

Bill Wilson Writes the Twelve Steps

I was in this anything-but-spiritual mood on the night when the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were written. I was sore and tired clear through. I lay in bed at 182 Clinton Street with pencil in hand and with a tablet of scratch paper on my knee. I could not get my mind on the job, much less put my heart in it. But here was one of those things that had to be done. Slowly my mind came into some kind of focus.

Since Ebby's visit to me in the fall of 1934 we had gradually evolved what we called "the word-of-mouth program." Most of the basic ideas had come from the Oxford Groups, William James, and Dr. Silkworth. Though subject to considerable variation, it all boiled down into a pretty consistent procedure which comprised six steps. These were approximately as follows:

1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.

This was the substance of what, by the fall of 1938, we were telling newcomers. Several of the Oxford Groups' other ideas and attitudes had been definitely rejected, including any which could involve us in theological controversy. In important matters there was still considerable disagreement between the Eastern and the Midwestern viewpoints. Our people out there were still active Oxford Group members while we in New York had withdrawn a year before. In Akron and vicinity they still talked about the Oxford Groups' absolutes: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. This dose was found to be too rich for New Yorkers, and we had abandoned the expressions. But all of us, East and West, were placing increased emphasis on Dr. Silkworth's expression describing the alcoholic's dilemma: the obsession plus the allergy. By now we knew from experience that the new prospect had to accept Step One or get no place.

This particular evening, as my mind ran over these developments, it seemed to me that the program was still not definite enough. It might be a long time before readers of the book in distant places and lands could be personally contacted. Therefore our literature would have to be as clear and comprehensive as possible. Our steps would have to be more explicit. There must not be a single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wiggle out. Maybe our six chunks of truth should be broken up into smaller pieces. Thus we could better get the distant reader over the barrel, and at the same time we might be able to broaden and deepen the spiritual implications of our whole presentation. So far as I can remember this was all I had in mind when the writing began.

Finally I started to write. I set out to draft more than six steps; how many more I did not know. I relaxed and asked for guidance. With a speed that was astonishing, considering my jangled emotions, I completed the first draft. It took perhaps half an hour. The words kept right on coming. When I reached a stopping point, I numbered the new steps. They added up to twelve. Somehow this number seemed significant. Without any special rhyme or reason I connected them with the twelve apostles. Feeling greatly relieved now, I commenced to reread the draft.