

“MORE ABOUT ALCOHOLISM” = THE INSANITY

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Leading up to chapter three in the Big Book, the Alcoholics Anonymous basic text has given us information about the alcoholic's problem ("The Doctor's Opinion"); throws in an example of the problem ("Bill's Story"); and tells us a little bit about the solution, which is a Higher Power working in and through us ("There Is A Solution"). Now the Big Book is going to show us the futility of an alcoholic trying to live without this solution. In other words, it's going to talk about the fact that trying to use ONLY human power (which is simply our self-will and our self-knowledge) to solve the problem of alcoholism leads the alcoholic back to the first drink.

For years now, I've heard people in our fellowship refer to the alcoholic's insanity as those crazy things we did when we were drunk. I'd like to suggest that this is a misperception. First of all, most of those things basically disappear once we stop drinking. Also, all alcoholics do not have in common all the crazy things we did when we were drinking. Some alcoholics have never gotten a D.W.I., some never lost a job or family due to drinking, and some even have never been arrested. Also, there are some NON-alcoholics who have gotten D.W.I.s, have lost jobs due to drinking, have caused accidents when intoxicated, have cheated on their spouses while trashed, have gotten into "beer muscle" fights, and have caused problems for the police. The ONLY insanity that EVERY alcoholic has in common is that even though alcohol has burned us and caused us problems again and again, we return to taking the first drink because alcohol brings about ease and comfort for us and soothes our inner turmoil. We're not thinking about the problems drinking caused us, we only think about the relief it brings once we have a few. This is the insanity that we need to be restored from mentioned in Step Two.

The word sanity means, "wholeness or completeness of mind; being able to see the truth." According to this definition, even if we are 99% sane in our thinking (which is questionable in my case!), there is still some incompleteness or insanity. The last few words in the Second Step ("...restore us to sanity") is not suggesting that we are crazy, it is saying that when it comes to combating alcohol, the alcoholic's thinking has some mental blank spots in seeing the truth.

A few lines into this chapter says that, "...our drinking careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could drink like other people." This is describing the experience of an alcoholic, so to help you identify whether you are one or not, ask yourself if this is your experience. The next line says, "The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession (or lie) of every abnormal drinker." For me this line is a good joke because it mentions controlling AND enjoying drinking which is impossible for an alcoholic. We can do one or the other but not both. If an alcoholic is trying to hold back and control their drinking, they are not enjoying it; and if an alcoholic is enjoying their drinking, it is usually more correctly described as having no control.

The second paragraph on page 30 contains the first of the two First Step questions: "We learned that we had to fully concede (which means "to admit to be true, or to admit defeat") to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion (or lie) that we are like other people, or presently may be, has to be smashed." The "lampshade on the wall" version of the First Step only uses the word "admitted", but here it refers to what we do as ADMITTING TO OUR INNERMOST SELVES, which sounds more like an acceptance. An acceptance of a problem is a MUCH deeper experience than just a surface admission of that problem. I remember when I was still drinking, I would sometimes admit that I was an alcoholic because it explained why I drank the way I did and gave me liberty to drink more. But when I finally ACCEPTED that I had a problem, then and only then did I finally do something about it. The book then suggests that (drunk or sober) we are different than non-alcoholics. My next-door neighbors may not need to go to meetings regularly but that I am like them has to be smashed. My mother may not need to work with other alcoholics but that I am like them has to be smashed. My co-worker may not need to wake up and do forty-five minutes of prayer and meditation but that I am like them has to be smashed. My cousin may be able to have one drink and not want another one but that I am like him has to be smashed.

