

LIVING SOBER, DYING SOBER

By Bill M.

Many articles in the A.A. Grapevine talk about how to live sober. In fact, there is even an A.A. book entitled "Living Sober," which was a very important part of my early sobriety, and is a big part of my sobriety today. But in recent days, I've been thinking not only about living sober, but about dying sober. Let me tell you why.

I am 83 years old and have been continuously sober for 22 years. I reached my bottom when I was 58 years old, thinking that alcohol was my problem. I later discovered, by way of the 12 Steps, that alcohol was not my problem - I was! Alcohol had been my solution to problems up to that point. A good friend of mine uses the word "alcoholitis" as a way to emphasize the fact that alcoholism is a disease, from which I suffered terribly. I took the first step in the A.A. program of recovery by admitting my powerlessness before I ever went to my first A.A. meeting. I was absolutely licked, and I knew it. Then I met this diverse group of people who called themselves alcoholics-but had quit drinking!

At first I had pretty bumpy progress with periods of elation mixed with depression and suicide attempts. But over time, as I was introduced to the Big Book, the Twelve and Twelve, regular A.A. meetings, working the 12 Steps, washing coffee cups (real ones), I began to change. My very patient sponsor talked me through many problems. I went to area assemblies, and to A.A. meetings in jails and prisons, practices I have followed throughout my sobriety. My first A.A. International Convention in New Orleans was followed by those in Montreal, Seattle, San Diego and Minneapolis. I've now been to meetings in foreign countries from Finland to France. If you asked me how many A.A. meetings I've been to in my life, I couldn't tell you precisely. But if you multiplied 365 days a year by 22 years, you'd come within rock throwing distance of the exact number. My life turned around 180 degrees. After years of practicing and practicing the 12 Steps, learning prayer and meditation, and helping others, my life was going rather smoothly. I was living sober.

Then recently, I was hit with a double or you might even say triple whammy! Prostate and bladder cancer, kidney problems and a heart attack.

There is something in the book about acceptance of reality. Consultation with professionals, as Bill W. suggests, led to the conclusion that surgery and other heroic measures will not be used. I am now at the point of dying sober. This is as important to me as living sober. So, what do I do? The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, of course. They are called "a design for living." Can the steps also be called "a design for dying?" I do believe so.

I started with Step One, and the admission and acceptance of my powerlessness. Then Step Two and surrender to the powers of nature, which are far greater than mine. Then the Third Step Prayer, in my own words: "God, I really do turn my will and my life over to your care." After saying this prayer with my spiritual confidant, I continued with the inventory of myself, as I am at this point in time.

Then, I admitted to God, to another person, and to myself the exact nature of my wrongs so I could identify what needed to be changed in my attitude and behavior from now on. Time is growing short, so on to Step Six, where I get ready for God to remove the bothersome stuff! Then, the Seventh Step prayer, that my shortcomings would be removed.

Of course, when God removes my shortcomings, this leaves me with a big void unless I have something to put in their place. Here is where I turn to what I call "Step Seven-and-a-half" for relief. To substitute good for bad, I go to the Prayer of St. Francis in the Twelve and Twelve, for corrective measures.

As for Steps Eight and Nine, the direct amends, which I have needed to make over the years, have been made except for one, which would have harmed the other person.

The Tenth and Eleventh Steps I call "maintenance steps." I now practice these through daily prayer and meditation and quiet time as recommended by Anne Smith and the early A.A.'s before there was A.A.!

All of the above has led me to a spiritual awakening as the result of practicing the Steps. I have had a complete change of attitude and behavior sufficient to carry me on to the final trudge along the road of happy destiny. I am daily sharing experience, strength and hope with others as we follow Dr. Bob's suggestion to clean house, trust God, and help others.

How to do this is explained to me on the last page of the last story in the Big Book. This leads me to where I want to be at the end of my journey along the broad highway, walking hand in hand with God and at peace with myself, and with others.

I am convinced that death is a part of life just as is birth. I truly feel that everything in my life-people, places, things-have been "on loan" to me. I came into life only with love, and I am going out only with love. I am really looking forward to the experience of passing out of this world with gratitude for having the A.A. program and fellowship freely given to me by those who have passed this way before. How grateful I am that those founders of A.A. followed the advice they gave everyone else to "pass it on".

Now that I've told you what it used to be like and what has happened, I'd like to tell you about what my final days have been like so far.

A.A. friends visited me continuously during the week I spent in the hospital's Intensive Care Unit, whose rules stipulate that only family members are allowed in the patients' rooms. Needless to say, the doctors and nurses were baffled by the size of my "family!"

Following that week, I contemplated life in my apartment at home. I knew I could fend for myself, but I didn't know exactly how I would. When I arrived, I found one guy cleaning my bathroom, top to bottom. Another was doing the same in the kitchen, another was running the vacuum, yet another was doing my laundry. I found out later that another was out shopping for groceries. I was going to say I live alone in a small apartment, but that's not exactly true. I live by myself, but I'm never alone.

My sponsor has formed a "Goon Squad" of close A.A. friends. Each one is taking turns at stopping in on their assigned days. They are also "on call" for transporting me to doctor's appointments, laboratory visits, even haircuts. My "family members" also are very helpful running errands to the drug store, bank, post office, grocery store, taking my trash out, doing my laundry and most important of all-just being there. This reminds me of what I was told at my very first A.A. meeting: "You will never have to drink again, and you will never be alone again."

But to keep it, you have to give it away. Yesterday I had a visitor who didn't come to clean or take me to an appointment. He wanted to be free of what he called "the big one," an incident in his life that filled him with guilt and shame. He had omitted it from a previous 5th Step, and he had come to realize that he would have to deal with it, or it would deal with him. We prayed about it, and he found relief and peace. Believe me, this is not an activity I engaged in when I was drinking, except to say, "God, get me out of this terrible jam." Now, I say, "God, please help this man." And a funny thing happens. God helps the man. And I get happy. Prayer is good medicine-for the pray-er as well as the pray-ee!

Yes, I live by myself, but am never alone. In fact, I am so busy with visitors that I've had placed on my front door a sign I made that says "Five-minutes per visit rule in effect!" Of course, nobody follows it. But now they know I need my rest.

Fear of death has been relieved by faith and courage. "There's something in the book about that." I chuckle, because I know that is one of my "sayings" I am famous for among my many A.A. friends.

Yes, there's a lot of stuff in the book about how to live sober. My advice to you is to read and contemplate what is there, get a sponsor, go to meetings, help the newcomer, and pray. And one day, maybe you'll be as lucky as I am. Maybe some day, by applying our 12 Steps, you will reach the point at which you are at peace with yourself, with others and with God.

You'll have the privilege of dying sober.