First in a series of articles on authors of Big Book stories

Interview with the author of "Doctor, Alcoholic, Addict"

DR. PAUL

Dr. Paul's story, "Doctor, Alcoholic, Addict" is published in the Third Edition of the Big Book; his remarks on acceptance, which appear on pages 449 and 450, have been helpful to many AA members over the years. This interview was conducted by telephone to Dr. Paul's home in California.

GV: How did you come to write the story that's in the Big Book?

Dr. Paul: The editor of the Grapevine — a woman named Paula C. — was also the chairperson of the committee to review the stories. She wrote to tell me that the magazine was going to use an article I'd written on why doctors shouldn't prescribe pills for alcoholics. So she knew my writing a little bit and she asked me if I had a dual problem and would I be willing to write an article about it for consideration in the Big Book. My reaction to that was the same as my reaction when it was suggested I come to AA — I thought it was one of the dumbest ideas I'd ever heard and I ignored her letter. Later on she called and asked for the article, and I lied and said I hadn't had time to write it. She extended the deadline and called me a second time. I had a gal working in the office with me who was in the program, and she thought it would be nice to have typed a story that might end up in the Big Book, so she said to me, "You write it, I'll type it, and we'll send it in." So that's what we did. But by that time they had done another printing of the Second Edition, and I thought, Fine, that means they won't use it. But Paula said she liked it and the Grapevine published it with the title "Bronzed Mocassins" and an illustration of a pair of bronze mocassins. Eventually it was put in the Big Book, but the title was changed, and my guess is that they wanted to show that an alcoholic could be a professional and be an addict, but that wouldn't make him not an alcoholic. It worked well but maybe it overshot the mark, and now one of the most uncomfortable things for me is when people run up to me at a meeting and tell me how glad they are the story is in the book. They say they've been fighting with their home group because their home group won't let them talk about drugs. So they show their group the story and they say, "By God, now you'll have to let me talk about drugs." And I really hate to see the story as a divisive thing. I don't think we came to AA to fight each other.

GV: Is there anything you regret having written in your story?

Dr. Paul: Well, I must say I'm really surprised at the number of people who come up to me and ask me confidentially if what they've heard on the very best authority — usually from their sponsor — is true: that there are things in my story I want to change, or that I regret having written it, or that I want to take it out because it says so much about drugs, or that I've completely changed my mind that AA is the answer or even that acceptance is the answer. I've also heard — on the best authority! — that I've died or gotten drunk or on pills. The latest one was that my wife Max died and that I got so depressed I got drunk. So, is there anything I'd like to change? No. I believe what I said more now than when I wrote it.

GV: Do you think that your story might help those who are dually addicted?
said that AA should change its name to Addicts Anonymous. I find that a very narrow-minded view based on people's personal opinions and not on good sense. History tells us that the Washingtonians spread themselves so thin they evaporated. Jim B. says the greatest thing that ever happened in AA was the publication of the Big Book, because it put in writing what the program was and made it available all over the world. So wherever you go it's the same program. I don't see how you could change the program unless you changed the book and I can't see that happening.

GV: It's a question of singleness of purpose?
Dr. Paul: That singleness of purpose thing is so significant. It seems to be working; why would we change it? I can't think of any change that would be an improvement.

GV: Nowadays drunks seem to come to meetings already dried out, but that wasn't always the case.
Dr. Paul: No, it wasn't. You don't get Twelfth Step calls as dramatic as they used to be. Now I find that if you're called upon to make a Twelfth Step call, it'll be on somebody who is in the hospital. You find out when they're available and not in some other kind of meeting, and make an appointment. But this might change as the number of treatment programs begins to fade out.

I used to make "cold turkey" calls, where the alcoholic hadn't asked for help. One time I went to see this guy who was described to me as a big husky fellow. He was holed up in a motel. I found out from the manager of the motel that he was on the second floor, and as I was walking up the outside stairs to get to his place, I thought to myself, if this guy comes charging out the door, he could easily throw me over the stair railing and I'd end up on the concrete. So I thought, well, the good news is I'd probably be one of AA's first martyrs. Then I thought, yeah, but I'd be an anonymous martyr. I made the call anyhow, and he got sober for a while.

GV: In your Big Book story, you say that acceptance is the key to everything. I wonder if you've ever had a problem accepting what life hands you.
Dr. Paul: I think today that my job really is to enjoy life whether I like it or not. I don't like everything I have to accept. In fact, if everything was to my specifications and desires there would be no problem with acceptance. It's accepting things I don't like that is difficult. It's accepting when I'm not getting my own way. Yes, I find it very difficult at times.

