

June 1965

We celebrate this month
the 30th Anniversary of AA



*First there was Bill W . . . then Dr. Bob . . . then Bill D . .
and then there were thousands.*

Bill
tells of the Beginning of AA

Bill writes in *AA comes of Age** that he had been sober for about a year, and was making vigorous but unsuccessful efforts to "sober up" drunks all over New York. As fast as he "preached" to them they got drunk. Finally the suggestion was made to him that he might be concentrating on the wrong things. Bill continues ...

Lois was still working in the department store, and folks were beginning to say, "Is this fellow Bill going to be a missionary for life? Why doesn't he go to work?" Even to me, this began to look like a good idea. I began to hang around Wall Street again and, through a chance acquaintance I had scraped up in a brokerage shop, I insinuated myself into a proxy row that involved control of a little machine-tool company in Akron, Ohio. In May of 1935 a party of us went out to Akron, fight-

ing for control of the company. I could already see myself as its new president. But when the chips were down the other side had more proxies and our side got licked. My new-found acquaintances were discouraged, and they left me in Akron's Mayflower Hotel with only about ten dollars in my pocket.

They departed on Friday. On Saturday, Mother's Day eve, I was pacing up and down the hotel lobby, wondering what I could do. The bar at one end of my beat was filling up

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rapidly. I could hear the familiar buzz of conversation in there. Down at the other end of the lobby I found myself pausing before a church directory. Then I was seized with a thought: I am going to get drunk. Or no, maybe I won't get drunk; maybe I'll just go into that bar and drink some ginger ale and scrape up an acquaintance. Then I panicked. That was really a gift! I had never panicked before at the threat of alcohol. Maybe this meant that my sanity had been restored. I remembered that in trying to help other people, I had stayed sober myself. For the first time I deeply realized it. I thought, "You need another alcoholic to talk to. You need another alcoholic just as much as he needs you!"

Then followed a strange chain of consequences. Choosing at random from the church directory, I called up an Episcopal padre by the name of Walter Tunks*, a great friend of AA to this day. In frantic eagerness I poured out my tale to him. I asked if maybe he knew some people who could put me in touch with another alcoholic. I thought he might know some of the Oxford-Groupers around Akron. When the good man learned that I was an alcoholic looking for another alcoholic to work on, he at first apparently envisioned two people drunk instead of one, but he finally got the point and gave me a list of about ten people who might be able to direct me.

* *The Rev. Tunks is now deceased.*

I immediately began calling them up. It was Saturday afternoon. People were not at home. Others were not interested and made excuses. The list quickly dwindled until it came down to one name at the very end. The name was Henrietta Seiberling. I had a vague recollection from my Wall Street days of meeting an elderly Mr. Seiberling, one-time founder and president of Good-year Rubber. I could hardly imagine calling up his wife and telling her that I was a drunk from New York looking for another drunk to work on. So I went back downstairs and walked up and down the lobby some more. But something kept saying to me, "You'd better call her." So I finally rang up. Unexpectedly, a young Southern voice came over the wire, which turned out to be that of a Seiberling daughter-in-law. I explained that I was an alcoholic from the New York Oxford Groups who needed to help another drunk in order to stay sober himself. Very quickly she got the drift of what I was saying. She said, "I'm no alcoholic, but I've had my difficulties. When you talk about spiritual matters, I think I understand. I know someone you might help. Won't you come out here right away? I live in the gatehouse of the Seiberling place."

When I got there I found a person of charm and understanding. She said she had worked through many a hard problem and had found her answers in the Oxford Groups.

She understood deep suffering. When I had told my story she said, "I know just the man for you. He is a doctor. We call him 'Dr. Bob.' His wife, Anne, is a grand person. Bob has tried so hard; I know he wants to stop. He has tried medical cures, he has tried various religious approaches, including the Oxford Groups. He has tried with all his will, but somehow he cannot seem to do it. So how would you like to talk with Dr. Bob and Anne?"

Soon Anne S. was on the phone — AA's much-loved Anne. Quickly Henrietta told her about me, an alcoholic from New York who wanted to talk about his drinking problem. Could she and Dr. Bob come over? Anne said, "I'm sorry, Henrietta. I don't think we can make it today. Bob always makes a great fuss over me on Mother's Day. He has just come home, bringing a big potted plant." What Anne didn't say was that the plant was on a table and that Bob was under the table, so potted that he couldn't get up. Henrietta said, "What about tomorrow? Why can't both of you come over to dinner?" Anne said they would try to make it.

Next afternoon at five o'clock that wonderful couple, Dr. Bob and Anne, stood at Henrietta's open door.

