

March 1994

YOUR MOVE

Reader responses to the September 1993 article, "Fine-Tuning Our Basic Text"

We received so many thoughtful responses to this article that selecting and excerpting proved a difficult task. Many readers, it seems, have an interest in the way women are portrayed in the Big Book - and a concern for its effect on AA.

Though space does not permit the publication of every letter, the pages that follow include the thoughts of several readers, whose opinions represent as fully as possible the range of responses to the September article.

This is **your** magazine, and only with your help can the Grapevine truly be the Fellowship's "meeting in print" and "forum for debate." If you have experiences and thoughts to share with fellow AAs, write them out and send them to: Editorial Department, PO Box 1980, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163-1980.

Taking liberties
From London, Ont.:

It is not often that I take the liberty of commenting on an article that someone else has written for the Grapevine, but in the case of the article "Fine-Tuning Our Basic Text" in the September 1993 issue, I felt the necessity of offering some thoughts.

To begin with, I have been sober and a member of AA for thirty-seven years, and during this time I have met many other women with the same length of sobriety, as well as many with quite a bit longer, and, naturally, many with much less. In total I have

met relatively few who felt wronged in any way by the manner in which the Big Book was written. Most of these women were grateful for the fact that the program of Alcoholics Anonymous offered them a practical solution to their problem and weren't too concerned with whether their gender was spelled out or not.

It may be worth noting that in the era when the Big Book was written it was quite generally assumed that references to "man" or "mankind" included both male and female gender. I am also quite convinced after extensive study and reading of circum-

stances surrounding the writing of the Big Book that Bill and the others didn't write it with any intention of showing disregard for women or any other factor, such as race, color, creed, social or economic background, and such.

The author of the Grapevine article says, "the Big Book is good, but not as effective as it could be," and refers again to the idea of a strictly male orientation. I would like to point out that over the years, more and more people, including many outside of AA, both professionals and laymen, have written reports on the comprehensive manner in which the book was written and its effectiveness in providing a Workable program for the benefit of many with a variety of human problems as well as alcoholism.

Can anyone just imagine what would happen if a project were put forth to revamp and change the book to reflect personal reference to all the different facets and entities of human nature?

Changing the personal stories section to reflect different recovery experiences is one thing, but changing the original writings by Bill is another. *P. H.*

Revising history?
From Burbank, Calif.:

There has been commentary in the Grapevine that "Alcoholics Anonymous should admit it has wronged women in the way the first third of the book is written." This is hard to justify, as the point of the book is only to show what a majority of the

first one hundred understood to be the basics of their program. No attempt was made, and understandably so, to predict the unknown future and what role diversity might play in that future. Also there were several women in the original group and the stories of two appear in the first edition.

In the modern framework of 1994, I think the first 164 pages should be viewed as a history book. It tells about the program of a small group of people and how they got sober in a very narrow time frame. I was told early on, "Read the Big Book and find out how the first one hundred got sober. Then apply what you learn to yourself and build your own program accordingly."

The Big Book was never intended to be, nor would it be, an "operating manual" with revision numbers and constant updates henceforth and forevermore.

The writer says the Big Book is ". . . an organic, growing, changing means of communication." God forbid! I have visions of George Orwell and *1984* with the Ministry of Truth whose job was to constantly revise history to conform to the latest government policy.

If you want a politically correct, thoroughly modern, New Age operating manual, go ahead and write it. Then see if it works. *D. B.*

By men for men
From Bollene, France:

Three cheers for Graham M.! He had the courage to say what this woman alcoholic has felt for a long

time: The Big Book was written by men for men.

It is not just that the language of the text is male-oriented. The entire concept of alcoholism - as presented in the first and subsequent editions - is overwhelmingly masculine.

How many alcoholic women executives identify with "Bill's Story"? What does the Wall Street crash of 1929 mean to a stockgirl stealing six-packs from the supermarket where she works?

Masculine experiences with alcohol dominate chapters one through eleven. The chapter five instructions for taking Step Four - with their emphasis on sexual transgressions - are my particular bete noire. Sexual transgressions? I didn't even think about sex while I was drinking!

