

July 1992

'A SEEMINGLY HOPELESS STATE OF MIND AND BODY'

In the foreword to the first edition of the Big Book, Bill W. states that the main purpose of the book is to "show other alcoholics *precisely how we have recovered.*" Here, and in many other passages in the Big Book and in countless other writings and speeches, it is clear that he and the early members of our Fellowship considered themselves to be "recovered alcoholics." However, his use of the word "recovered" when used as an adjective to describe "alcoholic" always seemed to me to be very inappropriate. Bill W. had an excellent command of the English language. He chose words very carefully and used them specifically and deliberately. I could not understand how he could use such a term when it was known, even then, that alcoholics can never recover from alcoholism as a person would recover from the cold or the flu. We will never "get over" alcoholism in the sense that we will become social drinkers. We will always be alcoholics.

On page 85 of the Big Book it says, "We are not cured of alcoholism." Could anything be more straightforward than that! How, then, could Bill W., or

anyone else for that matter, ever become a *recovered* alcoholic? I just couldn't understand this apparent contradiction. And, yet, I believe that Bill had chosen and used the word deliberately. That simply added to my confusion and frustration.

I have been attending a Big Book discussion meeting in a nearby city for a while. Recently we started over again at the beginning of the book. It seemed an appropriate time to bring up my concern, as insignificant as it may have appeared to others. Was I making a big deal out of nothing? Maybe so. But, it was important to me because I perceived this as a contradiction in terms. How can we be recovered, but not cured? What does recovery from alcoholism mean? I was really trying to understand what Bill was talking about because the concept of recovery is such a crucial focal point, not only for the Big Book, but for the entire program.

At that meeting, however, I could not get an explanation that was satisfactory to me. In fact, an old-timer who, like Bill W., considers himself to be "recovered," gave me the impression that I was

treading on sacred ground. I was committing a sacrilege of great magnitude.

A bit scathed, but undaunted in my quest, I called the AA General Service Office in New York and asked to speak to someone who could give me an explanation of a passage in the Big Book. I was transferred to a very patient woman who, initially, gave me the same explanations I had heard before. I countered with all my standard rebuttals. Although I found the debate very enjoyable, it seemed that my intellectual pursuits had encountered another stone wall. Then, in a moment of insight, this woman said to me, "Read the sentence that comes just before the one you are quoting." Aha!! I couldn't believe it. There it was. My answer. In front of my eyes all the time. How could I have missed it? The statement reads, "We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body."

So, *that's* what Bill was talking about.

The confusion and apparent contradiction were resolved. In this foreword, Bill had not written about recovery from the disease of alcoholism but recovery from a "seemingly hopeless state of mind and body." The extent of this hopelessness and despair was described in detail in his story in the Big Book and in other writings. At one point during Bill's hospitalization, a doctor had prepared Lois for the worst. Soon Bill would die or be committed to an asylum. Yet, as we all know, Bill did, indeed, *recover* from this hopeless condition. He regained his physical health. His "sanity was restored." He was, in fact, an alcoholic who had *recovered*.

A more careful reading of the Big Book reveals that this same idea is found not only in the foreword, but is repeated many times elsewhere in the book. Although the answer I sought was perfectly obvious and should have been apparent to me, it just hadn't registered in my mind. Maybe, I was looking for an answer that wasn't there. Or, maybe yet, I was looking for an

elaborate answer to a very fundamental question. As usual, Bill W. knew how to "keep it simple." I was the one complicating the issue. I thank my "teacher" at GSO for this insight.

I am also grateful to her for another valuable lesson concerning the use of "labels" when referring to ourselves or introducing ourselves at meetings. She emphasized a noteworthy point. These "labels" are *a personal* choice. After all, is this not a disease that requires self-diagnosis? The word "recovered" is certainly only a "label." If we focus on Bill's use of the word, it seems evident that not only are Bill and my old-timer friend recovered alcoholics, but so am I! But, my personal preference is to consider myself a *"recovering* alcoholic" because the term implies to me that there is still work to be done. I'm on the right road, but the journey is far from over. On the other hand, others, for their own reasons, would rather call themselves *"recovered* alcoholics." For some newcomers, anything beyond "problem

drinker" may be difficult. But the issue here is that, at any meeting, each person is free to refer to himself/herself by any designation he/she prefers at any particular time. No one has the right to question this designation or say it is not appropriate. And this is as it should be.

In conclusion, my quest was not in vain. I have learned three important lessons: First, I found an answer to a question which, though seemingly inconsequential to others, was troubling me. Second, I realize that the answer I sought was actually there all the time. I must learn to open my mind as well as my eyes to what is written in the Big Book, or any other literature, for that matter. But third, and possibly most valuable, now I also understand, accept, and respect the right of each person in this Fellowship to use any personal "label" he/she chooses—whether or not I understand, or agree with it.

"My name is Frank, and I am a recovering alcoholic."

Frank M., Lincoln, R.I.