

June 1985

First and foremost, we've come from *spirituality*. Although on June 10 this year we are celebrating Bill W.'s meeting with Dr. Bob, Bill himself almost always traced the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous back to 1932, to Zurich, Switzerland, and to the study of the world-famous psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Jung.

As Bill tells it, Rowland H., scion of a well-to-do Vermont family, had become a drunk. His parents subjected him to the "cures" of that day without success and finally sent him abroad to the care of Dr. Jung. After about a year of therapy, Jung called Rowland into his study and said, in effect, "Your illness is beyond the reach of our science, so I am discharging you."

The American, taken aback, asked, "Is there no hope, then?"

"None," replied Dr. Jung, "except we know some alcoholics have recovered if they have undergone a transforming experience of the spirit."


Rowland left Zurich and returned to drinking. However, he later found his way to the Oxford Groups, a religious movement of the time, whose members followed certain spiritual precepts. These included: cleansing one's inner self of past guilt, wrongdoing, and sin; making restitution to those they had harmed; surrendering to God through prayer; and helping others. In his Oxford Group experience, Rowland underwent the "transforming experience of the spirit" of which Dr. Jung had spoken, and he

stopped drinking. While attending Group meetings at Calvary Church in New York City, Rowland reached out to help a childhood friend and fellow-drunk, Ebby T. Ebby, too, began attending the Oxford Group and found sobriety.

Then — fortunately for all of us in AA — one of the "others" whom Ebby, in turn, sought to help was another old friend and drinking buddy from Vermont, Bill W. Bill, once one of Wall Street's fair-haired boys, had fallen into a gin-soaked, unemployable state through alcoholism. Ebby carried the message of hope to his old friend at his house at 182 Clinton Street, in Brooklyn.

And what was that message? What was the message carried to Bill by Ebby, who had heard it from Rowland, who had received it from Dr. Jung, one of the world's pre-eminent men of science? It was: *we can recover from alcoholism if we undergo a "transforming experience of the spirit"!*

Bill and his wife Lois had already learned from Dr. William Silkworth, chief of staff at Towns Hospital in Manhattan, that Bill's was a hopeless, progressive, irreversible case of alcoholism, an allergy-like sensitivity to alcohol combined with an obsession that condemned him to drink against his will. After Ebby's first visit, Bill went on a last, terrible binge, which landed him once more in Towns Hospital in December 1934. There Ebby called on him again, after which Bill had his own "transform-



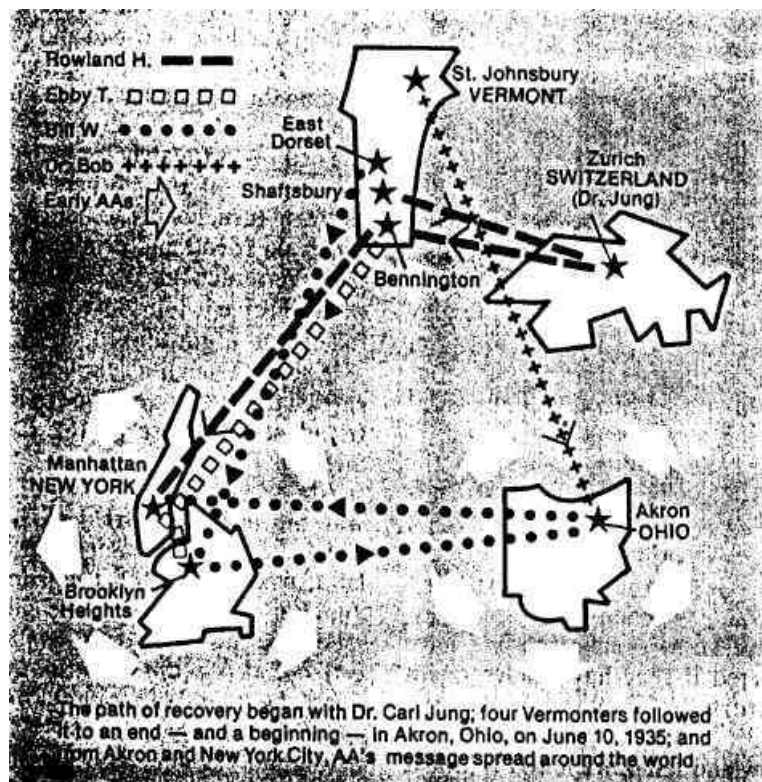
**I**N CONNECTION WITH AA's 50th Anniversary, I recently had occasion to dig back in the archives and research the beginnings and early years of our Fellowship. Having been sober a few twenty-four hours — as the saying goes — and having read most of the AA literature, I thought I was pretty knowledgeable. But as I delved into where we've come from, I experienced a kind of revelation, which I've shared at my home group and other meetings, and would like to share with you now.

Where *have* we come from? As I look back, certain principles seem to light up those early days.

*What is the message we carry?*

## A Transforming Experience of the Spirit

## "...Who Has Thoroughly Followed Our Path"



ing experience of the spirit." He never drank again.

That is the message Bill carried to Dr. Bob some five months later — and from that fateful meeting, it has been carried to every alcoholic who has come to AA in the half-century that has since passed. That is the message carried in dozens of passages in the Big Book, but no place more clearly than in that portion of Chap-

ter Five read at countless thousands Of AA meetings every day, the passage sometimes referred to as the "a-b-c's," which concludes with these "pertinent ideas":

"b. That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.

"c. That God could and would if He were sought."