In my Twelve and Twelve discussion group I often say that I prefer to suggest the Step Four workbook "Blueprint for Progress," from Al-

Anon, for women alcoholics to use in taking their Fourth Step. I feel it is more realistic for a woman's character defects than the examples given on page 65 of the Big Book.

The men in the group always disagree with me, stating that the Big Book (like the Bible) is for everyone. But the women in the group see my point: The AA program is for everyone, but the Big Book speaks mainly to men. Even the text admits this (chapter eight, paragraph one).

Chapters eight and nine are a handbook for dealing with the alcoholic male and "Dad." The few footnotes regarding women alcoholics and Al-Anon which have been added to the original text simply underscore the attitude that alcoholism is primarily a masculine illness.

Yes, let's do something about the Big Book. Keep the original edition in the archives for historical interest, with its outmoded vocabulary and at-

titudes of the 1930s. But please - for today - give us a working text that speaks to all alcoholics. *K. M.*

Individually responsible

From Elk Grove, Calif.:

I see that "politically correct" dogma is alive and well in at least one corner of the AA world scene. Well, why should revisionist history be limited to individuals, governments, and countries? Why not include the AA Fellowship and its Big Book in the action? Surely we can all benefit from this grand scheme to set straight the sins of omission and prejudice fostered by white European males and practiced in AA circles over the past fifty-eight years.

Of necessity, we will also be bound to examine Steps Three, Seven, and Eleven, along with Tradition Two. "Political correctness" demands that we eliminate the words "him," "his," "he," and "himself."

Since many, if not most, AA groups close their meetings with the Lord's Prayer, we have an attendant problem with the reference to "our Father."

And since we will be developing a firm foundation upon which to build our gender sensitivity, or lack thereof, we are going to be forced to deal with the fact that both of our officially recognized founders were male. Now we will be cooking with real Step Ten soundness. But wait. A personal inventory of this import cannot be limited to the one subject of sexual reference. We must have an historical fairness doctrine sympathetic to all races.

Otherwise, how can everyone relate to our program and fellowship activity?

If I had a dollar for every AA member I have heard express a "better idea" for rewriting the Big Book, I would be wealthy. When sensitivity and fairness become more important than the original, accurate, historical record and the truth, we can kiss our vast collective sobriety goodbye. There are even those among us who would consider the essence of the "Fine-Tuning Our Basic Text" article a violation of Tradition Ten in the fact that it is based on the principles and teachings of an outside issue identified as "International Women's Day," which Graham M. neglects to expand on.

After twenty years in AA, I have yet to hear a female, either prospect or proclaimed member, complain about being "wronged" by the basic text of the first third of the AA Big Book. Not one! But I have heard numerous female members justly complain about the arrogance and egomania of some male AA members, including myself.

The effectiveness of the AA message is directly dependent on the willingness of the individual to respond to certain spiritual principles. It is a matter of simple individual responsibility!

The author seems to be practicing selective inclusion and exclusion. He includes a sentence from chapter three, paragraph three, that states, "We are convinced to a man that. . ." yet he has excluded the first sentence

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in that very same paragraph which states, "We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking."

While I support any member's right to freedom of expression, I also support any member's right to challenge any material, written or verbal, presented within the framework of the AA Fellowship.

J. S.

Turning a blind eye

From Aptos, Calif.:

I opened my Grapevine tonight thinking about letting my subscription lapse. After a weekend at a women's retreat where we talked about recovery, feminism, and spirituality, I did not want to wade through the usual pages of "God as we understand Him."

Imagine my surprise and delight when I read Graham M.'s article on the search for more inclusive language. He referred to the gender bias in our beloved - and outdated - text and the blind eye we keep turning to it. Sometimes I feel we leave our brains outside of meetings too often, and base our opinions on fear and habit. Hooray for Graham and those who are willing to re-think our choices, values, and, yes, even our "basic text."

It takes courage to see where changes are needed, and courage to keep talking about it. I, for one, plan to keep expressing myself on this, and am so heartened to hear others feeling the same. Whether or not AA needs to, or will, do a Tenth Step to

all women for its deep gender bias in its book, I appreciate at least this one member stating it openly. We must do everything we can to not make our Fellowship exclusive or set up the possibility for female newcomers turning away from us because we are too stubborn to really see the changes we need to make.

