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The Power of a Pronoun

Changing "he" to "she" gave this alcoholic a different view of the Big Book.

'Thrilled as a kid with a flashlight under the covers, I picked up my pencil and, in the glow of my desk lamp on a dark November evening, I started to change the Big Book. Everywhere I saw he, his, him, I wrote she, hers, and her. Within minutes I was transforming the way I looked at myself and at my program of recovery. The miserable drunk stumbling through those initial chapters suddenly became a woman like me. The alteration of that single pronoun ended years of mental reservation and tedious translation by bringing to life not just symptoms, but a person, a stubborn, suffering drunk who, like me, had desperately needed the rooms of AA and a power greater than herself. And with this sense of life came an extraordinary jolt: a feeling of great relief, promise, and energy lifting, releasing, balancing the weight of the past.

There! That was it! The power. What a feeling! "What we needed was the power." And here it was! Here was something over sixteen hundred meetings, and thousands of hours of conversation in coffee shops, at curbside and on the telephone, had never supplied. Nor were they likely to. Because to me, the Big Book is our touchstone. Its warmth and fervor, the lines that tell the quaking newcomer about the disease and the hope for recovery, are the essence of our program. I know I read it as I was getting sober, curled in bed at two in the morning, while tears of relief rolled down my face.

The Big Book helped save my life. So when I also found sections, passages, nearly whole chapters which caused me pain, mystification, or confusion, I was afraid I'd drink. I would read about our actor "who may be kind, considerate, patient,

generous; even modest and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, he may be mean, egotistical, selfish and dishonest" and the mirror would be blank.

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Or I'd read about being "...in the world to play the role He assigns" and I would recoil with the ancient terror of my father's temper or from the more recent sting of my ex-husband's hand. I would read about patience in "The Family Afterward" and "To Wives," knowing I was being directly addressed, and become certain I was flunking this course of sobriety because I wanted and was getting a divorce. I tried to quash these difficult, searing feelings as rebellious impulses. I tried to find a Higher Power I could call "him." I reread sections of the Bible. I sang

hymns. I went to church. I didn't go to church. And still, everywhere I turned in the literature, I kept seeing, hearing, and reading: Find that power; that's what keeps you sober. Find that power, or you will drink.

In time, the immediate pressures abated. I had the divorce and seldom read the chapter "To Wives" anymore, having learned to treat those issues in Al-Anon. But my undefinable frustration was deepening; some fundamental element still seemed to be missing. Then one day I read, "as we understand *him*" for the 5,000th time and exploded! "Dammit! It's the language; the language of the Big Book doesn't include me. As that line is written any God of my understanding is going to be a he. In English, the phrase can't be read any other way!" I was excited.

So with the fervor of a conspirator, I had chapter five copied and set to work with my number two pencil. Page 61: "He" becomes "She," and suddenly we have, "She becomes, on the next occasion, still more demanding or gracious, as the case may be. Still the play does not suit her... She becomes angry, indignant, self-pitying. What is her basic trouble? ... Is she not a victim of the delusion that she can wrest satisfaction and happiness out of this world if only she manages well? ...She is like the retired businesswoman who lolls in the Florida sunshine in the winter complaining of the sad state of the nation." And on to page 65: "Mrs. Brown... Her attention to my husband...

(affects my) sex relations."

The entire story immediately began taking on this new life. Sentences glowed with warmth. They leapt, they danced; sometimes they waltzed. I'd exclaim, "Did I do that?" And I'd laugh. The Fourth Step acquired a bite and sting it never had before. Some lines slid into a kind of nonsense: "... the outlaw safecracker who thinks society has wronged her." But over all, the effect was profound.

Here was my alcoholism as a disease of action and an active disease; here was a whole new dimension in my identification as an alcoholic. I suddenly felt I owned the store. The promises related in the Big Book were now genuinely mine; as were the liabilities. Instead of just borrowing the shirt off the old drunk's back, kind of like a kid wearing her dad's or boyfriend's pajama top, I now had my own, tailored for me. It was already a far better fit. It seemed too that some part of me had been quietly murmuring, "Don't look too deeply into this facet of alcoholism. Or this part — violence, for example. That's the man's disease." Certainly it is; but up to now, it was also all I saw. Until now, I had no sense of my own power — both the power to harm and the power to heal.

It took me over four and a half years to find that part of myself in the Big Book via the pencil in my hand. I don't think others need to wait so long. Women alcoholics weren't on the agenda in 1939; both Dr. Bob and Bill thought "nice" women didn't

become drunks. The "naughty" ones, whoever they were, were shunted off to the wives as if they had the mumps. (In fact, our literature reports that AA's first Twelfth Step fatality occurred when a jealous husband let fly with buckshot at an unsuspecting AA who had come to take the man's wife to a meeting.)

Now, it's fifty years later. And despite revisions, footnotes, and amendments, we women still aren't in the book. And I think it's time. I think it's time for us to animate those pages, to take our experience, strength, and hope and share it with women entering sobriety. I know I'm not alone. I know other women encounter these same treacherous cross-currents and that some make it and some don't. Except for the combination of outside help and other women's experience, I might well have gotten drunk that first year. I don't believe someone else needs to come that close, to be that alone.

If we begin, I think we'll be amazed before we're halfway through — at the comfort we can offer where there has been little and the sense of power where there has been none. The right to be comfortable, that's all power is. The Big Book offers the first real comfort an alcoholic is likely to know — and to extend that comfort, in a voice that can be understood, to women seeking to get sober in AA — well, I think we (and the spirits of the founders) would have much to be proud of in fifty years.

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