

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS - DANGERS OF SUCCESS

By Jerome Ellison

Back in 1940, the late John D. Rockefeller, Jr., made headlines (John D. Dines Tossspots) by asking 400 of his wealthy friends to dine at New York's Union League Club and hear about a society of impoverished drunks called Alcoholics Anonymous. At that time the fellowship had been struggling along for a little more than four years and had about a hundred members.

John D. got sick at the last minute and his son Nelson presided. About seventy-five people showed up. The former drunks gave impressive testimony of their suffering, restitution and recovery. The assembled millionaires were impressed, and the ex-boozers figured their society's financial troubles were over. But, winding up the evening, the host expressed his father's belief that money would not be a good thing for a movement based on selfless service - "it needs only our good will." The millionaire went home without being asked to contribute.

Now, twenty-four years older and with a membership of 300,000 A.A. is rich in its own right. Despite bylaws prohibiting gifts larger than \$100, money pours in to national headquarters at the rate of more than \$400,000 a year and A.A. doesn't seem to know what to do with it all. Once a year it spends \$20,000 or so to bring 100 delegates in from the fifty states for a week-long, all expense paid conference at a New York hotel. It has leased a floor in a midtown New York office building, where a dozen recovered housewives and spinsters answer letters, distribute

pamphlets containing material on alcoholism purchased from freelance writers, circulate a monthly bulletin of member's stories, articles, jokes and cartoons called the Grapevine, print and mail press releases, and go to meetings.

These workers receive annual salaries of \$7,000 to \$9,000 and are backed by a staff of stenographers and clerical employees - nonmembers. Herb M., a member with experience as a press agent and convention manager is paid \$18,000 a year for part-time services (three and a third days a week). The rest of the money goes into sinking funds, which have no specific purpose, but are nice to have, since they produce, in the form of interest, more money for sinking funds. Bill W., the movements surviving co-founder makes around \$25,000 per year - a sum a grateful membership does not begrudge - on royalties from three books: Alcoholics Anonymous, which started it all, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions and A.A. Comes of Age.

For a movement that was born and grew to greatness in the face of ridicule, adversity and bitter poverty, this is indeed wealth. Even if Nelson Rockefeller's canny father had never suggested it, the question would now arise whether the success will prove ruinous.

The prodigies of selfless service performed by members have had a stunning impact on a basically me-first society. Press, clergy and the professions have fallen all over one another to heap praise on the drunks who found a way out, and for a long time it has been almost bad manners to speak of

A.A. in any but reverent terms.

Now, however, it is a public institution and subject to the same scrutiny accorded other community volunteer services. There are A.A. groups in every crossroads and neighbourhood - 10,000 of them. They have become almost as much a part of the community scene as the visiting nurse and the fire department, which they somewhat resemble. In a population containing 80 million users of Alcohol and 6 million cases of active alcoholism, they perform as necessary a life-saving function as the Coast Guard. Alcoholism has pressed its way into public attention as the nation's third deadliest disease, and A.A. has developed the only method yet found that produces large numbers of enduring cures. It suddenly finds that it has public responsibilities, that others besides its members claim a legitimate interest in how it conducts its affairs.

Many find the fellowship of interest entirely apart from its practical work of sobering up drunks. Though itself nonintellectual and sometimes anti-intellectual, A.A. strikes both therapists and theorists as being an almost classical demonstration of the psychotherapeutic theories of Carl Jung. Jung believed in God and in "spirit." He devised another vocabulary for transactions with agnostic professional colleagues, but firmly used these traditional terms in his correspondence. A good part of his life work was directed towards reconciling the insights of religion with those of the new psychiatry. Jung approved Freud's work as far as it went, but felt that forces unsuspected by Freud could be summoned to the aid of distressed humanity. This belief is also at the base of A.A., commonly described by its members as a "spiritual program."

This resemblance is not

entirely coincidental for, though he did not know it and though his contribution was inadvertent, Jung had a hand in founding A.A. Early in the 1930s, Jung took a patient named Rolland H., a rich American and chronic alcoholic frantically seeking a cure. After an attempt at treatment, Jung told Rolland H. that psychiatry couldn't help him. Then, asked the desperate patient, what could? Perhaps a religious conversion of some kind, Jung said. Such an experience could never be guaranteed, but one could seek the company of those who had had them, and hope. Roland H. went to England, joined the Oxford movement, got sober and returned to New York. There he continued his association with the Oxford movement, taking particular interest in other inebriates. One of these Edwin T., carried the news to Bill W., a Wall Street broker, then prostrated by alcohol. After undergoing a shattering subjective experience of religious enlightenment, Bill W got sober and began looking for other alcoholics who were interested in drying out by the new method. He found one - again through the Oxford movement - on a business trip to Akron, Ohio. His new friend was a down-and-out alcoholic physician, Dr. Robert S. The two founded Alcoholics Anonymous and led the movement jointly until Robert S. died, sober in 1950.

