

October 1957

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October...today...

God grant me the SERENITY TO ACCEPT

the things I cannot change.

COURAGE TO CHANGE *the things I can,*

and WISDOM TO *KNOW the difference.*

Let's
Be
Friendly
With Our Friends . . .

Fourth in a Series
by Bill W.

PRESS, RADIO, TELEVISION

IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1939. A few months before, our alcoholic fellowship, boasting all of one hundred members, had published a book we called "Alcoholics Anonymous." But nothing else had happened. Our books, five thousand of them, were piled in the warehouse of the printer, Cornwall Press, and nary a one could be sold.

The much-hoped-for piece in the *Reader's Digest*—which might have told the public about us and the new book—had failed to materialize. Panic-stricken, we had rushed from one national magazine to another, pleading for help. But this was in vain. Works Publishing, the little company we had formed to launch the book venture, was flat broke and so was everybody else. There was seemingly no place to turn.

But Providence knew better. Just as we hit this new low, Fulton Oursler, then editor of *Liberty*, had a caller—a free lance writer named Mor-

ris Markey. From Charlie Towns, proprietor of the hospital where I had once been such a good customer, writer Markey had received a terrific build-up on AA which he now retailed to editor Oursler, one of the most perceptive men I have ever met. Fulton Oursler saw the possibilities in a flash. Said he, "Morris, you've got an assignment. Bring that story in here, and we will print it in September."

Such were the words of AA's first friend of the press. These words were to save the bankrupt book and they also meant that the public was to have its first view of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Just as promised, Morris Markey's article, "Alcoholics and God," was printed in *Liberty* magazine. The results were immediate and electrifying. More than eight hundred urgent pleas for help hit *Liberty's* office. We carefully answered each one, not forgetting to enclose a book order blank. Orders soon began to come in and, helped by still more letters from our little office on Vesey Street, and by traveling AA members, new groups started up.

Other news-hawkers were not long in following the Oursler example. A month later the public-spirited editor of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* gave writer Elrick B. Davis an assignment to cover AA and to go the limit. For days on end articles about AA in general and about AA in Cleveland in particular were a leading feature of the *Plain Dealer*.

Alongside these articles there appeared editorial exhortations which in effect said, "AA is good and it works. Come and get it." Again the deluge. The tiny Cleveland group was swamped. But it happily survived and in a few months its numbers had shot up into the hundreds. Alcoholics Anonymous had started the year 1939 with less than one hundred members and it finished with more than eight hundred of them.

In February 1940 we got another mighty lift, this time as the result of Mr. Rockefeller's famous dinner at which he introduced us to his own friends and held AA up for the whole world to see. Again the press did a job. This time many newspapers, including the tabloids, said good things about us and the great wire services carried the story worldwide. AA's membership jumped from eight hundred to over two thousand in twelve months.

In the spring of 1941, the same drama was re-enacted on a far larger scale. Mr. Curtis Bok, owner of the *Saturday Evening Post*, saw AA at work in Philadelphia and urged his editors to select Jack Alexander to do a feature assignment. When Jack's piece hit the newsstands it brought in a Niagara-like flood of appeals for help. Two years later AA's membership stood at the ten thousand mark.

By telling our story to the American public this small band of early friends had increased AA's ranks by

one-hundred-fold in the short space of four years, had made AA a national institution, and had laid the foundation upon which our society has grown so mightily ever since.

Today the list of AA's friends in press, radio, and television is legion. At our Headquarters we subscribe to an extensive clipping service. Every week the mass of clip-sheets tell us the graphic story of what these friends have said and done. It is a never-ending and always growing stream of life-giving blood which they pump into our world arteries.

While word-of-mouth and personal contact has brought in many a newcomer, we can never forget that most of us are able to trace our chance for recovery back to our friends in communications — we read, or maybe we heard, or we saw. That is why AA now has 200,000 active members.

