

Spiritual Milestones in Alcoholics Anonymous

I

FEW, IF ANY, men or women have completely fulfilled the aims of Alcoholics Anonymous without at least some grasp of the spiritual, or to use another term in it's broadest sense, religion. True, there have been some who have managed to keep sober simply by mechanical action. But a preponderance of evidence points out that until one has some spiritual conviction, and the more the better, he takes no joy in his sobriety. Too often we hear an AA remark, "I think this is a wonderful program, but I can't understand the spiritual angle." To them the religion otherwise known as Alcoholics Anonymous is something complex, abstract and awesome. They seem to have the impression that religion, the spiritual life, is something to be enjoyed only by saints the clergy, and perhaps an occasional highly privileged layman. They cannot conceive that it can be for the reformed sinner as well. And yet the truth is, the spiritual AA is there for all of us to enjoy.

But, asks the alcoholic, where can I find a simple, step-by-step religious guide? The Ten Commandments give us a set of Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots; the Twelve Steps of AA give us a program of dynamic action; but what about a spiritual guide?

Of course the answer is that by following the Ten Commandments and Twelve Steps to the letter we automatically lead a spiritual life, whether or not we recognize it.

Here, however, is a set of suggestions, couched in the simplest of language:

1--Elimination of sin from our lives.

2--Develop humility.

3--Constantly pray to God for guidance.

4--Practice charity.

5--Meditate frequently on our newly found blessings, giving honest thanks for them.

6--Take God into our confidence in all our acts.

7--Seek the companionship of others who are seeking a spiritual life.

These are practical suggestions, mileposts on the road to a spiritual life. There is nothing Mysterious about them. Every one of the seven points is found elsewhere in AA literature, but here they are set down in a group for easier guidance. Let's look at each point briefly:

1--Eliminate sin from our lives.

We take a long step toward the spiritual life when we do a bit of personal housecleaning.

It is utterly essential, if we are to retain our sobriety, to eliminate the imperfections of lust, greed, selfishness, intolerance, gluttony, sloth, anger, jealousy--to mention but a few. Most of all we must banish the twin devils of an alcoholic, self pity and resentment. A non-alcoholic may be able to indulge occasionally in some of these sins without great harm or a complete moral setback resulting. But for an alcoholic such indulgence can be fatal. For further development of this point read Part IV, "Second Reader for Alcoholics Anonymous," another Akron publication.

2--Develop humility.

This is of a more abstract nature than the other points, harder to pin down. The simplest example, perhaps, is this: When you hear an AA say "I can't understand the spiritual angle of the program," note that it is almost invariably said wistfully. In other words, he would LIKE TO UNDERSTAND the spiritual program. And that in itself is a humble gesture. For humility is teachability, the willingness to learn, keeping an open mind. An inner feeling of unworthiness is healthy in the sight of God. Consider the words of St. Paul, whose memory of wrongdoings in the past led him to write to the Corinthians (1-15:9) "For I am the least of the apostles, that I am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." He then goes on to say "But by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." These words of deepest humility from the man who, more than any other, kept alive by his perseverance and faith in the Christian religion!

3--Constantly pray to God for guidance.

Prayer is a partnership. A foreman in a great corporation can get an idea that will benefit his company. But before the plan can be accepted it must go before the board of directors, men of wisdom and experience. And after it is accepted it is the foreman and men working with him who must put it into effect. In our personal lives God is the elder statesman. We ask Him for guidance, but we must do the work. It is logical to believe that if all men in the

world prayed sincerely for peace, peace would be forthcoming. But every man would have to do his part. We cannot pray for something that is apparently out of our reach, then sit back and expect God to dump it in our laps. But if we pray sincerely, then do our part by taking dynamic action, even things we thought beyond attainment will fall like ripe plums. St. Paul put it this way: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." (Philippians 4:13).

4--Practice charity.

This is simply another way of saying practice the Twelfth Step. The unselfish helping of others is the practice of love, upon which Christian philosophy is based. Remember at all times Our Lord's two commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. And ... thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." The great Jewish Rabbi, Hillel, who lived at the time of Christ, said: "What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow man; this is the whole Law; the rest is mere commentary."

5--Meditate frequently on our newly found blessings, giving honest thanks for them.

This is self evident, and, if one possesses the least spark of gratitude for his sobriety, is spontaneous. We who have known the very depths of despair are more likely to be grateful for the little blessings of life, such as freedom from fear and worries, love of our families and friends, respect from others and self respect, than those non-alcoholics who take such things for granted. We have ample reason for gratitude. Our blessings are proof to us that there is a God who will guide and bless us as long as we do our part.