A.A. was not completely without precedent. More than a century ago, a remarkable similar organization, The Washington Temperance Society, sprang up in Washington, D.C. and soon had branches in most big cities. Lincoln, concerned about alcoholism through the suffering of his law partner, Herndon, encouraged the members whenever he could, and even addressed them on one occasion. The Washingtonians had all the main features of A.A. - alcoholics

helping one another, weekly meetings, shared experience, readily available group fellowship, reliance on "the Higher Power." Bill W. and Bob S. added a spiritual regimen designed to produce personal improvement, a rule of anonymity, the practice of exchanging speakers between groups, and a membership restricted to those who confessed a problem with alcohol. The Twelve Steps of surrender, confession, self-examination, restitution and service were taken with only slight changes from the Oxford movement. The anonymity and alcoholics only rules were innovations.

A.A.'s great expansion began with the publication of an article by Jack Alexander in the Saturday Evening Post of March 1, 1941. Ten years later membership was up to 150,000: in ten more years it doubled that. America was suffering the hangovers of a national binge begun with the repeal of Prohibition and not yet ended. By aggressive lobbying, the liquor industry cleared away the remaining restraints on the sale of booze. Saturation advertizing disfigured the approaches to the major cities with five story whiskey bottles and bombarded the populace with reminders to drink. Consumption rose until it reached the present figures of a billion quarts of spirits, 2 billion quarts of wine and 12 billion quarts of beer a year. The industry employs a million people and pays them \$5 billion a year - more than we spend on the combined crude oil, natural gas, coal and ore-mining industries, and nearly twice what we spend on education.

Trouble arose along with sales figures. Those who drink consume, on the average, a quart of whiskey, two quarts of wine and four gallons of beer a month. Some, of course drink far less than this, others - especially the 6 million chronic

alcoholics - much more. Excessive drinking costs the nation \$35 million annually in medical care, \$30 million in jail maintenance, \$100 million in accidents, \$500 million in wage losses, according to estimates based on a Public Affairs Committee pamphlet. About a million people a year are admitted to be treated for alcoholism. One in twelve drinkers becomes an alcoholic: 14,000 deaths and 40,000 injuries a year result from the mixture of alcohol and traffic. 21,000 people die annually from cirrhosis, 6 million families are shadowed by alcohol and 12 million children suffer from their parents excessive drinking.

In the light of such figures, it is not surprising that A.A. seemed an answer to prayer in hundreds of thousands of families. A household devastated by booze is an isolated unit, plagued by debt, ridden by internal strife, with little hope, few friends, many enemies and a skeleton grown too big for the closet. A.A. replaces despair with hope. The family has friends again, understanding friends, people who have been through the mill, ready at any time for a cup of coffee and a chat. The necessity of total abstinence, and the means for attaining it, are made clear. The transformations are so impressive, and so often enduring, that the word "miracle" is frequently and understandably employed. Even physicians and psychiatrists, conditioned by occupation to disregard the claims of laymen, sought to learn from A.A.'s source of clinical information on the management of a syndrome that had baffled their professions.

Alcoholics, even sober ones, are only human, and can tolerate only limited amounts of adulation without becoming dizzy. Effective speakers were in great demand to tell their "stories," not only at

A.A. weekly meetings in distant places, but at convocations of professional groups, civic associations and service clubs. Big city groups stage annual banquets drawing up to a thousand people and costing up to \$10 a plate. Resort hotels are taken over for State and regional conventions. All this has gone to the head of many a reformed booze fighter, and a type of paragon known in the local groups as "Mr. A.A." pushed himself into key positions in the committee structure.

