

Fools Rush In...

As the author suggests in his title, a discussion of "what's wrong" with the AA Big Book is hazardous business at best, since to most AAs the book is "all right." Comments are invited.

THERE is an old adage "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," and the little treatise which follows is sure to raise a few eyebrows. Many are going to say: "Who does this fellow think he is who dares to question the Big Book?"

I realize that I still have much to learn about AA and I am endeavoring to ask questions rather than lay down dogmas, to stimulate thought rather than present the views of a closed mind.

There is one sentence on page 116 of *Alcoholics Anonymous* which has always seemed to me to be incompatible with virtually everything else in the book. My confusion was compounded still further because it has the emphasis of italics: "*After all, our problems were of our own making.*" One fellow AA member attempted to straighten me out by remarking that I must agree that they certainly are not of anyone else's making (with which I heartily agree), thereby implying

that they must be of my own making. Well, a few days ago, during a bad thunder storm, lightning entered my house via the radio aerial, shot through the radio, blew out the radio connection and the fuse, notwithstanding that the radio is grounded. Certainly that was no one else's fault, but was it mine?

Now let me say that notwithstanding my confusion regarding the primary responsibility, I was one of those fortunate ones who obtained his sobriety, nearly four and a half years ago, without the need of a "convincer." For this, I give credit to three wonderful sponsors and to the fact that, after having unsuccessfully tried medicine, psychiatry, insulin shock treatment and what-have-you, I was indeed ready for AA. The first piece of AA literature I read was the Big Book itself, so you see the quotation which bothered me did not quite throw me. At this point my AA critic says, "All right. So what? Why

bring it up?" He also thinks, at this point, even if he is too polite to say it, "You need your ego deflated a few more notches if you think you have no responsibility for the problems which arose during your alcoholic career. Better take your inventory over again, and this time do it right." In taking my inventory, I have given it a lot of thought because, as I shall try to explain, it is a question which has recurred in various ways in my experience, and being a relatively young man—thirty-seven when I joined AA—I believe it is a question of more than passing interest to the young man who needs AA, the man whose life and career are still very largely ahead of him.

I was once involved in an automobile accident in which a soldier was seriously injured. But for the fact that he was very drunk when he ran across in front of my car, I might not have escaped as lightly as I did. This incident gave rise to two problems: the problem of who was responsible for the accident, and the problem who was to pay the damages, hospital bills etc. To decide the latter it was necessary to determine the former. In the case of the alcoholic who seeks AA there are also the two parallel problems: who is responsible, and who will pay the damages and set about putting his life on a manageable basis without alcohol? But there is a significant difference in the case of the AA member; regardless of who, if anyone at all, was responsible in the first place, the

alcoholic is the one who must accept the responsibility now and make the restitution, with the help, of course, of a Higher Power.

So it really doesn't seem to matter at all to the alcoholic whether he was responsible in the first place or not. So, "What is the point in bringing it up?" to which I reply with the counter question, "Why does the Big Book bring it up, and emphasize it with italics?" It seems to imply that it is necessary to our recovery to understand that we, by actions which could have been controlled, brought on all the problems which arose out of our alcoholic condition; that we could have avoided them. And yet we are told, and this I believe, "*The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink . . . we are without defense against the first drink*" (page 34)... and (page 50)... "*But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge. This is a point we wish to emphasize and re-emphasize, to smash home upon our alcoholic readers....*"

These two quotations had a profound effect upon me but it was at first disturbing to be told on the one hand that I ought to accept that I had a disease over which I had no control, and on the other hand that I had the disease only because I had failed to exercise control. It carried with it the possible implication that all I had to do was to start over again and

not repeat the same mistakes. Fortunately I did not experiment, already having done enough of that.

It is true, of course, that no one forces drinks down our throats and that, in his story in the Big Book, Bill says "I forgot the strong warnings and the prejudices of my people concerning drink." Perhaps this is what was in mind when the words "*after all, our problems were of our own making*" were written. Many drinking people, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic, come from families who did not use (and had an aversion to) liquor and enjoined their sons and daughters not to use it. The day might come when some simple test will be devised which every person can take before they take their first drink, but, until that day arrives, are we really helping the alcoholic who seeks AA when we say, in effect, "You made this bed, so you'll have to lie in it"? Would we say to the diabetic, "It's all your own fault"? By so doing are we not creating an unnecessary self-blame which so frequently engenders self-pity? Are we not making it more difficult for the member to differentiate between humiliation and humility? Is not our remorse sufficiently hard to bear and overcome without forcing an over-all guilt complex on us as well, which we do not know for sure is justified? We should be honest and thorough in our inventory-taking and include any defects we find which preceded our drinking careers, but ought we to manufacture a liability of

initial self-blame for all our problems which, even if it can be proved to exist, has no bearing on the immediate problem? Or has it?

