many people through the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous using the Big Book, I can’t remember anyone *not* being able to identify with “Bill’s bottom”. I know I can! The next statements in the following paragraph were extremely important for me to consider. Bill says,

*“**Trembling, I stepped from the hospital a broken man. Fear sobered me for a bit. Then came the insidious insanity of that first drink, and on Armistice Day 1934, I was off again. Everyone became resigned to the certainty that I would have to be shut up somewhere, or would stumble along to a miserable end. How dark it is before the dawn!**”*

I asked my innermost self: “Have I ever felt like a broken man?” “Did being afraid of something ever cause me to sober up for a while?” “Can I identify with the insidious insanity of the first drink, after having been away from it for a while?” How about “How dark it is before the dawn”? Ever hear of “The Dark Night of the Soul”? Well, as did Bill, I experienced it! I experienced the inner experience that Bill was talking about in his story. Having put this part of the “Bill W.

Exercise” into action, I was able to come away from it with a deeper understanding and admittance of my First Step experience than I had ever before.

This was only the first part of the “Bill W. Exercise” -- having covered only half the “Bill’s Story”. I still had pages 9 – 16 to read – or should I say *experience*. With this half of “Bill’s Story”, which deals with Bill’s recovery from alcoholism, my friends suggested that I **mark anything that Bill did to recover that I am not willing to do.** This is not meant to be used as an exercise in “beating oneself up”. Instead, it’s a tool to see what areas need more focus and attention when going through steps 2 – 12.

Would I be willing to become open minded about such spiritual concepts as Bill had?

I focused on statements Bill made in which he had been struggling with his entire life. Some of them are:

“I simply had to believe in a Spirit of the Universe, who knew neither time nor limitation. (Page 10)

“It began to look as though religious people were right after all.” (Page 11)

“...there might be a God personal to me...” “I could go for such conceptions as Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind or Spirit of Nature...” “My friend suggested what then seemed a novel idea. He said, “*Why don't you choose your own conception of God?*” *It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning.* (Page 12)

On pages 13 & 14, Bill tells us what “steps” he took in 1934 in Towns Hospital, where he was separated from alcohol for the last time:

“There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. (*Step 3*) I ruthlessly faced my sins (*Step 4*) and became willing to have my new-found Friend take them away, root and branch. (*Steps 6 & 7*) I have not had a drink since.

My schoolmate visited me, and I fully acquainted him with my problems and deficiencies. (*Step 5*) We made a list of people I had hurt or toward whom I felt resentment. I expressed my entire willingness to approach these individuals, admitting my wrong. (*Step 8*) Never was I to be critical of them. I was to right all such matters to the utmost of my ability.” (*Step 9*)

“I was to test my thinking by the new God-consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt, asking only for direction and strength to meet my problems as He would have me. Never was I to pray for myself, except as my requests bore on my usefulness to others. My friend promised when these things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a way of living which answered all my problems. Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements” (*steps 10 & 11*)

“These were revolutionary and drastic proposals, but the moment I fully accepted them, the effect was electric. There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known. There was utter confidence. I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through. God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound... My friend had emphasized the absolute necessity of demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly was it imperative to work with others as he had worked with me. Faith without works was dead, he said. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic! For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work, he would surely drink again, and if he drank, he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us it is just like that.” (*Step 12*)

Would I be willing to do what our co-founder did to recover: The Twelve Steps? Sure I would. And I have. And I continue to on a regular basis. If it (The Twelve Steps – *the program of recovery*, as outlined in our Big Book) worked for Bill and the other early pioneers of Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930’s, it can work for all of us in 2001 and beyond.

This concludes my experience with “Bill’s Story” and the “Bill W. exercise”. If you care to, try it. If not, that’s ok too. But, one thing I had to learn was that **I cannot give an opinion on an experience I’ve never had.** Thanks for letting me share my experience.

Blessings,

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