ANONYMOUS

Making the message available

From Newport Beach, Calif.:

I am writing in response to the article "Fine-Tuning Our Basic Text." The article touched on a subject that myself and many other members have been talking about lately - the need for a more inclusive text in chapters two through eleven of the Big Book.

In fact, one of our women's meetings is a Big Book study and when we are reading passages out loud from the book we find it necessary to change "he" to "she," etc. Although women alcoholics can relate to the experiences and the feelings talked about in the Big Book, it can be very confusing and can make women alcoholics feel excluded.

I agree with the author that the text should be referred to a committee of women members who are asked to make any necessary revisions to make the chapters as effective as possible in communicating AA's experience to all alcoholics and the general community.

I am a very grateful recovering woman alcoholic and I want to make sure the AA message is spread as effectively as possible to all who need and want it.

S. F.

Limitation of language

From Englewood, Colo.:

Graham M. provided sound reasoning and a clear discussion of the gender-related semantic/linguistic shortcomings of the Big Book.

Written and spoken English often falls short of meeting our need to be sensitive to people from different groups. We are distinguished by gender, ethnic/cultural origin, lifestyle, nationality, race, politics, age, and other factors. AA is no stranger to this end-of-the-20th-century global phenomenon. We in AA knew decades ago that "we are people who normally would not mix."

In short, we are in the same awkward position which all English-

speaking people are in and it is not the first time for our civilization. Libraries and bookstores are filled with translations, re-translations and newly revised editions of the Bible and all classical literature. All such editions are major undertakings, usually requiring years of careful work.

Alcoholics Anonymous has the principles necessary (i.e. Steps, Traditions, Concepts) to decide whether to undertake such a project. We have the spiritual and human resources to follow through on our decision. In the meantime, we might consider adding (yet another) preface to the next edition of the Big Book. It would prompt the reader to keep in mind the historical context during which the



book was written. Survey data (demographics), often reported in Grapevine and various AA newsletters, could form a foundation for such a preface. The seed for such a practice appears in a footnote on page 34 of the Third Edition. It informs the reader of the increased number of AA members who are thirty years of age or younger.

I make this suggestion as a practical step, supporting Graham's proposal, aware of its advantages and disadvantages. I look forward to hearing others' comments. *M. H.*

It works the way it is

From Lake Jackson, Tex.:

I am a woman, I have been in AA for seven years, and I have never been offended by the focus on men in the Big Book.

I'm what a lot of AAs call a high-bottom drunk, but my bottom was low enough for me. I am active in AA. I have a sponsor, I sponsor several women. I have been to meetings all over Texas, in the midwest, and up the eastern seaboard. I have never heard a female alcoholic say she had or has a problem with the male gender wording.

There are a lot of Twelve Step programs today, but only two can claim any longterm successes. Neither of these two programs have ever changed the first 164 pages of recovery in the Big Book. That proves to me it works just the way it is.

Anyone, male or female, can find plenty of ways the Big Book "wrongs" them if they want to, but I truly believe the book was divinely inspired.

R. L.

Leave the book alone

From New York, N.Y.:

While I am heartened to know that Graham M. is sensitive to the feelings of women, and is concerned enough about male-oriented language in the literature to try to change it, I would tell Graham and others to leave the Big Book alone.

I am not a grammarian, but making the AA literature and the entire English language and idiom gender-neutral and/or gender-inclusive seems like an unnecessary exercise. The Big Book was written decades before Women's Lib, sexual harassment, and female heads-of-households, and maybe Bill W. didn't consult a lot of women when writing the Big Book because they were still out there getting loaded.

When I read the AA literature, I feel the spirit of love and fellowship. I don't say to myself, "Gee, that Bill W. is really sexist."

Perhaps a disclaimer at the beginning of the next edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* would be nice, but as a woman, I know that "mankind" means men and women, and would strongly support leaving our basic text as is. *E. H.*

Never good enough

From Clairton, Pa.:

Once again I wish to commend the Grapevine and especially Graham M. of Australia for his well thought out article in the September issue.

