

THE ALCOHOLIC'S INSANITY

by Robert H.

More crazy things have been said about insanity than about any subject ever discussed at an AA meeting. Sponsors tell war stories about their insanity. They give analogies about insanity that describe a single incident but nothing else. They talk about the insanity of the things they did while drinking. They talk about the insane things they did in sobriety. They talk about insane thoughts and insane feelings, and on and on it goes.

Surprisingly, to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever studied the use of the word insanity as it is used in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Yet it is from this source that all our thousands of quotes spring to life. It remains a mystery why no one talks of the way the word is used by Bill in the Big Book. It seems we are in as much denial about the meaning of insanity as it appears in our text as we once were about our disease. We have adored, very properly, our founders but in our use of the word insanity we act as if Bill never used it. Yet it is his first use of the word that is of the most importance to us.

If you wonder why old-timers want to define a word by giving a single example of it instead of a definition. If you wonder why no one investigates the original use of the word.

If you wonder why no one questions the bizarre definitions you hear from people who mean well. If you are tired of vague and meaningless definitions of insanity. Read on.

Insanity is the most misunderstood word in the Big Book. We hear so many different definitions of its meaning that the net result is confusion. Now, at last, we can study the simple truth of what Bill said, and what he meant. To arrive at this truth we must study the word insanity as Bill Wilson used it in the Big Book. As we correctly study insanity, the fear of the word goes away. We also find that the truth gives us far greater reason to have a sponsor, work the Steps, and to trust others for guidance. Hearing so many opinions of what insanity means is baffling to a student of the Big Book, because Bill tells us exactly what meaning he gives the word insanity the very first time he uses it in the Big Book (page 37). It is necessary that we understand Bill's definition because Bill is the person writing the book. He is the author who is using words to try to transfer an idea from his mind to our mind. If we don't know what Bill meant by insanity then we cannot accurately understand the Big Book. Worse still we cannot possibly work Steps One and Two or make an intelligent decision in Step Three. So it is important that we understand insanity correctly.

A word is just a symbol to convey a thought from one person's mind to another person's mind. This cannot be done unless both writer and reader have the same understanding.

It is Bill's definition of the word insanity that we want. After all he is the author of our book. He is the one who is using a word as a symbol to try to transfer a thought from his mind to our minds. So it does not matter what the dictionary definition of insanity is, it only matters what Bill means by insanity in his conversation with us uses the same definition and have the same understandings of the word used. So we will start with the paragraph where Bill first uses insanity in the book. Then, one word and one line at a time, we will look at exactly what Bill said, and what he meant, when he used the word insanity.

One additional bit of background is necessary at this point. Up to this point Bill had used very definite words such as "precisely how we have recovered." He said, we will tell you "in detail." And further on, "clear-cut directions are given." But this changes when Bill gets to the place where he uses the word insanity. There Bill quits using precise, specific language and starts using everyday language, or street talk. It is in this manner that he uses insanity. We will be referring to the lines in the Big Book where Bill first uses insanity so we will separate them below for easy reference.

"Whatever the precise definition of the word may be, we call this plain insanity."

Let us look at the words above. The word "whatever" means "it doesn't matter." When my wife says she is going out for ice cream and asked me what kind I want and I answer "whatever" I am saying it does not matter "or I don't care." The same is true here with Bill speaking. He is saying it does not matter what the precise meaning of the word may be. Because Bill tells us he is not speaking precisely we know that to look up the meaning in the dictionary would be misleading. Only precise meanings are given in the dictionary and Bill is not speaking precisely here. Now we can paraphrase Bill by saying "It doesn't matter what the dictionary meaning of the word may be." Bill isn't using a dictionary definition and he has told us so. The word plain means without nuance, without hidden meanings. It is simple and unobstructed. We can again paraphrase Bill by saying "It doesn't matter what the dictionary meaning of the word is, we call this plain insanity (street talk)." Now for the word insanity itself.

The next sentence is perhaps the most important sentence in the Big Book because it is in this sentence that Bill tells us his definition of insanity. He says, "How can such a lack of proportion, of the ability to think straight be called anything else." So Bill's definition of insanity is "lack of proportion, of the ability to think straight." We can now accurately paraphrase Bill by saying: "It doesn't matter what the dictionary definition of the word may be, we call this simply a lack of proportion, of the ability to think straight."

This makes sense. Now we can lay to rest all the different ideas of insanity. We all meant well but the fact remains that Bill's definition of the word is the definition we must use if we are to understand Bill and the Big Book correctly.