6--Take God into our confidence in all our acts.

In other words, ponder the rightness or wrongness of every thought, word or action. One of the chief blessings of being an adult is to be able to distinguish between right and wrong.

Regardless of how profitable an area may seem, if conscience tells us it is unethical, discard it.

We did not hesitate when young to talk things over with Dad. That's what Dads are for, to be kindly and helpful, ever ready to give counsel to their children. The Jehovah of the Old Testament was a stern, wrathful God, ever ready to punish. That, however, is not God as Christ teaches us. The God of the New Testament is like Dad, kindly and helpful, full of compassion and ever ready to forgive. We should always strive to make God a companion rather than someone from whom we constantly demand gifts.

7-- Seek the companionship of others who are seeking the spiritual life.

In the early days, the kitchen was the church of Alcoholics Anonymous. The few members met almost every morning to have coffee together, pray together, and give thought to their mutual problems. AA was a shaky structure in those days, with but few members, no literature except the Bible, no rules for guidance except a few inherited from Bachmanism (Oxford Group) that have since been pretty largely discarded. The members had to depend on fellowship, even more than we do today. AA has been described by medicine as group therapy.

The successful AA program of today is an accumulation of knowledge and ideas arrived at by trial and error of not only those early members, but of hundreds and thousands who have contributed even up to this very day. Although, for example, the Twelve Steps may have been composed by one man, they are actually the result of mass thinking. The Author wrote them after absorbing and sorting out the various thoughts gained in association and conversation with other alcoholics. There were generations of ethical thinking behind Moses when he inscribed the Ten Commandments. Who can say who first discovered one of the very cornerstones of AA, the 24-Hour Plan? Who can say who first applied the phrase "Easy Does It" to our program? One of your own ideas, publicly spoken, may within a year or two be accepted as a tenet of AA. Alcoholics Anonymous are YOUR people. You are safe in their company.

Your mastery of the sober life will grow in proportion to the contact you have with your AA friends. Not only do we attain stature by attending meetings, but by meeting our new friends for lunch, sitting with them on the front porch in summertime, dropping by to see them of an evening. The conversation will turn to our common problems, to the benefit of us all.

Ponder the words of St. Paul: "Be not deceived; evil companionships corrupt good morals." (I Corinthians 15:33.)

II

SOME OF US find God in unusual and unexpected ways. Some are fortunate to have a sudden illuminating experience that changes their lives within a space of minutes. Others may have the experience more slowly, a

gradual growth over a number of years. Here, then, are the actual stories of three members of AA who gratefully discovered God. Only their names have been disguised.

ARNOLD HAD been in AA for nearly a year. For a number of reasons he was particularly anxious to help a certain alcoholic friend, Fred, who was rather on the stubborn side.

Fred finally admitted his need for help, but balked at going into the AA ward of the local hospital. Arnold was persistent, and after several weeks of almost daily calls (Fred invariably smelling of liquor), finally convinced his "baby" that the alcoholic who took the massive dose of AA medicine (meaning conversation) in the hospital ward stood a far greater chance of becoming successfully sober than the one who tried to work out the program at home. Fred finally agreed he would go to the hospital on the following day, so Arnold called to reserve a bed. "Yes," said the admitting office clerk, "there will be a vacant bed tomorrow."

Arnold told Fred to pack his toilet articles and bathrobe, he'd pick him up at 2 o'clock the following afternoon. Shortly after noon the following day Arnold thought it would be wise to confirm the reservation. He called the admitting office and got another girl on the line. There had been an error. The original girl had forgotten to write down the reservation and the bed was no longer available. But perhaps tomorrow would do, there were two patients leaving then.

Arnold lost his temper. "By tomorrow my baby will probably be in the gutter again," he barked, slamming down the telephone. Still furious he called a superior officer of the hospital but got the same answer. "A fine thing," he muttered, "after all the time I spent convincing that guy. The Hell with it!"

Then for no apparent reason, there flashed into his mind a fragment of one of AA's favorite prayers--"Grant me, Almighty God, the serenity to accept that which I cannot change." The thought startled Arnold. He bowed his head in meditation and prayer. Then he picked up the telephone and called Fred. "Sorry, old man, but there has been a bit of confusion. But I can get you into the hospital tomorrow." To Arnold's great surprise, Fred agreed that tomorrow would be all right, that once he had given his word he didn't intend to renege.

Barely two hours later Arnold's phone rang. It was the hospital. The sponsor of an out-of-town patient had arrived a day earlier than anticipated and Arnold could have a bed later in the afternoon.