As A.A. became more prominent this tendency was noted outside the organization, and drew comment. A group of letters addressed last year to the editor of Harper's, was pointed: "Now that the myth of the Golden-Hearted prostitute has been laid to rest, let's tackle the Omniscient Ex-Lush." "The fanatics who prevail in some groups seem bent on making A.A. into a hostile, fundamentalist religion." "The movement needs to recover some of the good spirit it had before it became proud of its humility." These letters were occasioned by an article in which Arthur H. Cain pointed out tendencies toward cultism and narrow orthodoxy that limited the fellowship's therapeutic effectiveness.

My own experience with A.A. dates back more than ten years. While writing a series of articles for a national magazine, I attended hundreds of A.A. local meetings and a number of state and regional affairs, and developed a wide acquaintanceship in the movement. My articles aroused the interest of Bill W., and I was invited to evaluate, as a paid consultant, some of A.A.'s publications and activities.

This chore consumed a number of months in 1962 and 1963, and afforded an intimate view of the organization's national headquarters and policy making

boards. Since my recommendations were not confidential - "A.A. has no secrets but the names of its members" is a hallowed tenet - they can be disclosed. They contained little more that had not been said before, some of it by Arthur Cain. Anyone else undertaking a similar survey would, I think, have reached the same conclusions.

At headquarters, I missed almost completely the bubbling good will, the creative open-mindedness, the open and stimulating swapping of ideas that made so many of the weekly neighbourhood meetings memorable. Everybody was an expert, with a cluster of ideas closed to amendment. Bill W., the movement's traditional leader and a main source of the spiritual inspiration, had lost out in committee manoeuvring to a policy of "putting the thing on a business basis." Committee politics took up half the working day; gossip was venomous. In quick succession I was told that the co-founder (in my opinion still sharp-witted at seventy) was senile, that a staff worker was a hypochondriac and a committeeman a homosexual. The accused were at pains to assure me, separately and without encouragement, that the accusers were a nymphomaniac, a schizophrenic and a megalomaniac. I observed nothing to substantiate any of these charges. However, there was no inclination toward the "fearless and searching moral inventory" recommended by A.A.'s Twelve Suggested Steps.

The non-alcoholic Board of Trustees responsible for national policy was ultraconservative (one member, Archibald Roosevelt, had furnished literature for distribution by the John Birch Society) and this, I reported, had served the movement poorly. The board's rigid conservatism was reflected in a number of unfortunate policies, the most

odious of which was a tact endorsement of racial segregation within the branches. When a member submitted an article for the monthly bulletin pointing out that nearly all Southern A.A. groups and a great many Northern ones were racially segregated, and that A.A.'s Negro membership had failed to keep pace with the growing problem of Negro alcoholism, the article was turned down on the grounds that it "might disrupt A.A. unity." Local A.A. groups are free from any national control other than moral suasion. That even this influence should be withheld on so fundamental a point seemed to me a serious error. It is, however, in keeping with the fact that there are no Negroes on the headquarters staff or on any of the numerous A.A. national boards and committees.

The policy on publications, I reported, is likely to cost A.A. its once acknowledged leadership in its field. When Alcoholics Anonymous was first published a quarter of a century ago, it won universal acknowledgement that A.A. was well in advance of the field. But through the medical and psychiatric professions have been remarkably slow in coming to terms with alcohol addiction, much progress has lately been made, and the A.A. "Big Book" is beginning to have an Out-of-date, early-century, historical sound. The Board, however, has ruled that no further word shall be spoken. Despite the fact that the rank and file teems with exciting, relevant, informed and up-to-the-minute experience,

none of it is permitted to appear in book form. To publish such literature, it is felt, would be to risk heresy. As a result, A.A.'s official books, unfertilized by fresh documentation and contemporary interpretation, tend to sound more archaic each year.

I concluded that A.A.'s headquarters had been captured by an ultraconservative clique that was doing the society appreciable harm. This finding, was, of course, received by that clique without thanks and, despite the efforts of a small free-speech party, was prevented from reaching the delegates of the rank and file for whom it was intended. A.A., at least in its national offices, bears heavily the marks of its culture in its time - affluence and the shortsighted conservatism that affluence begets.

Fortunately for future generations, the influence of headquarters on local groups is not decisive. "Oh, those guys!", is a typical reaction from a local group secretary. "We send 'em their three bucks a year per member and forget about 'em." Many groups make no contribution to "the national." In the neighbourhoods and at the crossroads will surely be preserved in living practice those ideas that give mankind new hope whenever they achieve a renaissance - candour, humility, friendliness, enlightened understanding, a good-natured readiness to pitch in at any hour in any way to help a baffled human being.