



Third in a series of articles on authors of Big Book stories

Interview

with the author of

"AA Taught Him to Handle Sobriety"

BOB P.

Bob P. is the author of "AA Taught Him to Handle Sobriety," the final story in the Third Edition of the Big Book. A Grapevine staff member interviewed Bob by telephone at his winter home in Idaho.

GV: If you had the opportunity, would you write your Big Book story differently?

Bob P.: I don't think so. I hadn't read that story for maybe fifteen years, and a few months ago I was in a meeting

where the person chairing closed by reading the last few paragraphs of my story. I didn't even realize it was my story when he started to read because I hadn't read it in so long. And as he read it, I thought, "My God, that's good!" [Laughter] So I went back and read it again.

I think the only thing I'd change is to say, as we do to the newcomers, "It gets better all the time." I'd like to have expressed that more than I did, but probably everybody'd say "Oh bull!"

GV: It's a good message to hear, that long-term sobriety is possible and that

things do get better. How long have you been sober now?

Bob P.: Thirty-three years. Out here in Idaho, there are a lot of young people, and to them I'm some sort of icon because of thirty-three years' sobriety. But I go to other parts of the country where, hell, that's not so much. I have a friend down in Florida who has fifty-four years, and he looks at me as a newcomer.

GV: How did your story come to appear in the Big Book?

Bob P.: It was published first in the Grapevine, and then Dr. Jack — Dr. Jack Norris, who was [Class A] chairman of the board of trustees at that time — he read it and he said, "Let's put that in the Third Edition." And he'd heard me talk, and he knew I always talked about how to handle sobriety. But I was really shocked when my story was put in with the stories of those who'd lost everything. I didn't feel that way at the time.

GV: Did you think you were in another category?

Bob P.: I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for AA, but I was in such denial. I was so arrogant and self-centered and egotistical when I came in that I didn't think I'd lost anything. But I've since realized that I was absolutely at the bottom. In fact, I miraculously survived what is almost always a fatal illness or problem — esophageal varices or esophageal hemorrhaging from cirrho-

sis of the liver. After I'd been sober maybe ten or fifteen years, I went to the same hospital in Greenwich where I'd been hospitalized for this bleeding in the latter days of my drinking. I was having a minor operation — getting a mole removed or something — and when I went to do the intake, I gave my name to the woman in charge, who was a nurse, and she looked up at me and said, "I remember you." I said, "How could you remember me?" She said, "You were in the west wing, on the fifth floor, with internal bleeding." I said, "You must see hundreds of people in and out of the hospital with this thing." And she said, "Oh no, they all die."

GV: At the end of your story you talk about being addicted to fantasy, and you say that in sobriety you've been able to embrace reality. But have there been times during your thirty-three years when you were less than thrilled to be embracing reality?

Bob P.: Not really, though I've had all the usual things that happen to you in life — my parents have died and things didn't always go the way I planned. I always loved the idea that "life is what happens while you're making other plans." But I've never failed to find some good thing to be thankful to God about. Maybe that sounds awfully Pollyanna-ish, but that's the honest-to-God fact of the case. I was especially blessed by being a trustee and then by being the general manager of the Gen-

eral Service Office for ten years. What an incredible experience that was.

GV: Since leaving your position as general manager, what kind of AA activity have you been involved with?

Bob P.: I have home groups in Connecticut and Idaho and in Florida, and I still go to at least three meetings a week, sometimes more. And I'm sort of a convention freak. I love to go to AA gatherings — I got into that habit when I was at GSO and was going to them about every other week.



GV: Do you have a sponsor these days?

Bob P.: I've always had a sponsor. In fact I've survived three sponsors. The one I have now is still around — it's "attitude of gratitude" Hal M. down in Washington. I'm his sponsor and he's my sponsor. I had a wonderful sponsor out here, a past delegate from Idaho, lived down in Twin Falls, a fellow named Joe C. He died five years ago. He had less sobriety than I did by ten years or more but I picked him because he was the most devoted, loving, car-

ing AA that I'd ever met. He was taken away with galloping leukemia about thirty days after he went to the doctor. And during that time, I told him, "Joe,

you've helped teach so many people how to live and now, by God, you're teaching us all how to die." And he did. He was optimistic and full of gratitude and peace and love up until the time that he died. He was still going to AA meetings two days before he died.

GV: Do you have sponsees?

Bob P.: I do but I'm not a very good sponsor because I'm kind of impatient and irritable with newcomers. I always think they should do more than they do. But there are a number of people I've been able to help get started in AA, and then I turn them over to somebody else or they turn themselves over to somebody else. Part of the reason for that is that we have two homes so I don't have much real continuity with sponsees.

GV: In thirty-three years have you noticed any great changes in the way AA is going or the way meetings are conducted?

Bob P.: At my last talk at the General Service Conference, I bore down heavily on the fact that the biggest enemy of AA at that time was its growing rigidity. I still think it's much more rigid than when I came in, and a hell of a lot more rigid than Bill Wilson ever envisioned it.