It is entirely possible that the hospital would have called even though Arnold had not resigned himself to the will of God. But to Arnold it was, and still is, a miracle that brought him a deeper understanding of God.

Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way; "A man holding a straw parallel to the Gulf Stream, the ocean will flow through it. Conversely, hold it sideways to the stream and it will be washed away. So is man's relation to God."

BEFORE COMING into AA some years ago, Jerry, like so many of us, tried to find a method for controlled drinking. His search naturally was futile. Finally his boss suggested, and Jerry did not reject the idea, that he try Christian Science. So with a chip on his shoulder and disbelief in his heart, Jerry sought out a Practitioner, a kindly, sincere old gentleman with complete confidence in his Faith. Jerry had a dozen sessions with the Practitioner, learning nothing and heading as fast as possible for the nearest tavern after each meeting.

At what turned out to be their last meeting the Christian Scientist said to Jerry, "My son, if you ever have the urge to drink, even though you have a glass in your hand, if you will telephone me I will guarantee that you will resist temptation. . . At any hour of the day or night," he added.

Jerry told his friends in later years, "I thought if I called him he would pray for me. The prayer would probably drift over Lake Erie, or the Pennsylvania mountains, never in the world finding me in my favorite saloon." He promptly forgot the incident.

It was years later that Jerry found AA. For another year he practiced AA principles 24 hours a day. No one had a better record of hospital calls. No one attended more meetings. No one paid more conscientious attention to his babies. But Jerry was one who said, "I don't understand the spiritual angle." Sobriety with him was entirely mechanical.

Then that thing came to Jerry that comes to so many of us in AA. He faced a major crisis in his life. He had been bitterly disappointed in something by which he had placed great store.

And reverting to the days when he thought a drink was the solution to all problems, he found himself in a bar with a double bourbon in front of him. He toyed with the glass for a few moments. Then, on swift impulse, he walked across to a telephone booth and called his AA sponsor, explaining in a few words what had happened.

"Just dump that drink in the cuspidor and wait five minutes," said his sponsor. "I'm on my way down."

Half an hour later they sat over coffee in a nearby lunchroom. As they talked the words of the Christian Scientist came back to Jerry, words that had been forgotten for two years: "If you ever feel the urge to drink, call me. I'll guarantee you won't take it."

This was the turning point in Jerry's life. Within a few brief minutes he had learned THERE IS A GOD. He had learned the power of prayer. He knew of a certainty that his impulse to call his sponsor had been divinely inspired.

His telephone call was a form of prayer, a humble plea for help. As this is written, eight years later Jerry is living a contented, sober life, looked up to as a leader in AA and a respected member of his community. How can we permit ourselves to believe that prayer is not a powerful force when we see instances like this day in and day out?

A MORE DRAMATIC experience befell Lowell. We first met him five days after he had lost a good job. He had stopped drinking on the day he was fired, but had been loading up on barbiturates in a desperate effort to get some sleep. A member of AA called on him, but it took four days for him to become convinced that he belonged in a hospital. He was admitted to the hospital on a Saturday, but due to a terrific reaction of the sleeping pills, including a touch of DT's, it was Tuesday before his mind was clear enough for him to even realize where he was.

On Tuesday and Wednesday a number of AA's called on him, but their stories didn't make sense to him. On Wednesday evening, about dusk, he was seated staring out the window of his private room contemplating the future. Needless to say, there seemed no future. His job was hopelessly gone. His reputation for drinking stood in the way of other jobs. His wife had left him several weeks before. His only money was what remained of his severance pay, barely enough to last a week or two. He had sacrificed all his friends in one way or another. As he stared into the darkening skies his future seemed darker than the night that was closing in. Suicide seemed the only course, and he pondered the easiest way out.

At this moment someone said, "Hello, Lowell." Startled, he looked up to find standing beside him an old drinking companion whom he had not seen in several years. "Jim," Lowell exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been in AA for a couple of years. I just dropped around to see if there's anything I can do." Jim was the first caller that Lowell had known personally. Jim, a brilliant editor and writer, had sunk to the very gutter, and Lowell had watched the decline. Lowell knew for a fact that Jim had been in a dozen jails, had slept in doorways, had taken on menial jobs for a few dimes to buy whiskey. Here was something Lowell could understand.

For an hour Jim talked quietly. He spoke not of his drinking experiences, because Lowell knew about them. He spoke of AA friendships, about the love of God, about spiritual gifts. His words were simple but sincere. He did not sermonize, scold, threaten or warn. He spoke of the Bible, of God's sunshine, of the books he loved. And at the end of an hour Jim quietly put a carton of cigarettes on the dressing table -- "Just in case you run out" -- and left.

