

Memorial Service for Dr. Bob
24th Street Clubhouse, New York City, N.Y.
November 15, 1952

A meeting was held at the 24th Street Club House in memory of Dr. Bob. A recording of Dr. Bob's last talk was played and a portrait of Dr. Bob was unveiled. Bill W. then addressed the meeting.

Dr. Bob's recorded voice has come down to us across the air since he died in 1950. Some may say that his actual voice is still forever, but you and I know that is not so and that his spirit will be with us so long as this well loved society of ours endures. Now, I happen to be one who believes that people never die, that on beyond death there is another life and it could be that Dr. Bob is looking down upon us now, seeing us, hearing what we say and feel and think and have done in this meeting. I know his heart will be glad.

Dr Bob was a chap who was modestly and singularly against taking any personal acclaim or honor but surely now that he is no longer with us he can't mind, I don't believe and for him I wish to thank everyone here who has made this occasion possible and the unveiling possible, with all the work and love that that has entailed. Again, I wish to thank each and everyone.

In A.A. we always deal in personalities, really, this thing is transmitted from one to another and it isn't so much what we read about it that counts, it's what we uniquely know about of ourselves and those just around us who have us and who we would help. Therefore, I take it that you folks would like it better than anything else if I just spun a few yarns about Dr. Bob and that very early part of A.A., which we so often call the period of flying blind.

Of course you'll remember my little story about how a friend comes to me with the idea of getting more honest, more tolerant, making amends, helping others without demand for reward, praying as best I knew how and that was my friend Ebby.

As you heard Dr. Bob say, he had heard those things too from the same source, namely the Oxford Groups which have since as such, passed of f the scene and have left us with a rich heritage of both what and what not to do. Anyway, a friend comes to me and I go to other alcoholics and try to make them my friends and some did become my friends but as you heard Dr. Bob say, not a darn one got sober.

Then came that little man that we who live in this area saw so much, him with kind of blue eyes and the white hair, ' Doc Silkworth. You'll remember that Doc said to me, "Look Bill, you're preaching at these people too much. You've got the cart before the horse. This 'white flash' experience of yours scares these drunks to death. Why don't you put the fear of God into them first? You're always talking about James and the Varieties of Religious Experience and how you have to deflate people before they can know God, how they must have humility. So, why don't you use the tools that we've really got here, why don't you use the tool of the medical hopelessness of alcoholism for practically all those involved? Why don't you talk to the drunk about that allergy they've got and that obsession that makes them keep on drinking and guarantees that they will die? Maybe when you punch it into them hard it will deflate them enough so that they will find what you found."

So, another indispensable ingredient was added to what is now this successful synthesis and that was just about the time I set out for Akron on a business trip. It had been suggested by the family that it was about time that I went back to work. I went out there on this venture, which as Dr. Bob said, "fortunately fell through." You heard him tell about the story in the hotel after I had taken a good beating and I was tempted to drink and needed to look up another alcoholic, not this time to save him but to save myself, for I had found that working with others had a vast bearing on my own sobriety.

Then, how we were brought together by a girl who was the last person on a long list of people I 'd been referred to. The only one who had time enough and who cared enough and that was a girl in Akron, herself no alcoholic, her name was Henrietta Seiberling. She invited me out there and she became interested at once. She called Smiths and we learned Smithy had just come home with a potted plant for dear old Annie and he put it on the dining room table but as Annie said that just then he was on the floor and they couldn't come over at that minute.

You'll remember the next day how he put in an appearance. Haggard, worn, not wishing to stay and how then we talked for hours. Now I have often heard Dr. Bob say and I thought he said it on the recording that "it was not so much my spirituality that affected him," he was a student of those things and I certainly know that he was never affected by any superior morality on my part. So, what did affect him? Well, it was this ammunition that dear old Doc Silkworth had given me, the allergy plus the obsession. The God of science declaring that the malady for most of us is hopeless so far as our personal power is concerned. As Dr. Bob put it in his story in the book "here came the first man into my life who seemed to know what this thing alcoholism was all about."

Well, if it wasn't the dose of spirituality I poured into Dr. Bob, it was that dose of indispensable medicine to this movement, the dose of hopelessness so far as one doing this alone is concerned. The bottle of medicine that Dr. Silkworth had given me that I poured down the old grizzly bear's throat. That's what I used to call him.

Well, he gagged on it a little, got drunk once more and that was the end. Then he and I set out looking for drunks, we had to look some up. There is a little remembered part of the story. The story usually goes that we immediately called up the local city hospital and asked the nurse for a case but that isn't quite true. There was a preacher who lived down the street and he was beset at the time by a drunk and his name was Eddie and we talked to Eddie and it turned out that Eddie was not only a drunk but something which in that high faluting language we now call a manic depressive, not very manic either, mostly depressed. Eddie was married with two or three kids, worked down at Goodrich Company and his depression caused him to drink and the only thing that would stop the depression was apparently baking soda. When he got a sour stomach, he got depressed so he was not only drinking alcohol but we estimated that in the past few years he had taken a ton of baking soda. Well, we tried for a while, of course, we thought we had to be good Samaritans so we got up some dough to try to keep the family going, we got Eddie back on the job but Eddie kept right on with alcohol and baking soda both. Finally, Dr. Bob and Annie took Eddie along with me into their house, a pattern which my dear Lois followed out to the nth degree later and we tried to treat Eddie and my mind goes back so vividly to that evening when Eddie really blew his top. I don't know whether it was the manic side or on the depressive side but boy did he blow it and Annie and I were sitting out at the kitchen table and Eddie seized the butcher knife and was about to do us in when Annie said very quietly "well Eddie, I don't think your going to do this." And he didn't. Thereafter, Eddie was in a State asylum for a period I should think of going on a dozen or more years but believe it or not he showed up at the funeral of Dr. Bob in the fall of 1950 as sober as a judge and he had been that way for three years.

