A Fragments of History
by Bill

worth of Towns Hospital and the famed psychologist, William James, called by some the father of modern psychology. The story of how these streams of influence were brought together and how they led to the writing of our Twelve Steps is exciting and in spots downright incredible.

Many of us will remember the Oxford Groups as a modern evangelical movement which flourished in the 1920's and early 30's, led by a one-time Lutheran minister, Dr. Frank Buchman. The Oxford Groups of that day threw heavy emphasis on personal work, one member with another. AA's Twelfth Step had its origin in that vital practice. The moral backbone of the "O.G." was absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love. They also practiced a type of confession, which they called "sharing"; the making of amends for harms done they called "restitution." They believed deeply in their "quiet time," a meditation practiced by groups and individuals alike, in which the guidance of God was sought for every detail of living, great or small.

These basic ideas were not new; they could have been found elsewhere. But the saving thing for us first alcoholics who contacted the Oxford Groupers was that they laid great stress on these particular principles. And fortunate for us was the fact that the Groupers took special pains not to interfere with one's personal religious views. Their society, like ours later on, saw the need to be strictly non-denominational.

In the late summer of 1934, my well-loved alcoholic friend and schoolmate "Ebbie" had fallen in with these good folks and had promptly sobered up. Being an alcoholic, and rather on the obstinate side, he hadn't been able to "buy" all the Oxford Group ideas and attitudes. Nevertheless, he was moved by their deep sincerity and felt mighty grateful for the fact that their ministrations had, for the time being, lifted his obsession to drink.

When he arrived in New York in the late fall of 1934, Ebbie thought at once of me. On a bleak November day he rang up. Soon he was looking at me across our kitchen table at 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn, New York. As I remember that conversation, he constantly used phrases like these: "I found I couldn't run my own life;" "I had to get honest with myself and somebody else;" "I had to make restitution for the damage I had done;" "I had to pray to God for guidance and strength, even though I wasn't sure there was any God;" "And after I'd tried hard to do these things I found that my craving for alcohol left." Then over and over Ebbie would say something like this: "Bill, it isn't a bit like being on the water-wagon. You don't fight the desire to drink—you get released from it. I never had such a feeling before."

Such was the sum of what Ebbie had extracted from his Oxford Group friends and had transmitted to me that day. While these simple ideas were not new, they certainly hit me like tons of brick. Today we understand just
why that was . . . one alcoholic was
talking to another as no one else can.
Two or three weeks later, December
11th to be exact, I staggered into the
Charles B. Towns Hospital, that fa-
mous drying-out emporium on Central
Park West, New York City. I’d been
there before, so I knew and already
loved the doctor in charge—Dr. Silk-
worth. It was he who was soon to
contribute a very great idea without
which AA could never have succeeded.
For years he had been proclaiming al-
coholism an illness, an obsession of the
mind coupled with an allergy of the
body. By now I knew this meant me.
I also understood what a fatal combi-
nation these twin ogres could be. Of
course, I’d once hoped to be among
the small percentage of victims who
now and then escape their vengeance.
But this outside hope was now gone.
I was about to hit bottom. That ver-
dict of science—the obsession that con-
demned me to drink and the allergy
that condemned me to die—was about
to do the trick. That’s where medical
science, personified by this benign little
doctor, began to fit in. Held in the
hands of one alcoholic talking to the
next, this double-edged truth was a
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THIRD INFLUENCE
At this point a third stream of influ-
ence entered my life through the pages
of William James’ book, “Varieties of
Religious Experience.” Somebody had
brought it to my hospital room. Fol-
lowing my sudden experience, Dr.
Silkworth had taken great pains to
convince me that I was not halluci-
nated. But William James did even
more. Not only, he said, could spirit-
ual experiences make people saner,
they could transform men and women
so that they could do, feel and believe
what had hitherto been impossible to
them. It mattered little whether these
awakenings were sudden or gradual,
their variety could be almost infinite.
But the biggest payoff of that noted
book was this: in most of the cases
described, those who had been trans-
formed were hopeless people. In some
controlling area of their lives they had
met absolute defeat. Well, that was
me all right. In complete defeat, with
no hope or faith whatever, I had made
an appeal to a higher Power. I had
taken Step One of today’s AA pro-
gram—"admitted we were powerless over
alcohol, that our lives had become un-
manageable.” I’d also taken Step
Three—"made a decision to turn our
will and our lives over to God as we
understood him.” Thus was I set free.
It was just as simple, yet just as mys-
terious, as that.
These realizations were so exciting
that I instantly joined up with the
Oxford Groups. But to their con-
statement I insisted on devoting my-
self exclusively to drunks. This was
disturbing to the O.G.’s on two counts.
Firstly, they wanted to help save the
whole world. Secondly, their luck with
drunks had been poor. Just as I
joined they had been working over a
batch of alcoholics who had proved
disappointing indeed. One of them,
it was rumored, had flippantly cast his
shoe through a valuable stained glass
window of an Episcopal church across
the alley from O.G. headquarters.
Neither did they take kindly to my
repeated declaration that it shouldn’t
take long to sober up all the drunks in
the world. They rightly declared that
my conceit was still immense.