I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that as a woman, sober now fifteen years, I have struggled throughout my

life with the misconception that I was somehow never quite good enough. Although not entirely to blame, much of what we read or are told at work, at home, or in church seems to be aimed at the male gender exclusively, and that includes the Big Book.

I realize fully that at the time the original text was written there were very few, if any, women members. Yet that has changed dramatically. Happily, of the forty-two stories now included at the back of the Big Book, thirteen are about women. Yet as a perfect example of what Graham said in his article, page 29 reads: "Each individual, in the personal stories, describes in his own language and from his own point of view the way he established his relationship with God." How much more accurate, without changing the context, it would read if the "he/him" references were simply replaced with "they/their." After all, Bill W. himself urged us, in every way possible, to be "inclusive rather than exclusive."

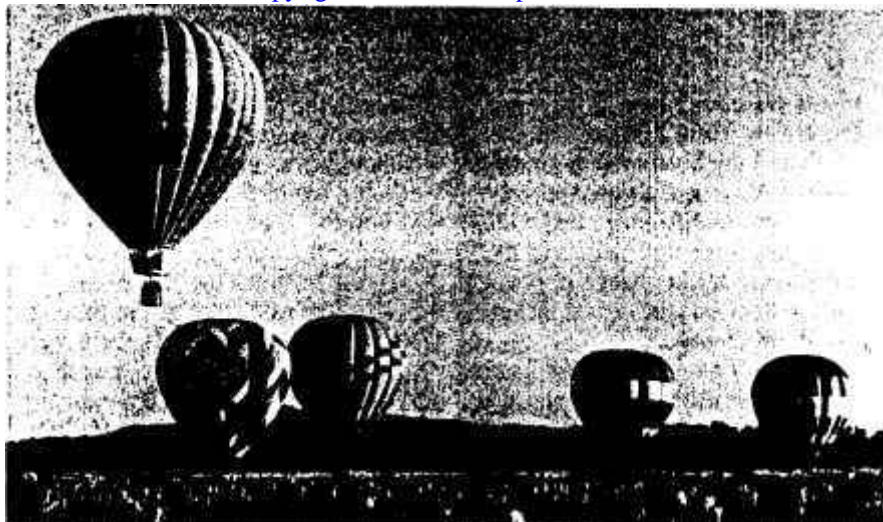
Let the Big Book, in its entirety, continue to reach out to sick alcoholics, women and men alike. *J. P.*

Pertinent at any time

From Chicago, Ill.:

In "Fine-Tuning Our Basic Text," the writer suggests that the text of chapters two through eleven be referred to committee for rewriting with more inclusive language for women. Though commendable, I feel that a change that sweeping would not be a good idea.

Works of literature, art, and music



that survive through time do so not because they adapt to the moment but because they are pertinent at any time. I do not think that it is wise to change history to accommodate today. As recovering alcoholics, should not our efforts be to change today and thereby change tomorrow's history?

As a gay male I fully appreciate "To Wives," yet I would never suggest that it be changed to "To Significant Others" in order that it be more relevant to me. It would be nice if the whole world would relate to me, but I feel that such a desire on my part is one reason I landed in AA in the first place.

Sobriety is for those who want it. If I want it badly enough and am willing to go to any length to get it, I will cut through the conventions and get the message. *L. S.*

Will it really help?

From Flushing, N.Y.:

Has modern liberalism and its de-

sire for "politically correct" speech and writing finally reached AA?

Graham M.'s article reminded me of the times I have attended meetings on the upper east side of Manhattan, where the Third, Seventh, and Eleventh Steps are rewritten and read in a way that makes God sexless ("... God as we understood God," rather than "... God as we understood Him"). While the motive for this revision (to make AA more attractive to women) isn't a bad thing by itself, I get a queer feeling that I am not really in an AA meeting every time I hear the Steps read that way.

Call me a "bleeding deacon" if you wish, but it is truly disconcerting to hear AA literature rewritten, if only to suit the whim of a particular group. Moreover, I cannot accept the notion that a gender-free revision of the Big Book, a mostly symbolic act, will really make women feel more at ease in AA. Why not try giving love and service to other alcoholics, regardless of sex? *M. F.*