This was the man who was to be my partner and founder of Akron's Group Number One. With the remarkable Sister Ignatia, he was to care for 5,000 cases of alcoholism

in the time when AA was still very young. This was the wonderful friend with whom I was never to have a hard word. This was Dr. Bob, AA's co-founder-to-be.

But at five o'clock that Sunday afternoon Bob did not look much like a founder. He was shaking badly. Uneasily he told us that he could stay only about fifteen minutes. Though embarrassed, he brightened a little when I said I thought he needed a drink. After dinner, which he did not eat, Henrietta discreetly put us off in her little library. There Bob and I talked until eleven o'clock.

Just before I left for Akron, Dr. Silkworth had given me a great piece of advice. Without it, AA might never have been born. "Look, Bill," he had said, "you're having nothing but failure because you are preaching at these alcoholics. You are talking to them about the Oxford Group precepts of being absolutely honest, absolutely pure, absolutely unselfish and absolutely loving. This is a very big order. Then you top it off by harping on this mysterious spiritual experience of yours. No wonder they point their fingers to their heads and go out and get drunk. Why don't you turn your strategy the other way around? Aren't you the very fellow who once showed me that book by the psychologist, William James*, which says that deflation at great depth is

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the foundation of most spiritual experience? Have you forgotten all about that? Have you also forgotten that Dr. Carl Jung in Zurich told a certain alcoholic, the one who later helped sober up your friend Ebby, that his only hope of salvation was a spiritual experience? No, Bill, you've got the cart before the horse. You've got to deflate these people first. So give them the medical business, and give it to them hard. Pour it right into them about the obsession that condemns them to drink and the physical sensitivity or allergy of the body that condemns them to go mad or die if they keep on drinking. Coming from another alcoholic, one alcoholic talking to another, maybe that will crack those tough egos deep down. Only then can you begin to try out your other medicine, the ethical principles you have picked up from the Oxford Group." Now — talking with Dr. Bob — I remembered all that Dr. Silkworth had said. So I went very slowly on the fireworks of religious experience. I just talked away about my own case until he got a good identification with me, until he began to say, "Yes, that's me, I'm like that."

In turn, Dr. Bob talked to me about himself as he had never talked before. He too was a Vermonter. His father had been a stern but deeply respected judge in St. Johnsbury. Also, as in my case, Dr. Bob's drinking proclivities had shown up early. In fact, he had busted out of Dartmouth College for this reason.

"I knew that I needed the alcoholic as much as he needed me. This was it.

Somehow he had wormed his way through medical school and internship in Chicago. Despite his drinking, he had shown a talented flair for surgery. After his marriage to Anne, they had settled in Akron where in due course young Bob was born; a daughter, sister Sue, was adopted.

Dr. Bob at the time of our first meeting was fifty-five, some fifteen years older than I. He must have had an iron constitution. He said that all through the years his drinking had been practically continuous. When he got too jittery to operate or to see patients, he sedated himself heavily. When this recourse sometimes failed, he would steal away for a week or so to a drying-out place so that he could start the same cycle all over again. In those rare moments when he got thoroughly sober, the insatiable craving for alcohol still never let up. This was a physical phenomenon which bedeviled even his first years in AA, a time when only days and nights of carrying the message to other alcoholics could cause him to forget about it. Although this craving was hard to withstand, it doubtless created some part of the intense incentive and energy that went into forming Akron's Group Number One. Bob's spiritual release did not come

easily; it was to be painfully slow. It always entailed the hardest kind of work and the sharpest vigilance. Yet he seemed to have no serious neurotic difficulties. As he often put it, "I just loved my grog."

By the time I met him this compelling love had almost done him in. His surgical skill was still recognized, but few colleagues or patients dared to trust him. He had lost his post on the staff of Akron's City Hospital and barely existed through a precarious and dwindling general practice. In debt up to his ears, he was only one jump ahead of the sheriff and his mortgage payments. Anne verged on a nervous crack-up, and their two children of course were greatly upset. Such was the payoff of twenty-five years of alcoholism. Hope was a word they had come to avoid.

In our first conversation I bore down heavily on the medical hopelessness of Dr. Bob's case, freely using Dr. Silkworth's words describing the alcoholic's dilemma, the "obsession plus allergy" theme. Though Bob was a doctor, this was news to him, bad news. Always better versed in spiritual matters than I, he had paid little attention to that aspect of my story. Even though he could not make them work, he already knew what the spiritual answers were.

What really did hit him hard was the medical business, the verdict of inevitable annihilation. And the fact that I was an alcoholic and knew what I was talking about from personal experience made the blow a shattering one.

