



AA Grapevine, March 1971

Bill W.

1895-1971

*co-founder
of Alcoholics
Anonymous*

12. *Anonymity is the spiritual foundation
of all our Traditions, ever reminding us
to place principles before personalities.*

By permission of the family, Bill's anonymity may be broken at the public level. The Grapevine is maintaining his anonymity as a gesture of unity with our Twelfth Tradition.

NEITHER CO-FOUNDER of the Alcoholics Anonymous Fellowship is with us any longer, and we, their survivors, are on our own.

Dr. Bob passed away on November 16, 1950.

Bill found eternal peace on January 24, 1971.

Beyond the sorrow of the moment, Bill and Dr. Bob remain for us what they were in the years when AA came into being through their leadership: symbols of firmness of purpose and serenity. We have all partaken in some measure of the sobriety they achieved and of the message they carried until their final moments among us.

Full comprehension of their achievements is difficult to set down in black and white. Both men filled the vacuums of their own souls with their "language of the heart" to find sobriety, and then passed on what they had found to hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions by now) of other alcoholics. Each of us, in the lonely universe of individual consciousness, must reckon what he or she has taken of the gift that the Higher Power gave to Bill and Dr. Bob, the gift that they shared with us. The measure of our debt is, of course, drawn somewhere near the limits of gratitude itself, in the infinity of love.

They are both gone now.

*"... that one
awakens
to eternal
life."*



TIME HAS blurred memories of Dr. Bob. A near-legendary figure today, he reminded Bill (in the wisdom of his last words to his great friend) to "keep it simple" — perhaps his finest legacy to countless recovering alcoholics, second only to the spiritual richness and compassion of his nature.

Perceptions of Bill, however, are still sharp. So they will remain until we are gone, and another generation has passed, and the years between the passing of the co-founders of AA have begun to seem brief and distant. But for now Bill's image is clear in our minds; unthinkingly, we still anticipate his next anniversary.

or read a letter he has written to console a friend in trouble, or simply catch illusory sight of him at his desk in New York City or Bedford Hills. How fortunate are those who share these memories.

Now Bill, too, has gone.

Excessive sadness is inappropriate to this passing. Bill himself would bid us accept the inevitable with equanimity and cling to the faith that, in the words of St. Francis (whom Bill loved), "It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life." The passing of a human being who has lived an ample time on earth to the dimensions that Bill did is no more mournful an event than birth



or individual growth or the long-range progress of mankind.

Wrote Bernard Shaw, decades ago: "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making *you* happy."

Here, indeed, is the "true joy" that Bill took in living. Let us fix it in our hearts as we view the monument he has left, not in columns of praise in print, not in stone, but in *people*. Each one of *us*, who wept and died so many times on barroom stools and in alcoholic loneliness, has with rebirth in AA inevitably taken to himself a little bit of Bill. As that essence passes forward to others, the joy is compounded — and so on and on, for God alone knows what amplitude of time and into what corners of the earth.

But may we not cry for *ourselves*

a moment — for the gap made by the passing of this exceptional man in an era which has seen inhumanity spread beyond comprehension, in an era when no other hero has performed quite so benign and humanistic a miracle as he? May we not indulge ourselves with a moment's agony — to ask when we shall look upon his like again — to ponder our own possible failure, in trepidation over the prospect of life without him — to fear, even more deeply, for our Fellowship and for the sobriety of each alcoholic who is sane and sober because Bill lived?

Never!

Bill would not countenance any mourning for ourselves, either, though he would understand it, as he comprehended so wide a range of human weakness. He would tell us only to seek strength in our loss; he would recall to us his own adversities, failures, and despairs, the foundations upon which his monument is built.

The vitality of his admonitions

rings still with the vivid clarity of life. Once he wrote to a friend in despair:

"Trouble is not what it seems. At least, not when you have been in AA for a while. You somehow begin to see that life is just a short day in a great school. In the longer perspective, it matters not much whether the lessons are easy or difficult. The point is, do we learn, and do we transmit to others what we have found?"

"The only people that I can be genuinely sorry for are those who have no idea of why they are alive or where, if any place, they are going. They cannot possibly have the longer perspective which would so greatly comfort them in times of adversity. They spend their whole lives long avoiding trouble or complaining about it when they get it.

"When you stop to think about it. Alcoholics Anonymous is a society which is founded, not so much upon success, as upon failure. The only reason I know is that I once failed myself — I drank so much bathtub

gin, I nearly died. The capitalization of that failure, and of many others, is the foundation upon which Alcoholics Anonymous is built."

So spoke our co-founder.

He and Dr. Bob have gone, and a leaf in the annals has turned. AA was born years ago in a drying-out hospital in New York City, spread across the country and to other nations, and, after twenty years, "came of age." This is history — many fragments of a legend, or a thousand legends — that people will tell other people for countless years to come. But the past is really a prologue.

Now, brother and sister alcoholics, the weight is entirely upon ourselves. The future will test our worthiness. And what we accomplish with the heritage that Bill and Dr. Bob have passed to us will be our common reward. None of us had better repeat the words *I am responsible* in quite the same way ever again.

They have both gone.

We are on our own.

The monument stands steady.

I am responsible...

Whenever anyone, anywhere, reaches out

for help, I want the hand of AA always

to be there. And for that:

I am responsible.