SOMETHING MISSING
After some six months of violent
exertion with scores of alcoholics
which I found at a nearby mission
and Towns Hospital, it began to look
like the Groupers were right. I hadn’t
sobered up anybody. In Brooklyn we
always had a houseful of drinkers liv-
ing with us, sometimes as many as five.
My valiant wife, Lois, once arrived
home from work to find three of them
fairly tight. The remaining two were
worse. They were whaling each other
with two-by-fours. Though events like
these slowed me down somewhat, the
persistent conviction that a way to
sobriety could be found never seemed
to leave me. There was, though, one
bright spot. My sponsor, Ebbie, still
cling precariously to his new-found
sobriety.
What was the reason for all these
fiascos? If Ebbie and I could achieve
sobriety, why couldn’t all the rest find
it too? Some of those we’d worked
on certainly wanted to get well. We
speculated day and night why nothing
much had happened to them. Maybe
they couldn’t stand the spiritual pace
of the Oxford Group’s four absolutes
of honesty, purity, unselfishness and
love. In fact some of the alcoholics
declared that this was the trouble. The
aggressive pressure upon them to get
good overnight would make them fly
high as geese for a few weeks and then
drop dizzingly. They complained, too,
about another form of coercion—some-
thing the Oxford Groupers called
“guidance for others.” A “team” com-
posed of non-alcoholic Groupers would
sit down with an alcoholic and after
a "quiet time" would come up with
precise instructions as to how the alco-
holic should run his own life. As
grateful as we were to our O.G.
friends, this was sometimes tough to
take. It obviously had something to do
with the wholesale skidding that went
on.
But this wasn’t the entire reason for
failure. After months I saw the
trouble was mainly in me. I had be-
come very aggressive, very cocksure.
I talked a lot about my sudden spiritual
experience, as though it was something
very special. I had been playing the
double role of teacher and preacher.
In my exhortations I'd forgotten all about the medical side of our malady, and that need for deflation at depth so emphasized by William James had been neglected. We weren't using that medical sledgehammer that Dr. Silkworth had so providentially given us.

Finally, one day, Dr. Silkworth took me back down to my right size. Said he, "Bill, why don't you quit talking so much about that bright light experience of yours, it sounds too crazy. Though I'm convinced that nothing but better morals will make alcoholics less alcoholic, gave them the bad news. Because of the identification you naturally have with alcoholics, you might be able to penetrate where I can't. Give them the medical basis first. While it has never done any good for me to tell them how fatal their malady is, it might be a very different story if you, a formerly hopeless alcoholic, gave them the bad news. Because of the identification you naturally have with alcoholics, you might be able to penetrate where I can't. Give them the medical basis first, and give it to them hard. This might soften them up so they will accept the principles that will really get them well."

**THE MISSING LINK**

Dr. Silkworth had indeed supplied us the missing link without which the chain of principles now forged into our Twelve Steps could never have been complete. Then and there, the spark that was to become Alcoholics Anonymous had been struck. During the next three years after Dr. Bob's recovery our growing groups at Akron, New York and Cleveland evolved the so-called word-of-mouth program of our pioneering time. As we commenced to form a society separate from the Oxford Group, we began to state our principles something like this:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol
2. We got honest with ourselves
3. We got honest with another person, in confidence
4. We made amends for harms done others
5. We worked with other alcoholics without demand for prestige or money
6. We prayed to God to help us to do these things as best we could

Though these principles were advocated according to the whim or liking of each of us, and though in Akron and Cleveland they still stuck by the O.G. absolutes of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, this was the gist of our message to incoming alcoholics up to 1939, when our present Twelve Steps were put to paper.

I well remember the evening on which the Twelve Steps were written. I was lying in bed quite dejected and suffering from one of my imaginary ulcer attacks. Four chapters of the book, Alcoholics Anonymous, had been roughed out and read in meetings at Akron and New York. We quickly found that everybody wanted to be an author. The hassles as to what should go into our new book were terrific. For example, some wanted a purely psychological book which would draw in alcoholics without scaring them. We could tell them about the "God business" afterwards. A few, led by our wonderful southern friend, Fitz M., wanted a fairly religious book. There wasn't terrific enthusiasm for the undertaking. Every one of us was wildly excited at the possibility of getting our message before all those countless alcoholics who still didn't know.

Having arrived at Chapter Five, it seemed high time to state what our program really was. I remember running over in my mind the word-of-mouth phrases then in current use. Jotting these down, they added up to the six named above. Then came the idea that our program ought to be more accurately and clearly stated. Distant readers would have to have a precise set of principles. Knowing the alcoholic's ability to rationalize, something airtight would have to be written. We couldn't let the reader wiggle out anywhere. Besides, a more complete statement would help in the chapters to come where we would need to show exactly how the recovery program ought to be worked.

**12 STEPS IN 30 MINUTES**

At length I began to write on a cheap yellow tablet. I split the word-of-mouth program up into smaller pieces, meanwhile enlarging its scope considerably. Uninspired as I felt, I was surprised that in a short time, perhaps half an hour, I had set down certain principles which, on being...
counted, turned out to be twelve in number. And for some unaccountable reason, I had moved the idea of God into the Second Step, right up front. Besides, I had named God very liberally throughout the other steps. In one of the steps I had even suggested that the newcomer get down on his knees.

When this document was shown to our New York meeting the protests were many and loud. Our agnostic friends didn't go at all for the idea of kneeling. Others said we were talking altogether too much about God. And anyhow, why should there be twelve steps when we had done fine on six? Let's keep it simple, they said.

This sort of heated discussion went on for days and nights. But out of it all there came a ten-strike for Alcoholics Anonymous. Our agnostic contingent, speared by Hank P. and Jim B., finally convinced us that we must make it easier for people like themselves by using such terms as "a Higher Power" or "God as we understand Him!" Those expressions, as we so well know today, have proved life-savers for many an alcoholic. They have enabled thousands of us to make a beginning where none could have been made had we left the steps just as I originally wrote them. Happily for us there were no other changes in the original draft and the number of steps still stood at twelve. Little, did we then guess that our Twelve Steps would soon be widely approved by clergymen of all denominations and even by our latter-day friends, the psychiatrists.

This little fragment of history ought to convince the most skeptical that nobody invented Alcoholics Anonymous.

It just grew . . . by the grace of God.