

March 1968 AA Grapevine
Big Book Stories - Updated (5 of 5)

This is the fifth article in the Grapevine's series by authors of the personal histories in the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous. The Big Book was published in 1939; a revised, enlarged version came out in 1955. Now, the author of "The Career Officer," page 523 in the revised (second) edition, reports on thirteen more years of sobriety in Ireland, where he first found AA twenty-one years ago.

Living the Program in All Our Affairs

More than twelve years have passed since I ended my story in the Big Book with the words "AA has made me very happy." Nothing that has happened since has made me change my mind. The personal details of my life in between are unimportant to anyone but myself. They have made me more grateful to our founders and to the vast army of my comrades in Alcoholics Anonymous. But the passage of time has given me more time to think. And in the hope that what I write will not be taken as the views of an Angry Old Man, I put forward some of the things I think about.

In *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton wrote, "Tradition is living and active, but Convention is passive and dead. Tradition does not form us automatically; we have to work to understand it. Convention is accepted passively, as a matter of routine. It offers us only pretended ways of solving the problems of living, a system of gestures and formalities....One goes through an act, without trying to understand the meaning of it all, merely because everyone else does the same."

Convention does rule the lives of most of us. We do go through life saying things and doing things because others do them and say them. For instance, our Slogans. A slogan originally was the war cry of the Scottish Highlands. Anyone who can imagine a Highland chief urging his clan into battle with slogans such as *Think* or *Easy Does It* cannot be very well acquainted with the Scots. Yet for us, today, these AA Slogans are very useful pieces of advice. When we merely accept them passively, as if brainwashed, that is lazy thinking, and lazy thinking can become an important defect if applied to our Steps.

The Twelfth Step sets out that our founder members tried to practice these principles in all their affairs. And still, so many tell us that no one could possibly apply these principles to his whole life. Is this not lazy thinking? Do some of us just accept the Steps, to be "with it," without working out what these principles really are for each of us?

My own list of the principles I must practice consists of: realism, with its frequent reminders of humanity; faith, anchored to some unchanging norm of goodness (God, as I understand Him); atonement; patience; and thinking with spiritual discipline. Can I honestly tell myself that the practice (though not the finished accomplishment) of these principles is impossible for me in *all* my affairs?

Perhaps with advantage to ourselves - especially at the start - we might pay more attention to a few words in our purpose: to solve our common problem. Our common problem is not, as we quite naturally may have thought, just to stop drinking *period*; we can all remember from our past the dreary, unending sequence of stop, restart, stop, restart. The problem is to remain securely abstinent permanently, albeit we work at it one day at a time. Obviously, no one will stay dry for long or willing unless life without drink gives him satisfaction. He can arrive at that satisfaction only by learning to live with himself in peace, with his neighbor in charity, and with his conscience in reasonable repose. That, at least for me, is the guide motif of our Steps. That is why it doesn't now seem right to me to go about saying, "AA is a strange program," though I used to for a time. It no longer appears strange to me. It seems the only sort of recovery program that could possibly work for an alcoholic.

Yet so many of us still tell a newcomer that he has only to stay dry for today and to come to meetings. The meetings won't practice the Steps for him, though they may and should help him to persevere in his own practice of them. Even the most meeting-minded member has to pass many hours of the day when he is alone and must depend on his own inner strength. These are the hours when practice of these principles in all his affairs must cease to be a conventional, superficial acceptance of them and become a matter of the heart and the will.

I find that over the years I have acquired a few mild dislikes. The calling of the Higher Power, or God as we understand Him, "The Man Upstairs" is one. The advertising of some member as a star speaker and a special attraction is another. (This isn't envy!) Can we not take every speaker, silver-tongued or tongue-tied, at his real value of being another alcoholic who is doing his best to stay recovered himself and trying to help us to do the same? And I do somehow feel from time to time that the increasing number of conventions and the like, through the amount of preliminary organization and work involved, are diverting time and effort from our primary purpose. These distastes are, however, very slight ripples in a sea of contentment.

In the sense that I have been a member of our group for all but five months of its more than twenty years' existence, I suppose I rank as an old-timer. My group has always been marvelously kind to me and tolerant of a personality that has consistently demanded a great measure of tolerance. Old-timers must often be a headache to younger members. But the old-timer who has come to realize, as I hope I have myself, that he is not God's gift to AA, but that AA is God's gift to him, still has something good to give to his group: the demonstration of his continued sobriety, his active membership, and his gratitude for his recovery to - under God - the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

My prayer for my AA contemporaries and myself is that we may to the end remain, in Tennyson's words, "Strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield."

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