

Turning on the Power

By "keeping it simple," the relaxed residents of Vilcabamba have found the secret of healthy serenity and longer life

VILCABAMBA, a quiet village about sixty miles south of Quito, Ecuador, is a tiny community with no hospitals, no doctors, and no health-care system. Yet it is the home of some of the healthiest people in the world and has become well-known for the longevity of its residents, many of whom live to the age of 100 or more.

An article in the July 1974 Grapevine, "Greed, Fear, and Ignorance," tells the story of my first trip to Vilcabamba. I visited there a second time in December 1975, and once again was deeply impressed with the way the simplicity of these people's lives contributes to their peace of mind and longevity.

"Keep it simple" acquires dramatic impact in the mirror of this remarkable community. These men women live by simple, powerful truths that keep them healthy. Unlettered by our measurements, they know far more about real health than any of us. Their lives are a quiet, steady demonstration of their faith in God.

Reading and talking may give me knowledge about God. Working the Steps slashes through the empty rhetoric of conversation *about* God and gives me an experience *of* God. To go from knowledge to experience is to move a distance measured in light years.

Gene Krupa, the jazz drummer, was once asked what it was like to play with Louis Armstrong. After a moment's thought, Krupa replied, "It felt like somebody turned on the power." In the Big Book (page 45), we read, "Lack of power, that was our dilemma." In my experience, working the Steps enables us to cooperate with God's power and to change. The power is always there, but we get the results only if we do our part.

We hear a great deal about cofounder Bill W.'s spiritual experience when he was hospitalized for the last time in 1934. Unfortunately, we hear much less about what Bill did that set the stage for the experience. With the help of Ebby, he took what in essence amounted to the first eight Steps of the program while in the hospital. (The Twelve Steps, in their present form, were written four years later.) Then, said Bill, "There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known. . . .God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound" (Big Book, page 14).

Bill never drank again, and you and I are sober as a result of his experience. *He did all this work with the Steps within his first week of sobriety.* The power released through this has been passed on to you, me, and hundreds of thousands of men and women throughout the world. It's so strong that alcoholics can stay sober simply by going to AA meetings, even if they don't work the Steps themselves. By just becoming part of the AA community, drunks can become ex-drunks. However, without working the Steps drunks cannot get well--and there's an immense difference. Without continuing work with each one of the Twelve Steps, we eventually start to suffer from depression, anxiety, fear, hostility, and all the other symptoms of our illness, sometimes sooner, sometimes later.

If all I do is go to meetings and not drink, eventually I'm going to suffer from all those crippling conditions. The solution is to use the answers that have been here all the time: Dig into the Steps. Forget the detours of therapy groups, pills, inspirational reading. Use the prescription that Bill used back in 1934: honest application of the program's principles.

God is truth. I can find Him only through honesty, and the honesty must begin with where I am as a human being. Sometimes, it has meant starting with honesty about my dishonesty. With painful slowness, I've come to understand that the Steps will speak to my condition wherever I am in sobriety. Fresh work with all of them creates fresh experience. The demands of the program are specific and the rewards equally precise. Do the work, and collect the benefits.

And that's the message the program offers. Follow the directions, and all of us have a specific method to change ourselves and transform our lives. That's the message we can carry to another alcoholic trapped in the morass of self-will. However, unless I do this kind of work with the Steps there are three things I'll never know: (1) what the AA message is, (2) how to experience the message, and (3) how to help another AA find it.

With quiet wisdom, the *longevos* of Vilcabamba avoid the errors that have spawned the extensive mental, physical, and spiritual sickness that seeps through our culture. They have done it with an easy grace evidenced by their relaxed, unhurried lives. Short on book education but long on real knowledge of living, they stand as alert monuments to a sense of wholeness our culture understands dimly, if at all.

The Big Book charts a vivid, vigorous course for personal change and growth. It's simple, direct, and precise. The program's transforming power is linked with its simplicity. AA's message promises healing and wholeness for *any* alcoholic who will pay the price. The price is simply to accept the help that will save our lives. In the process, AA gives us everything we really want but could never find anywhere else.

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