Lowell has no memory of the passing of time. He knows that he got into bed and for many minutes stared into the dark. His past whirled before his eyes. He recalled how cruelly he had treated his wife's love. He felt an urge to apologize to the man who had been forced to fire him. He closed his eyes.

Miraculously the room seemed to glow softly, the luminance gradually increasing until a brilliant, rosy light suffused everything. Beads of perspiration broke out on Lowell's forehead.

Then came a voice, low but distinct:

"Everything is going to be all right. Now sleep."

The light seemed to fade. Lowell jerked to a sitting position. The window shade was still drawn. Only the feeble rays of the night light glowed near the floor. The room was empty and quiet. Lowell was overcome with a great weariness. He sank back on the pillow and that was all he remembered until a nurse awakened him to wash for breakfast.

The experience of the night before was still vivid. But most miraculous of all, a deep peace had settled on Lowell. A great weight had been lifted from his soul. He felt free. He knew the past was forgiven, the future secure.

Some minutes later a nurse opened the door and looked in. Then she quietly retired.

Lowell was on his knees beside the bed, saying his first halting prayers since childhood.

It might be added parenthetically that today, as this is written, Lowell has had that faith and peace for 10 years. To complete the story, his wife returned to him in due time; he found jobs, not at his former salary, but enough to keep him; and five years later his former boss asked him to come back to his old job at a much higher salary than he had ever earned.

THUS THE STORY of three men who found God in their darkest hours.

They are not unusual. History is full of dramatic conversions. Perhaps the story of St. Paul is the most familiar. We read in the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, how Saul, a persecutor of the Church, was stricken blind near Damascus and heard the voice of Jesus gently chiding him. Changing his name to Paul, he became the most dynamic force the Church has ever known.

Some three centuries later came another miraculous conversion that made a lasting and vital impression on Christianity. Although Augustine was born of Christian parentage, he spent his life in profligacy, AA veritable "flaming youth" of that early day. Finally he found his way to Milan and came under the influence of Ambrose, a powerful preacher and intellect. One day Augustine stood in a garden, bowed under the weight of contrition, when he heard a voice say over and over, "Take up and read."

Believing it to be a divine command he turned at random to a page in a volume of the Apostles and found himself reading what today we find in Romans 13:13, 14: "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." (It is strange how many passages in the Bible seemed directly aimed at us alcoholics) And St. Augustine, through reading that passage, found peace, and went on to become one of the greatest of all theologians.

III

IT WOULD BE NICE if God were a stately old gentleman, benign, with a long gray beard, clothed in flowing white gown, seated on a golden throne surrounded by angels and archangels. But unfortunately, it is not as simple as that.

No man can describe God completely as He is. God being an intangible spirit, conceptions of Him often differ as day from night. It is like the blind men in J. G. Saxe's poem.

The six blind men visited an elephant, each one feeling the beast to determine what he was like.

One felt the elephant's side and said it was like a wall, another his tusk, saying it was like a spear; the third his leg, likening the beast to a tree; the trunk, a snake; the ear, a fan; and the tail, a rope And as the poet points out, all were partly right and partly wrong.

We find, as we become older in AA, that it becomes necessary for us to decide for ourselves what it is that we worship. What is this higher power in which we put our faith? What is our conception of God? We should try to know God as He is.

This is a problem that we must solve for ourselves. And it may take long and searching thought. Perhaps you will find a hint somewhere in literature. Perhaps an understanding clergyman can put you on the right track. Perhaps you will gain some knowledge in talks with other AA's.

All that is certain is this: Great thinkers through the ages are agreed there is a God, and a very definite need for Him. Four centuries before the birth of Christ the great Greek philosopher Plato said: "he was a wise man who invented God." And 200 years ago, Voltaire, perhaps the greatest of French philosophers, although still regarded by some as an agnostic, said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him."

Nowhere under the heavens is there a breed of men (and women, too) in such desperate need of God as alcoholics. No single group in all the world is more in need of divine guidance and peace than those who have forsaken the bottle and are starting a new life.

Karl R. Stolz, religious educator and psychologist, in "The Psychology of Religious Living" says:

"Sooner or later every intelligent man discovers that he must worship something or someone, a superior existence to which he can give himself wholly, and in which he loses himself only to find himself enriched. Of and by himself man is insufficient."

We of AA have discovered at staggering cost that of and by ourselves we are insufficient,

So we find ourselves groping for a God to whom we can give ourselves wholly and in which we will find ourselves enriched. If we persevere it is almost certain we will find him.

Since the birth of history man has turned to his deities. He asked the blessing of his God on his crops. He prayed for success in war. He asked that he might be blessed with a male child.

