

A uniquely American phenomenon.

Americans react to most social problems by first shouting "There oughta be a law," and then calming down to measure the problem and attack it by spontaneous individual effort. The American weakness for drink first produced the ill-omened prohibition amendment. Recently it has produced the more remarkable and more typical response described here.

Alcoholics Anonymous was conceived by a drunk lying on a bed in a drunks' hospital in New York in 1934, and had a hard birth in Akron, Ohio, the following year. A doctor of medicine was present but at this critical moment was too alcoholically jittery to know an accouchement was taking place. The American tradition of adverse beginnings was thus fulfilled by this organization, which today equally fulfills the tradition of success after struggle. By birthplace, heritage, tradition, habits, looks, and tone of voice Alcoholics Anonymous is unmistakably American. And yet in almost every way it contradicts the stencils by which non-American minds gauge American achievement. It has almost no money and wishes it could do with still less. In fifteen years its membership has grown from nothing to 120,000, yet it never urges anyone to join. Of formal "organization" it has almost none, yet it avers it "ought never to have any." A man or woman becomes a member by simple declaration, and need share his decision with only one other human being. There are no pledges or constraints in A.A.; no records that must be kept or quotas that must be broken. Seniority confers no favors. A.A. has one purpose only: "to help the sick alcoholic recover, *if he wishes*."

In a world whose spiritual values have dropped close to the vanishing point, the strange society of A.A. places its entire proposition upon the reality of spiritual experience. It achieves harmony among a membership in which Catholics associate not only with Protestants and Jews but with

high-decibel agnostics or fancy religionists of species known only to God. Its members, who know better than to contradict the psychiatrists' diagnosis that they are "grandiose, infantile, and self-absorbed," practice daily an Obedience that has no enforcement mechanism and no system of punishment for infraction. The one rule common to every A.A. clubhouse is that if, as rarely occurs, a member seeks to attend a meeting while drinking, he is escorted to the door, with the invitation to return only as soon as he recalls his society's purpose.

If A.A., successful and American, had a password proof against any member's forgetting, it would be "Failure." One by one, each member tackled something that proved too big for him; only when he acknowledged his inability to deal with a circumstance that most people can meet with ease was he able to become a full member of this organization, of those for whom "one drink is too many and a thousand aren't enough." Dentists and doctors, stevedores, ministers, cops, poets, publishers, matrons, vocational-guidance counselors, stenographers, artists, bartenders, and master mechanics are all to be found in A.A.'s ranks, as diverse and exclusive as a classified telephone directory. Yet all have a common vantage point; each one, from a broad and comfortable ridge, has a clear view downward into the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Although alcoholism is a state so complex that a leak-proof definition is impossible here, a clinician can, in his own bald terms, describe it simply: "a progressive, incurable and fatally terminating disease." That alcoholism could be *arrested* was well known, but this knowledge was for many years almost useless, for the arrestment was up to the drinker: would he or would he not stop? Usually he would not, no matter how he longed to, for he was inwardly convinced that he could not; so long as he knew

that a couple of quick ones would give him a desperately bought temporary relief from his sufferings, he could see no permanent way out. Psychiatry's dictum that alcoholism was only a symptom of a deep-seated psychic disorder was not very helpful in the crisis forever engulfing the alcoholic and his family.

It dawned on Bill W.* in 1934, when he was close to the last stages of alcoholic disintegration, that if he attempted to help other alcoholics he might thereby help himself. He went to work--and found himself able to stay sober for the first time in years. But this was cold comfort, for the drunks on whom he worked stayed drunk. He was on the verge of a relapse that might well have been final when he met the drunken Dr. Bob in Akron. Only then did it dawn that the help must flow two ways: one-sided preachment was useless, but when help was mutually offered and accepted between two suffering and desperate drunks, each of whom sought to help himself by helping the other, a new element entered into a materialistically hopeless situation. As a result of this help from the helpless, Bill W. stayed sober and Dr. Bob got sober, and the nucleus of Alcoholics Anonymous was formed. By the end of that year A.A. had three members. By the end of another year it had fifteen. By the end of still another it had forty--divided among Akron, New York, and Cleveland. That was all.