GV: Anything specific?
Dr. Paul: Nothing major, though it sometimes seems major that I have to accept living with my wife Max and her ways of doing things! She is an entirely different person than I am. She likes clutter, I like things orderly. She thinks randomly and I like structured thinking. We're very, very different. We never should have gotten married! Last December we were married fifty-five years.

GV: I guess she knows your thoughts on this matter.
Dr. Paul: Ad nauseam.

GV: You're still going to meetings?
Dr. Paul: I'd say five or six a week.

GV: Do you and Max go to meetings together?
Dr. Paul: Max isn't in AA, she's in Al-Anon and she's still very active in it. But I go to Al-Anon too, and that helps a great deal, and Max comes to open AA meetings with me and that helps too. It's kind of like Elsa C. used to say: when two people have their individual programs, it's like railroad tracks, two separate and parallel rails, but with all those meetings holding them together.

GV: Do you think you'd still be married if you hadn't gone to meetings all these years?
Dr. Paul: I'm sure we wouldn't. I initially thought that the Serenity Prayer said I'd have to change the things I couldn't accept. So I thought, well, we can't get along so it's time to change the marriage. I used to go
around looking for old-timers who would agree with me and say that's what the Serenity Prayer meant. But Max and I finally made a commitment to the marriage and stopped talking about divorce and started working our programs. In fact we tend to sponsor each other, which is a dangerous thing to do, but we help each other see when we need more meetings, or need to work a certain Step or something like that.

GV: Do you have, or did you have, a sponsor?
Dr. Paul: Early on I was talking to a friend of mine, Jack N., who was sober a couple of months longer than I was. Jack and his wife and Max and I used to go to AA speaker meetings together. I was telling him how my home group was nagging at me because I didn't have a sponsor, and on the spur of the moment he said to me, "Why don't you be my sponsor?" And I said, "I don't know if they'll allow that." But we decided to try it and it worked out. He calls me 'cause I'm his sponsor and I call him 'cause he's my sponsor so I guess we call each other twice as often. We're still sponsoring each other. That's been going on for twenty-seven years. He moved to L.A. but we stay in touch, mostly by phone.

GV: Is there a tool or a slogan or a Step that is particularly useful to you right now?
Dr. Paul: Pretty much every morning, before I get out of bed, I say the Serenity Prayer, the Third Step Prayer, and the Seventh Step Prayer. Then Max and I repeat those prayers along with other prayers and meditations at breakfast. And I say those three prayers repeatedly throughout the day.

I grew up thinking that I had to perfect my personality, then I got into AA, and AA said, no, that isn't the way we do it: only God can remove our defects. I was amazed to find that I couldn't be a better person simply by trying harder!

What I've done with a number of problems — like fear and depression and insomnia — is to treat them as defects of character, because they certainly affect my personality adversely. With depression, I've never taken any antidepressants. Instead, with any defect I want to get rid of, I become willing to have it removed, then I ask God to remove it, then I act like he has. Now, I know God has a loophole that says he'll remove it unless it's useful to you or to my fellows. So I tell him I'd like my defect removed completely, but he can sleep on it, and in the morning he can give me the amount he wants me to have, and I'll accept it as a gift from him. I'll take whatever he gives me. I've never done that when he hasn't removed a great deal of my defect, but I've never done it when he has permanently and totally removed any defect. But the result is that I no longer fight myself for having it.

GV: That's a helpful way of seeing things. It makes defects into a gift.
Dr. Paul: That's right. And it's the Rule Sixty-two business [see Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 149]. It's like Father Terry always says, "Be friendly with your defects." In fact some poet said, "Hug your demon, otherwise it'll bite you in the ass." Poets can talk like that.

GV: Has your sponsoring changed over the years?
Dr. Paul: I do a lot more stuff by telephone. When I'm speaking at a meeting, if I think of it, I give out my home phone number. So I get a lot of phone calls from all over the country. People ask me if I'm willing to help them as a sponsor and I tell them, well, you call me every day for thirty days, or maybe sixty or ninety or whatever, and then they call me every day, and we get to know each other, and during that time we find out what it's like to be relating to each other. It's kind of a probationary period. Then if they still want me to be their sponsor, we'll go ahead and if they don't, we move on and there's no loss. And this gets them accustomed to calling, so when they have a problem, they don't have to analyze it at great depth and decide if it's bad enough that they should bother me with a phone call. I haven't personally been doing each Step individually with people as much, but I've redone all the Steps myself on an average of every five years. And every time I've done that, my sobriety has stepped up to a new plateau, just like the first time I did them.