The bottom of page 31 contains another one of the tests for discovering whether you are an alcoholic or not when it says, "We do not like to pronounce any individual as alcoholic, but you can quickly diagnose

yourself. Step over to the nearest barroom and try some CONTROLLED drinking. Try to drink and stop abruptly. Try it more than once. It will not take long for you to decide, IF you are honest with yourself about it. It may be worth a bad case of jitters if you get a full knowledge of your condition.” I’ve been at meetings where it was said that if you are not sure if you are an alcoholic, why don’t you go out there and drink. I believe this does a disservice to a person who is uncertain. We need to first give them information about what differentiates an alcoholic from a non-alcoholic so they can see if the experience of an alcoholic matches their own experience. They need to be told about the first paragraph on page 44 where it says, “If, when you honestly want to, you find you cannot quit entirely, or if when drinking, you have little control over the amount you take, you are probably alcoholic.” In other words, if you can’t always predict how much you are going to drink once you start, and when you stop drinking you can’t stay stopped even when you really want to, then this is ONLY experienced if you are an alcoholic. Please note that up until this point, the book has given us about forty pages of information by which the reader can decide if they are an alcoholic. It is ONLY after all this info that the book then suggests that if you’re still not sure if you are an alcoholic, try a test of controlled drinking. A good way of doing this is two drinks every day for one month, no more and no less (and no skipping days to store up!). Just suggesting this usually sends fear into the heart of an alcoholic, or if you’re a non-alcoholic you’ll probably think something like, “I don’t think I could drink all that.” Either way, it’s a good standard for diagnosing yourself.

Starting with the middle of page 32, the first of four characters in this chapter is discussed. The “man of thirty” (who is able to stay “dry” for 25 years) is included as an example of what happens to alcoholics who think that, “if I remain sober for a long stretch, I can go back to drinking normally”. Remember, “Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic.” Historically, it is not known who this story is referring to. However, in the beginning of this one paragraph biography he is identified as an alcoholic when it says, “Once he started (drinking), he had no control whatever.” We know that this must be an alcoholic because the book has previously described one of the symptoms of alcoholism as having an allergy (or abnormal reaction) to alcohol by craving more alcohol once we start drinking. Because of this, an alcoholic generally CANNOT predict how much they are going to drink once they start, and a non-alcoholic can ALWAYS predict how much they are going to drink. If you notice at the top of page 33 (after he starts drinking again) he is dead within four years. A question I like to ask people after reading this story is, “Did alcohol kill this gentleman or did the belief that he could drink like other people kill him?” Ya see, I don’t believe that it’s the first drink that gets you drunk. I believe that it’s your MIND telling you that it’s okay to TAKE the first drink that gets you drunk, because once an alcoholic’s mind tells them that what they are about to do is not wrong or harmful (and even at times tells us that taking a drink is the RIGHT thing to do), there is no human power that can stop them from drinking. We always return to drinking mentally and spiritually before we return to drinking physically. That’s why the Steps deal directly with our mental and spiritual condition.

The second of the two First Step questions can be found in the middle of page 33 where it says, “If we are planning to stop drinking, there must be no reservation (or plan for the future) of any kind, nor any lurking notion that someday we will be immune to alcohol.” We should ask ourselves this question also (after finishing this chapter) in order to thoroughly complete the First Step. Basically, the pages up to and including this chapter (when studied and understood) provide 99% of the information needed to make a solid Step One conclusion.

In the first full paragraph on page 34, we have another test for discovering whether we are an alcoholic or not when it says, “try leaving liquor alone for one year. If we are a real alcoholic, there is scant (or very little) chance of success.” I don’t know about you but if someone suggested, back when I was drinking, that I try to stay away from alcohol for a year, I would have said to them, “But you don’t understand, alcohol is the only thing that helps me deal with life. Doesn’t it do the same for you?” And of course it DOESN’T do the same for them because they are having a completely different experience than we are and that’s why we are so baffling to them when we go back to drinking after years of problems with it. When alcohol causes trouble for them, they just stay away from it. Moderating our drinking forever or staying away from it for more than a short period just isn’t possible if you are an alcoholic, so the two tests this chapter provides are good barometers for a self-diagnosis.

It is very important to notice what the top of page 35 says before we can go on. It states, “...we shall describe some of the mental states that precede a relapse into drinking, for obviously this is the crux (or puzzling difficulty) of the problem.” Please keep this in mind as the chapter goes along. The stories about Jim and Fred that follow are NOT about people, places and things. The authors are merely pointing out

some of the mental states, attitudes, and thoughts that precede drinking. This is how we know that it's not the first drink that gets you drunk and that relapse starts well before taking the first drink.