Since those years A.A. has evolved into a membership of 120,000 divided into some 4,100 local groups. Metropolitan areas such as New York, Cleveland, Chicago, and Los Angeles may harbor 100 to 200 groups each. Ninety prisons have A.A. clubs within their walls, and over 100 clubs exist to further the A.A. idea, although not formally affiliated with A.A. In Chicago the weekly "intergroup" meeting never brings out fewer than 1,200 A.A.'s at a time. In New York, the "Annual Banquet" may have to be abandoned unless some way can be devised of splitting it into sections, for no hotel has a ballroom large enough to seat it.

Much more important are the statistics of

sobriety. Of those who make a genuine effort to stop drinking through A.A. principles, 50 per cent get sober at once, and stay that way. Another 25 per cent get sober after some relapses. The remaining 25 per cent show improvement. A.A. is not out to make a showing. It refuses to screen its membership, as some doctors would like, to eliminate the "hopeless" cases; gaining a statistical advantage is not A.A.'s purpose--and furthermore an impressive number of "hopeless" cases have recovered. A.A. quietly and with good cause believes that all those who relapse or drop away will be back later and permanently, if they live. The word "cure," however, is not in the A.A. vocabulary. On the contrary the man who succeeds in staying sober must still recognize himself as an alcoholic.

Suppose you were to go to an open meeting of A.A., as you are perfectly free to do. You would find yourself in a group of from thirty to 300 people, one-third of whom might be women. (Only 10 to 15 per cent of A.A.'s active membership is female, but non-alcoholic wives of alcoholic husbands are attending meetings in increasing numbers, and this attendance is strongly encouraged.) The average age would be between thirty-five and forty and is steadily growing younger; it used to be that an alcoholic seldom recognized his trouble until his middle forties, whereas now, with greater publicity for the whole problem, he sees what is wrong sooner; today, some A.A.'s are not much over thirty. Prosperous, less prosperous, and poor would be represented in about equal thirds; so would the educational levels of college, high school, or less. If this were a typical meeting, 40 per cent of those present would be Catholics--double the number you would encounter in an exact sample of the U.S. population. At the other end of the scale are the Jews--represented by no more than a sprinkling, even in New York.**

There is no use trying to draw conclusions from appearances; the blowzy old lady near the front may be a casual visitor who never had a drink in her life, whereas the pink-cheeked,

white-haired gentleman who looks like a deacon may have had a record of fifty alcoholic admissions into hospitals and jails. The group is probably meeting in the parish house of a church, a political clubhouse, a public auditorium, or a small mezzanine banquet room of a hotel--any place where an evening's rent is reasonable and the atmosphere is neither so high-toned as to discourage a man wearing out his last pair of shoes nor so forbidding as to scare a Caspar Milquetoast. The air is dense with tobacco smoke, and the evening's chairman has to bang his gavel hard to cut through the loud, familiar talk. There is no set speech for chairmen, but a typical opening might be something like this:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I wonder if the new people who are here for the first, second, or third time would please raise their hands. . . . That's fine. I'll ask the old-timers to please make themselves known to the new people and try to see they have a good time. As you know, A.A. groups have two kinds of meetings, open and closed. The closed meetings are for alcoholics only, but tonight is an open meeting, so everybody is welcome. If there are any reporters here I just want to remind them that they can write anything they like so long as they don't use anybody's name. You've got to respect us on that because some people are funny: they usen't to mind being seen in the Hotel Metropolis so drunk they couldn't stand up, but they're still a little bit sensitive about being seen sitting down here cold sober. . . .

"Maybe you think we have some fancy test that can tell you whether you're an alcoholic or not. But we haven't. The only person who can decide whether you're an alcoholic is yourself. If you want a little helpful hint I'll tell you something I heard Fanny J. say at a meeting a couple of months ago: when anybody stops *boasting* about how much he had to drink the night before and starts *lying* about it, there's maybe just a little bit of a chance that he's getting to be one of us. But that's up to you.

"Some people are able to get the A.A. program while they still have their jobs and their wives and their homes, but there are

others who don't seem to be able to quit drinking until they've lost everything. That's given rise to the saying that there are 'high-bottom' drunks and 'low-bottom' drunks. But remember what Bill W. said: 'The difference between the high-bottom drunk and the low-bottom drunk is that both are lying in the gutter but the high-bottom drunk has his head on the curb.' We are all drunks. If you think you are a drunk we invite you to join us.

