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Due to some schedule changes in my family life resulting in geographic conflicts, I have found it necessary to trade my regular Monday night study meeting for a podium-discussion meeting in another town, and while I welcome the chance to get to know some of my fellow AAs better, I miss my home group's Big Book study meeting.

My own schedule at this time does not easily permit me to commit myself regularly to another meeting, or I

might try to start another Big Book study myself. But my current situation brings home to me the importance of the Big Book in my sobriety, which I had begun to take for granted.

My love affair with the Big Book began when the fellow who twelfth-stepped me gave me a copy. He told me to start at the beginning and read it through from cover to cover and not worry about whether I understood it all or not. I've always been an

avid reader, so the task did not bother me. I read it at night when I went to bed, often finding myself unable to stop and fighting off sleep just to read a little more. In the course of a few days — less than a week — I had gone through it entirely and was ready to read more.

That initial reading opened my eyes and gave me hope. The foreword told me that the book contained the combined experience of hundreds of people, and that kept me from looking at it with much skepticism. I couldn't argue with their success.

While the fellow who gave me the book had acquainted me with the disease concept of alcoholism when he first talked to me, my alcohol-fogged brain was unable to soak it in. "The Doctor's Opinion," while maybe not as technical as what I would have wanted, made sense to me, and I began to identify the manifestations of the allergy and obsession as two separate conditions working in concert to form my own drinking pattern.

The tone of writing was masterful and refreshing, unlike some of the more "religious" material I had read on alcohol. Instead of feeling condemned or dirty, I felt the writer was a friend. He (and hence the Fellowship) understood me and was not going to judge me, and was genuinely interested in helping me find a way out of my dilemma. The objective presentation made me feel less tainted: I wasn't dirty and weak-willed; I merely had a disease. Reading the book was not just an exercise of disci-

pline because I had said I would read it. It quickly became enjoyable — I was attracted to what it had to say.

"Bill's Story" enabled me to see some common characteristics — not necessarily directly related to alcoholism — between him and me. "More About Alcoholism" elaborated on topics already approached in the earlier chapters. My curiosity was aroused and I was anxious: I knew there was more I wanted to know, but would I be able to understand it and apply it to myself?

When I got to "How It Works," it told me that while there was a chance this book might not help me, if I was honest with myself I could expect a drastic change. As I went through the instructions on how to do a Fourth Step inventory I found myself substituting my own resentments and fears for those examples given, and I began to understand how my thinking had gotten so out of control that it was no wonder I drank like I did.

Chapter five was the high point for me. Oh, the promises were neat, and even though most of them have come true for me, the idea of being able to simply live sober is still so exciting that the rest of the benefits are almost beside the point. "To Wives" was beneficial in taking my own inventory and subsequent self-understanding, as I could draw comparisons of how my drinking and living had caused damage to others. The stories in the back of the book gave me food for meditation and more helpful suggestions as to how I could apply this pro-

gram to my life.

And I cannot overlook the footnotes at the back of the book, particularly Appendix II regarding spiritual experiences. Having had an "experience" as opposed to an "awakening," it helped me realize that not everyone in this Fellowship was going to latch on to this program like I did, nor did they need to. Some would rocket into sobriety; some would find sobriety a little more slowly; even though some were not drinking, their emotional progress might be slow and even questionable; and some who still were drinking might be marking more spiritual growth in certain areas than I might be. Spenser's quote at the end demanded that I keep an open mind and a high level of acceptance not only toward the AA program, but toward the persons I encountered in the Fellowship — and that, too, helped reinforce my fledgling sobriety.

All these things and more came to me during that first week. I was still antsy, though, and wanted to learn more to help cement my sobriety. I did not trust my newly formed way of thinking, and was afraid I might, unintentionally perhaps, misinterpret and misapply the information I was getting. Other Conference-approved literature was given me, and I "liberated" (without permission — I still wasn't totally honest, but I was broke) many old issues of the Grapevine and read one, two, or three a day.

At the time I came in, my home group's study meeting was on the Twelve Traditions, but within a cou-

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ple of weeks the meeting went back to the Big Book. A fellow who was later to become one of my sponsors had the ability to explain things very simply and straightforwardly, and tie information in with earlier material for a more comprehensive overview. I began to pick up some things "between the lines," so to speak. I was fortunate to be able to attend my first convention before I was thirty days sober, and sat through a day-long Big Book study he and another fellow put on. Through their very apparent love for the book and patient and ordered coverage of its material, more and more things began to fit together for me. I was falling in love with its story and was coming to view it as a literary masterpiece as well.

About a year ago my home group decided to experiment with a Big Book study guide (not Conference-approved) which breaks the informa-

tion down a paragraph, sentence, and sometimes, a line at a time. I was selected to lead the study. Study with this guide may go a little slowly, covering from two to five pages a night. The format allows for discussion after each question (sort of fill-in-the-blank questions without the blank), and by our group's sharing in this manner I have come to better know, understand, and respect the program that my fellow group members also work. Sometimes we "chase a few rabbits" and get off the specific subject in trying to explain the topic's importance, but the conversation is always focused on this program. When the book is digested in pieces, as this manner lends itself to, I have seen long-time members who had nothing to say — who might never speak at a podium meeting — change and wax verbal, even enthusiastic in their insights. The sharing of personal experience, strength, and hope seems of particularly high quality. I have learned from my fellow students that the Twelve Steps have worked in dealing with literally any problem life can bring — the solution is all-encompassing — and that makes me love the Big Book even more.

Over the years I have lost track of how many times I've gone through the Big Book. Hundreds of notes, in three or four colors of ink and a couple of pencils, cover the margins and spaces between the lines. A sponsor gave me a photocopy of the dust cover from one of the first edition books, which I have covered with

plastic and use with pride on my own worn book. Twice I have bought a new book with the intent of retiring my first, but the task of transferring my most important marginal notes to a new book is almost overwhelming, and somehow I don't think a new book would be the same to me.

Living in the sticks as I do, with only one AA member whose phone number is not long distance, those early days demanded that I hold on to all I could get, and often the Big Book was all I could get hold of when a meeting or a member wasn't available. And granted, I come from a "hard core" group when it comes to the Big Book. I tend to agree sometimes that discussion meetings don't have a lot to offer. I tend to not have much time for pontification and holding forth (a trait of which I, too, am sometimes guilty) if it doesn't help me to stay sober. On the other hand, the best comments I hear at discussion meetings are based on the Big Book's message of defining the problem, proposing a solution, and giving practical ways, not nebulous "pop" psychology and theories ("keep it simple") to achieve that solution.

Perhaps what I'm saying, to the newcomer and old-timer alike, is that if you've never really, *really* studied the Big Book, don't shortchange yourself. Discussion meetings are great for sharing, but the experience, strength, and hope shared through a concentrated focus on the Big Book and its message is incomparable.

E.L., Gentry, Ark.