Sometimes people call me 'cause they're feeling in a funk, their sponsor has moved away or died, or they've moved away from their sponsor, or the meetings don't mean much anymore. They aren't getting anything out of AA. And because of my relationship with pills, I've had a lot of people come to me and say they've got — what do you call it? — a "chemical imbalance." They're seeing a counselor who says, "Yeah, you're depressed," and the counselor wants to start them on an antidepressant. My suggestion is, if you want to do some-
thing like that and you haven’t done
the Steps in a number of years, do the
Steps first. And repeatedly people will
do that and decide they don’t need
the pills.

GV: When you speak at out-of-state
AA meetings, does Max go with you?
Dr. Paul: I don’t go unless she goes.

GV: Why not?
Dr. Paul: Because I decided I didn’t
come to AA to become a traveling
salesman and be away from home. So
we go where it’s a big enough event
that they can take us both. And
what’s really more fun is if it’s a mixed
event where Max can speak, especially
if she gets to speak first. She likes
that. She likes to say that I say that
she tells a perverted version of my
drinking story. Then she points out
that I was the one who was drinking
and she was the one who was sober.

GV: There are many more young
people in the Fellowship now. Do you
think young people have special
problems because they’re getting sober
at such an early age?

Dr. Paul: People always say they’re so
glad to see the young people come in,
and I agree, but I’m glad to see the old
people come in too. I like to see any-
body get sober. It’s hard to say
whether your pain is greater than my
pain or mine’s greater than yours. I’m
sure that young people have problems,
but we all have problems — gays have
problems, people who are addicted to
other drugs have problems, single
people have problems. I can’t think of
anything more of a problem than be-
ing a woman alcoholic trying to get
sober, married to a practicing alco-
holic male, and with a handful of kids.
That must be as about as big a prob-
lem as you can get. Everybody has spe-
cial problems.

I’ve said it often and I haven’t had
any reason to change my mind: the
way I see it, I’ve never had a problem
and nobody will ever come to me with
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program — the Steps — covers every-
thing conceivable.

I’m getting way off from what you
asked me. I can’t give short answers.
I often tell people that the more I
know about something, the shorter
the answer, but when I don’t know, I
just make up stuff.

GV: Did you find it helpful at some
point to become familiar with the Tra-
ditions?

Dr. Paul: I find the Steps easier to
understand than the Traditions and
the Traditions easier to understand
than the Concepts. In fact, I find the
long form of the Traditions consid-
ernably easier to understand than the
short form, and I find that the long
form is much more specific on the
idea that AA is for alcoholics and not
for just anybody who wants to come
in. A lot of people like that phrase
“The only requirement for member-
ship is a desire to stop drinking,” and
people interpret that to mean that if
you’re willing to not drink, you can
call yourself an alcoholic and a mem-
ber of AA. That’s not at all what it
says. I think it means that if you’re an
alcoholic with a desire to stop drink-
ing, that’s the only requirement for
membership.

GV: How many years have you been
sober now?

Dr. Paul: Twenty-seven.

GV: Twenty-seven years of meetings.
Have you seen any changes in the way
the meetings are conducted?

Dr. Paul: All I see is that there are
more meetings and bigger meetings
and more variety of meetings. I just
love to see AA grow. I enjoy meet-
ings. I’ve been to meetings in Sin-
pore and Hong Kong and Japan, but I
think the most interesting was when
Chuck C. and Al D. and I were vaca-
tioning in the Cayman Islands and we
couldn’t find any meetings. We were
twelfth-stepping alcoholics there and
decided we all needed a meeting, so
we went to the local newspaper and
got some publicity. Then we had a
public information meeting, then we
got a regular meeting started. As far
as I know, that meeting is still going.

GV: So you haven’t gotten bored by
Alcoholics Anonymous.

Dr. Paul: Well, I thought about that
some years back. Why is it that so
many people aren’t around any more?
Where do they go? It seems to me
that most of the people who leave AA
leave because of boredom. I made up
my mind I wasn’t going to get bored,
and one of the things I do when I get
bored, if I can’t think of anything else
to do, is to start a new meeting. I’ve
probably started fifteen or twenty.
The most recent one was last Novem-
ber. I got a couple of friends together
and we started a “joy of sobriety”
meeting — it’s a one-hour topic dis-
cussion meeting and it has to be a top-
ic out of the Big Book and it has to be
on the program and how you enjoy
living the program. It’s fast-moving
and we just have a lot of fun. It’s a
great antidote for depression.

GV: What’s the most important
ting a woman alcoholic trying to get
sober, married to a practicing alco-
holic male, and with a handful of kids.
That must be as about as big a prob-
lem as you can get. Everybody has spe-
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