GV: What would be an example of increasing rigidity?

Bob P.: I was particularly ticked off at that time by the rigidity of the General Service Conference itself. For example, some people were unhappy about the fact that at the end of the chapter in the Big Book "To Wives," there are two paragraphs that refer to Al-Anon for those people who want that kind of help. One man said we couldn't do that because it was affiliation. This thing was debated for an hour on the Conference floor as to whether it was proper within our Traditions to have a paragraph in the Big Book referring to Al-Anon. They finally compromised by directing that the offending mention be put in a size smaller type and moved down two inches! Really!

GV: Speaking of the Traditions, what was your impression of Bill W?

Bob P.: Well, he's so clouded now in sainthood.

GV: Did he have any non-saint-like aspects?

Bob P.: Bill was a driven man and ab-

solutely determined to get his own way. But he was always very humble and he always leaned way over backwards to give credit to everybody else. He was a great example, really. You know when he was called the founder of AA, he always insisted, "Oh no, I'm just the co-founder." And he always called the guy who carried the message to him — Ebby T. — he always called Ebby his sponsor, even though Ebby never could stay sober. But yes, he was a persistent son-of-a-gun in getting AA the way he thought it should be — for example, changing the ratio of alcoholics and nonalcoholics on the General Service Board. He fought that one for years and years and got his way in the end. Of course, I think he was right — the majority of the trustees really should be members of AA and take that responsibility.

On Bill, I loved one thing that Dennis Manders said — Dennis was a non-alcoholic who came to work at the General Service Office in the mid-forties. Dennis said that when Bill concluded his speech at the 1955 General Service Conference, he said, "Now AA is in your hands and I will step down," and he dramatically left the stage and started down the steps that led down off the stage. Dennis used to say, sort of laconically, that it took Bill quite a few years to actually make that last step.

GV: It has been noted that a lot of old-timers are no longer going to AA.

Do you have any thoughts on why old-timers drift away?

Bob P.: It's kind of the nature of the disease, isn't it? You get everything going great, and then the old ego comes back and you think, "I don't really need those meetings." On the other hand, I know ever so many people in my generation of AA who are still enthusiastic about going to meetings. I guess I tend to know more of those kind of people than I do the others — maybe that's why I tend to be more optimistic! In Greenwich, where I'm very active in local AA, there are a number of people at the meetings who were there when I came in. So there are other old-timers, if you want to call them that, who feel the same way I do about the importance of AA in their lives.

GV: Have you ever gone through a period where you got ticked off with AA or bored with it?

Bob P.: Never! I've never been bored with an AA meeting in my life. In fact, I'd even go so far as to say I've never been bored in my life. I heard one kid say about something, "Oh, that's boring." Well, I don't identify. I don't even know what he meant.

GV: You've had an adventure for the last thirty-three years, that's for sure.

Bob P.: I'll be seventy-eight next month, and the last fifteen years have been the best of my whole life. Every day I find the joy of living exuberant-



ly. I was out running this morning and I went three miles up the valley with a fifteen-degree wind-chill factor and the dawn was so glorious and the scenery was so glorious and my beloved wife was with me — she was walking and I'd walk partway with her and then run. We have a great home out here and our children are around us and they're fine and you know, life is so good. The point is, I'm younger, more vigorous, more healthy in every way, and living a far, far better life than I did when I was forty-four years old.

One of our neighbors was just emerging from her house this morning to drive to Boise to get a plane. And this gal said, "My God, I can't believe it" when she saw us. It was cold and it was dark and she was just bundling up

for her drive, and here these old codgers were walking and running up the road! It becomes a lot more important the older you are.

GV: You get stiff if you don't move. There's a lesson in that.

Bob P.: As Helen Hayes once said — you know she was a pretty old dame — "If you rest, you rust."

GV: Is there any particular sobriety tool that you find helpful?

Bob P.: It's difficult for me to single any one thing out. I still read the Grapevine regularly. I read the Hazelden "Twenty-four Hour Book" every morning and have for thirty-three years. I read the Big Book at least once a year, and I always discover new

things in it, and the "Twelve and Twelve" too.

GV: Do you use the Eleventh Step?
Bob P.: Every single morning when I'm running.

GV: What do you do?

Bob P.: I go through everything that I have to be grateful for, and I ask God to deliver me from the bondage of self and I ask that I be of maximum service to God and my fellow man. Then I try to do the layout in my own mind of what I'm going to be doing during the day.

GV: AA really gives us a plan for living, doesn't it?

Bob P.: What I've always talked about in meetings, and wrote about in the Big Book, is the fact that AA is not about stopping drinking. Anybody can stop drinking — the problem is to stay stopped. And as far as I know; the only way you do that is to change your inner self — to effect a new psychic transformation, if you will, a spiritual transformation. In Alcoholics Anonymous we find a real reason for living and a kinship with a Higher Power and a new joy in life that we simply didn't know in our drinking days — or, in my case, even before I drank. That's what AA is all about.