"You're going to hear from three members tonight, and they're all going to have very different stories to tell. All we ask of you new people is that you keep an open mind. If you don't happen to hear anything tonight that fits in with your own story, or reminds you of your own pattern of drinking, please keep coming, for sooner or later you're bound to hear something that hits you right where you live.

"And I ought to tell the newcomers that we don't practice any religious ritual of any sort here, except that we end every meeting by standing up and reciting the Lord's Prayer, and we ask you all to join. The first speaker this evening . . ."

The first speaker, and every speaker at every A.A. meeting, begins with one standard line: "My name is _____, and I am an alcoholic." Thereafter he says exactly what he likes, and what he usually likes is to tell the story of his drinking, and how, eventually, he came into A.A. What a newcomer, feeling in his heart of hearts that he is an alcoholic, expects to experience at the first meeting can never be known, except it is a good bet he does not expect to be shaken with laughter. But that is what usually does happen to him, and what usually dissolves his intention of leaving after the first twenty minutes and making a dash for the nearest bar. No one has quite such terrific stories to tell as an alcoholic, and once he is released from his fears and shames by having put his alcoholic activity behind him he makes a formidable raconteur, using his old self as the butt of his new. The laughter that shakes the hall is the laughter of recognition.

Over and over, the newcomer hears references to the Twelve Steps and in

particular to *the* Twelfth Step. The Twelve Steps constitute at once the philosophy of A.A. and its means to therapy for the alcoholic who is making an honest attempt to stop drinking. They are not absolutes, but are presented as *suggestions*. In condensed form for the quick-reading non-alcoholic, they are these:

First, the alcoholic admits that he has become powerless over alcohol; that his life has become unmanageable. This is the admission of failure without which his ego does not undergo the deep deflation that seems the key to success.

Next, he comes to believe that only a Power greater than himself can restore his life, and turns his will and his life over to the care of God *as he understand Him*.

Further, via nine detailed suggestions, the alcoholic undertakes a searching moral inventory of himself; admits to God and one human being his wrongs and shortcomings, asking God to remove them, and himself making the human amends possible. He seeks by prayer and meditation to improve his conscious contact with God as he understands Him, praying only for knowledge of His will, and the power to carry that out.

Finally, having had a spiritual experience, he tries to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all his affairs (the Twelfth Step).

"Alcoholics Anonymous," said Bill W. when the American Psychiatric Association invited him to address it in 1949, "is not a religious organization; there is no dogma. The one theological proposition is 'Power greater than one's self,' but even this concept is forced on no one. The newcomer merely immerses himself in our society and tries the program as best he can. Left alone, he will surely report the gradual onset of a transforming experience, call it what he may. Observers thought A.A. could appeal only to the religiously susceptible. Yet our membership includes a former member of the American Atheist Society and about 20,000 others almost as tough. The dying can become remarkably open-minded. Of course we speak little of conversion nowadays because so many

people really dread being God-bitten. But conversion, as broadly described by William James, does seem to be our basic process. . . .

"Our deep kinship, the urgency of our mission, the need to abate our neurosis for contented survival; all these, together with love for God and man, have contained us in surprising unity. There seems safety in numbers. Enough sandbags muffle any amount of dynamite. We think we are a pretty secure, happy family. Drop by any A.A. meeting for a look."

Among the toughest of the tough, the lowest of the low, the most cynical of the cynical, the program works. The alcoholic, man or woman, is merely urged to look again at the idea of a Higher Power, and to dissociate that idea from the old-man-with-the-whiskers, the angry Santa Claus, the avenging anthropomorphic tyrant with which he was stuffed and terrified in his childhood. Gradually the phrase "as *you* understand Him" takes hold. Sometimes the concept of the Higher Power can be accepted only by some elaborate stratagem. One alcoholic, determined in his agnosticism, at last solved his problem by accepting as a Power greater than himself the steam radiator that clanked and hissed in his miserable room. It was hot and full of energy and burned him when he touched it. It was sufficient. The radiator clanked inscrutably; the alcoholic stopped drinking.