Nor have we changed during the ages. In farm districts the pastor still asks that the crops be blessed. During the late war clergymen in virtually all churches prayed God to bring a "just" victory to our side. The young father still asks God to bless him with a son and heir.

But in the more abstract desires we have changed from the simple savage who prayed only for material blessings. As Dr. Stolz puts it, "The votaries (worshippers) of an ethical religion seek release from the attitudes considered contrary to the will of the deity, and crave fellowship with the object of worship, inward peace, and a sense of security."

IV

BUT IF OUR CONCEPT of God is on the nebulous side, we are offered more concrete guidance on the subject of religion and spirituality. It is not awesome, abstract and complex, even though it seems so at first.

Let's examine what some of the fine minds of history -- philosophers, psychologists, educators -- have to say about religion. Note that none of them, with the exception of St. James, is a professional religionist.

"Religion is the worship of higher powers from a sense of need." --Allan Menzies.

"Religion shall mean for us the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."--William James.

"Religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands."--Immanuel Kant.

"Religion is that part of human experience in which man feels himself in relation with powers of psychic nature, usually personal powers, and makes use of them."--James Henry Leuba.

"Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."--The General Epistle of James, 1:27.

One cannot but be impressed with the similarity of these definitions to our own Twelve Steps.

The Menzies definition is nothing more than a condensed version of the first three steps wherein we admit we are beaten, come to believe a Power greater than ourselves can restore us, and turn our wills and lives over to that Power.

William James, stripped of verbiage, says that we should believe in God AS WE UNDERSTAND HIM.

Immanuel Kant also tells us to turn our wills and lives over to God, and then hints at Steps Five to Eleven, wherein we are admonished to give our lives a thorough housecleaning.

For such confessions and restitutions are without question divine commands.

James Henry Leuba hints at the Twelfth Step, where we make use of our newly found powers.

And all we need to do in the St. James passage is to substitute the word "Alcoholic" for "Fatherless and Widows" and we have Step Twelve. As a matter of fact, before we gave up alcohol we were very definitely fatherless and widows.

The spiritual life is by no means a Christian monopoly. There is not an ethical religion in the world today that does not teach to a great extent the principles of Love, Charity and Good Will.

The Jehovah of the Hebrews is a stern God who will have vengeance if his laws are broken, yet the great Hebrew prophets taught a message of social justice. Incidentally, the modern Jewish family is one of our finest examples of helping one another. When a member of the family gets into trouble of any kind, the relatives, from parents to cousins, rally around with advice, admonition, and even financial assistance. This, incidentally, may be one reason there are not more Jewish members of AA. The family, in many cases, can handle the alcoholic problem.

Followers of Mohammed are taught to help the poor, give shelter to the homeless and the traveler, and conduct themselves with personal dignity.

Consider the eight-part program laid down in Buddhism: Right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindedness and right contemplation. The Buddhist philosophy, as exemplified by these eight points, could be literally adopted by AA as a substitute for or addition to the Twelve Steps. Generosity, universal love and welfare of others rather than considerations of self are basic to Buddhism.

Spiritual Milestones

The ultimate aim of all men is peace of spirit. Without a spiritual life there can be no tranquility and serenity. St. Augustine says, "Peace is the tranquility of order." we will find peace when our lives are rightly ordered.

There can be no better safeguard to sobriety than faith and trust in God. It can be cultivated through prayer and observing the happiness of those who live a blameless life.

Alcoholics have more of a task in attaining a state of grace than normal persons.

Spiritual growth has been slow but progressive in most non-alcoholics. They were introduced to religion in childhood and for the most part have advanced year by year. Alcoholics, too, were introduced to religion early in life, but abandoned it for many years during their drinking careers.

Spiritual laws are as immutable as the laws of mathematics. As certain as two plus two equals four, so does evil beget evil and good beget good.

The ways of God are mysterious, but don't we meet mystery constantly in daily life? The worker in an airplane factory is given a small blueprint that doesn't seem to make much sense of itself. He follows that blueprint because he knows that the man upstairs has the master plan. So the Man Upstairs gives us a small section of the blueprint for life. We follow it and our lives become an orderly segment of the Universe.

The Power of God has been likened to the electric power line that runs by our homes. We can fill the home with the finest appliances -- kitchen range, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, television--but until we plug into the electric power line they do not run. So are our lives unsatisfactory until we plug in on the Power of God.

The Twelve Steps are a steep, hard climb. But as we make the climb we can make it easier by remembering there are two handrails -- God and Fellowship.

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

LORD, MAKE ME an instrument of Thy peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.