

It Works For Me

Sober sixty years, a member reflects on AA's principles

My sobriety date is August 15, 1947.

During World War II, I served as a naval aviator flying single-engine seaplanes that were catapulted off cruisers and battleships. The catapult shot didn't cure a hangover, but for a little while it really took your mind off it. In the summer of 1945, I ended up in a Navy hospital with pneumonia, and I went into DTs. I was in the hospital for four weeks. I got drunk nine of my last ten nights there, so obviously, I didn't learn a great deal. I got out of the service in December 1945, and continued to drink, gradually coming to the realization that I couldn't handle it, but I didn't know how to stop.

Finally, on a steamy Saturday morning in August 1947, I called the Chicago AA office, which put me in touch with an AA, and I met with him that afternoon. He lived in Oak Park, the Chicago suburb where I lived, and he'd been sober for five years. AA was only twelve years old at the time, so he had been sober nearly half as long as AA had been in existence. I was twenty-five years old.

I was brought up in a traditional Christian religion. Its followers declared that they had the only true way to God. At the time of my entrance into AA, I believed in nothing. Looking back, it seems to me that my problem was not an unwillingness to believe in God; I was simply unable to believe in that concept of God and I didn't know any other way to find him.

That first day, this man talked to me about "God as we understood him." The bewilderment and antagonism of years began to melt, thawed by this unheard-of approach to God. Nobody argued about whose Higher Power was higher.

The next day, he took me to the Sunday morning breakfast AA meeting on the west side of Chicago. There were sixty or seventy people there. I listened to the speaker and several comments afterward. When we walked out, nothing seemed different, but apparently something was different because I never took another drink and I began to experience the miracle and the power of AA.

In the spring of 1948, I heard Paul S. talk at that same meeting. He was one of the early Akron AAs. Over and over, he kept saying, "AA, in and of itself, is sufficient." I didn't know whether to believe him or not. But, today I believe it's true. AA, in and of itself, is sufficient if we work the Steps.

If I were drowning, I would want a life preserver, not a serving of cotton candy philosophy, theology, or positive thinking. In the Twelve Steps, AA gave me a life preserver. The people in AA told me: "Do these things and your life will change." That is precisely what happened.

Between 1951 and 1958, I worked construction jobs in Thule, Greenland; Keflavik, Iceland; and Point Barrow, Alaska. During most of that time, my AA came out of the Big Book. When the "Twelve and Twelve" was published in 1953, I started reading that. Every day, I read a chapter of the Big Book or the "Twelve and Twelve," and I went through them, over and over. When the Big Book was written, no AA member was sober more than a few years, and yet, its prescription for a sober, useful life remains as timely and powerful today as ever.

After returning to the Chicago area in 1959, I became involved with working in the Cook County Jail in Chicago and in the State Penitentiary in Joliet, Illinois. For years afterward, I'd run into

somebody at a meeting who had met me, years before, at one of those meetings. At that time, we worked with wet drunks more frequently than we do now.

My first visit to Bill's home was in the spring of 1951, when I was nearing the end of a highly unsuccessful career as a professional wrestler. Television was still pretty new and our shows were just about the only ones on TV that were rehearsed. Sometimes I wrestled at the Rainbo Arena in Chicago. The matches were televised around the midwest and the east coast. It turned out that Bill's wife, Lois, was an avid wrestling fan and used to watch the matches from Rainbo. Immediately, she asked the question all wrestlers dread: "Are the matches fixed?" Well, of course they are, but I kept trying to avoid telling her the truth without actually lying. Finally, I admitted they were, and her face crumpled as disillusionment set in.

Another time, at Bill's home, I met Henk Krauweel, a nonalcoholic Dutch social worker who helped start AA in Holland. He said he used to take motion pictures of boozers when they were drunk, and he'd have them watch it after they sobered up. "I would say to them, 'See, you are behaving like little swines,' but they still wouldn't stop," he told me. But when AA started, they stopped.

In 1951, I heard Bill speak at the Medinah Temple in Chicago. He said, "Suppose each of us had not found AA until ten years after we did," and then he paused. There wasn't a sound in the packed auditorium as each of us remembered the despair that filled our souls at the time AA answered our cry and saved our lives.

Bill resisted all attempts by AAs to turn him into a guru or a spiritual leader and refused honors from outside organizations. Bill looked and acted like everybody else and in 1955, at the St. Louis Convention, he turned AA over to the members.

I was fortunate to be a guest in Bill W.'s home three times and to be in small groups with him on two other occasions. In retrospect, I'm increasingly amazed at his wisdom and spiritual insight. We don't appreciate him enough. Bill was sober only a few years when he wrote the Twelve Steps. These came to be the foundation of my life as I, very slowly, began to understand their wisdom. The Twelve Traditions are pure genius in steering AA away from the pitfalls that have impaired so many other spiritual movements.

Alcoholics Anonymous is for alcoholics; it is not for nonalcoholic drug addicts, food addicts, shopping addicts, sex addicts, or any other kind of nonalcoholic. That is critically important and Bill saw that many, many years ago. In fact, Bill explained why a nonalcoholic drug addict does not belong in closed AA meetings in a February 1958 article in the Grapevine titled "Problems Other than Alcohol."

That question has surfaced again and again as the treatment industry has sent nonalcoholics to closed AA meetings. Anybody is welcome in AA--provided he or she is an alcoholic. That's very simple, but very important for the survival of our Fellowship. If an alcoholic who also used drugs wants to go to AA meetings, that's fine, but, as Bill pointed out, he should keep his comments to his alcoholism. All addictions are not the same.

As a culture, we often worship change and think it's progress. But frequently, it isn't progress, it's simply different.

When Dr. Vincent Dole retired as Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee some years ago, he said, "My greatest concern for the future of AA is that the principle of personal service might be eroded by money and professionalism."

The AA message is a message from one amateur to another. By profession, Dr. Bob was a physician, but he helped alcoholics as an amateur. By profession, Bill W. was a stockbroker who helped alcoholics as an amateur.

I regularly attend working Step meetings on Wednesday evening and Saturday morning. In the working Step group, the members are committed to working and reworking the Steps. The worst advice I ever got in AA was to work the first nine Steps once and then attempt to exist on Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve. In 1963, sober sixteen years, I heard a suggestion that there's great benefit in redoing all of the Steps. It turned out to be absolutely correct. In my experience, AAs who continue to work all of the Steps do not suffer from depression, anxiety, apathy, boredom, and similar symptoms.

Today, we have special interest meetings: women's meetings, men's meetings, gay and lesbian meetings, and even meetings for doctors, lawyers, and so forth. I've always felt that everybody should be welcome in any AA meeting, even though there may be some use for special interest meetings. I would not belong to an AA group that barred anyone.

My belief in God began as a very simple view of the Higher Power. Gradually, as I read everything I could find on the spiritual life, it became very complicated and, in my view, quite advanced. As years have passed, my belief has become simpler and simpler. My relationship with God is dependent on rigorous honesty and continuing work with the Twelve Steps because this gives me a continuing experience of God in my life.

The Twelve Steps are deceptively simple but provide limitless spiritual growth for anyone with the patience to stay the course. However, the timetable is generally far slower than we believe it should be. That's why so many members of Alcoholics Anonymous wander into various kinds of groups that promise spiritual enlightenment or psychological fixes on a fast track. It's a promise such groups rarely, if ever, keep.

I'm eighty-four years old today, and in all these years, AA has never deserted me, in spite of my frequent wanderings from the program.

The AA message is a "spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps." The foreword to the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* says "AA's Twelve Steps are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole."

It works for me.

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