The Jim story comes next. This piece is about Ralph Furlong, who wrote the story in the first edition of the Big Book called "Another Prodigal Son". It contains a powerful lesson about what happens when you only work SOME of the Steps or only practice PART of AA's program of recovery. It points out his downfall this way: "We told him what we know of alcoholism (Step 1) and the answer we had found (Step 2). He made a beginning (Step 3)...All went well for a time, but he failed to enlarge his spiritual life (the way we enlarge our spiritual life is by thoroughly working Steps 4 through 12)." So Jim went back to drinking because he wasn't participating in all three parts of AA's plan for overcome alcoholism: recovery (which is found by working the Steps), unity (which is found at meetings and in fellowship with other AA's), and service (which is the unselfish activity of positively helping others, inside AND outside of AA). I'd also like to point out that this story contains what I believe is the reason for EVERY alcoholic who has EVER relapsed - they failed to enlarge their spiritual life. This is supported on page 120 where it says, "Perhaps your husband (the alcoholic) will make a fair start on the new basis, but just as things are going beautifully he dismays you by coming home drunk. If you are satisfied he really wants to get over drinking, you need not be alarmed. Though it is infinitely better that he have no relapse at all, as has been true with many of our men (and women), it is by no means a bad thing in some cases. Your husband (the alcoholic) will see AT ONCE that he MUST REDOUBLE HIS SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES IF HE EXPECTS TO SURVIVE." Think about it, and ask a person who has just came back if they were failing to continue to enlarge their spiritual life just before relapse.

Page 37 has many descriptions (using different words) of the alcoholic insanity. It can also be called the mental state that precedes the first drink, or the mental blank spot that allows the alcoholic to return to drinking. The book calls it, "the foolish idea, plain insanity, lack of proportion of the ability to think straight, curious mental phenomenon that parallel with our sound reasoning, insanely trivial excuse, our sound reasoning failed, insane idea, our justification for a spree was insanely insufficient, and little serious or effective thought during the period of premeditation of what the terrific consequences might be." If you don't understand or relate to one way of putting it, maybe one of the other phrases works for you, but they repeat it again and again to make sure that we fully understand.

The third character mentioned is a story about a jay-walker. He's so cocky that he doesn't just walk or run in front of fast-moving vehicles, he skips in front of them. I can almost see this guy out on Route 78. His problem is not that he's a little older and a little slower but that his mind keeps telling him to do it again even though it causes him problems and injuries. This is also a good comparison of what happens to the alcoholic.

The last story (beginning on page 39) is about an early member named Harry B. even though the book refers to him as Fred. For me, this is one of the most important stories in the program portion of the Big Book because we never know what the path bringing us to our next drink is going to look like. If you read the previous Jim story, you will notice that he wasn't necessarily having a good day because he was a little frustrated about working for an automobile agency he once owned, and even had a small argument with his boss. But Fred is having a GREAT day. His business came off well, he was pleased and knew his partners would be too, it was the end of a perfect day, and there was not a cloud on the horizon. In other words, Fred was NOT hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. But he still drank. His problem began earlier in the story because he, "wouldn't believe himself an alcoholic (no Step 1), much less accept a spiritual remedy for his problem (if you don't take Step One, you don't need Steps Two through Twelve)." As you read Fred's story (as well as the rest of the chapter) please notice the Twelfth Step work of the early AA members.

The chapter then ends with another review of what has already been said again and again thus far in the Big Book - "Once more: The alcoholic AT CERTAIN TIMES (not ALL the time but at certain times) has no effective mental defense against the first drink (so an alcoholic may be able to "think the drink through" nine out of ten times, but they have no defense when that tenth times comes). Except in a few RARE cases, NEITHER HE NOR ANY OTHER HUMAN BEING can provide such a defense (that includes ourselves, the fellowship, or our sponsor). Our defense MUST come from a Higher Power." Like it says in How It Works, "That probably NO human power could have relieved our alcoholism". So we cannot think our way out of alcoholism, a sick mind cannot heal a sick mind, self-will cannot overcome self-will, and if our thinking is a big part of the problem, we cannot USE the problem to SOLVE the problem.