

May 1995




---

## Rowland H,

*A vital link in the chain leading up  
to the formulation  
of Alcoholics Anonymous*

---

In 1931, the renowned Swiss psychiatrist Dr. Carl Jung told a patient, "You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. I have never seen one single case recover, where that state of mind existed to the extent that it does in you." The man, Rowland H., asked, "Is there no exception?" "Yes," replied Dr. Jung, "once in a while, alcoholics have had what are

called vital spiritual experiences." He went on to describe spiritual experiences as ". . . huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once guiding forces . . . are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begins to dominate them." The doctor, however, dashed water on Rowland's hope

that his past religious convictions alone could bring on this "vital spiritual experience."

Rowland H. was born October 29, 1881 — two years after Dr. Bob and fourteen years before Bill W. — into a family of wealth and respectability. Rowland's father, Rowland Gibson H. (the H. family tree had an unbroken chain of "Rowlands" dating back to 1763), was superintendent of the Congregational Sabbath School for twenty-five years. His mother's father, a Yale graduate, was a man of the cloth. The H. family of Rhode Island was a paragon of respectability, dedication to public service, industrial leadership, and the values of family life. As early settlers of the colony, their roots in Rhode Island reached back over 350 years. Rowland's forebears were landowners, manufacturers, men of learning in literature and science who left their imprint on America as achievers, leaders, and philanthropists.

Rowland's grandfather was known as the "Father of the American Alkali Industry." Unlike robber barons of his day, Grandfather Rowland had great respect for the dignity of his employees. At the family woolen mills in Rhode Island, he introduced one of the first employee profit-sharing programs in America. After the purchase of a lead mine in Missouri in 1874 he found the miners living in "ignorance, wretchedness, squalor, and drunkenness"; he shortened the work week, built decent housing, and started a school. He wrote

in 1875: "Place a people face-to-face with vast labors, lower the physical tone by an enervating climate, let them find by experience that the labors are too great for their powers; and listless, slipshod habits will result with whiskey as a relief from trouble." This enlightened statement must have been considered radical by his fellow industrialists.

Rowland's grandmother Margaret is credited with introducing one of the first kindergartens to America. His Aunt Caroline was, at the turn of the century, president of Wellesley College. His father, Rowland Gibson, was president of Peace Dale Manufacturing in Peace Dale, Rhode Island, and vice-president of Solvay Process Co., Syracuse, New York. So Rowland grew to manhood in a world filled with people who were making things happen.

The well-to-do customarily sent their young men to preparatory school to direct them toward college and train them in moral disciplines and social manners; Rowland attended Fay School in Southboro, Massachusetts and Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut. At Yale, Rowland was called "Ike," "Roy," and "Rowley." He sang in the freshman and varsity glee clubs as well as the chapel choir. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree with the class of 1903. In today's vernacular it could be said that Rowland was born and raised with a silver spoon in his mouth. Yet he was by several accounts not aloof from other people. The years fol-

lowing Yale were spent learning the family business at the woolen mill, starting out in the wool-sorting department. Then he went to work for the family business of Semet-Solvay, the nation's leading producer of coke and coke ovens, first in Chicago and later in Syracuse.

Following his recuperation from an appendectomy in 1906, he returned to Peace Dale Manufacturing as secretary-treasurer. Rowland did have ability as a business manager, but he also had doors of opportunity opened for him. It's faster for the son of the owner to work up the ladder than for the normal aspiring employee. In addition, Rowland's life in the business world could be adjusted to accommodate his lifestyle — the reverse case of most struggling young business managers.

Rowland spent the winter of 1909 traveling in the West. Upon his return, he married Helen, a graduate of Briar

Cliff and the daughter of a Chicago banker. He was just short of twenty-nine when the marriage took place in October 1910. The newlyweds spent the next few months abroad. Helen and Rowland had four children: Caroline (1913), Rowland Gibson (1917), Peter (1918), and Charles W. B. (1920).

The H. family had long been involved in local, state, and national politics and Rowland became active in the Republican Party. He attended the Republican National Convention as a delegate in 1912 — the convention which renominated President William H. Taft. From 1914 to 1916, he served in the Rhode Island State Senate.

As World War I got underway, Rowland became a civilian member of the Ordnance Department. Later he resigned to accept a commission as captain in the Army's Chemical Warfare Service.

When Rowland's father died in 1918 neither Rowland nor his younger brother Thomas wanted to manage the day-to-day operation of the several companies the H. family controlled, so Peace Dale Manufacturing was sold. Semet-Solvay Company and the Solvay Process Company joined with three other chemical companies to create Allied Chemical and Dye Corporation (now Allied Signal, an eighteen-billion-dollar corporation). Rowland was a member of Allied's board of directors from its inception until his death. He also served for many years on the board of Interlake Iron Corporation, another H. family holding.

Any problem Rowland had with alcohol did not lead to his dismissal from either board. However, with the H. family so deeply invested in the corporations, the antics of a drinker may have been explained away and covered

up. The socially prominent families of the 1920s and '30s were mum on family problems; they were especially guarded about moral weakness in their ranks, and in that day, many considered alcoholics to be morally weak.

