

The Big Book



The following nine-page section speaks to the question—
Are AAs using the Big Book as much today
as the early members did in the past?

One-Shot Deal or Constant Companion?

SOME AA MEMBERS voice the opinion that the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* can be sufficiently absorbed at the first reading, that the Big Book contains little or nothing to repay later reference or study. This may be true for geniuses gifted with instant comprehension and total recall.

Yet capable nonalcoholic attorneys must refer frequently to basic source books. The same is true of engineers, navigators, editors, and surgeons. Is it possible that alcoholic brains, only recently groggy and confused with malnutrition, resentment, anxiety, and disastrous convictions, can permanently retain the essentials of a 575-page volume after only one exposure?

One thing is certain: I do not have such a powerful learning capacity as that. I frequently find it necessary to refer to our Big Book. Like many others, I often get the impression that changes have been made in the text since I last referred to it. Sentences have been added, meanings

have been altered, and other statements that I recall with great clarity have somehow been deleted without a trace.

There are two possible explanations for this:

(1) While I am asleep, gnomes sneak into my house and cleverly make revisions on their tiny linotype machines and printing presses, even duplicating the marginal notes which I put there months before in my own handwriting!

Or (2) my memory is fallible, and also — if I am being restored to sanity, as the Big Book promises in Step Two, and if the program is giving me spiritual progress (page 60) — I may actually be aware of meanings that escaped me on my previous reading.

The gnome theory has its appeal. It is less damaging to the ego to believe privately in elves than to entertain the possibility that I could be wrong.

Prankish though the gnomes may be, they are invariably benevolent.

So far, all their changes have been helpful. And the gnomes who tamper with *my* book seem to make identical changes in the Big Books of other members who constantly refer to *their* copies.

In addition to correcting my own erratic memory, there is another reason why I must occasionally reread the Big Book. I hear statements from AA speakers that confuse me. For example, in our area we often hear it said, "There are no musts in AA."

Such speakers evidently have a copy of the Big Book that has not yet been "defaced" by the gnomes. All through my copy, I find musts, sometimes three or four on a page. Here are a few (the italics are mine):

"If we are planning to stop drinking, there *must* be no reservation of any kind, nor any lurking notion that some day we will be immune to alcohol." (Page 33)

"...*We must* find a spiritual basis of life — or else." (44)

"Above everything, we alcoholics *must* be rid of this selfishness. We

must or it kills us!" (62)

"... These resentments *must* be mastered..." (66)

"We *must* be willing to make amends..." (69)

"... We ask that we be given strength and direction to do the right thing, no matter what the personal consequences may be.... We *must* not shrink at anything." (79)

These are only a handful of the scores of musts scattered through the Big Book. Along with them are hundreds of other phrases containing words like "absolutely," "necessary," "indispensable," "thoroughly," "completely," "essential," and "without fail." These words imply musts to any mind not looking for a loophole or an escape hatch.

Admittedly, these musts are not forced on the newcomer by any "big shots" in AA nor by any man-made law or regulation. In that sense, there *are* no musts; we alcoholics are free to drink, free to disregard the Twelve Steps. For doing so, we will not be fined nor kicked out of the Fellowship. All that will happen to us is that we will go mad or die.

If we don't try to make this consequence clear to new men and women, we are cheating them.

A few years ago, a fairly successful Los Angeles businessman, sober a few weeks, had to go back to Detroit on a company matter. There, he would meet some of his old drinking pals. At an AA meeting one night, he triumphantly told a friend of mine that he had read the Big Book and

discovered there was no reason why he couldn't have a few highballs with the boys. His proof? "It doesn't say in the Big Book that you can't drink in Detroit!"

True. For that matter, neither did it say he couldn't drink right here in Los Angeles. Or Dallas. Or Pine Gulch. But he had found what he was looking for: a loophole.

Another statement I sometimes hear from AA speakers is that, since *they* have never taken an inventory, Step Four isn't necessary. Others say it isn't necessary to write out our inventories. Some cite themselves as living proof that Step Five can be skipped.

If I don't consult the Big Book, I might assume their statements were gospel. But the book says, "If we skip this vital step [Number Five], we may not overcome drinking. Time after time newcomers have tried to keep to themselves certain facts about their lives.... Almost invariably they got drunk."

Contrary to the advice given from the podium by some speakers, the Big Book repeatedly stresses the importance of *writing* the inventory: "making a list"... "setting it down on paper"... "We consulted our list of names."

From my own experience, I know I need the Big Book, not only to correct errors innocently planted by other members, but to bring into line my own misconceptions about what I *thought* the speakers were saying.

In listening to tapes of my own AA talks, I am often horrified at my incoherence and at the discovery that I did not say what I intended to say or what I *thought* I was saying. Then, I pray that newcomers will not judge the AA program by what I have told them. God, how I hope they will read the Big Book! — not once, but many times.

Often, at meetings, I'll hear a member tell a newcomer, "All you have to do is keep the plug in the jug."

The Big Book (pages 82-83) says, "We feel a man is unthinking when he says that sobriety is enough.... There is a long period of reconstruction ahead.... The spiritual life is not a theory. *We have to live it.*" (Another implied must.)

Does one reading of the Big Book equip us with enough information to judge the validity of statements tossed out in an informal conversation or an extemporaneous talk?

The newcomer sometimes hears this statement from people that he, in his innocence, may consider experts: "Take what you like in AA and forget the rest."

Does it make sense to tell a newcomer, devoted to the alcoholic principle of "self-will run riot," that his own sick, confused mind (which repeatedly got him drunk and into trouble) is the mind capable of judging what is good for him?

The Big Book suggests (page 98), "Burn the idea into the consciousness of every man that he can get

well regardless of anyone. The only condition is that he trust in God and clean house."

The new man may be looking for a way to drink without disaster and to get family, employer, creditors, and the law off his back. With that goal in his boozy brain, is one reading of the Big Book, or any part of it, likely to convince him of the nature of his illness, or to make clear the requirements of the AA recovery program?

Rereading of the book may be of great value even beyond maintaining our personal sobriety. Because of the success of Alcoholics Anonymous, members are invited increasingly to participate in the activities of other organizations and agencies in the field of alcoholism. Some of these worthy organizations have as their proper goal the providing of housing, food, and other material assistance to various unfortunate persons, including alcoholics. Of necessity, these agencies must be supported by outside contributions, including tax subsidies. Unless AA members keep the AA name out of the operation, and serve the organization as individuals, they will create public misunderstanding as to the policy and purpose of AA.

Further, they will render it easy for the recipient of such services to assume he is receiving them as part of the AA program. Is this bad?

The Big Book, on page 98, says: "The minute we put our work on a service plane, the alcoholic com-

mences to rely upon our assistance rather than upon God. He clamors for this or that, claiming he cannot master alcohol until his material needs are cared for.... We simply do not stop drinking so long as we place dependence upon other people ahead of dependence on God."

The Big Book helps us explain to others where other aids leave off and AA begins. If that distinction is not observed by members — acting either as professionals or as AAs — AA could become diluted and powerless to help the alcoholic.

As a writer, I am often amused at the reaction of other writers when they come to AA. When first sober, the writer frequently announces that he intends to donate his talent in a magnificent service to the Fellowship: He will rewrite the Big Book!

Unfortunately, his professional eye is focused more on achieving terse, flowing prose than on understanding AA principles. So the writer gets drunk before finding a better way of saying, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable."

For some reason, those writers who remain sober get very busy in their own outside work and in various AA activities at the level of group, institutions, or General Service. They seem never to have time to *rewrite* the Big Book. These sober writers do, however, seem to have time to *reread* it.

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