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Where Will Power Comes In

by Bill

The following is Bill's answer to a letter asking about the role of the will power in staying sober. — ED.

THERE has always been a lot of confusion about this matter of exerting the will. When the Twelve Steps say "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, . . ." we assert what has always been a fact about that malady—namely, that a frontal attack by the will on the desire to drink almost never works.

This hard fact is the premise upon which we must start—the recognition that actual lunacy cannot be subdued by straight will power. God knows drunks have tried hard enough to do just this and have generally failed. Nobody would expect much result were every kleptomaniac to take the pledge not to steal. Respecting stealing, the kleptomaniac is as compulsively nutty as he can be. Though this compulsive condition is not so generally recognized in the alcoholic, because drinking is socially acceptable, it is nevertheless true that he is just about as crazy. Therefore our First Step is realistic

when it declares that we are powerless to deal with the alcohol hex on our own resources or will.

But even AA's First Step asks for willingness—the willingness to admit that our will power is not going to work head on. But that's only a starter. All of the rest of AA's Twelve Steps require both willingness and will power. They certainly deal in religious and moral values.

For example, we must acquire the willingness to take a moral inventory. This much accomplished, we then must needs muster the gumption to actually do that. We can become willing to believe in the efficacy of AA's Twelfth Step—carrying the message to others. But if we are aroused from sleep at twelve o'clock at night to make a Twelfth Step call—well, the actual making of that visit may call for a considerable amount of will power.

Another example: It is especially required of the atheist and agnostic

that he become open-minded on the subject of God. This seems to require a considerable exertion indeed. If then we suggest that he address himself to whatever God there may be, in meditation and prayer, he usually finds this takes a lot of discipline to do, even as an experiment.

The net result of willingness and will, as applied to the life problem in general, does eventuate in a release from the desire to drink, thereby getting around any heavy exertion of will power on the alcohol problem itself. Precisely why this release comes to most of us, is totally unexplained. We *are* restored to sanity, provided we condition ourselves for the gift of restoration—or, to put it in religious terms, to the inflow of God's grace which results in the expulsion of the obsession.

Nor does it seem to matter how we define God's grace. We can still claim if we like that we have tapped a hidden or unused inner resource. We don't need to actually define just where that came from. Or we can believe, as most of us finally do, that we have tapped the resources of God as He exists in us and in the cosmos generally. None of us can presume to know exactly how this is.

Of course I do not mean to say that no will power respecting the alcohol problem is ever to be used. During my first couple of years, I had two or three severe temptations to drink. But having practiced the AA program pretty faithfully, I was fully able to see the consequences of

so doing at the time I was tempted. The usual blinding rationalizations were not present. I had been restored to sanity, respecting alcohol. I nevertheless had to make a choice. But under these conditions it was not hard. And the choice did require a certain modicum of will power. Or of willingness to choose rightly.

I think this exercise of the will is appropriate and necessary during the interval in which one is developing a general release from the problem. But a general and complete release is quite possible, after considerable practice of AA's program. I know because I have been under enormous emotional strain since AA started. I had a neurotic depression that lasted from 1943 until 1955, one from which I never fully surfaced. About three years of this was suicidal. But the release from alcohol had been so thorough that I was never tempted during this long siege to resort to drink.

So this is the substance of the AA party line as I happen to see it. But please be assured you don't necessarily have to see it the same way. Plenty of people differ with me, and yet remain sober. Nevertheless the experience of most of us seems to back up what I have just said. Those who try to work the program in other ways, and who succeed by so doing, are in my belief staying dry the hard way. AA's orthodoxy, if it can be called that, is merely what the majority experience suggests. You can still take your pick!