So even that obscure little talk about Eddie made the grade. So then Dr. Bob and I talked to the man on the bed, Bill Dotson, who some of you have heard, A.A. number three. Here was another man who said he couldn't get well, his case was too tough, much tougher than ours besides he knew all about religion. Well, here it was, one drunk talking with another, in fact, two drunks talking to one. The very next day the man on the bed got out of his bed and he picked it up and walked and he has stayed up ever since. A.A. number three, the man on the bed.

So the spark that was to become Alcoholics Anonymous was struck. I came back to New York after having taken away a great deal from Akron. I never can forget those mornings and those nights at the Smiths. I can never forget Annie reading to us and the two or three drunks who were hanging on, out of the bible. I couldn't possibly say how many times we read Corinthians on love, how many times we read the entire book of James with loving emphasis on that line "Faith without works is dead." It did make a very deep impression on me; so from the very beginning there was reciprocity, everybody was teacher and everybody was pupil and nobody need look up or down to the other because as Jack Alexander put it years later "we are all brothers and sisters under the skin."

A group started in New York, but let's turn back to Akron. Smithy, unlike me and the man on the bed was bothered very badly by a temptation to drink. Smithy was one of these continuous drinkers. He wasn't what you would call one of these pantywaist periodic's. He guzzled all the time and apparently by the time he got to be sixty odd, which was when he got A.A. He was so soaked in rum that he just had a terrible physical urge to drink. Long after he told me that he had that urge for something like six or seven years and that it was constant and that his basic release from it was in doing what we now call the twelfth step. So Smithy, greatly out of love and partly by

being driven began to frantically work on those cases, first in City Hospital in Akron and then as they got tired of drunks in the place, finally over at St. Thomas where there is now a plaque which bears an inscription dedicated to all those who labored there in our pioneering time and describing St. Thomas in Akron as the first religious institution ever to open it's doors to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Ah, how much of drama, how much of struggle, how much of misery, how much of joy lies in the era before the plaque was put there. No one can say. There was a sister in the hospital, a veritable saint if you ever saw one. Our beloved Sister Ignatia. Dr. Bob mentioned her. He told how she would deny beds to people with broken legs in order to stick drunks in them. She loved drunks. She was a sort of female Silkworth, if you know what I mean. So finally a ward was provided and you remember that Dr. Bob was an M.D. and a mighty good one. Now you know that quite within the A.A. Tradition Dr. Bob might have charged all those drunks who went through that place for his medical services. He treated 5,000 drunks medically and never charged a dime, even in that long period when he was very poor. For unlike most of us to whom it is a credit to belong to Alcoholics Anonymous, it was no credit to a surgeon at that time. "It was lovely that the old boy got sober" his patients said, "but how the hell do I know he'll be sober when he cuts me up at nine o'clock in the morning." And so that frantic effort went on out there and it went on here and we got back and forth a little bit between Akron and New York. You haven't any conception these days of how much failure we had. How you had to cull over hundreds of these drunks to get a handful to take the bait. Yes, the discouragements were very great but some did stay sober and some very tough ones at that.

The next great memory I have is that of a day I shared with him in his living room in the fall of 1937. I, you remember had sobered up in late '34 and Bob in June 1935. Well, we began to count noses, we asked ourselves "How many were dry and for how long," Not how many failures, how many successes were there in Akron, New York and the trickle to Cleveland and in the other little trickles to Philadelphia and Washington. How much time elapsed on how many cases? We added up the score and I guess we had maybe forty folks sober and with real time elapsed. For the first time Dr. Bob and I knew that God had made a great gift to us children of the night and that the long procession coming down through the ages need no longer all go over into the left hand path and plunge over the cliff. We knew that something great had come into the world.

Then it was a question of how we would spread this and that was answered by the publication of the book and the opening of the office here. It was spread by our great friends who rallied about us. There were friends in medicine, friends in religion, friends in the press and just plain but great friends. They all came to our aid and spread the good news.

Meanwhile drunks from all over Ohio, all over the Middle West flocked into the Akron hospital where Dr. Smith and Sister Ignatia ministered to them. And I have no doubt that two out of three of those drunks are sober, well and happy today. So that achievement certainly entitles Dr. Bob to be named as the prince of all twelve steppers.

That was the end of the flying blind period; next we needed to discover whether we could hold together as groups. We had learned that we might survive as individuals but could this movement hold together and grow. On a thousand anvils and after a million heartbreaks the tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous was also forged out of our experience and what had been a tiny chip, launched in the flying blind time on the sea of alcoholism now became a mighty armada spreading over the world, touching foreign beachheads. Of all that, this meeting here in this historic place in commemoration of Dr. Bob is a great and moving symbol. I know that he looks down upon us. I know that he smiles and we know that he is glad.