THE TIME JUST BEFORE THE FIRST DRINK

It is in the time just before the first drink that is of particular interest to us. Our book asks: "What sort of thinking dominates an alcoholic who repeats time after time the desperate experiment of the first drink?" Bill asks this question in our book because he was very interested in what went on in the mind of the alcoholic in the time just before the first drink. He went from one relapsed AA to another interviewing them to see if they could remember exactly what they were thinking about just before they drank. Bill believed

that if he could get enough information on this period just prior to drinking, he might be able to cure alcoholism. Bill was so interested in the "time just prior to the first drink" that he gives us two illustrations in the book. Bill says, "We shall describe some of the mental states that precede a relapse into drinking, for obviously this is the crux of the problem."

Bill's first example is of Jim, the car salesman. When Bill ask him about his state of mind just before drinking, Jim said:

"I felt irritated that I had to be a salesman for a concern that I once owned . . . went to see a prospect, got hungry and stopped at a roadside place where they had a bar. I had no intention of drinking. I just thought of having a sandwich. I had eaten there before. Suddenly the thought crossed my mind that if I were to put an ounce of whiskey in my milk it couldn't hurt me on a full stomach." I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I vaguely sensed I was not being any too smart, but felt reassured as I was taking the whiskey on a full stomach."

Our book continues:

"Thus started one more trip to the asylum for Jim. Here was the treat of commitment, the loss of family and position, 3rd loss) to say nothing of that intense mental and physical suffering which drinking always caused him (4th and 5th loss). He had much knowledge about himself as an alcoholic. Yet all reasons for not drinking were easily pushed aside in favor of the foolish idea that he could take whiskey if only he mixed it with milk!"

We can now see what Bill meant by "lack of proportion." Jim was facing five big losses if he drank but he drank anyway. Jim drank because the reasons for not drinking were "easily pushed aside." Today we would call this pushing aside repression. Repression is the involuntary blocking out of our conscious minds unwanted, painful, or undesirable memories.

This happens without the person knowing it is happening. All the evidence about the five big losses that Jim would suffer as a result of drinking were blocked from his consciousness. He had no way of making a proportionate decision because he did not have the facts at his conscious disposal to make this balanced decision. Thus any idea that he could drink with impunity, no matter how trivial, was enough to outweigh the missing information that would have allowed him to make a rational, balanced, decision. To Jim, with his limited facts, the decision to drink was a good decision. There was no evidence to the contrary. Jim was: "unable to bring into his consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. If these thoughts occur, they are hazy and readily supplanted with the old threadbare idea that this time we shall handle ourselves like other people."

When we accept the idea that the insanity of our disease is such that we did not have in our conscious mind the facts with which to make a proportionate decision about whether or not to drink, many other things fall into place. It explains for instance why we did the same thing over and over expecting different results. Naturally we did the same thing over and over. The same repression of the facts with which to make a balanced decision kept happening over and over again. This ensured that we would make the same decision time after time. The lack of evidence was the same in each case so the decision had to be the same.

It also explains why knowledge of our disease is not enough. How could it be? All the knowledge we had about the consequences of drinking would be lost just when we needed it most, when we were making the decision to drink or not to drink. This also explains why the same percentage of very bright people suffers from alcoholism as do the rest of us. Their knowledge is of no help when it is repressed from consciousness and not available for consideration.

This explains too why will power was not enough. The will is the part of the mind that chooses between the emotions on one hand and the intellect on the other hand. When all the information was lost to the intellect (through repression) the will had no evidence with which to say no to the emotions that demanded a drink. The will rendered its verdict based on balance and there simply was nothing in the intellect to balance out the emotions' demand for a drink. No amount of will has ever been, or ever will be, effective under these circumstances.

We now see that insanity is just a lack of proportion in our thinking. We also see how it ties in with what Bill was saying in the Big Book up to the point where he first used the word insanity. But how does it fit in with the rest of the book you say?

Let's look at the two paragraphs following the insanity paragraph we have just discussed. In these two paragraphs we find Bill using other words that he contrasts with our sound thinking. It reads in part:

"But there was always the curious mental phenomenon that parallel with our sound reasoning there inevitably ran some insanely trivial excuse for taking the first drink. Our sound reasoning failed to hold us in check. The insane idea won out."

