

September 1957

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September... 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

Third in a Series
by Bill W.

With
Our
Friends . . . THE CLERGYMEN

EVERY RIVER HAS A WELLSPRING at its source. AA is like that, too. In the beginning, there was a spring which poured out of a clergyman, Dr. Samuel Shoemaker. Way back in 1934 he began to teach us the principles and attitudes that afterward came to full flower in AA's Twelve Steps for Recovery.

If ever there was a living water for drunks this was it. We took the cup of Grace that Sam held out and we drank, not forgetting to pass it on to others. Our gratitude goes up to Him whose Grace ever fills that cup, and out to Sam who first offered it to us.

But rivers must have tributaries, else they cannot travel far nor grow

great. The ever-deepening stream of spirit on which we AAs journey to better things now has its myriad tributaries—branches which feed into the main current of the life of our whole fellowship. The most numerous and most vital of these streams of devotion and service have always come to us from our friends in the clergy.

Let me illustrate:

Few know that it was a minister who was the primary figure in forming AA's original Board of Trustees, who were to become the custodians of AA's services, world-wide. I am thinking of Willard S. Richardson, a friend and associate of the Rockefellers. In 1937 we called upon Mr. Richardson to help us find a lot of money for AA work. Instead he helped us to find ourselves. Largely because of his kindness and understanding, his devotion and his hard work, AA's first Board of Trustees was formed and the writing of the Big Book was begun. His was the kind of giving that had no price tag on it. What our 7,000 groups today owe "Uncle Dick" Richardson, a clergyman, only God could possibly know.

At the Rockefeller dinner meeting of 1940 another man of the cloth appeared. He was no other than Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. As the main speaker for the non-alcoholics present, Dr. Fosdick became the first man of religion ever to stand right up before the general public and give us a big pat on the back. I often

wonder how much this generous act required of his understanding, love, and sheer nerve. Here was a small bunch of so-called "ex-drunks"—virtually unknown. I still tremble when I think how America would have rocked with mirth if two or three of us AAs had turned up plastered in the spotlight of that famous dinner! Clergyman Fosdick had gone far out on the limb for us. We shall remember this always.

Surely by hundreds, and probably by thousands, our friends in the clergy have since continued to go out on the limb. They install our meetings in their basements and social halls. Never interfering with our affairs, they sit in the back rows—explaining that they have come to AA to learn. When Sunday arrives, they preach sermons about us. They send us prospects and marvel at their progress. When we sometimes ask them to speak to us, they invariably apologize for their own ineffectiveness with alcoholics. This is humility for sure... too much of it, perhaps.

When it comes to patience and tolerance they are at their best. Of course they soon learn that, although sober, we AAs can sometimes be grandiose and champion rationalizers. We can also be careless and irresponsible. They listen blandly when we tell (by inference) what a superior society we have! Once in a while they hear experiences and language at a meeting that would make practically anybody blush. But they never say a word, or bat an eye. They

take the nonsense side of AA in stride, sometimes with the patience of Job. They know we are really trying to grow up, and they want to help.

This stirring and round-the-clock demonstration by our friends in religion sets many of us to thinking: "When we consider all that these priests and preachers have done for us, just what have we ever done for them?" This is a good question indeed.

Though the following isn't strictly AA business, I cannot but help report what priests and ministers have done for many of us, personally. Some AAs say, "I don't need religion, because AA is my religion." As a matter of fact, I used to take this tack myself.

After enjoying this simple and comfortable view for some years I finally awoke to the probability that there might be sources of spiritual teaching, wisdom and assurance outside of AA. I recalled that preacher Sam probably had a lot to do with the vital spiritual experience that was my first gift of faith. He had also taught me principles by which I could survive and carry on. AA had provided me with the spiritual home and climate wherein I was welcome and could do useful work. This was very fine, all to the good.

Yet I finally discovered that I needed more than this. Quite rightly, AA didn't try to answer all of my questions, however important they seemed to me. Like any other adoles-

cent, I had begun to ask myself: "Who am I?"—"Where did I come from?"—"What is my purpose here?"—"What is the real meaning of life?"—"When the undertaker gets through with me, am I still alive, or not?"—"Where, if any place, do I go from here?" Neither science nor philosophy seemed able to supply me convincing answers. Naturally I began to shop about in other directions, and I think I made a little progress.

Though still rather gun-shy about clergymen and their theology I finally went back to them—the place where AA came from. If they had been able to teach me the principles on which I could recover, then perhaps they might now be able to tell me more about growth in understanding, and in belief.

Though my sobriety had come easy, the growing up business hadn't. Both emotional and spiritual growth have always been mighty difficult for me. My quest to understand myself—and better to know God and His design for me—became a matter of great urgency. The clergyman, I reflected, must represent the accumulated wisdom of the ages in matters moral and theological. So I began to make friends with them—this time to listen, and not to argue.

I can happily report that one of these clergymen has turned out to be the greatest friend, teacher and adviser that I ever expect to have. Through the years I have found in Father Ed much of the grace and



understanding by which I can now grow, if only a little at a time. He is

the finest living example of spirituality that I happen to know. He has often set my feet back on the path when otherwise I might have gone off on an indefinite dry bender. It is characteristic that he has never, in all these years, asked me to join his church.

Therefore it is with the deepest feeling that I here cast up AA's debt to the clergymen: without their works for us, AA could never have been born; nearly every principle that we use came from them. Their example, their faith and their beliefs in some part, we have appropriated and made our own. Almost literally, we AAs owe them our lives, our fortunes and such salvation as each of us has found.

Surely, this is an infinite debt!