The precise beginning of Rowland's problem with alcohol is difficult to fix. Some events lead us to believe it could have been as early as 1918. For example, when Rowland's father died, he was thirty-seven and had held several positions within the corporations. His brother Thomas was twenty-six and only three years out of college, but it was Thomas, not Rowland, who became the one to administer the estate, a task of great responsibility. There is a brief mention of Rowland being president of Solvay Securities (likely another H. family holding) from 1918 to 1921. From 1920 to 1927 he was a member of a New York investment banking firm, but he resigned from that

position in 1927 to travel in Africa (at that time an adventure generally reserved for the royal or wealthy).

We know that by 1931 Rowland was under the care and treatment of Dr. Jung in Zurich, Switzerland. The Big Book offers this insight into Rowland's battle with alcohol, referring to him

anonymously as "a certain American business man": "For years he had floundered from one sanitarium to another. He had consulted the best known psychiatrists." This reference suggests that both Rowland and his family had recognized he had an alcohol problem for several years prior to 1931. Ebby T., who carried the message to Bill, had this to say about Rowland: "I was very much impressed by his drinking career, which consisted of prolonged sprees where he traveled all over the country."

The 1927 to 1935 period in Rowland's life is sketchy. While in Africa Rowland contracted a tropical disease, and in 1928 he traveled to the West Coast for his health. In 1929 he bought a ranch in New Mexico. Upon discovering high-grade clay on the ranch, he

organized a clay products company to produce floor and roof tile. In 1932 he took up residence in Vermont. Between 1932 and 1936 he divided his time between Vermont and New Mexico. The published accounts make no mention of Rowland's travel to Zurich to stay a year in Dr. Jung's care or his



Portrait of the renowned Swiss psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Jung.

return to Jung after a slip, as mentioned in Bill W.'s January 1963 letter to the doctor. Bill wrote to Dr. Jung: "Mr. H. joined the Oxford Group, an evangelical movement then at the height of its success in Europe ..." Returning to New York, Rowland connected with the Oxford Group there, led by Dr. Samuel Shoemaker.

In August 1934, Rowland was staying at his home in Shaftsbury, Vermont, when he learned through two other Oxford Groupers of Ebby T.'s possible six months sentence to Windsor Prison for repeated drunkenness. The Groupers were Shep C. and Cebra G., whose father was the judge before whom Ebby was to appear. In Bennington, Rowland and Cebra G. intervened at the hearing and asked that Ebby be bound over to Rowland.

The judge agreed and Rowland took Ebby to his home in Shaftsbury and later on to New York City where Ebby stayed with Shep C. Of the first meeting with Rowland, Ebby said, ". . . he was a good guy. The first day he came to see me he helped me clean up the place."

Ebby's carrying the message to Bill W. is well-known, but little is known about Rowland's personal sharing with Bill.

In his book *Bill W.*, Robert Thomsen reports that Bill could never recollect if it was Ebby or Rowland who gave him William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. A likely scenario is that Rowland gave the book to Ebby who in turn gave it to Bill. Thomsen also reveals that Rowland H., Ebby, and others would join with Bill around a little table in the rear of Stewarts Cafeteria for coffee and sharing after their Oxford Group meeting. Lois writes in *Lois Remembers*: ". . . [Rowland] remained an ardent Oxford Grouper until his death in 1945." (Lois goes on to mention that Cebra G. later joined AA in Paris.) From Rowland's perspective there was no compelling reason to join AA. After all, by the time the Big Book was published, he'd been sober eight years. His sobriety, however, is evidenced by this comment in the Big Book: "But this man still lives, and is a free man ... He can go anywhere on this earth where other free men may go without disaster, provided he remains willing to maintain a

certain attitude."

In 1935, Rowland returned to Wall Street as general partner in a brokerage firm; from 1938 to 1939, he was associated with an engineering firm; from 1940 to 1941, he was an independent consultant. In 1941 Rowland became executive vice-president of Bristol Manufacturing of Waterbury, Connecticut, a leading manufacturer of industrial devices.

His later years were filled with sadness. Rowland Gibson, his oldest son, a captain in the army, was killed in 1941. His second son, Peter, was a navy pilot who deliberately flew his plane into a screen of American flak while pursuing a Japanese kamikaze plane. Rowland himself suddenly died of a coronary occlusion while sitting at his office desk on Thursday, December 20, 1945. At the time of his death, Rowland was a vestryman in Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City and a member of St. Peter's-by-the-Sea, Narragansett, Rhode Island. AA students will identify Calvary Episcopal with the Rev. Sam Shoemaker and the Oxford Group.

Of all the contributions Rowland and his family made in industry and through philanthropic activities, perhaps none has had a more far-reaching impact than Rowland's one unselfish effort to sober up Ebby T. It is in spirit certainly one of the earliest Twelfth Step calls, a quiet turning point in the evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Ron R., Bowling Green, Ky.