

October 1970

AA's 35th Anniversary International Convention

July 3-5, 1970, at Miami Beach

How It Seemed to One Biased Alcoholic Observer

THE MAN in the wheelchair reached up, gripped the lectern with both hands, and in one smooth motion hauled himself to his full six-foot-three-inch height. To many of the thousands gathered in the huge Convention Hall in Miami Beach that Sunday morning, he seemed to rise like a sunburst, in his brave orange blazer, from behind the speaker's stand. And in another smooth motion the throng of 11,000 — AAs and their families and friends — was on its feet in a standing ovation to Bill W., the surviving co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Probably this instant intensely affected more of the conventioneers than any other event in the crowded three-day program that included

nearly fifty separate AA meetings, workshop sessions, and panel discussions, plus multiple screenings of the film *Bill Discusses the Twelve Traditions* and many Al-Anon and Alateen sessions.

Thousands in that hall, and hundreds of thousands more all over the world, owed their sobriety, their sanity, their happiness, and their very lives to the recovery program of which the tall man had been the first practitioner and the first chronicler. For thirty-five years, his own life had been a continuous example of the AA program's effectiveness.

But this moment on a bright Florida morning meant much more than that. Many of us had reason to regard Bill's appearance as an answer to a prayer voiced in silent

unison by thousands of us just two nights before, in this very hall. We had been told that illness prevented Bill's scheduled participation in the Big Meeting that Friday night. There was no guarantee that he would be well enough to appear at any session of this International Convention, to which recovered alcoholics and their families had traveled from places as remote as Thailand, Australia, and South Africa.

Bill's personal physician had asked us to join in sixty seconds of silent prayer, "...to close our eyes, picture Bill's face, and ask God to shower His grace upon Bill and heal him, to make him well and whole."

Throughout the excitement and

activity of the rest of the Convention, underlying the mirth and fellowship was a note of concern. But now, at the Sunday-morning Spiritual Meeting, that glorious orange blazer had scattered those dark forebodings, and Bill's voice, strong and steady, gave further proof that our unanimous prayer had been answered.

A few moments later, we heard one of AA's first friends among the clergy, the Rev. John C. Ford, S.J., wind up the Convention with an inspiring message that included the reminder "I can't, but God can, and God will."

When the editors of the Grapevine asked me to write my impressions of the Convention, they were well aware that no one person could

cover more than a small fraction of the many simultaneous meetings over the three days. In the minds of the 11,000 who attended, there are exactly 11,000 valid sets of impressions, all differing in emotional variety and intensity.

If you were there, this record of my reactions is intended only to stimulate your own precious personal memories of what the occasion was "really" like, to you.

If you were not there, and have never attended an AA convention, this report may strike you as a patchwork of confusion, hysteria, euphoria, maudlin sentiment, rapture, and exaggeration, exultation, frenzy, fatigue, and more confusion. You're correct; now you've got some idea of what heady events our AA gatherings can be, from small regional conferences to our International Conventions, held every five years.

Within a few minutes after entering the Hotel Fontainebleau, I saw so many familiar faces that I could well have been back in my home area of Los Angeles, 2,400 miles away. Others from all parts of the country were having the same experience, greeting friends and acquaintances in the vast lobby, the coffee shop, the meeting rooms, the hospitality rooms, on the streets, aboard the plentiful buses shuttling along Collins Avenue. Delight, excitement, friendship, and anticipation were everywhere.

As a participant in the Grapevine

"... some idea of what heady events our AA gatherings can be..."

Workshop, I checked in at the Convention Committee headquarters, where over the weekend I glimpsed portions of a continuing marvel.

There, our AA girls of the GSO staff handled the ever-changing details of that complex three-day event. Phones rang. Scheduled speakers — AA and nonalcoholic — checked in and were greeted warmly. AAs from Canada, Norway, Central America, and various parts of the United States strolled in to say hello to the GSO staff, with whom they had corresponded over the years.

Panic-type messages were delivered by phone and by live, agitated members. A speaker had to cancel out; the girls calmly arranged for a replacement. A prominent New York doctor, invited to address the Convention, might not get airborne out of Kennedy Airport in time to give his talk. He did make it, and the girls made arrangements to whisk him back to the Miami airport so he could keep another engagement.