One by one, the speakers who rise and tell their stories 12,000 times or more a week the country over are driven to say the same thing: "I don't understand it, but I don't need to; it works." Certainly one thing that works is the feeling of fellowship engendered by several hundred people in the same room, every one of whom knows at firsthand the exact horrible details of alcoholic suffering. Most alcoholics, before they encounter A.A., are convinced that nowhere in the annals of medicine or abnormal psychology can any parallel to themselves be found. "It may be all right for some people but it would never work for *me*" is the most common first response heard by an A.A. having

his first talk with an alcoholic who does not yet dare to hope. Nothing is a more powerful solvent to this sort of suffering egotism than being physically surrounded by several hundred people, every one of whom once held precisely that same thought, and slowly realizing that the horrors once thought to be unique are, in reality, a universal experience in the society of A.A. Most A.A.'s carry fat address books in their pockets; in these are crammed the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the A.A.'s he has met inside or outside his own group. This is the equipment he needs for what is known as the Nickel Therapy: when the desire for a drink reaches dangerous proportions, the A.A. drops a 5-cent piece in a coin telephone and dials the number of a fellow member who will sit out the siege with him.

The Twelfth Step, by which alcoholics work with alcoholics, does not mean that A.A. evangelizes, proselytizes, or whoops things up in any way among "hot prospects." If a despairing wife calls an A.A. (almost every sizable telephone book in the U.S. has an A.A. number in it) and asks that he "try to do something with Jim," the first inquiry must always be directed to the point, "Does Jim want it?" If the answer is "No, but God knows he ought to," the A.A. will beg off seeing Jim and have a chat with his wife or family instead. Only when Jim is ready to talk will the A.A. go to work directly. Even then, there is no urging. The A.A. member will talk not about Jim but about himself. He will emphasize that no A.A. takes any sort of pledge of sobriety. He works, instead, on the "Twenty-four Hour Plan," which the A.A. often expresses as "Tomorrow I may go on the damnedest bender you ever heard of, but I'm not going to have a drink *today*." The Twenty-four Hour Plan is of vital importance to those who have newly stopped drinking--for to them, nine times out of ten, the contemplation of the balance of a lifetime without the solace of alcohol is intolerable. Yet A.A.'s who have been dry ten years or more still wisely make their plans for sobriety no further than a day in advance. The first longing of

someone who has stopped drinking is to be able to resume it successfully; only slowly is this point of view replaced by the one that says "I wouldn't take a drink now, even if I could." All this the A.A. discusses at low pressure.

Where the A.A. truly burns to get something across to the suffering alcoholic is in telling him that not only is life *possible* without alcohol but it is a damned sight more pleasant. This is difficult. A universal feature of advanced alcoholism is a sharp constriction of interests: the alcoholic who once belonged to a choral society, went to sketch class once a week, collected matchbooks, and went on short-line railroad excursions has now abandoned all these things in favor of continuous drinking. It is hard for him to find his way back to these things alone: it is hard for him to find his way back to society at all. But A.A. offers him a society that will instantly welcome him, ask him no questions, but instead begin to deluge him with the mirthful, frightful record of its own calamities.

A.A. is founded on the Christian principle of Love. It is the fashion, even in these dark days, for the worldly to scoff at such a declaration, but the A.A. does not scoff and does not blush at holding so old-fashioned an idea. Like ceasing to drink, the A.A. finds that loving his fellow man makes no impossible exactions of an ordinary, all-too-human being.

..

There was once a new A.A. named Joe, who came to an older A.A. named Fred, asking advice. Joe had encountered a third A.A. named George whose every attribute of personality Joe found repulsive. Was it essential that Joe should love George? Yes, said Fred, it was. Joe thought for a long, dismal moment and then announced that if this were true he would have to retire from the program and resume drinking; loving George was beyond his powers.

"Wait a minute," said the old A.A. "There isn't anything to keep you from loving George. Hell, you don't have to *like* the s.o.b. any more than I do."

* Anonymity is, to the A.A., of immense spiritual significance--reminding him "to place principles above personalities." Bill W. and Dr. Bob, referred to in this article, were the first two members of A.A. and thus cannot escape some identification as "founder" and "co-founder." Dr. Bob's death late in 1950 revealed him at last to the general public as Dr. Robert H. Smith, noted surgeon of Akron, Ohio.

** Of all groups needing A.A., the American Negro stands first. A.A. welcomes him, but the Negro's knowledge of alcoholism as a sickness is understandably slow in developing. Only in the last few years have A.A. groups formed in Negro communities such as New York's Harlem.

Source: *Fortune*, February 1951, pp. 99-100, 138-144