In Dr. Bob's story as afterwards written for the AA book, and years later in his last full-length talk at Detroit, he made this point very clear: it was not any spiritual teaching of mine, rather it was those twin ogres of madness and death, the allergy plus the obsession, that triggered him into a new life. It was Dr. Silkworth's idea, confirmed by William James, that struck him at great depth.

You see, our talk was a completely mutual thing. I had quit preaching. I knew that I needed the alcoholic as much as he needed me. This was it. And this mutual give-and-take is at the very heart of all of AA's Twelfth Step work today. This was how to carry the message. The final missing link was located right there in my first talk with Dr. Bob.

Unexpectedly, I got a little fresh financing from my New York business associates, so I stayed on in Akron that summer of 1935 to continue the proxy fight. Still worried about Dr. Bob, Anne invited me to

come over and live with them at their home at 855 Ardmore Avenue. How well I remember our morning meditation, when Anne would sit in the corner by the fireplace and read from the Bible, and then we would huddle together in stillness, awaiting inspiration and guidance.

Three or four weeks after the Mother's Day debacle, Dr. Bob looked at me one morning and said, "Bill, for a number of years I have had to go down to Atlantic City to our medical convention. I haven't missed one in a long time. Don't you think I had better go?" Very frightened, Anne said, "Oh, no, no!" But seeing that he had to face the music sometime, I replied, "Well, why don't you go? After all, we must learn to live in a world that's full of alcohol." And slowly Bob said, "I guess maybe you're right."

So he went to the Atlantic City medical convention and nothing was heard of him for several days. Then one morning his office nurse called up and said, "He is over here at my place. My husband and I picked him

off the railroad station platform at about four A.M. Please come over and see what you can do."

We got Bob back home and into bed, and right then we made an alarming discovery. He had to perform a certain operation that only he could do. The deadline was just three days away; he simply had to do the job himself; and here he was, shaking like a leaf. Could we get him sober in time? Anne and I took turns around the clock trying to taper the old boy off. Early on the morning of the operation he was almost sober. I had slept in the room with him. Glancing across towards his bed, I saw that he was wide awake but still shaking. I'll never forget the look he gave me as he said, "Bill, I am going to go through with it." I thought he meant the operation. "No," he said, "I mean this thing we've been talking about."

Anne and I drove him to the hospital at nine o'clock. I handed him a bottle of beer to steady his nerves so he could hold the knife, and he went in. We returned to the house

and sat down to wait. After what seemed an endless time, he phoned; all had gone well. But after that he didn't come home for hours. Despite the awful strain, he had left the hospital, got into his car, and commenced to visit creditors and others he had harmed by his behavior. That was June 10, 1935. To the time of his death fifteen years later, Dr. Bob never took another drink of alcohol. Next day he said, "Bill, don't you think that working on other alcoholics is terribly important? We'd be much safer if we got active, wouldn't we?" I said, "Yes, that would be just the thing. But where can we find any alcoholics?" "They always have a batch down at the Akron City Hospital. I'll call them up and see what they've got," he answered.

Getting hold of a nurse friend of his on the receiving ward of the hospital, Dr. Bob explained that a man from New York had just found a new cure for alcoholism. (We called it a cure in those days.) But the nurse knew Dr. Bob of old. So she retorted, "Is that so, Dr. Bob? You don't mean to tell me that you've tried it on yourself!" "Yes," he said, "I sure have."

The new customer was in no shape to be seen. But two days later, Dr. Bob and I were looking into the face of the first 'man on the bed.' It was old Bill D., AA number three, whose story you can read in the second edition of the Big Book. Bill was still pretty glassy-eyed. When

Dr. Bob and I gave him the medical bad news about the allergy and the obsession, old Bill showed a startled interest. But when we began to describe our spiritual approach, Bill shook his head and said, "No, I'm too far gone for that. I've always believed in God. I used to be a deacon in the church. But, boys, I've been in and out of this place six times in the last four months. This time in DTs I badly beat up one of the nurses. I know I can't even get home from here sober. I'm afraid to go out. No, it's too late for me. I still believe in God all right, but I know mighty well that He doesn't believe in me any more."

"Well, Bill," we said, "can we come back and see you tomorrow?"

"Yes," he replied, "you fellows really understand. Sure I'd like to see you." So next day we came back and found him talking to his wife, Henrietta. Bill pointed to us and said, "There are the fellows I was telling you about. They are the ones that know. They understand what this is all about."

Then Bill told us how, during the night, hope had dawned on him. If Bob and I could do it, he could do it. Maybe we could all do together what we could not do separately. Two days later Bill suddenly said, "Henrietta, fetch me my clothes, I'm going to get up and get out of here." Bill walked out of that hospital a free man and he never took a drink again. The spark that was to flare into the first AA group had been struck.