Likewise, we've come from *humil-*

ity. At a recent Regional Forum, after trustees, General Service Office and Grapevine staff members, and Conference delegates had shared what their service responsibilities were, a new member came to the microphone and remarked he had never heard such "self-importance run riot." Contrast this with the touching recollection of Bill W. by an early visitor to the New York office, as related on the flyleaf of Bill's new biography, *Pass It On*:

"...I was a couple of months sober and so excited, so thrilled to actually meet the co-founder that I gushed all over him with what my sobriety meant to me and my undying gratitude for his starting AA. When I ran down, he took my hand in his and said simply, 'Pass it on.'"

Ego-driven though he was, Bill was ever pushing off credit to others. To Ebby, who was never able to achieve lasting sobriety but whom Bill invariably introduced as his "sponsor." To Lois. To Dr. Bob, whom Bill never let us forget was the co-founder! Bill, *warning* us not to be "so vain as to imagine ourselves authors of a new religion," and reminding us that "everything is a gift from God."

We've come from *anonymity*. Our Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions are being assaulted today as never before. With political figures, movie and TV stars, sports heroes, and celebrities of every stripe finding recovery in AA, more and more well-meaning members are saying anonymity is old-fashioned. It is no coin-

cidence that Bill's last message, framed on many an AA member's wall, deals bluntly and emphatically with this very issue:

"If I were asked which of these blessings I felt was most responsible for our growth as a Fellowship and most vital to our continuity, I would say, the 'Concept of Anonymity.' ...AA must and will continue to change with the passing years. We cannot, nor should we, turn back the clock. However, I deeply believe that the principle of anonymity must remain our primary and enduring safeguard."

Bill not only spoke this conviction, he lived it. He turned down an honorary degree from Yale University. He chose not to be listed in *Who's Who in America*. He declined having his picture on the cover of *Time* magazine with a major profile inside the magazine. All his life, he turned away personal publicity and honors of all kinds. Not because he wouldn't have liked them, but because he believed so strongly in the spiritual value of anonymity.

We've come from *rejection of power*. In this respect, Bill may have been unique among the charismatic leaders of the world's greatest movements. Most such leaders, in fact, hang on tenaciously to their power until they are ousted by young Turks — or until they die. Bill, on the other hand, labored desperately to get *us* to accept the power, through the Conference structure. As Dr. John L. Norris, long-time chairman of the



General Service Board, said: "He was willing to let go of us before we were willing to let go of him."

We've come *from the bottom up*. We have always been — and we still are — an upside-down organization. The "ultimate responsibility and absolute authority" (in the words of Concept I) reside in the *groups* and not in any board of governors or hierarchy of officers or headquarters office. In the beginning, AA sprang from groups of newly sober drunks, and it spread as new groups were formed wherever the message was carried. The incredible diversity of meetings in AA today — open, closed, discussion, beginners, Step study, Big Book study, Eleventh Step, men's, women's, young people, gays, airline pilots, priests, doctors, and many more — has come about not through any direction from a "headquarters" but rather in response to the needs of the members of the groups themselves.

AA is now present in 112 countries around the world, but it did not spread to other countries as a result

of a decision by some faceless executive in a headquarters office that money and effort should be directed to develop Country A and then Country B — as it might have, if AA were a multinational commercial organization. Rather it spread, as it always does, by means of one concerned and caring alcoholic, sober in AA, reaching out to help a fellow-alcoholic who still suffered.

Sometimes the message was carried by a traveling member. In other cases, it was a member in the U.S. or Canada trying to share his recovery with a relative abroad. Or the message-carrier was a magazine article, the result of good public information work; one article in 1946 in *Reader's Digest* brought calls for help from places as far away as South Africa and New Zealand, to the young General Service Office in New York.

By whatever means, in whichever country, a lone drunk gets sober with the help of the AA program. Then he or she twelfth-steps another prospect. Soon there's a small group. Then several groups, and the need for some

kind of service office to receive calls. If people in that country speak another language, Alcoholics Anonymous usually does not grow very rapidly or very big until the recovery literature — and especially the Big Book — is translated and published in the native tongue. Gradually, a service structure comes into being: a service board, a Conference, a national service office, and intergroups. Thus the Fellowship has always grown from the bottom up, not from the top down.

We've come from *a freedom from rules*. The co-founders and the pioneer members must be turning in their graves at the trend in AA today toward rigidity and rules. Stories are legion of Bill W.'s permissiveness. At one time, a small delegation of members from St. Louis traveled to New York to meet with Bill and cite a long bill of complaints against a clique of members who were ignoring or violating every Tradition in running a local clubhouse. When the visitors were finished voicing their anger and their resentments, Bill thought for a while and then asked, "Are these fellas sober?" The delegation assured him they were. Whereupon Bill spread out his palms and shrugged and asked, "Well...?" And that was the end of the talk.

One of Bill's favorite expressions was, "Every group has a right to be wrong." How often do we hear *that* viewpoint expressed in 1985 AA? In *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, page 151, Bill states "each AA group [is] an individual entity, strictly re-

liant on its own conscience as a guide to action. In charting this enormous expanse of freedom we found it necessary to post only two storm signals. A group ought not do anything which would greatly injure AA as a whole, nor ought it affiliate itself with anything or anybody else... Sobriety had to be its sole objective. In all other respects there was perfect freedom of will and action."

In a *Grapevine* article, Bill made the same point by saying facetiously (and borrowing an expression from Wilson Mizner, a wit of that day) the only rule an AA group ought to have was "no opium smoking in the elevator!"

We've come from *tolerance* — from understanding and sympathy and patience and kindness toward each other. The Big Book compares us to shipwrecked passengers who have been rescued, so "camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel from steerage to Captain's table." It speaks of our discovering "a way out on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action." And, "Tolerance of other people's shortcomings and viewpoints and a respect for their opinions are attitudes which make us more useful to others." The Big Book speaks even more strongly in discussing Step Four: "We cannot be helpful to all people, but at least God will show us how to take a kindly and tolerant view of each and every one."

R. P., *Riverside, Conn.*