Members strolled in, or phoned in, trying to locate other members, and lingered to talk with the girls. An AA from Central America requested an interpreter to assist the Spanish-speaking party of 300 AAs from Colombia, El Salvador, and Honduras. The GSO girls took it all in stride, chatting amiably as

they made quick and efficient decisions. Anyone who has organized a backyard cookout for three couples can appreciate what it must be like to juggle the affairs of a gathering of 11,000 people, coordinating the activities of hundreds of participants in nearly fifty separate meetings.

Watching the girls remain serene, gracious, and tactful, an observer found it hard to believe they had been at this exhausting task during the many months of planning, back in New York. It was even harder to realize that they, too, were alcoholics, a class of people notorious for a low tolerance for frustration.

The GSO staff, of course, did not do it alone. The Host Committee of AAs in Miami and other Florida communities had things so well-organized that the crowds of registered visitors flowed smoothly to the various sessions in response to their own whims, or the tuggings of their companions. An army of Host Committee members, totaling over a thousand, had arranged transportation and housing details, set up and manned information and registration booths and first-aid stations, and provided clear direction signs for our guidance within Convention headquarters at the Fontainebleau.

Most AAs find that the inspirational effect of a Convention is long-lasting and that the glow and

excitement linger for days or weeks afterward. Still, there are side-effects that must be expected until experience is acquired. Looking at the program for almost any hour, one sees four or five simultaneous AA meetings or panels, and often several Al-Anon events. Like children in a candy store, we have a few pennies of time to spend and are surrounded by a bewildering array of tempting goodies.

Which to choose? The decision is made more difficult when we attempt to compromise with the various desires and interests of our companions. Veteran conventioneers eventually learn to *use* the AA program at AA conventions, selecting sessions on a plan of *Easy Does It, Live and Let Live*, "Let go and let God." Or, in emergencies, *Think*.

Until this serenity (relative) is attained, the conventioneer envies the medieval torture victims who were pulled asunder by only two horses.

Add to this the late-night alka-thons, followed by visits to hospitality suites and the hotel rooms of friends from Texas, North Carolina, and Manitoba. There ensues a detailed analysis of all the AA talks heard so far at the Convention. Sleep? What's that?

It's now days after the Convention, and I can't recall in many cases who said what. But the es-

sence of all those talks, broken down by the metabolism of memory, provides stores of spiritual nourishment and knowledge to be drawn upon years hence.

A few impressions:

Lois, "First Lady of Al-Anon" and wife of AA's Bill W., telling us that no link (or person) in AA is more important than any other ... commenting that the young people of today seek proof that good can overcome evil, and citing AA as an example that such victory is possible.

The meeting of World Hello, made up of AAs who, because of geography, occupation, physical incapacity, or confinement in institutions, are Loners, sharing strength and hope with each other across thousands of miles through correspondence and exchange of taped conversations. In the World Hello meeting, we heard alcoholics of such diverse backgrounds as: an Army sergeant, who recently volunteered to return to Vietnam; an ex-con, sober now after thirty years in and out of prisons; a woman confined to a wheelchair; an inmate on special leave from a Florida prison; an eloquent and highly educated Brahman from India; and a sailor who, with blemished grammar but impeccable sincerity, told us, "I want to thank yez for all you've did for me."

At an alkathon, we heard Louis, the first black Delegate to AA's General Service Conference, stress

the value of service in AA. With impressive directness, he told of his first Twelfth Step call on a white drunk in a "lily-white" neighborhood, of his reluctance to make the call, out of fear of personal danger, and of his eventual realization that he could not deny another drunk a chance at sobriety. Citing the Third Tradition, which defines the only requirement for membership as a desire to stop drinking, Louis explained how the Traditions are as important as the Twelve Steps, equally useful as tools in helping us to change our ways and to get rid of our old ideas that retard our spiritual progress.

Some of us heard riotously funny stories by medical doctors who found their sobriety in AA; woven into the laughter were tragic accounts of losses of family and profession and gratifying accounts of recovery in AA.