Sometimes we hear members complain about the press as though we were being exploited for stories and profit. They say, "Well, those writers make a good living out of story telling and the publishers make their profits. After all, what is so remarkable about that? They are only acting as they normally would."

However, most of us realize that such statements are far less than half the truth.

Practically every writer and editor of our acquaintance has gone far beyond his call to duty or his natural desire for a stirring story.

Years ago we requested all people in communications to respect the anonymity of our members. This was asking for a great deal because the average reporter couldn't imagine doing business without full names and pictures. But when we explained the "why" of our anonymity—that we dare not allow "big shot-ism" to get going among us—they saw the situation at once; and they have ever since fallen over backward to conform to our needs, despite many a temptation to publicize personally our nationally famous members. On a few occasions, such members have deliberately broken anonymity, but this has seldom been the fault of the press. As a matter of fact, editors have frequently restrained over-eager AAs who wanted their membership made public.



In their continuing enthusiasm for AA many of these friends have gone still further. They have per-

sonally dedicated themselves to our cause. Jack Alexander, for instance, became a trustee for AA and greatly helped us with our literature problem, and never missed a chance to give us a boost by word and by pen.

Less well known is the relation we had with Fulton Oursler. His was a most brilliant example of personal dedication to Alcoholics Anonymous.

In 1944 it was decided that AA ought to have a monthly magazine. By this time Fulton had seen AA at work close at hand. A person well known to him had made a remarkable recovery. The moment Fulton heard of our magazine project he volunteered at once and, though never an alcoholic, he became a member of The Grapevine's editorial board and one of its founders. He went into his own pocket for organization expenses, gave advice, scanned manuscripts, and wrote a piece for one of the early issues which he called "Alcoholics Are Charming People." We afterward joshed him about this title. Grinning, he used to say that the title should have been "Some Alcoholics Are Charming People"!

In the years afterward I came to know friend Fulton very well. A busier man I have never seen. No matter when he went to bed, nothing short of pneumonia could keep him from being at his desk at five A.M. where he wrote until eleven. But his day had then only begun; his countless friends and activities kept him

going far into the evening, and I was the one who sometimes kept him up until midnight.

AA was then in the storms of its adolescence. Our Headquarters was just taking on its shape and its responsibility. We needed advice, especially about public relations, and it was to Fulton that I frequently went. It was in this period that Fulton became a Senior Editor of the *Reader's Digest*, where his helpfulness to us was soon reflected in the wide coverage they began to give us.

Then came the time when we wanted Fulton as a trustee for AA. Knowing his immense burden of work, I was most reluctant to ask him. But I needn't have felt that way, for when I popped the question, his face lit up and he said, "Why, certainly! When do I begin?" Fulton couldn't get to all our meetings, but he was always on tap. I remember once breaking into his busy hours with a request that he help us out in Hollywood where we were in a jam with a motion picture producer. He instantly dropped his work, and got on the long distance phone. Within an hour he called me back to say that everything was settled, that we need worry no more.

A few months before he died we spent one more evening together. It was then that he told me what AA had meant to him. Most humbly describing his earlier life as a time of prideful agnosticism and sophistication which had led him down a blind alley, he went on to relate

how the example of AA had affected him; how he had eventually joined the church of his choice, and how these two influences had inspired him to write about the Bible in "The Greatest Story Ever Told." He had done for AA, he went on to say, only a fraction of what AA had done for him, a non-alcoholic.

These, and a host of other experiences with the men and women of

press, radio, and television, plainly tell us of what their dedication has meant. In nearly every city where AA grows today, we see our friends in communications following in the footsteps of Jack Alexander and Fulton Oursler.

For all such couriers of good will, let us be everlastingly grateful. And let us always be worthy of their friendship.

Ed note—With this article Bill comes to a temporary end in his "Let's Be Friendly ..." series, which began in the July Grapevine. In the next issue—November, when AAs observe "Gratitude Week" and "Tradition Month"—Bill writes "Respecting Money."