

August 1953

*The final event of the Third General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous held in April of this year was a talk by Bernard B. Smith, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of The Alcoholic Foundation, and a non-alcoholic. In his talk Mr. Smith suggested the underlying responsibility and opportunity that the growing maturity of AA brings with it.*

*Excerpts from his talk follow.*

## The Conference, AA and Society

LET us remember that in keeping with the concept of the Twelfth Step, we owe an obligation not only to those of this generation who suffer from alcoholism, but to generations of alcoholics yet unborn. History is unfortunately replete with evidences of spiritual movements that, after the generation in which they were built had ended, lost their vigor, saw their purposes become diverted, and their spiritual sources begin to dry up. These Conferences serve, therefore, to insure that the concepts of life and of living which have brought us our recovery are available to all who may suffer from alcoholism today, one hundred or one thousand years from now.

And so we are charged with an obligation, an obligation that stems from our Twelfth Step, that the spiritual message of AA can be brought for all time to all those who need it and are capable of receiving it. We in AA want to insure that the spiritual base of AA never is destroyed by the lust for power, fame, money or prestige. We must continue to direct our purposes to guarantee to all who may suffer, now or in the future, that there will never be a government in Alcoholics Anonymous ... a government in which there *can* be power or fame or prestige. We must insure, through these Conferences, that no principles or practices are adopted as part of the life and traditions of AA until they have been tested by the hearts and by the minds of the entire Society of Alcoholics Anonymous.

### THE REAL MESSAGE

This Conference has an obligation that in my judgment is not limited, however, to the service of the millions who now suffer from alcoholism and the many millions more who will suffer in the generations that will follow us. If there is one thing that impresses itself upon the consciousness of a so-called non-alcoholic trustee, it is the fact that the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous are principles which constitute a message for the spiritual health of humankind. For the real message that we are delivering to society is not that we who were sick are now well, that we who once drank too much now do not drink at all.

Our real message to society is that we have found a way to live in God's world. While the discarded bottle may be the yardstick of our recovery from alcohol it is by no means the measure of our spiritual health. Our message to the world is not that we have succeeded in ceasing to drink, but that in so ceasing to drink we have succeeded in learning to live.

Let us take the concept of anonymity. I can remember when the reason for the name "Alcoholics Anonymous" was based on the fear of human beings to admit to the world that they had once been afflicted with alcoholism; yet within a relatively short space of time the word "anonymity" as a device to hide one's past as an alcoholic has disappeared. I know of no alcoholics in AA who are today not proud of their affiliation with the Society. The concept of anonymity today means to all of us the humility that comes with the willingness to serve without hope of gain or recognition or reward. If only all of human society could accept this concept of humility as we practice it in serving humanity; if only the willingness to serve was based on our concept of anonymity, instead of for reasons of pride or social distinction, how much richer would society become!

### AA's' RICH LIVES

The life of the AA member is, by its nature, a rich one. Who can enjoy health better, who really knows the nature of health, who has not been seriously ill? Who can know faith better

than he who denied it, and in denying it, abandoned life; and then, in re-asserting life, deliberately chose to meet that life armed with faith? Who can appreciate temporal time more than one who once stood on the edge of time, prepared to have time close out his life forever? For the alcoholic who has joined us has made a choice. He could have refused to continue to accept the things we cannot change, and thus have run away from reality. That is why the AA is a richer human being than he who has not, out of the depth of suffering, had a freedom of choice, whether to live as one of God's creatures, or to continue to deny life.

### MEANING IS FOUND

So many of us in this world spend our days working and dying, but never knowing or feeling in the true sense the life of the spirit. So many of us live, and will continue to live, a life of conflict, of emptiness, of self-destruction and despair; some of us escape by becoming automatons, living on the margins of life. Recovery came to us only when the spiritual message of AA reached us. We found it possible to transcend the society in which we live, for we at last found a means for giving meaning to our place in this world and to our functioning within it.

A leading Swiss psychotherapist, in a book recently published in which he sums up his thirty-five years of practice, has this to say in support of our faith: "Man is so deeply embedded in his egoism and isolation that only a

humble self-surrender to God, the personal God, can really bring about a liberation and transformation. It is faith which binds man to God, and through Him to all creatures. In this way the true community comes into being."