This paragraph is no problem at all with our new knowledge. We know before we start to read the paragraph that in times of stress the mind will repress information that causes it pain. When Bill uses the words "insanely trivial excuse," we know at once that the mind has repressed the losses incurred from drinking so that sound reasoning was not possible. Thus the "insanely trivial excuse" won out. There was actually little or no other information available to the mind except the "insanely trivial excuse." In a sense the insanely trivial excuses were not insanely trivial. It was the information available to the mind for decision-making.

Still the next paragraph in the Big Book talks about the times we have gone out deliberately to get drunk. At times our repression or our insanity was not entirely complete. When repression, (insanity) did not entirely repress all the information about the pain and suffering which follow a spree, our mind used justification and rationalization to overcome the objections that managed to bleed through the repression. Using lots of rationalizing and justifying is the same as getting drunk deliberately. Rationalization and justification are conscious ego defense mechanisms. When we use rationalization and justification it simply means we are conscious of our reasons for getting drunk as opposed to being unaware as happens when repression is involved. Even then Bill says "we are obliged to admit that our justification for a spree was insanely insufficient in the light of what always happened."

We see examples of the times when the repression was complete and when it was not complete in comparing Bill's illustration of Jim, the car salesman and Fred, the accountant. In Jim's case he "realized he wasn't being any too smart" in deciding to drink. This tells us that some information about the pain of losses to follow drinking was not repressed. Jim's mind had to deal with it another way so his mind rationalized the drinking by telling itself it will be safe to drink if only he mixed it with milk.

In the case of Fred, the accountant, Bill's illustration is a little different. Bill quotes Fred as saying "Not only had I been off guard, I had made no fight whatever against the first drink. This time I had not thought of the consequences at all!" We see clearly that in Fred's case the repression was complete. No information at all was available to counter the "emotional obsession to drink."

On the page 42 Fred says; "I saw that will power and self-knowledge would not help in these strange mental blank spots." These strange mental blank spots describe our mental state just prior to the first drink precisely. Our minds were blank concerning the losses we would have if we drank. Our book says "Once more: The alcoholic at times has no effective mental defense against the first drink." How could he have a mental defense if the mental part of our decision-making powers was blocked from our consciousness? There can be no sound reasoning when our mind has a blank spot where it should have the information concerning the losses from taking the first drink.

Fred's story also differs from Jim's in another way. Jim drank because he had a resentment (although he doesn't realize it or admit it to Bill) because he was now working as a salesman at a car dealership he once owned, and he drank because he, "failed to enlarge his spiritual life". Fred had no problems whatsoever. Fred takes an entire paragraph to tell us everything was fine physically, financially, etc. In fact he says it was the "end of a perfect day."

This tells us that he did not drink just to relieve negative feelings. He drank to get to the euphoria of alcoholism that the average temperate drinker never experiences. So the obsession, the insanity, to drink doesn't come about because of pain alone. While pain can be one motivator, just as often, especially in the early stages of our drinking, we drank to get from a state of well-being to a state of euphoria.

Again, the insanity of the first drink can and does occur for the positive reason of experiencing a feeling of euphoria as often as it occurs from the stress of emotional pain. This is a critical difference between the alcoholic and the non-alcoholic and the hardest concept for the non-alcoholic public to understand.

One popular definition of insanity in AA is, "Taking the same action over and over again expecting different results." Of course this refers to the story of the jaywalker who progressively gets in more serious accidents as he continues to jaywalk. This analogy of repetitious harmful behavior is a good demonstration of the progression of the disease and the consequent progression of the denial system to prevent us from facing the truth, but it doesn't really explain insanity. The insanity is not in the repetition of the action. The insanity, as explained on page 2, is in the thinking just before the first drink in each individual incidence of the repetitious behavior. Naturally we take the same action over and over; the same disproportionate thinking keeps taking place when our mind is making the decision whether to drink or not to drink. Just as we earlier showed the need for understanding the context in which Bill Wilson first mentioned insanity we now need to understand his style or writing to further understand him and the Big Book. His peculiarity of writing we are referring to is that of using synonyms of words instead of repeating the word in consecutive sentences or paragraphs. The most notable instance of this is in the 6th and 7th Steps where Bill uses the terms "defects of character" and "shortcomings" to mean the same thing.

We know this is true because he was personally asked by one old-timer about this. Bill replied: "My English teacher taught me never to use the same word in successive sentences or paragraphs where another word could be substituted for it."