To me, one of the major benefits

of the Convention was the opportunity to see and hear the nonalcoholics in many professions and occupations who are concerned and informed about the problem of alcoholism. Often we AAs are inclined to adopt the insular feeling that we are all alone in the battle against alcoholism and, further, that we are misunderstood.

At Miami Beach, more than 10,000 of us had a chance to meet several of our nonalcoholic trustees and to realize that many of these men — doctor or jurist or leader of industry — were serving AA unselfishly and sometimes at personal sacrifice while most of us were still drinking.

There was "Dr. Jack" (John L. Norris, MD), retired associated medical director of Eastman Kodak, and chairman of AA's General Service Board. He called himself "privileged as a physician to be a part of this miracle."

Another nonalcoholic trustee, Dr. Travis E. Dancey, in opening the panel on "AA and Medicine," also referred to miracles: "I do not believe in them, yet I see them."

Among the nonalcoholic speakers was Dr. Stanley Gitlow, internist and associate clinical professor of Medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York City. Using blackboard diagrams, he clarified how use of alcohol and pills for their relaxing effect leads step by step to physiological and psychological addiction. Then he explained how the AA program helps alcoholics to change their habits and way of life by developing new attitudes.

Those attending the panel on "AA and the Communications Media" were impressed by the deep understanding of AA principles and the nature of the disease of alcoholism shown by Karl K. Krueger, editor of *The Rotarian*, which last



year devoted almost an entire issue to alcoholism and AA. It's encouraging to know that AA has such informed friends.

Between meetings, I heard excited AAs tell of enlightening talks by other non-AAs, such as priests and prison wardens and judges and specialists in various fields of alcoholism. While no one of us could attend all the sessions, we will benefit from them all as those who attended the Convention return to

their home groups full of new information, and we share our experience.

Likely, over the months and years, the precise words will fade and blur and blend, but the spirit of the Convention will remain, as does my memory of the 25th Anniversary Convention in Long Beach, Calif., in 1960. In Miami Beach in July, I was one of 11,000 who saw AA in action. I have seen proof that it works in towns and

cities throughout the United States and nearly a hundred foreign countries.

I have heard laughter in a dozen accents, and seen tears in the eyes of men and women whose skins range from pale pink to the deepest browns and blacks.

I bring home the memory of men and women of all social and financial backgrounds, embracing each other, talking and laughing together.

And who are we, these privileged

souls? We are the former outcasts, the hopeless, the lonely, the friendless, the despised, the avoided ... and the avoiding. We are alcoholics who, thanks to God's grace, could stand up, sober, to express in applause our love and gratitude to a Higher Power and to His instrument, the first AA member, the tall slim man in the orange jacket, who had urged us to keep our Fellowship united for the sake of our own lives and the lives of those to come.

L. H., North Hollywood, Calif.

From an address on Unity at the Delegates' Luncheon, Hotel Doral, Saturday, July 4:

UNITY seems to me to express very well that quality which sets our Fellowship apart. For society at large has so many problems which either spring from or are aggravated by *lack of unity*.

Yet I think that this Unity concept is frequently misunderstood, both in and out of AA.

One thing I'm sure it *doesn't* mean is that you must agree with me! I believe that we all have a moral obligation to speak our minds and stand up for our convictions. Any so-called unity which attempts to stifle dissent is no unity at all, in my opinion.

I think we must not only listen to other views, we must actively solicit and encourage them. Only so, I believe, can an informed group conscience speak.

Once it has spoken, then all of us must go along on truly basic issues. Consider, for example, our Traditions of anonymity and self-support. Few subjects in AA have been discussed so thoroughly over the years. Many members have questioned or disagreed with these concepts — and have voiced their views vigorously.

Yet when the overwhelming majority of us supported these Traditions, almost all of the dissenters went along. This is the meaning of Unity, as I understand it.

May it always be so!

Bob H.

*In eleven different languages,
eleven thousand members of
Alcoholics Anonymous made this pledge
of unity at the 35th Anniversary
Convention:*

This we owe to AA's future:

**To place our common welfare first;
To keep our Fellowship united.
For on AA Unity depend our lives,
And the lives of those to come.**