There is another message which AA has for a sick society. This message is implicit in our twenty-four-hour concept . . . the concept of asking an individual who has found his life unmanageable because of alcohol to refrain from drinking for twenty-four hours. That is all that the individual with a drinking problem is asked to do; and yet, I have learned in these years of association with AA that this simple concept of twenty-four hours has far greater significance than the simple statement "I will not drink for twenty-four hours" would connote. Goethe expresses it: "Yes! To this thought I hold firm persistence—the last result of wisdom stamps it true. *He only earns his freedom and existence who daily conquers them anew.*"

### CONCEPT OF HONESTY

Let me mention something else AA has to give to society, if that society finds it possible to receive it, and that is the concept of honesty, of truth and of freedom. For all these concepts, within AA, are one. We of AA recognize that truth is not a scientifically demonstrated theorem, but rises out of an intuitive grasp of eternal truth to which one must hold on to survive. It is because we have learned that the basic principles of AA are basic truths

that the disciplined observance of these principles has brought us sustained recovery from alcoholism.

Now let me turn to another concept of AA that has in it a great message to the world. And that is our great Twelfth Step. What is this Twelfth Step but an extension of the fundamental principle of all faiths, namely "Love thy neighbor as thyself"?

### SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE

We in AA do not rest while our neighbors are enslaved by alcohol and the destruction it brings. We are engaged in a spiritual struggle, one that is ceaseless and undying. We are concerned with the lives of our neighbors, and we do something about it. When the rest of society ceases to be indifferent to the suffering of its neighbors, ceases to sanction human desolation and begins to live in keeping with the spirit that infuses AA, we can have greater hope for the world.

There are today leaders of thought in society who hold to the proposition that human beings cannot live the life of the spirit and still function under the jungle laws of competition in an industrial society. I contend that the lives of the members of the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous disprove and completely demolish this proposition and disclose its inherent falsity. I believe that a world which will take the time to examine the evidence that AA provides will find that the life of the spirit can be lived in keeping with the need for compliance with the economic laws of society.

For we in AA know, as the rest of the world must learn, if it is to survive, that in this age of industrialization, of atom bomb and hydrogen bomb, this electronic age, man (if he is to function as man) must remind himself that he is a spiritual animal. Man must have faith, must have his values. We can live like automatons, we can cease to feel that life has meaning; but when one of us believes that life has no meaning, it is because something has happened to us, not to life. All of us who have known suffering, the dread isolation of our days with alcohol, and have survived, have learned that we cannot deny life without losing what life holds for us; we must be able to take life's venom and its sweetness, its cowardice and its valor, its suspicions and its trusts, its pains and its joys . . . for that, after all, is what human existence is. AA has taught us that we can accept this existence when lived in terms of the life of the spirit.

### THE CHOICE IS LIFE

We who have learned to live through AA can remember—for we talk of it at our meetings—the days when faith was giving way to fear, hope to despair, and love to distrust. With the help of those who had found recovery within AA, and who practiced the Twelfth Step, based on the concept "love thy neighbor as thyself," distrust turned to love, despair to hope, and fear to faith. But I say again that the important aspect of our recovery, and our message to society, is that each AA

in becoming one of us, made a decision to abandon fear, to abandon despair, to abandon distrust. For he had a choice, and that was to go on the way he was going, and that was the easier way. But he made the choice, a choice to live within the maximum of his capacity, in keeping with God's will and the doing of His will.

For we who once suffered and now live within the protective society of AA have learned through AA that man evolves only in terms of persons and people, in friendships, in shared agonies and in shared happiness.

We, and the life we lead within the concepts of AA, bring a message to this world, if the world will hear us, and that is that the spirit can take hold of our material world and completely transform it; that despite the nature of this competitive, material, mechanistic world of ours, man need no longer slink in the shadows, but, illumined by the flame of faith, can find the light by which to work and function, and by this light see a world dignified by human friendship, human decency and human devotion.