On page 43, the Big Book says, "Though there is no way of proving it, we believe that early in our drinking careers most of us could have stopped drinking," and yet it goes on later to say with the casual assurance which gives it added emphasis, "*After all, our problems were of our own making.*" None of us know with certainty—not even the medical profession—what the exact nature of the disease is. Opinions vary widely even among those who think that the disease is in the first instance physical, and those who think it is primarily mental or emotional, and including a few who still think it is nothing more than character weakness or willfulness, among those who think we are born with it or develop the symptoms before we start to drink, and those who believe that at some time during our drinking career we pass that indiscernible line. Have we therefore the right to assume that the disease is self-inflicted, either knowingly or otherwise? Can we even say with certainty that a person could bring alcoholism upon himself if he deliberately set out to do so? It seems to me that we are either alcoholics or we are not and that we do not have the choice, unless you consider odds of 993 to 7 a blameworthy gamble. Would we say to the widow of a railroad accident victim, "After all it was his own

fault. He knew he might get killed if he rode on a train." Personally, as I see more and more young people come into AA I find a growing conviction that for the potential alcoholic, as well as for the advanced alcoholic, "One drink is too many," but how is he to know before he takes the rough course which eventually leads to AA?

In assuming that the problems are of the alcoholic's own making, are we not selling AA short to society and in particular to our employers?

As my primary defense against alcohol, over which I can never gain control, I now have the spiritual strength which comes from *trying* to help others who are faced with the same problem, and in *trying* to practice the AA principles of good living in all my affairs. Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive; the true success is to labour." I believe that in AA it is the sincere effort, rather than the achievement, which brings the true spiritual reward. Sincere effort can start from the day we join; achievement rarely comes quickly. I firmly believe that my disease has been arrested, and, without denying the room for further improvement, that my sanity has been restored.

When I first came to AA I had great fear of being known as an alcoholic (I used to loathe the word) and much preferred, if I must be called anything at all, to be known as a drunk, or rather as an ex-drunk. This seemed to leave me at least with

the self respect of being a he-man. There was at first an ostentatious pleasure in describing my drinking exploits. I did not realize at first that the sole purpose of describing them was merely to qualify myself so that my sponsee or new listener might understand that I had some first hand knowledge of his problem, but that the real story I ought to be telling him, after the qualifying introduction, was how the program of AA was bringing about my recovery. But my thinking changed and I found myself abhorring the term "drunk," as drunkenness was the occasionally spectacular but more often merely sordid (and usually disastrous) outward expression of my alcoholism, and I now believe that if we are to give our younger prospects the best chance in society we ought to be more careful of our use of the word "drunk" when describing our disease in public.

During a recent Regional Conference in Ontario we had some rather fine reporting from a very favorable press, but many of us felt that it was marred by a headline which blared out, "2,000 Ex-Drunks Here to Chart New Era for AA." Yet they were only calling us what we so frequently call ourselves. Has the time not arrived for us to get respectable? I still have no pride in being an alcoholic (as distinct from the great privilege of being a member of AA) but it now connotes no more stigma to me than diabetes, tuberculosis or any other disease, and it would seem to be in keeping with the tradition of at-

traction to call ourselves, at least in open meetings or otherwise in public, by a name which suggests to society that we have a disease, rather than one which carries with it the more common connotation of dissoluteness or irresponsibility. "Ex-drunk" is a negative term which suggests only that we are not as bad as we used to be. It is, in my view, a misleading description of people who have learned or are learning to live a

full life in tune with a Higher Power. Why sell ourselves short to society?

I have been trying to get across to some large employers that alcoholism is a disease, and that, if and when punishment is necessary, it ought to be on the grounds of failure to take treatment for the disease, not for being a victim of it, but I am still baffled by the bogey, "*After all, our problems were of our own making.*"

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