We need this information in studying the way Bill used the words obsession, illusion and deluded (on page 30 of the chapter entitled "More About Alcoholism" where he is starting to build his case for the critical importance of the "type of thinking that dominates" an alcoholic in the time just before the first drink.

Again our book reads:

"The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. The persistence of this illusion is astonishing. The delusion that we are like other people or presently may be, has to be smashed." The word obsession means: "a persistent, disturbing, uncontrollable thought that intrudes on our mind." This describes exactly the way we were preoccupied with drinking, even while focusing consciously on another subject. It also explains our book saying: "parallel with our sound reasoning ran some insanely trivial excuse.

Illusion means: "the state of being deceived or mislead intellectually. The perception of something existing in such a way as to cause misinterpretation of its actual nature." Clearly the idea of controlling our drinking was not real. Our mind was functioning in a way that deceived us concerning the outcome of drinking.

Delusion is the false beliefs steadfastly held by the individual despite contradictory objective evidence. And there was evidence by the score that we were out of control long before we ever came to see it.

In comparing these three words - obsession, illusion, and delusion - to insanity we see that all pointed to the inability to see things as they really were. When Bill has built his case for the term insanity however, he quits using these other words.

BENEFITS OF UNDERSTANDING INSANITY

The first, if not the most important, benefit is to prevent scaring off the newcomer. Time and time again we hear people who have been around AA for a while tell of the fear and apprehension they felt when they were new and saw the word insanity in the Second Step. Over and over again we hear that the newcomer was blocked from accepting the first Step, to one degree or another, because it implied they were crazy. Putting these fears to rest in the newcomer would in itself be enough to warrant a study and explanation of the word "insanity."

The second and most obvious benefit of understanding the term insanity is to better understand the Big Book. This helps us to better understand and work the Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. This is especially true of Steps One, Two and Three. In better working the Steps the likelihood of our recovery increased and the quality of our recovery is enhanced.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into a detailed analysis of working the Steps a few comments are pertinent because they are directly connected to "insanity."

The table below shows Steps One through Three in their most elementary form. Following the table we will show how our knowledge of "insanity" helps us understand and work these Steps.

Step 1

The Problem

Powerlessness

Disproportionate thinking or insanity

Step 2

The Solution

A Greater Power

Proportionate thinking or sanity

Step 3

The Decision

Between Steps 1 & 2

A place between insanity & sanity

In Step Three we are required to make a choice between Step One and Step Two. This is the same as making a choice between our powerless condition over alcohol and accepting a power greater than ourselves which will solve our problem. It is a choice between sanity and insanity. This is also the same as choosing between living in the problem and living in the solution that we so often talk about in meetings.

The anatomy of our powerlessness over alcohol is simple. The obsession guarantees us that we will have a moment of disproportionate thinking when we will decide to drink. The allergy makes it impossible for us to quit drinking once we have started. If we can't predict when we will start, because of the obsession, and if we can't predict when we will stop, because of the allergy, then we are powerless over alcohol.

Obviously if we never started to drink we wouldn't have to worry about the allergy that makes us keep drinking once we started. So the whole crux of our alcoholism is in the time during which our obsession for alcohol is so strong it controls our mind. The time just before the first drink.

Therefore the main focus of our study is the insanity of the first drink. It is here that insanity and powerlessness over alcohol are the same.

The third benefit is that the more completely we accept the problem, our powerlessness over alcohol; the easier it is to accept a power outside ourselves as the solution. A knowledge and understanding of our "insanity" helps tremendously in accepting our powerlessness. First it helps because it limits our powerlessness to the time just before the first drink, not our everyday life and actions. Secondly since we are the ones who "learned" about our powerlessness and its dangers, we don't mistakenly think we are powerless over everything. To do so would help prevent a state of "learned helplessness" and thus prevent a quick and effective recovery. Also, the more knowledge we have of the problem the more completely we can effect a solution.

The fourth benefit of understanding insanity is "knowing that we will not know." This sounds at first like a contradiction in terms but it is not. Perhaps the most difficult part of the denial system to penetrate in the alcoholic is the prized knowledge and judgment. A simple and sound explanation of why "we will not know allows" newcomers and old-timers alike to reach out for help in our recovery just as we would in other life situations where our knowledge was insufficient to complete a task of solve a problem in living.

For example we have no problem calling an attorney if we need legal help. We have no problem going to an M.D. if we have physical problems. We have no problem calling an electrician, a plumber etc. This is what Bill meant when he said "we often show good judgment in other areas of our life."

