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EARLY MEMBER

(The following remarks were contributed by one of the first 12 AAs in Chicago who was asked to write something for the Chicago issue. The writer is a newspaperman who moved to Washington, D.C., a year or two after he joined the fellowship. The article doesn't concern the operation of AA in Chicago but it does present a problem that older members throughout the country have come in contact with.)

WHAT have I got out of AA?

That was the first question "that came to my mind recently when I was asked to do an article for the "all-Chicago" edition of the *Grapevine*.

Something was wrong with the question. It set unevenly in my *mind*, like a piece of a jig saw puzzle that almost, but doesn't quite fit, and you try to force it in anyway. I'm the worrisome type who is eventually overcome with shame if I force a wrong piece in place in a puzzle, or peek at the concealed cards in solitaire.

So I went back to my first question. The defect was obvious. I've been dry more than 11 years, with the help of God and the AA Program. The question should have read:

What has AA got out of me?

Now the atmosphere is clearer, and under the cloak of anonymity, my typewriter fingers (four all told) itch to cop a plea.

For a long time I've felt like

that ingrate in the New Testament who was cured of some malady by Our Lord, and didn't bother to check in with Him again, to give a simple expression of gratitude. That fellow has been the object of scorn for a couple of thousand years, but I can't help but feel sorry for him. He probably went to his grave with the uneasy realization that he had received much and given little.

A "Marginal" AA

After all these years of sobriety, during which I have received blessings beyond measure, I find myself a "marginal" member of Alcoholics Anonymous. That means I rarely attend meetings, and even more rarely perform Twelfth Step work. I blush to admit it, but I have drifted into a certain snobbishness in this matter of preaching the gospel of AA. I would resent spending an evening with anyone who wasn't

an "exceptional" case.

In the Catholic church, we call my kind of people "candle burning Catholics." They are the citizens who crowd the churches on Easter and Christmas mornings. As was once said of an eminent movie star, they are ready to die for their faith, but not willing to live for it.

Humdrum Sobriety

I suppose you could dismiss my situation as a case of spiritual draught. To an alcoholic in the bitter and despairing struggle of decision, to a man with the six-inch shakes, praying for release from his affliction, either through death or through success in staying dry, my problem would seem a little silly.

Yet I suspect there are a good many old timers in AA like myself, who feel that they have somehow missed the boat, that they have come to accept the blessings of sobriety as the normal course of events, and are prone to forget that they, like the newest and shakiest member of the group, are suspended above personal disaster by the slender margin of the first drink.

I am well aware, of course, of the impossibility of recapturing the spirit of exaltation that fills the once-desperate heart of the alcoholic during the "spiritual awakening" of his first six months of success with the AA Program. In this period the daily exercise of a

normal life is as thrilling as the sight of the physical world to a man who has had the cataracts, lifted from his eyes.

Technically Dry

But somewhere between that sense of exaltation and the other extreme of humdrum acceptance of sobriety there must be a happier, medium for us spiritually dried-up old rummies. We should find some satisfaction by expressing our gratitude in deeds which would transfer the benefits of our experience to the needy.

When an alcoholic has the misfortune to slip the whole route and get drunk after months or years of apparent success with the AA Program, it is usually possible to put a finger on the reason for his slip. The sponsor who knows the background can see where the victim ignored or failed to come to grips with some specific step in the Program.

It should be equally simple, in the case of those of us who have been technically dry for years, but who have drifted away from the dynamic practice of the Twelve Steps, to isolate the cause of our failure either to achieve the fullness of the program or to return to it what it has given to us.

Sixth Step His Answer

As I look into my own case, I

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have an uneasy feeling that I have been paying only lip service to the sixth step, in which we "were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."

The Rev. Edward Dowling, S.J., a St. Louis clergyman who is beloved wherever AAs gather, has said that this sixth step divides the men from the boys in AA, and I'm afraid he's right. After more than eleven fortunate years of physical, if not spiritual sobriety, I realize with some chagrin that there are some subtle defects of character which I still cherish. In my own way, I have been as devious with myself as the drinker who accepts the first step with secret modifications, because he wants to avoid the disastrous effects of drinking more than he wants to cut whisky out of his life.

"Willing or Ready"

Father Dowling, in an interview published by The Queen's Work of St. Louis, emphasizes the difference between "almost willing," which the Sixth Step might have said, and "entirely ready," which it does say.

"This Sixth Step is impossible without a love of God based on a humble sense of reparation, thanksgiving, and adoration," he said.

If a jaded old member of AA like myself really chewed up the Sixth Step carefully, he might realize that he was violating that Step

when he became impatient with the tediousness of some group meetings, when he tried to shove off on the more eager beavers the duty of visiting a strange prospect, or when he shrugged his shoulders over the failure of some bumptious character to solve the drinking problem.

Short on Tolerance

This is more than an academic question of spiritual capacity, because if I came down drunk next week, I would need from others the patience, the charity, and the tolerance which I presently find myself in short supply, because of my unwillingness over the years to read the fine print in the Sixth Step.

Rededication or —

As I go back over this copy, I can see some of my old time associates in AA snorting with justified irritation that I'm crying with a loaf of bread under my arm. Why don't I stop feeling sorry for myself and use the tools at hand to rededicate myself to the Program, and give back a little of what I've had from it?

I'm too languid to argue the point with my aggressive colleagues, however. Maybe I'll get around to doing something about it one of these days.

I just hope nothing happens in the meantime.

THE NEGRO IN AA

THERE are nearly 300 Negroes among Chicago's 5,000 AAs. Because of the neighborhood group plan they are concentrated largely in five groups on the city's south side. A sixth is in Evanston.

The experience of the Negro alcoholic follows the same pattern as that of his white fellow. If he has an alcoholic problem and honestly wants to do something about it he is accepted and enjoys exactly the same status as any other member. Chicago adheres to basic AA tenets that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking and that creeds, races, sects, or social divisions have no place in the fellowship.

Considerable effort was put out before the first Negro member found himself for a permanent stay in AA more than six years ago. Gradually a group got underway. The following year it had grown until its size, from Chicago standards, became unwieldy and it was split into two groups. So, the Evans Ave. group

became the Evans Ave. Wednesday group and the Evans Ave. Thursday group. The six groups now functioning meet deliberately on different nights each week to foster visiting each other. Once monthly the groups gather for a joint meeting.

A morning meeting is held by one group on Saturdays and a Sunday afternoon meeting is conducted by another. The daytime meetings for night workers are attended by visitors from out of town and local albies seeking a haven in the day time. In addition, all members attend one of the three city wide Tuesday night meetings held on the south and north sides and in the Loop.

It must not be thought that the members of the Evans Ave. groups remain apart from the main stream of Chicago AA activity. The city and sectional meetings are well attended and Negro members serve ably on the various committees of the Chicago group as a whole.