

Fine-Tuning Our Basic Text

Today was International Women's Day and it has made me reflect on

a few things. As a portion of the Big Book was read out at one of Canberra's regular AA meetings, I thought that perhaps Alcoholics Anonymous as a society should do a belated Step Ten in consideration of our Big Book, and admit it has wronged women in the way the first third of the book was written.

I'm a man, and after I had a severe enough alcoholic bottom to lose my reservations about Step One, I had no problems with the language of the Big Book. After twenty-one years in the Fellowship, however, I can now see how many women (some of whom have written to the Grapevine over the years) could feel excluded by the language of our basic text: chapters two through eleven are mostly written in a way that assumes that both the reader and the recovering alcoholic described in the text are male.

Unlike some people, I don't think the text of the Big Book was divinely inspired and should never be altered. I do believe, however, that it has the

*in search of more
inclusive language*

earmarks of a group of people following a high inspiration toward helping each other, and countless future members, as effectively as possible.

As I understand AA history, the first drafts of the Big Book were subjected to a rigorous review process that encompassed large representative sections of AA and the general community. Early drafts by Bill W. were worked on by New York, Akron, and Cleveland members (almost all male). The opinions of doctors and psychiatrists (all male) were sought and taken notice of, especially concerning the wording of the Twelve Steps. Clergymen of several faiths (all men) were consulted and had an influence. Jack Alexander made some excellent suggestions concerning style and sentence length, and these were taken up.

Unfortunately, one large section of the community - women - wasn't consulted then, and has not been consulted since, about the text of the first third of the book - and it shows . . . badly. One example from chapter three: "We are convinced to a man that ..." Why not: "We are con-

vinced, each and every one of us . . ."? No loss of emphasis and no loss of potential female members.

Despite trying valiantly to do their best, early AA members made a lot of human mistakes. However, to a large degree, they and subsequent members have corrected these inevitable errors. They have fine-tuned the text of our publications, and our Fellowship itself, to overcome many of the limitations of human beings and the English language.

For example, after the first edition of the Big Book was printed, many readers concluded (although it was not the intention of the Big Book writers) that unless you had a Bill W. "flash" kind of spiritual awakening, you weren't on the program. This error was corrected by the subsequent inclusion of an appendix sharing members' experience that there were many kinds of spiritual awakenings - some quite gradual - but all valid.

In addition, to reflect the changing composition of our society, personal recovery stories from early AA in the first edition of the book have been augmented with more contemporary recovery experiences for editions two and three. This needed to be done and it was. Edition four, whenever it comes out, will doubtless continue this necessary work.

I don't believe that the Big Book is some kind of a linguistic monument, chiselled into stone, never to be changed. It is an organic, growing, changing means of communication that, like a chisel itself, needs to be

regularly sharpened to maintain its usefulness as a communication tool.

I know there are people who will say "Utilize, don't analyze" and "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." I submit that if those attitudes had prevailed over the past fifty-eight years, we'd still all be in the Oxford Groups. Of course we should analyze our situation - Step Ten suggests this, and Bill W. himself once said that, for AA, "the good is sometimes the enemy of the best." The Big Book is good, but it is not as effective as it could be, especially in the way that chapters two through eleven present information in a mostly male-to-male manner.

I think that it is now well and truly time for AA to do a long-overdue Step Ten as regards women readers of the first third of the Big Book. The text of chapters two through eleven should be referred to a committee of, say, six recovered women members, who should be given exactly the same brief as I imagine those other (male) sectors of the community were given fifty-five years ago: "Please read the enclosed text and suggest any revisions necessary to make these chapters as effective as possible in communicating AA's experience to (a) *all* alcoholics and (b) the general community."

I feel confident that this could be done in a way that leaves the spiritual and historical integrity of the book intact, but expresses our vital AA message in a manner that is sensitive to the fact that the human race consists of two sexes, not one.

Graham M., Canberra, Australia