But when it comes to running our personal life we are reluctant to ask for help. This reluctance exists because we have been trained since childhood to be self-sufficient. Asking for help makes us feel we are weak. However this unwillingness can be easily overcome once we have a sound reason for asking for help that leaves us room for self-respect. It allows us to more voluntarily make the decision to reach out for help. The more it is our decision to ask for help the more eagerly we take the actions necessary to recover. This brings us to Step Two.

Step Two is just the opposite of Step One. Here we are talking about the solution. We are talking about more power. We are talking about sane or proportionate thinking. Having proportion in our thinking means that we can see clearly the losses that come from drinking as well as any temporary feeling of well-being that we may experience from the first few drinks. Being able to see both positive and negative factors in taking a drink means we can weigh each side and make a decision based on reason. We can use our sound reasoning because all the information for a good decision is available to our conscious mind. We can think in terms of which would we have the more lasting benefit. This is a return to sanity.

In an ironic twist we now "know." But since this knowledge is the knowing that we will not know it promotes our dependence on God and Others. The entire nature of "knowing" is now changed from one of a self-centered, self obsessed nature of being totally self sufficient; of trying to out-think, out-work and out-manipulate our fellow man, to one of surrender and a willingness to accept help. As we accept the fact that "no man is an island" our defense mechanisms go down. We stop keeping others at arms length. We become teachable. We allow others to reach out to us in love and caring without fear of being rejected or slighted. It instantly places us in a position of being "a part of" instead of "apart from."

Humility is "seeing ourselves in our proper relationship with God and our Fellow Man." When we become a part of we have made a good beginning in becoming humble people. This new balanced relationship with our fellow man is strangely similar to being able to see both pluses and minuses from drinking. We now see that we have faults that our fellows can help us with and that they have frailties with which we in turn can help them. Moreover we see that living a life of service to our fellows is the only real way we can be of service to God. So our answer lies in living in harmony with others as one among equals. Trusting and being trusted. Helping and being helped. Nurturing and being nurtured. Loving and being loved. Living and letting live.

As we ask for advice and help in matters of increasing importance in our lives we begin to develop trust in other people. We come to see that others really do want the best for us, that the world is a warm supportive place, not a cold forbidding planet where we must fight for our existence.

As we feel safer and safer we let go of our ego and have less to defend. We develop more and stronger ties of friendship as we share at increasingly deeper levels of personal intimacy. Now we can be more open with other people and the cycle of sharing and trust grows and grows. We have faith that others will love us and be supportive of us. We can relax and enjoy life. We are on the road to "being happy joyous and free."

SUMMARY

When the question of defining insanity came up we found that no one had made a serious effort to give us a valid definition of the word as Bill Wilson used it in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Single examples and personal opinions were insufficient. We saw that it was Bill's definition that we need to use because he is the author of the book Alcoholics Anonymous. If we were to understand the Big Book, we had to understand the author, not what some Tom, Dick and Harry joked about on the street corners of AA. The Big Book is where the word originates as it is used in AA, and the way AA uses it is what is so important. Once we got through this wall of denial about where to find the meaning of the word insanity we very quickly got results.

Bill says that insanity is lack of proportion, and the preceding paragraph tells us that this lack of proportion is due to repression. Repression is the hiding from memory of unwanted or unpleasant thoughts. In the case of the alcoholic these losses are the tremendous losses we would incur if we drank. The story of Jim the car salesman proved that at times the repression was not complete and rationalization and justification was necessary to place us in a state of mind where it was better to drink than not drink. The account of Fred the accountant showed a complete mental blank in the mind where the losses of drinking should have been so that we found no reason at all to "not drink."

Perhaps the most quoted of all is the analogy of the jaywalker where insanity is depicted as taking the same action over and over, always expecting different results. But this was shown to be the recurring repression and it followed that the same decision had to be made over and over because the same lack of evidence about losses from drinking kept recurring.

CONCLUSION

The time will come in every alcoholic's life that he will be under severe emotional stress. These are the times when we do not know what is best for us to do. It is against these times that we build our insurance by going to meetings, sponsoring others and being sponsored, helping others, and above all, by working the Steps. There need be no fear of a moment of disproportionate thinking if we are actively doing the things that have proved successful for millions of alcoholics over a half century of time. As we learn to trust others to care for us when we cannot care for ourselves we may come to see that this is the primary way in which "God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves." We are privileged to know these truths while we are still on the human part of our spiritual trip. We are much blessed.